

Detroit: demolished by design

Violence, Racism and Collapse of Community

Lynne Clive (Marilynn Rashid)

It's Thursday afternoon, and I'm jogging my two or three miles on the track at the downtown Detroit YMCA overlooking the gym where a group of about sixteen mostly black men are playing basketball. The man and woman who were running when I started have finished, so I'm alone and keeping an eye on the game to fight the boredom of running on an indoor track.

Some months ago, I noticed the heightened level of intensity and rage in these pick-up basketball games, and today, thinking about the numerous incidents of urban violence I've observed and heard about recently, I am mesmerized by the quick and constant shifting back and forth between play and anger, hilarity and loud hostility. There are no referees in these games, so the disagreements over points and fouls are worked out through indignant shouting, screaming accusations, insults and occasional shoving and fighting.

When these blow-ups occur, the few white players almost always step back and wait silently for the resolution, while a number of the black players not involved in the confrontation yell at the others to stop fighting and play ball. The din of their voices is deafening but they always resume play eventually. Today, one such outburst ends with one man shoving another and shouting, "Suck it, you fucking bitch!"

I've been going to the downtown "Y" for several years now, and I've come to appreciate this place as one of the few centers of racially integrated activity in my daily life. I've lived in this city, which is now 80% black, all my life, but except for alienated activities like grocery shopping and riding the bus, I do few social everyday things with blacks. The "Y" is one of the welcome exceptions. People are generally friendly and tolerant. I've had some thought-provoking encounters and discussions with women of various ages and races in the locker room and the sauna.

The men, too, are usually kind and open. Numerous times on my way to and from the track, I've heard black men complaining to each other about the constant hostility on the basketball court; they wish the others could get it together, put aside their differences and not waste so much time fighting.

Today, as I run above the blaring voices, watching as these strong angry men shove, shout at and curse each other with sexist, anti-female epithets, I remember that I am a small white female alone on the track, and with paranoid abandon, I imagine their rage overflowing the court, their incensed eyes filling up the gym, rising until they see me there to become a target for all their frustration and resentment and disillusionment. But as always, I finish my run. The men temporarily resolve their altercation. The game goes on.

This past summer, my sister was riding her bike down an inner city street on her way home from work. Three black youths, dressed fashionably and with in-vogue flat-top hair styles, walked out and stood in the middle of the street facing her, smiling as she approached. It happened too quickly for her to stop or turn around. Staring at her and still smiling, they shoved her into the path of an on-coming car. Fortunately, the car slammed on its brakes and she wasn't seriously injured, although her arm and leg were badly cut and her hand was sprained.

The old deaf black man who was driving the car ran out to help her, screaming at the young men. My sister screamed and cursed at them too. One of them picked up a piece of concrete and threw it at her. When they started walking back towards her, she got on her bike and rode away.

The other night, a friend of mine who works at a neighborhood bar waited on an extremely distraught young black woman. She told my friend that she was “trying to deal with something,” and when encouraged to talk, explained that she’d just visited a woman friend of hers in intensive care in the hospital. The woman had been beaten unconscious at her own birthday party by men who were supposedly guests at the celebration. She was beaten so badly that her friend could not even recognize her, and days after the attack she was still in a coma. Why were these things happening, my friend asked her. The woman shook her head slowly and replied, “It’s a fashion, a fad, a sick fad.”

Two other friends of mine, a man and a woman, were beaten up by several young black men after the men intentionally bumped into them on a downtown sidewalk. The woman’s cheekbone was fractured. Another friend, a white man in his early forties who’s lived and worked in the city all his life, was running on Detroit’s Belle Isle park on a late summer afternoon, when three young black men asked if they could run with him. When he replied “Sure,” one of them started jogging along side him. My friend smiled at him and put out his hand for the familiar hand slap. The young man smiled, gave him “five,” and then slugged him in the ear with his fist. He then turned back to join his friends who were looking on.

The tales of violence go on and on. Here are some that appeared in the papers: Two black men are severely beaten by whites outside a rock concert hall on the city’s east side. Some days later, several young black men beat up a white man in the same area. Rival gangs of blacks and whites attack each other at a street festival in nearby Hamtramck. Seven youths are injured. Two black vagrants are seriously beaten by as many as 20 black youths in downtown Detroit. A white man drives his car into a group of blacks, mostly children, killing three people and seriously injuring others. A 19-year-old black man from Detroit is beaten to death in Roseville, a predominantly white Detroit suburb. Three white teenagers are charged with his murder.

No Center, No Heart

Detroit is not the murder capital of the country any more, but it has been experiencing an alarming upsurge in violence, much of which you won’t read about in the papers. The feeling of paranoia and fear that even long-time Detroit residents are now experiencing recalls the tense climate of the city in the mid-’sixties, before the ’67 riot, and in the early ’seventies, when whites were fleeing en masse to the suburbs. But there are many differences in the political atmosphere now, and there are multi-faceted aspects of the violence we’re seeing, rooted in racism, class oppression, sexism, the destruction of community, and the vapid values promoted by a pervasive consumer society. Most everyone would agree that very little, if anything, has changed for the better in the city of Detroit since the ’67 riots.

The population of Detroit has plummeted in the last two decades as not only whites, but middle-class blacks continue the migration out of the city. The edges of the metropolitan area have expanded voraciously with astounding speed into the few remaining rural stretches until they have linked up with the expanding metropolitan areas of other cities. There is nothing but urban sprawl between them, and the entire area is chopped up by a huge expressway complex that also grows and grows, tentacling out into one neighborhood after another, destroying natural connections between people and places, keeping working people off the streets and in their cars, addicted to a frenetic sense of speed, and plagued by a never satisfied need to “escape.”

In Detroit itself now, there is no center, no heart. The old downtown is full of virtually empty office buildings, vacated in moves to new shiny complexes on the river or in the suburbs. The neighborhoods that have managed to survive are like threatened islands of life with large expanses of devastation in between.

Except for the poor and working class neighborhoods of the southwest side, made up of Latinos, blacks, Poles and Arabs, the one or two integrated neighborhoods in the city are middle-class. Many of those families pay for their children to attend private or area Catholic schools which are more likely to be somewhat racially mixed. But the vast majority of Detroit youth are consigned to the public school system which continues to be a breeding ground for violence and desperation, reflecting the harsh reality of daily life for blacks in all large urban American areas.

Injustice at Every Turn

In a country in which 71.1% of privately-owned wealth is in the hands of 10% of American families, in a country in which the rich are consistently getting richer and the poor and working classes are getting robbed, prospects are exceedingly grim for inner city youth. From 1980–90, the poorest 20% of Americans (with average incomes of \$7,725) have seen their real income drop 3% while their net federal tax rates have increased 16%. The richest fifth, however, (with average incomes of \$105,209) have seen, a 32% hike in their real income while their federal tax rates have been cut 5.5%.

People who get off the freeways and into the fractured heart of this city will see evidence of immiseration at every turn, where the insidious, business-as-usual operation of capitalism has created a highly visible, exceedingly desperate, and primarily black underclass.

The ranks of the homeless—at least 10,000 in Detroit—have swelled to the point where working people are constantly barraged on the streets with requests for money or pleas to pump their gas or wash their car windows. There's increasing competition among garbage pickers in my neighborhood and in numerous others throughout the city. These are the abandoned ones whose misery is built into the system. If this class did not exist here, it would of necessity come into being somewhere else.

Not only for the impoverished and oppressed, but for the vast majority of inner-city dwellers, life under U.S. capitalism is ugly, brutish and often short. According to federal researchers, the homicide rate for young men in the U.S. is from 4 to 73 times the rate in other industrialized nations. Research for the National Center for Health Statistics shows that for the year 1987, 21.9 men per 100,000 were killed; between the ages of 16 and 24; for black men that rate was 85 per 100,000, an increase of 40% since a low in 1984. Nationally, homicide is the leading cause of death among black men, as well as for young black women in specific urban areas.

According to the research cited above, Michigan was the most treacherous state for young black men, with a homicide rate of 232 per 100,000, largely concentrated in the Detroit area.

By far, the two most available “apparent” paths out of the cycle of poverty and despair for young blacks are also professions rooted in authoritarianism and violence—one legitimate by this society's standards, the other illegitimate. The U.S. armed forces have been able to fill their ranks with the nation's poor by taking full advantage of their bleak future, claiming to teach skills that will be “marketable” in civilian society and offering educational benefits beyond the time of service. For a huge portion of service-men and -women, joining the armed forces is overwhelmingly an act of economic desperation. Needless to say, the environment of military training and service is infused with male dominance, power and coercive discipline. Here violence is institutionalized and controlled by a hierarchy based on the “virtues” of authoritarianism.

If the army doesn't attract poor urban youth, often the world of petty and not so petty crime does; here again, force and violence reign. Drug running, dealing and thievery often begin as acts of economic survival, but in crime-dominated neighborhoods where a large percentage of the population is armed and where the police are corrupt and trigger happy, the risks are high and the chances of living past the age of thirty are very slim.

Feeding Racist Attitudes

If young offenders are not cynical, violent and angry at the outset of their careers, reform schools and the prison system will likely mold them into ruthless criminals schooled in injustice, weary of being victimized, and ready to prey on others weaker than they. The victims of social victims are usually those closest to them, often women and children, usually people in their own families and communities. Studies show that 95% of all violence against blacks is committed by blacks.

Instead of pointing to the dire conditions in which blacks live in this country, such statistics have fed racist attitudes. The racist perception that is enforced is that blacks are more prone to violence than whites, and even that domestic violence is more acceptable in Black-American culture. The result is a double standard in which blacks are targeted by the police and the “justice” system in ways that whites are not. According to the National Youth Survey, when white and black teenagers commit the same offense, police are seven times more likely to charge the

blacks with a felony, and the courts are more likely to imprison the black offenders. As prisons are the institutional indoctrinators of criminal lifestyles, it is not surprising that youths of all races leave prisons more skilled in crime than when they entered, and the cycle continues.

Nowhere is the legitimization of racist practices more blatant than in the Reagan/Bush domestic drug war. According to recent studies on FBI arrests, blacks are being arrested at a rate highly disproportionate to their drug use. Blacks make up about 12% of regular drug users and 16% of regular cocaine users, and yet last year they made up more than 48% of those arrested on charges involving cocaine and heroin.

Though black drug users in impoverished cities are likely to be more visible, the vast majority of drug use and drug dealing goes on in middle and upper middle class white suburban neighborhoods. The highly publicized, get-tough, police crackdown on low level drug users has been devastating for inner-city neighborhoods; it has done nothing but increase the misery of daily life.

Despite these and other government sponsored attempts to “clean up” the neighborhoods, urban school drop-out rates, gang activity and violent crime all continue to climb. Racism and class oppression rear their massive heads in other connected arenas. White, middle and upper class, first-time offenders are more likely to be admitted to drug rehabilitation programs, to be paroled or pardoned, to receive counseling and community support. Poor and working class blacks are more likely to go to jail.

Cultural Disintegration

Remembering the statistic that shows blacks as the primary victims of black crime, and then thinking of the numerous recent incidents involving both blacks and whites, one is tempted to conclude that crime in poor black communities is increasing to the point where it's breaking through its borders and affecting us all. But that is obviously only part of the picture. And again, such a partial conclusion focuses on black violence and fails to address the larger context; the seeds of the violence lie elsewhere.

The cultural disintegration so rapidly taking place in black urban communities is reflective of mass industrial society where family and community ties have been whittled away by the social and political forces of the corporate market. The voids in these fractured communities are being filled at breakneck speed with rage and cynicism or colonized by the empty promise of consumerism.

In the 'fifties and 'sixties, Detroit's east side was heavily populated by black families that had recently emigrated from rural southern communities, whereas most of the residents of the black communities on the west side had been urbanized for quite some time. People who knew the city intimately at that time remark on the contrasting atmospheres in these areas, both poor and black.

On the east side, one could see, feel and experience cohesive community, a sense of solidarity, of familial responsibility, pride and self-respect. These are characteristics of old, small farming communities which were eventually destroyed when dispersed and dragged into an urban monster like Detroit. (They are also being destroyed by agribusiness and urbanization in their native rural environments.)

The black pride messages of the civil rights movement were extremely powerful and significant for black Detroit communities in the 'sixties. Slogans like “Freedom Now” and “Black Is Beautiful” were charged with a revolutionary fervor and potential that is difficult to imagine today. The black urban youth of the 'nineties has had no similar experience; their sense of this period of promise is formed, not by continuity or direct involvement, but by media images and a few textbook accounts that flatten, distort and historicize. It has little relevance to their present daily battles for survival.

And, too, in the face of the glaring injustice that continues to block their paths, one must admit that these ideals, for all their intensity, did not bring blacks the freedom they demanded; and it is likely that today's black youth are sorely aware of this.

Martin Luther King's dream, after so much struggle, is still a dream, and acknowledging that reality brings bitterness, cynicism and further alienation. While significant black voices (Malcolm X, King, the Panthers) were systematically silenced and destroyed, the movement was insidiously co-opted by politicians like Detroit's mayor Coleman Young who, after getting a strong political foothold through his identification with civil rights and trade unions,

was quickly bought out by the corporations to become a classic puppet of the system, giving the illusion of black power while ignoring the continued demise of poor and working class communities in the city.

Clearly, the corporations run the cities, and nowhere is this more apparent than in Detroit, where time and time again viable neighborhoods were destroyed to build factories that promised jobs but delivered further cultural disintegration and misery.

The Superficial Promise of Style

After the rich contexts of community, class solidarity and shared experience are obliterated, only the market remains to fill the vacuum. The images of (primarily male) power, wealth and prestige that have always driven mainstream (i.e. commodity) culture are now disseminated more pervasively than ever. The slick, techno-messages of sophisticated films, music videos, television and advertising appear as the key to all that is missing in one's life. As the powerlessness increases, so the bizarreness of the mimicry of power is magnified. Thus 1920s style shootouts between armed, expensively dressed teenage gangs has become a not uncommon occurrence at high school dances and house parties.

In the 'sixties and early 'seventies, a profound social consciousness led many people, young and old, to seek freedom, solidarity, love and peace. But today, while yuppies look for the most state-of-the-art compact disc player or the least touristy vacation spot, impoverished urban youth are looking for the right high-tops or the perfect hair style. Almost everyone is after the fastest, slickest or classiest car. Television and other mass media promise to satisfy every need. They offer it all, and often in the terms of a violent elitist society, with sometimes blatant and other times thinly-veiled metaphors of sexism and domination.

We are sadly quite accustomed to hearing of acts of violence rooted in poverty, racism, sexism and drugs, but what is most confounding of late is that street violence has also become a fashion, a style, a macho peer-pressure game removed from the visceral reality of its consequences, void of genuine emotion and tragedy, saturated instead with superficial intensity and a distanced, mediatized sense of adventure. It often seems that the perpetrators of such crimes are watching themselves on a TV or video screen while they act out scenes of violence and domination, scenes in which they come out on top, they subdue, overpower, destroy and win. One suspects they are watching themselves through their mind's camera eye, with little or no human attention to their victims, because no one else is truly watching or acknowledging their existence in any significant way. The fact that much of the violence recently has occurred after big mediatized events (the Piston's basketball championship, the Independence Day fireworks, the Montreaux Jazz Festival) suggests an alarming cause and effect relationship between individual actions and the spectacle.

We should not be surprised at the increasing level of violence in a nation-state engendered and maintained through the conquest and subjugation of tribal and community-based people and through the exploitation and despoliation of the earth. Competition, confrontation and hierarchical control are valued and encouraged on many levels in this society—in schools, in sports, in the workplace, in the State Department. It is not only in urban areas that violence is on the rise, but in countless rural and small-town communities as well which are not immune to the social disaffection and alienation typical of most cities. And certainly, the ubiquitous, captivating media messages influencing inner-city dwellers, penetrate small-town and rural consciousness as well.

But violence is truly in vogue on the streets of U.S. cities. It is advertised on sale on every TV channel, in every video game, in every competitive sport, and American youths have been brought up to be good consumers who realize that if they can't be free or loved, at least they can be tough and have style.

What is most tragic, perhaps, is that this violence, bereft of social consciousness, is so clearly misdirected; it rarely, if ever, confronts those institutions of society responsible for the oppression, those forces that maintain themselves through continued exploitation. Instead, as it impulsively and compulsively mirrors the media spectacle and targets one's own family or community, it becomes self-directed, self-defeating, self-destructive.

No Sympathy, No Compassion

Though I live in the inner city, I have a part-time teaching job in a wealthy Detroit suburb. When I ride the bus to this morning job, I find my fellow passengers are primarily black domestics, and during these long rides, I am always struck by the increasingly conspicuous segregation in this metropolitan area, not just blacks segregated from whites, but rich and middle class from poor. When I enter that suburb and that school, I am entering a totally different culture, one that has a corner on the world of opportunity. The opulence of those streets is blatant and appalling; the contrasts with inner city streets are overwhelming.

Lately, I have come to look at those wealthy suburban streets as flaunting a more insidious, more entrenched and more powerful kind of violence than the kind I've been discussing in this article. For, clearly, this prosperous suburb exists on the backs of those impoverished inner-city neighborhoods. There is a bold arrogance that comes with class privilege and economic security and comfort. Certainly, there are exceptions, but for the most part there is little or no sympathy in these affluent communities for the plight of the poor, the homeless, me unemployed.

"Te compadeces de los destechados?" I asked one of my students, after explaining the Spanish verbal phrase "to sympathize with" and the noun for the homeless, "los destechados." No, he answered, in slow perfect Spanish, I don't sympathize with the homeless. And when asked why not, he confidently explained that there were plenty of jobs for people if they really wanted to work, and then went on to complain about welfare fraud. A middle-class black student of mine whose family recently moved to the suburbs from the city denounced AIDS victims, telling me they got what they deserved, they made their choices, opted to take drugs, chose to be gay or not to use condoms. He also denigrated the city, saying he now has no reason to go "down there."

All the counter-arguments put forth by a few other more sensitive students and myself are refuted with a moralistic self-assurance that astound me in people so young. Only when accused of being cold and uncaring are they temporarily taken aback, because these characteristics obviously do not fit into their self-conceptions. All in all, it is virtually impossible to confront with words such profound ignorance in people who are ostensibly so "intelligent," so secure with their place in the world.

Most educated middle-class whites in the 1960s and 1970s could not get away with voicing such attitudes. Their position brought with it a certain humility and compassion and a responsibility, at least in words, if not in action, to acknowledge the injustice of a system that granted them privilege and denied others, on the basis of class or race, the basic necessities of survival. But in the last ten years or so, the white and now the black middle-class as well have succumbed to a pervasive social rationalization for their material affluence—a lifestyle which frenetically attempts to mask the spiritual emptiness and social alienation of their own existence.

Not only do they fail to see the connections between their prosperity and the economic misery of the black underclass, but many blame the poor for their poverty and misfortune. Similarly, many middle and upper class whites exclusively fault Mayor Coleman Young for the devastation of the city. Though he, like most politicians, is undoubtedly corrupt, the attacks on Young are disproportionate to his role. These critics expose themselves as racist apologists for the system, scapegoating Young for a situation in which they, through their investments in the corporations that control him, have prospered.

Environmental Racism

There is yet another kind of violence visited upon poor minority communities everywhere, but particularly in large industrial cities. This violence comes in the form of environmental pollution, and its effects on poor urban residents have been deadly. With calculated, institutional racism, corporate decisions are made to locate polluting industry, hazardous waste facilities, landfills and incinerators in poor minority neighborhoods where residents are uninformed, uneducated or too overwhelmed with basic daily survival to organize themselves in protest.

Recent studies on demographics and the locations of hazardous waste sites found that the one variable which best explains the existence of hazardous waste facilities in a community was its racial composition. Communities with a single hazardous waste facility were found to have twice the percentage of people of color as communities with no such facility. Communities with the largest levels of waste activity (two or more hazardous waste facilities

or one of the nation's largest landfills) had three times the minority representation of those communities without any such activity. Three of the nation's five largest landfills are sited in predominantly black or Latino neighborhoods. The chemical industry has prospered through deliberate neglect, through its attack on the environment and its willingness to jeopardize the health of the poor. Though environmentalists are now acknowledging the existence of these "sacrifice communities" and beginning to link issues of social justice and pollution, there is little hope of substantive change in the policy of a corporate capitalist system fired by uncontained growth and production, profit and greed.

In the Detroit area, such policies have been the rule for a long time. The southwest side, made up of poor minority communities, is one of the most polluted areas in the country. It is heavily occupied by steel plants, refineries, incinerators, hazardous waste treatment plants and contaminated waste sites. Needless to say, the incidence of cancer, respiratory disease and birth defects in this area is extremely high and continues to climb.

The Detroit trash incinerator, at this point the world's largest, was sited on the city's near east side in an area inhabited mostly by poor blacks and elderly whites. Though not yet burning to its 4,000 ton-per-day capacity, it continues to fail mercury emissions tests and to pour out dangerous levels of numerous other contaminants, including cancer-inducing dioxins.

Other more recently proposed incinerators in outlying areas appear to have a much better chance of being defeated for two reasons—these communities have benefited educationally from the protests surrounding the Detroit incinerator, and they are not poor minority communities. They have managed to organize themselves quickly. Because of their better economic and educational standing, they have access to resources and political inroads to force local bureaucrats to listen to them. Such conditions do not exist in the impoverished community around Detroit's incinerator, and it is feared that, ironically, these outlying areas, in defeating their incinerators, will insure the continued operation of the Detroit facility as it may likely be fueled with the refuse from these and other surrounding communities.

Not only is the physical health of residents affected by pollution, but their mental and emotional state of being as well. Growing evidence points to a direct connection between pollution and high crime rates; it is strongly suspected that airborne toxins make some people violent. Psychological studies point particularly to the formation of ozone close to the earth's surface on warm days when sunlight hits chemicals from auto exhaust and industrial pollution.

As chemical pollutants affect the nervous system and can alter behavior in numerous ways, it is suggested that ozone, even at "low" "sub-toxic" levels, is responsible for provoking hundreds of incidents of domestic violence in large cities with polluted air.

Studies often prove the obvious. We all know that chemical pollution makes people physically sick and adds substantially to the generalized feelings of depression and powerlessness that already exist due to the oppressive conditions of their daily lives.

And Something's Being Done?

Recently, even the media and city officials have acknowledged that inner city violence has reached devastating levels, and that "something" must be done. Some cities are instituting programs intended to build up the black male image, to give urban youth, particularly boys, a sense of hope for the future. In Washington, D.C., successful black men are being recruited to elementary schools to provide students with a strong male presence and positive role models. In other places, black men will serve as mentors, big brothers, tutors. Schools in Chicago are "considering" placing more emphasis on African-American history and culture. Other schools are considering all-male education.

In Detroit a Catholic-Church-sponsored organization (which recently got a major grant from the U.S. Defense Department) has instituted a program called "Fast-Track" intended to help students secure basic skills so that they can enter job training programs. Last month, students at Detroit's Finney High School, where ten black males from the class of 1991 have been killed or wounded in the past ten months, organized a demonstration and a vigil against violence. It was led by the school's ROTC.

Back at the “Y,” I now notice that the basketball games are a little more subdued due to the presence of a big white YMCA official (possibly the minister who works here) in a suit and tie, standing on the foul line with his arms folded authoritatively over his chest. He rocks a bit forward onto his toes, then back to center. His expression is serious as he “oversees” the game. I’m quite sure that the players themselves complained to the office about the constant fighting, and that the office responded in this way.

Such official acknowledgement brings with it the false message that government, church and social organizations will take care of things, while the apathy, complacency and powerlessness of individuals and communities grow. City and church officials busy themselves trying to allay people’s fears and attempting to foster a more positive image of Detroit so that potential investors won’t look elsewhere. But of course the corporate structure remains intact and corporate decisions continue to diminish the quality of our lives.

I am not surprised by the official response, that it affirms male dominance and hierarchy, that it works through the church and the military, that it seeks to quell present and potential rage by offering “marketable” skills and the promise of employment. I am not surprised that it aims to bolster the broken self-image of the black male while making no mention of the self-image of the black female. It must be assumed that though she is equally and often more at risk, though incidents of rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence continue to soar, her self-conception is not threatened and that she endures in spite of all.

Of course, I don’t think for a moment that any of these programs or tactics will be effective on any significant scale even on their own terms. As long as we seek authority outside ourselves—as long as we demand to be policed even during our hours of play and leisure—violence and rage, repressed or manifest, will continue to hold sway over our lives.

What I would like to see and hear in response to this crisis is a massive popular outcry condemning consumerism, industrial capitalism, patriarchy and progress, while affirming community and the strength of individuals to direct their own destinies and meet their own needs. And here the self divides. For this is nothing but naive, idealistic rhetoric, words that mean little or nothing from within the monster; there are no whole communities here capable of voicing such demands and acting on their needs and desires. We’re talking Detroit reality here. People are struggling to feed their families, to keep them from killing each other, to survive the week, not to change the world.

Within this context, there is little hope of any radical transformation. Sorting through the layered complexities of violence and racism in our city brings no solace. We are the targets of black underclass rage just as much as white suburban, self-righteous racists, and we’re more available. Like everyone else, we too are hooked into a system that destroys us, we too are struggling to hang on to the dissolving threads of a fragmented community.

We’re left wringing our hands and driving our cars down freeways that we know have irreparably fractured our connections with each other. We’re left running around and around on an indoor track while “the man” looks on, and while the neighborhood kids run down to the corner store to turn in the bottles they’ve ripped off from the homeless man in the alley. And now they’re off to play the “Contra War” video game, while their big brothers and sisters are on their way to the Persian Gulf.

fifth Estate

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