

The (Last) Rights of Malice Green

Cops kill man; Community creates Memorial

G. Raffito

On a chilly Friday morning, November 6, 1992, a slight drizzle dabbled the sidewalk where the night before a man had been bludgeoned to death by a gang of Detroit policemen.

The story on the street was spreading faster than any newswire—how a black motorist was stopped and dragged from his car by two white cops who took turns brutally beating the unarmed man; how five other officers soon arrived to assist in the merciless discipline of a dying “suspect.”

At a nearby women’s shelter, a case worker was on the phone trying to comfort a prostitute who had witnessed the cops slugging and kicking the victim. The horrified woman was trying to describe how an officer hammered the victim’s head with a large, heavy regulation flashlight, even after the victim was handcuffed. The witness feared for her life and yet, like several other bystanders, she wanted the truth to get out, the truth about the police.

The police seemed only dimly aware of an audience that previous night. Perhaps they figured any onlookers were too drugged out or too unconcerned to learn more, as the Emergency Medical Service carried the lifeless body away into the night.

As one cop once reminded me, “Rough arrests go with rough neighborhoods,” and this type of arrest was not unusual for people in this typical American ghetto. Not unusual, except that the victim was not supposed to die—not this way, not in such a conspicuous and gruesome manner.

As the news ricocheted through the city, the deceased would soon have a name, a name not without its sad irony: Malice Green.

The run-down neighborhood at 23rd and Warren is common to many areas of Detroit, a modern ghost town, where the remaining houses and store fronts sag in various stages of decay. Some structures are burned-out shells still inhabited by wandering street people. They keep warm by burning wood stripped from other rooms; sometimes a bathtub becomes a make-shift fireplace.

Other, more secure dwellings resemble small fortress outposts. Iron-barred windows and doors, chain-link fences and barking dogs encircle rusting autos and whatever few possessions the residents have left. Every few weeks there’s another story about somebody burned alive because they couldn’t escape through the barred windows (seven children died in such a firetrap as this went to press).

Detroit has become an industrial graveyard where mounds of demolished wood and rubble litter most neighborhoods, as fields of weeds and brown grass have taken over where homes used to be. In July of 1967, about a mile from 23rd and Warren, America’s second largest rebellion of the century began—the largest until the Los Angeles uprising in the spring of 1992.

In neighborhoods like these, doctors intern at surrounding hospitals for gunshot wound surgery and crack-baby natal care, desperate prostitutes turn tricks for as low as \$2, and cops find occasional “provocation” to bash a skull—like Malice Green’s.

On that cold Friday, a media circus converged on this lower west side of town. A caravan of news wagons formed around the field on the corner.

Camera crews would soon be arranging their tracking shots along the sidewalk where Green had lain bleeding several hours earlier.

The public would soon learn what two EMS units observed before 11:06 pm, when Green was pronounced Dead on Arrival at Detroit Receiving Hospital from multiple head wounds, or “severe trauma to the brain.” On this morning after, EMS blankets, used latex gloves and discarded first aid wrappings could still be seen near the bloodied pavement. Sand had been hastily dispersed to help cover the large stain.

TV network vans would remain in the area for the next couple days. This was their first big story since the Presidential elections. TV, radio and newsprint echoed the obvious analogies to the Rodney King beating. Both incidents centered on white cops grotesquely beating a black suspect. But unlike the Rodney King situation, there was no video camera rolling during the Malice Green arrest. And unlike King, Green did not survive.

After the last of the media crews wrapped up their commentaries for the next spectacle-fix, I would return to the scene. In the weeks and months ahead, so would hundreds, and eventually, thousands of others.

Life After Television

The Rodney King video seemed to be the catalyst to the first major uprising sparked through television. Without the freak timing of an amateur cameraman, King’s nightmare would have been just another night on the “beat”. The deeply disturbing images of the boys in blue showing their true colors shocked the nation. Still, the power of TV to galvanize viewers has been grossly exaggerated.

Since its inception, TV has failed to mobilize people towards any significant action besides the consumption of the video images and their products in the market. Television has been the ultimate tool of what social theorist Jacques Ellul called “integration propaganda” meaning it energizes people to go to the refrigerator or the shopping mall, but little else.

There’s a lingering myth about the Vietnam War, resurfacing since the Rodney King beating. It claims televised images of the war leaped out from the sea of violent TV shows as something so unique that it alone inspired millions to actively protest the war.

In reality, the opposite was true. Television, with its inherent capacity to destroy community and deeper human interaction, diffused more rebellion than it provoked. It caused part of its audience to gasp or swear but its effect was ultimately to pacify viewers, with its underlying message to “stay tuned.” It was and is the information and activities away from the tube—demonstrations, organizing, sabotage, civil disobedience, underground newspapers, soldiers deserting, i.e. the very acts of rebellion—which truly inspire people to revolt against the (televised) status quo. [1]

Had TV been the provocateur some contend it to be, then the rioting in LA and elsewhere would have occurred immediately after the widespread airing of the King videotape. For days and weeks after the King beating, the video loop aired continuously on local, national and global networks. The broadcasts found millions of viewers but the streets were no more turbulent than usual. Something else was still needed to trigger the massive uprising: for starters, the “not-guilty” verdict for King’s uniformed assailants.

The media blitz immediately following the Green slaying caused a brief panic with Detroit’s mayor, the city council, the police chief and most anyone in authority. Mayor Coleman Young proclaimed the killing a “disgraceful and total embarrassment.” This attempt to quell any rioting before it exploded may inadvertently cause a change of trial venue. That’s where the “prejudiced” (black and urban poor) jury could be replaced by an “impartial” (white and much less suspicious of police) jury in a surrounding suburb, just like the Rodney King case.

Detroit has its own notorious example of this type of legal maneuvering in the infamous Algiers Motel incident, during the peak of the ’67 riots. In that massacre, three young, unarmed black males were lined up inside the motel where they were tortured and executed by white cops with shotguns. The cops were eventually acquitted by a white jury in a distant rural community. [2]

All seven officers involved in the Malice Green killing were quickly suspended, and the four men facing felony charges were fired during their rather revealing preliminary trial examinations. The two cops who triggered the

fatal assault, nicknamed “Starsky and Hutch” (after a twenty-year-old TV cop show), face the most serious charge of second-degree murder.

Meanwhile, city attorneys rushed through a \$5.1 million settlement to a lawsuit filed by the victim’s wife. Detroit’s payoffs in police brutality settlements continue to be one of the highest in the nation, but a guilty verdict for the two cops charged with murder during an arrest remains very unlikely. Such a rare murder prosecution would give new meaning to the euphemism “embarrassment” for Detroit, and for the entire United (Police) States of America.

The People’s Memorial

It began with an anonymous bouquet of flowers on the sidewalk along Warren Avenue, where Malice Green was murdered. By the weekend, more flowers and markers were placed on the spot by relatives, neighborhood friends and anonymous strangers. Demonstrations and wakes for Green were held around the city in churches, schools and in the streets, but the most powerful vigils were the gatherings at 23rd and Warren.

The 3rd Police Precinct in that district quietly issued orders for police to stay away from the site to avoid further provocation. Residents soon noticed fewer patrol cars in the area; the cops abruptly stopped their routine harassment of the neighborhood, especially to anyone within the vicinity of 23rd and Warren.

There the people’s memorial began to grow.

The memorial is framed by a brick wall of a house which has been transformed into a community message center. It has grown into more than just a roadside marker; it is an act of daily community defiance.

It rained almost daily in November, yet every day and night there were people, some homeless and living in the alleys, cleaning the area around the memorial and rearranging items washed away or damaged in the rain. A haunting array of symbols marks the spot where Malice Green received the majority of his fatal blows.

There are the familiar flowers (some in plastic), candles, religious books and Malcolm X emblems, but there is also a wide assortment of homemade eulogies, cards and odd artifacts which may vanish and get replaced during the week.

On one of my recent visits, I noticed a pair of white leather shoes covered in graffiti where some unused bandage packs once rested. An old alarm clock, a canteen and a shovel broken in two were propped nearby. A freshly stained wood railing encases the ground display.

Looming above the sidewalk is a long wall: the community exhibit and bulletin board. Placards of poetry, announcements of upcoming demonstrations, trial dates, and newspaper clippings from around the country fuses with angry, defiant graffiti.

The centerpiece of this expressive mosaic is an intense portrait of Green by local artist Benny White. When White was finishing the wall painting, it started to rain, but the dripping colors from Green’s hair made the sad, gazing image more chillingly powerful.

The memorial is not without annoyances. Forced attempts to deify Malice Green to Christ-like status and the usual leftist slogans litter the wall. Not surprisingly, the worst culprits have been the RWL (Ready, Willing and Lost) and the RCP (Really Confused Puppets).

When Malice Green’s mother suffered a heart attack during a wake for her son, the RCP rushed to the site the next day with their “Seize (Sleaze) the Moment” posters, recycled Maoist literature and fresh Malice Green T-shirts to “raise money for Mrs. Green.”

The alert community quickly ran the morons out of the area but it has created some new tension and suspicion, previously reserved for the media and the cops. When a friend visited there by himself once in December, some neighborhood kids shouted at him, “Go home, white bitch.”

Yet, despite these flaws, the memorial continues to unite people as it glares back defiantly at the police state. The ongoing community dialogue is loudly compassionate and intelligently poetic. Unknown authors link this incident to a long succession of atrocities, from the genocide and enslavement of Native Peoples, to apartheid in South Africa and in America, from the ’67 riots to the ’92 uprising after the Rodney King verdict...and it voices direct, uncensored protest against the cops.

Cop-Free Zone

I occasionally substitute teach at a nearby women's shelter. Usually it's a small government class. The only exam I've given is a pretty simple yet unconventional test. A sample question reads: "The US Constitution was created by what special interest group?" (a. Native Americans, b. African Americans, c. women, d. wealthy white males).

I won't suggest two hours with my students will shatter their ten-plus years of indoctrination through schooling. Still, I have a rare chance to make some sort of impact beyond the typical graded classroom.

Out of my teaching experiences so far, a short field trip to the Malice Green memorial was the most profound day in school this year.

As we silently shuffled around the site, my students read almost every word on the wall. One student left a message on the designated poster board. Other people were there, black and white, and they all seemed to sense we were part of a special outdoor classroom. I recited a Dudley Randall poem, "The Ballad of Birmingham," before tacking it up to the brick.

The poem was about a boy who died in a 1963 KKK firebombing of a Birmingham, Alabama church.

No baby, no you may not go,
For the dogs are fierce and wild,
And clubs and hoses, guns and jails,
Aren't good for a little child..."

As we slowly drove back to the school I tried to answer the flood of questions as best as I could. Within minutes, the students were scribbling poems about the feelings overwhelming them.

One fifteen-year-old girl had never written a poem before. She wrote this:

Cops
Supposed to protect
Yet they took a life
An innocent one
Wake up and face reality
They choose who to protect.

Predictably, the media soon eased off its somewhat sympathetic portrayal of Malice Green with forced offerings of more "balanced" reporting. This meant trying to emphasize Green's drug use and the trace amounts of cocaine and alcohol reportedly found in his bloodstream, as if this could somehow justify his horrible fate.

And of course, there came the obligatory, exclusive interviews with cops who showed no hint of irony in demanding their innocence "until proven guilty."

The prosecution would prefer to see a couple of more cops (the last Detroit police chief is doing time in a federal pen for some major racketeering and embezzlement schemes) take a fall, to show the citizenry it's not the system, just a few bad apples. There remains quite a Public Relations crisis, which will worsen if the trial is moved to another county, and obviously, if all the cops are found innocent.

Detroit's Mayor Young has always been like most effective politicians—a master of empty rhetoric. His election in 1973 relied heavily on his promise to create a less repressive police force by hiring more black and women cops.

The combined national guard and city police admitted to killing at least 29 out of the 43 people murdered during the 1967 riots, while follow-up research confirmed that sniper-fire was a complete fabrication of law-enforcement agencies. [3]

An undercover, homicidal homicide unit called STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) perfected this search and destroy spirit during 1971–74. The almost completely white units were responsible for at least two dozen killings of mostly black civilians, so the newly-elected Young's disbanding of STRESS was hailed as a great victory for city residents.

Besides this bureaucratic name-changing and paper shuffling within law enforcement, the twenty-year reign of "neighborhood concerns" from the Young administration can best be summarized with two of his biggest causes: the building of the world's largest trash incinerator, and the GM Poletown Cadillac assembly plant, which became the largest community destruction and forced relocation of US citizens since Japanese-Americans during World War Two. [4]

Thus, it should be no surprise that one of the veteran cops charged with murdering M. Green was a STRESS alumnus.

For while minority and women cops now prowl the decaying neighborhoods, the big changes have been in more sophisticated weaponry, more clandestine STRESS-like units, greater advanced computer access and shiny new patrol cars.

The ideal armies of the state have become multi-racial, male and female—and forever faithful to whoever is in the executive suites. Without cops, there would be no state, no capital and no business of the day.

As this article went to press, a desperate and sickly-appearing mayor was proposing massive street sweeps and searches in another final solution against urban crime.

According to several accounts, what most enraged the cops in Malice Green's fatal beating was his refusal to open his fist, after he was ordered to do so, even after they kept slugging away at his skull and kicking his flinching body.

On one recent visit to the memorial, I noticed someone had scribbled a note on the wall: "Malice Green—A Civilian Killed In the Line of Duty—That Duty of When To Say No."

On that horrifying November 5th night, an EMS technician decided he'd seen enough and blurted out over the emergency band radio, "What should I do if I witness police brutality-murder?"

At the very least, this fragile community of rebellion is trying to answer that question. The winter cold now rips at the hung paper notices, and the felt-tip markers freeze, making it nearly impossible to leave a message on the community bulletin board. But somehow people keep leaving notes to each other.

I'm going back there, as soon as the snow clears. I hope to bring another friend or two, and some chalk. The chalk will mark the gray sidewalk, chalk-lines which can be erased to make new lines. Heavy marks will outline the perimeter of this people's memorial, this COP-FREE ZONE.

When we come back again, we'll enlarge the perimeter a few more feet, and hopefully again, whenever we return. Maybe someday there'll be chalk lines all over the city, signifying communities which are COP-FREE. May it start here.

—G. Raffito

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Notes

1. Ellul, Jacques. Propaganda. (1964). Also Mander, Jerry. Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television (1978).

2. Hersey, John. Algiers Motel Incident. (1968). Hersey erroneously believed some justice might be served so he mistakenly published his book before the absurd final verdicts were rendered.

3. "Kerner Commission Report," US Government (1968)

4. Wylie, Jeanie. Poletown: Community Betrayed. (1989).

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"Killer Cops Get Prison in Green Murder," FE #343, Fall-Winter, 1993

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