White racist violence and Black responses

Detroit, June 1943

Sean Alan Cleary

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a review of
Run Home if You Don't Want to be Killed: The Detroit Uprising of 1943 by Rachel Marie-Crane Williams. UNC Press 2021

Rachel Marie-Crane Williams's new graphic history examines the violence that erupted in Detroit during the summer of 1943 in 230 evocative and beautifully rendered black and white images and text. But erupted might be the wrong word to describe what has been called variously a race riot, a pogrom, or, as Williams says in her title, an uprising.

The basic event began as fights broke out in a vast expanse on Belle Isle, a city park in the Detroit River, between groups of Black and white working-class people out on a hot Sunday afternoon. But it quickly spiraled into two days of violence, largely inflicted by police and white mobs on Detroit's Black communities of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley.

Was what happened, white supremacist mob violence and Black defense, panic, and fear, and retribution, an eruption of tension, or was it a slow building up of an ever-present violence in American life? Does the word eruption itself let the very real perpetrators of that violence, and those that encouraged it off the hook?

Langston Hughes's poem, "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943," was perhaps the first attempt to put the nature of the violence that summer into words. Hughes's poem takes as its addressee an America that he's fed up with. It's a country on a war footing. A country asserting that it is unified against fascist aggression.

But, ironically, it's a white nation that Hughes knows doesn't include himself. "Looky here, America," he begins with a delicious sort of antagonism. Hughes knows that at this point, in this war, the main character of the American drama is not the communities within its borders struggling against white aggression.

It's not the only time he addresses America as a whole in a poem, for sure, but "Beaumont to Detroit: 1943," has a fed-up-ness to its address all its own—a preview of his later, and much more famous, "Harlem" with its often-misinterpreted threat of "or does it explode?"

Hughes's poem, even in the moment of the summer of 1943, understands its causes. "Now your policemen," he writes, "let the mobs run free." The attacks are coordinated, if only implicitly, with the authorities; a way to uphold the racial order of a white-supremacist state.

Whipped into a mob, Hughes explains, white America had let loose violence on Black communities across the country in a paroxysm of anti-Black violence, partly, he says in emulation of the very fascist the country opposed.

Even at the time, some contemporary accounts considered the Detroit riots a pogrom of the type waged against European Jewry. One observer describes how even before the two deadly days in June, white nativist gangs, the Ku Klux Klan chief among them, patrolled the edges of Black neighborhoods with the blessing of the police looking to enforce racial barriers and drive Black communities into fear.

It was clear, even then, that it was not just economic uncertainty that drove the violence. It's this dynamic between white supremacy and economic competition that Williams's graphic history sets out to understand. She

makes use of extensive media research, first person accounts, photographs from June 1943 and its aftermath, and semi-fictional scenes that bring a reader into closer contact with the personal paranoia, fear, and violence that exploded on the Belle Isle Bridge and spread across the city's Black neighborhoods.

Her book gives us insight into how people on the streets fled for their lives, how Black men, harassed by police sent to keep the peace, were detained, beaten and killed. We see kitchen table conversations of the type of near-to-life fictionalizations that animate many good documentary films. But we also see the recorded testimonies of Black men and women caught up in the violence like James Reid who witnesses the murder of Julian Witherspoon by a white police officer, and who was later himself shot while in police custody.

But Williams also grants space to the political lead-up to June, with State actors of an entrenched Federal government hand wringing over the "racial tensions" at play in wartime America, while clergy and leaders of the NAACP met and discussed with a federal administration more concerned with the production and propaganda of war than with an obligation to justice.

Williams's figures are drawn masterfully in a style that evokes the heavy dark lines of wartime newsreels, but can achieve the intimate focus on the faces of her characters reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's or Walker Evans's haunting documentary photography work in the 1930s and '40s.

It's especially the eyes of her characters that Williams takes a deft hand in depicting. And like Lange's and Evans's work, Williams's graphic history (in some marketing materials also called a graphic novel), attempts in the faces of its characters to tell a larger story of how state indifference to the structural violence of segregation and ghettoization of Black communities can spiral into attacks by an embittered white working class.

At times, the narrative focus of the piece can be too pointed toward offering a political and economic understanding of the lead up to June, instead of generating a more complete picture of any of the individual actors or communities. In fact, a larger sustained understanding of the communities of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley might have created a better through-line for the story. Instead, Williams focuses on the big points of history in the lead up: the aborted 1941 March on Washington, FDR's Four Freedoms speech, and the fight over segregation in the armed forces and defense industry.

Surely, these are the big political moments and questions that contributed to the general situation in Detroit. And, although we fairly quickly transition to the city, Williams never quite gives us a story of someone integral to violence, or defense that day. If we are to understand those days as an uprising, as she says in her title, it's difficult to do so without a clear sense of what a community defense might have looked like.

Part of this effect comes from Williams's use of vignettes instead of central main characters, something employed in other historical documentary forms like film, but in the graphic narrative form, loses something of its inertia. She attempts to formulate the violence of what she calls an uprising itself as the main driving force behind the narrative.

But the violence and reprisals are presented by Williams as part of a two-sided spiraling of rumor and fear dependent on what Williams calls "each community's worldview." This too closely hems to a so-called balanced narrative that can be more accurately cast within the structural violence of American white supremacy, and the sometimes chaotic reaction and defense against it.

This is where contemporaneous understanding of the violence of June 1943 as a pogrom, and Hughes's evocation of the America outside himself that he's fed up with could better understand and represent what happened on those two chaotic days. Even if their historical is narrowed by proximity, their understanding was from the inside.

Sean Alan Cleary is a teacher and writer from Cambridge, Massachusetts. You can find his work in *Gulf Coast, Public Books, Puerto Del Sol, Another Chicago Magazine*, and at **seanalancleary.com**.

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