

Black Day in July—one Year later

Chris Singer

1968

Who are the long list of names in the oceans
Who are the figures standing in the cabin doors
as the train highballs North
Who are the wailing children,
bodies ripped into bits of flesh?
I catch aspects of their profiles,
am wound around them like a serpent
grasping for life.
whose eyes are these, gouged out
mucus smeared in the red earth,
figure hanging tarred above the lynch fire?
what bodies are these crushed and maimed,
or brains kicked out on the piss pavements
of the cities?
How many aspects of truth do you need Negro leaders?
How many angles are there to any story?
Whose church was that now charred smoldering in time?
Whose mamma getting laid in the cotton patch:
Whose orishas call blood-warnings?
Whose shall die, and die, and die, and die?
Whose soul fucked on the assembly floor?
whose mind picked clean in air-conditioned offices?
whose children shot to pieces in Newark tenements?
whose blood is that efficient lackey-tom motherfuckers?

—Larry Neal

It was one of those hot and humid nights of the early summer that we all detest. So Daniel Thomas loaded some refreshments, his phonograph, and his wife in the family car and headed out to Rouge Park.

They sat at a picnic table in the cool darkness and played some records. They were joined by a group of youths who had heard the music. They all talked and enjoyed the rock and roll and each other's company—for a while.

Suddenly the group attacked Mrs. Thomas. Daniel tried to hold them off, yelling for his wife to flee in the car. He died trying to protect his pregnant wife from a gang assault.

A few of the more than a dozen assailants were charged with specific crimes. Beyond that it became a forgotten incident, part of a long line of forgotten incidents.

Daniel Thomas was black; his killers were white.

Less than one month later, across town at 12th and Clairmount, a summer Sunday morning was shattered in an open rebellion. The story of Daniel Thomas was lost during the revolt that left 43 persons dead and \$80 million in property destroyed.

But in a very real way the story of the relatively little tragedy of Daniel Thomas was, in large measure, responsible for the bigger tragedy. Congressman John Conyers, Jr., in whose district the rebellion began, characterized it as a revolt by the have-nots against the haves; an orgy of violence seen as being justified by the participants.

Detroit's forgotten people, who could not in their own minds distinguish themselves from Daniel Thomas, went wild. For an agonizing week last July, they struck back.

Even before the revolt had run its course, or perhaps was merely suspended, Detroit's establishment began scratching its collective head trying to figure out what had happened. The white power structure had told one another, and the people, that "it" would never happen here.

Our negro community is progressing they had continually said.

One effort was a reasonably objective survey of the black community that was made to find out if there had really been a revolt, and if it was really a revolt of the have-nots.

Black teachers from the Detroit public school system were sent into the streets with questionnaires. It was a survey of attitudes, designed to finger specific grievances.

The results confirmed Conyers' theory.

It was indeed a revolt, and it was in fact a revolt of the have-nots. It was a rebellion directed at property, not people; and at, philosophically, the institutions that make property the object of worship in this society.

A not really surprising picture of the rebel emerged from the survey. He was most often a male between the ages of 15 and 35, with most between 15 and 24 years of age. The vast majority were raised in the North and a simple majority were without gainful employment.

This picture of the rebel was later confirmed by the mountain of statistics that arose from the thousands of arrests made during the rebellion.

An overwhelming majority claimed they thought the United States wasn't worth fighting for in Vietnam or anywhere else. Most indicated that they believed the attitudes of whites was getting worse, and that violence aided black liberation.

Curiously, a national poll released the week of the Newark Rebellion showed that 99 percent of the whites interviewed felt "Negroes were progressing fast enough."

The causes of the revolt, as they were explained by the participants, weren't terribly surprising either. Study after study always comes to the same conclusions. Specifically, the McCone Commission study of the 1965 Watts



The almost all white Michigan National Guard charges down Detroit's 12th Street where the 1967 Rebellion began.

Revolt before the Urban League study, and the Kerner Commission report after it, both tend to substantiate the results of this Detroit study.

The charge of police brutality led the list of the rebel's grievances. Fifty-seven percent said that this was the major complaint they had. What they claimed were insults, a general lack of respect, promiscuous frisking and other searches, and wrongful arrests or arrests for relatively minor violations; all had built up resentment among the rebels.

An overwhelming majority of those interviewed claimed that they had been the personal "victims of police brutality."

Big city law enforcement, and its attendant problems, has been a much discussed public issue. It was known before the rebellion, indeed it was accepted fact, that Detroit suffered terrible police-community relations. It was not a simple handful of celebrated cases like the Cynthia Scott killing in 1963 that irked people; as much as the day to day procedures of the department.

The policeman who patrols the urban ghetto inevitably comes to view himself in the same way that the ghetto residents view him. He is a soldier in an occupation army. His function is not law enforcement; but the prevention of revolt.

Overcrowded living conditions ranked second on the list of grievances. Fifty-five percent of those interviewed said that it contributed a great deal to causing the rebellion. An Urban League survey of Detroit housing a few years ago, revealed that housing conditions for black Detroiters had not measurably improved since the last comparable survey. That housing survey, they compared the new one with was taken in the early 1920s.

The one-two punch of urban renewal and suburban segregation has combined to make the population densities of inner cities frankly unbearable. A telling statistic emerged from the Newark Rebellion, also of July, 1967. If the entire population of the United States lived in the same density of population as the blacks in Newark, then every living American could be packed into the ten [sic] boroughs of New York city, with some room to spare.

Poor housing was said to be a major grievance by 54 percent of those interviewed. Detroit Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh has often said that of the 800,000 housing starts in the United States in 1967, none were for low-income housing anywhere in the nation.

A general lack of jobs, and poverty were indicated as grievances by 45 and 44 percent of those interviewed, respectively. And anger with the practices of neighborhood businesses was important to 43 percent of those interviewed. Grocery stores were singled out as especially resented by 54 percent, and loan offices by 48 percent.

Both private and official investigations have consistently shown that inner city residents pay more for goods of lesser value at food markets, than do suburban shoppers. And sales taxes, a nuisance to most shoppers, are actually repressive to the poor who must budget every penny, often without knowing how to budget or being able to do comparison shopping.

And again, both private and official surveys have conclusively shown that the poor, who lack ready cash and must buy on credit, consistently pay as much as 300 percent more than other shoppers for comparable, or often inferior, goods.

It is not as difficult as one might believe to put the survey, or the rebellion that initiated it, into a historical perspective.

Two things have contributed most to the crisis in American cities. The first is the continuing exodus from the South to the Northern cities. Both blacks and whites have made the journey. Lacking a competitive education, unused to comprehensive law enforcement, unable to communicate effectively, and lacking a familiarity with city life and northern culture; these immigrants have become the dispossessed, disoriented, frustrated and resentful people seen on the streets during rebellions.

Coupled with their immigration to the North has been the ever increasing progress in industrial techniques. Without job skills, it has been more difficult for these groups to "pull themselves up by their bootstraps" than for previous immigrant groups. The unskilled jobs earlier immigrants were gratified to hold have been automated out of existence.

Today's poor have no bootstraps. And the gap between Conyers' haves and have-nots keeps getting wider.

So, it was in this context that the rebellion occurred. It was not a revolt directed at people as much as at institutions. It was not even directed at institutions as much as a revolt against a life style the institutions force upon the urban poor, most of them black.

Many whites were hard pressed to comprehend the tactic of burning down neighborhood stores. Mayor Canavanagh expressed shock at "the almost carnival-like atmosphere" in the streets.

It's not really that difficult to understand.

But, this is one year later. Today's question ought to be: how much has changed, and how extensively have people's life style been altered?

Tragically, the only valid question is: have things changed at all?

And the answer is that things have changed only slightly, if at all.

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