Of Rumour and Riot

(Belt Magazine, July 22, 2015*)*

In late summer of 1967, waves of rumours moved through metropolitan Detroit, announcing a series of race divisions across the city and between city and suburb. The rumours went as follows: the police were training white suburbanites, preparing to incite a riot and then launch an armed invasion of ghetto areas. Black activists were mining the motorways and planning to shoot white suburbanites as they drove to their downtown offices. Concentration camps in various secret sites across the U.S. were being readied for a massive displacement and incarceration of black inner city populations. Or the ghetto itself might be cordoned off into a concentration camp. Black mobile killer squads would roam the suburbs murdering whites.[1]

[1] For more about the circulation of rumour in Detroit 1967, see Marilynn Rosenthal, "Where Rumor Raged." *Trans-Action* 8 (1971):34-43; see also Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989, and Amy Kenyon, *Dreaming Suburbia,* Wayne State UP, 2004.

In their mobility and content, the rumours mapped a physical and psychological geography of metropolitan Detroit at a highly charged historical moment. For in that July, the most serious urban American uprising to date had occurred in the city. With 43 deaths (33 black, 10 white), 2,000 injured, and 7,000 people arrested, Detroit's numbers were not surpassed until events in Los Angeles in 1992.

In the days before social media, rumour travelled mainly by word of mouth and telephone. But it spread no less rapidly and unpredictably, subverting official channels of communication. With both city newspapers out on strike by the fall, a kind of narrative crisis hung over the entire metropolitan area, this accompanied by an arms race as city dwellers and suburbanites bought large quantities of rifles and handguns. Finally, the Mayor set up a "Rumour Control Centre," with the express purpose of checking out rumours and countering falsehood with truth.

The idea of a Rumour Control Centre seems laughable now, and probably seemed laughable at the time, when narrative certainties were being contested on a daily basis. Perhaps the only available truth in late 1967 was that Detroit was full of stories. They were all about race and urban space, and they were all up for grabs. For example, what had happened in July? Was it a riot, a rebellion, an outing, a holiday, an insurrection, a new feeling? These were some of the terms used by participants and witnesses. In these differing expressions, everyone staked some claim to the event: the families of the 43 people who died, the police, the inner-city dwellers who burned, looted, and talked; the suburbanites who sat shocked in front of blue TV screens until downtown had been "made safe" by federal troops. Then they jumped into their cars, locked the doors, and went sightseeing downtown in such numbers that the curfew had to be reinstated. In their disparate life paths, everyone searched for some narrative hold on events. Everyone figured in the local enactment of power relations in urban space, precisely because the long hot summer was about people as *users* of space; it

was about bodies, skin colour, and lived urban culture. It was about work, about houses and streets, who owned them, who policed them, who controlled them, who occupied them.

As a white child living in the Detroit suburb of Garden City at the time, I recall standing on the front porch at night during that late July. I saw a pale glow in the sky above Detroit as it burned. By August, the kids sat on glaring, sun-baked bumpers of Fords and Chevys and repeated the rumours of a black conspiracy against our subdivisions. It was an addictive topic. We longed for the thrill of a curfew or for school to stay closed, come September. But there was no need. In suburbia, we were safe as houses. Blinded by our sunny neighbourhoods. What we failed to see was that the real conspiracy lay closer to home than we knew, on our own doorsteps, in our safety, and in layers of suburban self-deception.

In the post-war period, rapid suburbanization had exacerbated an already profound dislocation of space and race. If there was a conspiracy behind the rumours, then we in the suburbs at least, were looking in the wrong places. Perhaps we needed our own Deep Throat to instruct us, as he would later instruct the Watergate journalists, to "follow the money."

What might we find by following the money? During the 1950s, nearly one out of every four white Detroiters moved to the suburbs. The increasing mechanization of industry in the American South, combined with the draw of Detroit as automotive capital, meant that, in the same period, the city's black population rose by more than 50 per cent. However, commercial and industrial suburbanization increased almost simultaneously with these demographic movements, taking jobs out of the city, causing downtown property values to plummet and the city tax base to shrink in a period of heightening social need. Together, Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler (Detroit's "Big Three") built twenty-five new plants in suburban areas between 1947 and 1958.[2]

[2] Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996 (128). The post-war deindustrialization of Detroit is treated at length in Sugrue's work and supports his central argument that later

Garden City was one of many suburbs positioned to benefit from post-war industrial suburbanization. With its proximity to Dearborn, and with other manufacturing plants and warehouse facilities relocating from Detroit to nearby industrial corridors, Garden City's growth was assured. Complementary metal and machinery industries and retailers developed around these corridors. In Garden City, some gains were straightforward, such as the award of a $1 million contract to a local electrical parts company by the Chrysler Corporation. Other benefits were more like small commentaries on the times, such as the school board purchase, in 1957, of the opulent boardroom furniture from Packard, a Detroit car company on the skids. The Packard Company had been a major player in the automotive game, with a plant on East Grand Boulevard stretching across many blocks. That plant is now one of the city's most iconic industrial ruins. But Packard was one of many companies that suffered cutbacks or closures, and by the time of the 1967 disorder, Detroit had lost nearly 130,000 manufacturing jobs.

Commercial suburbanization proceeded apace too, with supermarkets, gas stations, and fast-food restaurants appearing along the suburban strip roads. Between 1954 and 1961, twenty-nine "one stop" shopping centres opened in the Detroit suburbs. Eventually Garden City residents had several major malls within easy striking distance of home, including Wonderland, Westland, and Fairlane. This expansion of suburban fields of consumption was facilitated and financed by downtown Detroit. As the rate of return on downtown shops looked set to fall below that of suburban shopping centres, the migration of commercial capital accelerated. Sales at Hudson's department store went into steady decline after 1954. Hudson's recouped its losses and managed to keep the downtown store open until 1983, but

urban problems had their origins not in the aftermath of the 1960s urban rebellions, but in the "complex and interwoven histories of race, residence, and work" in the longer post-war period (5).

only by investing in the suburban malls at Northland and Eastland. Kern's, Detroit second-largest department store, had closed as early as 1959, removing almost an entire downtown block from the tax rolls.

These processes of urban disinvestment, spatial change, and suburbanization cannot be separated from the history of race in America. In Detroit as in other Rust Belt cities, middle-class whites were able to follow and add to the flow of money away from the city. Many white workers had the means to move into tract houses in the blue-collar fringe developments located near suburban manufacturing plants. But persistent housing discrimination prevented any significant black suburbanization, adding to what Thomas Sugrue, in his comprehensive study of race and inequality in post-war Detroit, described as a "spatial mismatch between African Americans and jobs." Car ownership was lower in Detroit than the suburbs. And the lack of a cohesive metropolitan-wide transportation system combined with discriminatory employment practices to limit the chances of Detroit residents seeking work in suburban locations.

It is tempting to say here that in all these arrangements, capitalism "played a race card." The organization and economy of post-war American space suggested a mapping that underpinned Malcolm X's assertion that "it's impossible for a white person to believe in capitalism and not believe in racism." Detroiter Auburey Pollard Sr. put it still more graphically: "What does this do with the Negro? It puts him in a circle… They work in a circle. You can see the money moving." Pollard's son was one of three young African Americans killed by police in the notorious Algiers Motel Incident, which occurred during the events of July 1967.

As a result of these post-war spatial and demographic changes, derelict houses, factories, and warehouses began to dot the cityscape. The post-riot suburban sightseeing may mark one of the few occasions that commuters ventured off the freeways into the

neighbourhoods marked by disinvestment. In *Fitzgerald: The Geography of a Revolution*, his seminal history/geography of a single Detroit neighbourhood, William Bunge accused suburbanites of "sucking" money out of Detroit "like the lamprey eels suck the juices out of Michigan Lake trout." In Bunge's account, freeway construction proved to be a crucial act of disinvestment, literally providing a funnel for the exit of white people and resources to the suburbs. Moreover, post-war freeway building in Detroit was an act of visual segregation in that it removed entire neighbourhoods from the commuters' field of vision. Bunge put it more bluntly, arguing that suburbanites understood the ghetto only as "the commuter time necessary to pass through it."

If Detroit's inner-city neighbourhoods could be reduced to the abstraction of a spatially experienced expense of travel time, then Detroit as a city in which people *lived* had become less and less real to suburbanites. As a child of the fifties suburban boom, I remain convinced that the decade was a key period in which we walked away from the city, and closed our eyes and ears to those who remained. Those whites who spent their childhoods in suburbia did not meet African Americans. For me, this was true until I left home for university.

The suburb was a mystified space to its own inhabitants. The mystification occurred in the notion that the purchase of a house in the suburbs was the post-war fulfilment of the American Dream, perhaps a variant of "manifest destiny," an unproblematic expression of American freedom, movement, growth, and prosperity, and finally, in the denial that this was a space founded, at least in part, on the premise and promise of segregation. By 1967, James Baldwin (in *Nobody Knows My Name*) had already warned that in the geography of northern spaces, black was becoming invisible to white. Yet in the inner city, white remained visible to black, in the shape of the police, courts, lawmakers, city administrators, absentee landlords, and the media. White had access to black lives in ways that were not reciprocal. Incidents

involving white police officers drew particular criticism from residents and from Detroit's local NAACP. In a community that was nearly 50 percent black in 1965, just 2.8 percent of the police force was black.[3]

The larger point for the post-war period, is that the overall trend in living space both in the city, and between city and suburb, was towards increased residential segregation, with black renters and home owners forced to occupy the aging urban housing stock left behind by departing whites. With the construction of public housing already kept to a minimum, African Americans were effectively excluded from the private real estate market by a range of discriminatory practices emanating from city realtors and lending institutions. These practices were facilitated by post-war federal housing policies and consolidated "on the ground" by organized resistance on the part of white neighbourhood "defence" groups. When black Detroiters succeeded in crossing the colour line, they regularly met with harassment and violence from their new neighbours. Sugrue found that white resistance took a variety of forms, including demonstrations, effigy burning, arson, vandalism, and physical attacks. In spite of a gradual, spatial expansion of black residence in the 1950s, both visible and invisible walls continued to limit the chances of African Americans. The pressure this put on the everyday living space of black Detroiters cannot be overstated. On Twelfth Street, where the 1967 rebellion started, the population density was 21,000 people to the square mile, more than twice the density of white districts.[4]

Detroiters soon found that the integration narrative of the southern-based Civil Rights movement could not easily be transplanted to northern cities. Some black Detroiters invented their own narratives, ones which underlined the *de facto* apartheid of the north, in contrast to

---

[3] Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press,2001 (38).
[4] Barbara Stanton, "Pain and Promises: The Detroit Riot's Legacy." *Detroit Free Press*, Sunday, July 19, 1987.

the South's legacy of Jim Crow and *de jure* apartheid. Detroit stories went like this: "We pay taxes so white people can live in the suburbs. No one attempted to compensate us for the freeways. We don't use them. But they have taken up land and reduced our tax base." "Suburbia is a white noose." "I work in Detroit and I live in Detroit, but I don't feel free. There are so many places closed to me." In Motown, it was said, integration referred to no more than the brief period of time between the arrival of the first black on the block and the departure of the last white.[5] These were clear and powerful statements, visions of suburbia that remained unseen by those of us who lived there.

Moreover in the 1960s, many black Detroiters found a helpful and strategic discourse in African anticolonial and liberation struggles. In 1965, the Detroit president of the NAACP stated that "the Negroes in Detroit feel they are part of an occupied country." Hear, too, some of the insurrectionist narratives of riot participants and black activists: "Man, how can you call this place a home? This ain't no mother-fuckin' home. This is a prison. I'd just as soon burn down this damn place as any other." "We are determined to control our own community."[6] Stokely Carmichael stated that the "American city is, in essence, populated by people of the Third World, while the white middle classes flee the cities to the suburbs," and "anyone who has lived in a modern black ghetto knows, it is no mere figure of speech when the predominantly white police forces are referred to as a 'colonial army of occupation.'" Beyond Detroit, when armed Black Panthers trailed white Californian police squads in order to monitor arrests, the assumed identity of African liberation fighter was palpable. When nearly three decades later, following the violence in L.A., warring gangs the Crips and the

[5] See Leonard Gordon, ed., *A City in Racial Crisis: The Case of Detroit Pre- and Post- the 1967 Riot.* Dubuque IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1971 (116, 124, & 131), and Fine, *Violence in the Model City* (356).

[6] Van Gordon Sauter & Burleigh Hines. *Nightmare in Detroit: A Rebellion and Its Victims.* Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1968 (231), and Fine, *Violence in the Model City* (372).

Bloods joined ranks, named the riot a 'slave rebellion' and organized mass meetings, a post-sixties transmission of liberation narratives was still in evidence.

These events we call riots tend to produce surprising narratives, counter-narratives, complex identities, and sometimes unexpected alliances. It is little wonder then, that the word itself – *riot* – is so frequently challenged, that participants often reject it, in favour of more politically productive words such as *rebellion* or *uprising*. Social historians tend to view the word less negatively. Rioting is a part of history and when viewed in retrospect, particular riots or periods of social disorder may be seen as either key moments in a period of struggle or rumbling motors of historical change. But if we are to listen to participants, then the words they choose need to be brought into the conversation.

In addition, we need to situate each rebellion in both its local and larger context. For example, if recent events in Baltimore and Ferguson had local triggers, they also tapped into widespread anger and frustration about the historical and ever-rising numbers of black deaths as a direct result of police violence. Moreover, protesters made strategic connections with the Black Lives Matter movement. It was no different for Detroit, back in 1967, where the backdrop was Civil Rights, Black Power, and yes *again*, police violence in black communities. Police actions, the failure of our legal system to hold them to account, racist media representations/obfuscations of these incidents, and, sadly, the vehemence of white denial so reminiscent of those mystified fifties suburbanites – all of these remain shockingly consistent from sixties Detroit to Baltimore and Ferguson today. And if we are tempted to speak of these local disorders as isolated outbursts, we must look again. Discontent was no more confined to Detroit, than it is now to Baltimore. In the 1960s, along with Watts, Newark, and Detroit, there were numerous lesser-known outbreaks of disorder against perceived local and national injustices. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence identified 239 urban riots between 1963 and 1968. In what historian

Paul Gilje has termed a "contagion of disorder," the Commission cited some 200,000 participants, 8,000 injuries, and 190 deaths.

Even sympathetic observers will, for the most part, condemn the violence we associate with urban protest: street confrontations with the police, burning, and looting. But there are a few commentators currently repeating Martin Luther King's remark that "a riot is the language of the unheard." And although they are less in evidence now than in the late sixties, there are still some who believe that violence is sometimes a necessary tool in the struggle for social change. What *all* of us need to do is give pause for the historical contexts of violence, and for the voices and actions of participants themselves. Looking back at Detroit 1967, I came across those who spoke of the exhilaration of throwing a brick, who smiled at police and firemen and said, "The streets are ours."[7] And because I had begun to learn something of the larger story of Detroit and my own suburban home by the time I came to these voices, they could not be dismissed. These were not random words and rumours; this was not random violence. In fact, none of it seemed terribly surprising, given the history of these spaces.

In those July days, there were also moments of irony and carnival. For example, some people pulled looted sofas onto the pavement and became spectators in their own event. In a period of television history dominated by white sitcoms set in white suburbs, a man reported that the first image he saw on his looted TV was footage of himself; he was carrying that TV down a burning street. The Kerner report (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) told of local residents out in their pyjamas, laughing and joking and "dancing amidst the flames." Achille Mbembe has written of the role of humour in situations of power

---

[7] See Fine, *Violence in the Model City* (162) and the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (76).

and protest: “the people who laugh kidnap power and force it, as if by accident, to contemplate its own vulgarity.” There is political drama, play, and humour in the practice of urban disorder. This is a practice that can toy with things as they are, and ask us to imagine what might be.

After events in Ferguson and Baltimore, we have again entered into debates about the meaning of the word riot, whether it is a word that should be used at all, and finally, whether a riot, by whatever name, ever achieves anything. These are not new questions. I first visited them some years ago, when I began to read about Detroit in 1967, when it became too hard to ignore my nagging suspicions that there was a violence closer to home, embedded in the segregated places of my childhood. And although it would be ridiculous to claim that nothing has changed since then, it is also clear that a widespread and persistent white denial of black experience continues to block our collective progress. When white people learn something of the historical background to events and something of our own blind complicity, then riot acts, identities, and stories cannot be so readily dismissed as the inexplicable, mindless violence described by the mainstream press. Participants are making new history, acting in and from a situation that has been largely ignored. It’s up to the rest of us to listen, learn, choose our own words with care, and be part of the long solution.