SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE: REBELLION, SUBURBIA, AND THE STORY OF PLAINFIELD, NEW JERSEY

A Dissertation submitted to Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

Drew University in partial fulfillment of

The requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Committee chair: *William B. Rogers, Ph.D.*

Associate Dean, Caspersen School of Graduate Studies

Madera Edwards

Drew University

Madison, New Jersey

August 2014

ABSTRACT

Somewhere in the Middle: Rebellion,
Suburbia, and the Story of
Plainfield, New Jersey

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation by

Madera Edwards

The Caspersen School of Graduate Studies
Drew University August 2014

The primary focus of this text is the riot that upended the suburban city of Plainfield, New Jersey from July 14-18, 1967. Through a nuanced dialectic exploring the use and conditions of the terms riot and uprising to describe and explain moments of intense urban violence commonly associated with racial tensions, it is the determination of this author that the term riot, as used to describe the Plainfield incident, is a misnomer. In fact, the evidence suggests that the Plainfield episode, all those that happened in the summer of 1967 and thereafter, and those that happened since the Harlem event of 1943 are, in fact, uprisings characterized by the rebellion of a racial underclass discontent with their imposed inferior social and economic positions. The onus, then, for racial categorization is placed squarely at the feet of the oppressor class, or white establishment, for this analysis demonstrates the pivotal role violence plays when it comes to distinguishing between perpetration and reaction; thus, determining the role of violence

as vengeance versus violence as protest becomes an essential conclusion of the evidence in order to fully appreciate the upheaval in July 1967 in Plainfield, NJ.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my husband, Michael John Adams.

This would not exist without you.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has taken some time, and during the long years of its completion, I drew on support from people who truly mean a lot to me and my work. I am truly grateful to Drew University, specifically Caspersen School of Graduate Studies where I spent more than a decade going through the rigors of a PhD program. I appreciate the time that my advisors gave me, and I especially value my committee, Dean William Rogers, Dr. Lillie Edwards and Dean Richard Greenwald, for their time and support.

I would also like to thank the Plainfield Public Library, specifically Ms. Hull and the local history department. Furthermore, I would like to thank the countless people who talked to me about this topic and the tumultuous days of 1967. This especially holds true for my neighbors, who have lived with this project for quite some time. I appreciate their friendship, guidance and cheerleading.

I would like to thank all those involved in this project in allowing me to take time off and indulge in book reading and watching New York Yankee baseball, the things that keep me going.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family. First, my mother—my biggest fan—her wisdom and guidance help my endurance and perseverance. I learned it all from her, and she will always be my role model.

My father, his words of encouragement and his understanding helped me throughout my PhD program. He assisted in giving me the drive to finish this project. He makes me proud to be his daughter.

My sister and nephews have always been there for me. I thank them as well for the continuous love and support they give me each and every day.

My husband is my muse. Without him, I would still be on page one. His consistent input and reassurance inspired me. His love and support kept me grounded. He reminds me each day how lucky I am to have a true partner in life, someone willing to do anything and everything to keep me going. For that, I am truly grateful.

Thank you to all who have supported me throughout the years. This work is a reminder that indeed it does take a village to conquer big things in life. And, my village is awesome.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

During the winter months of early 2005, two engaged-to-be-married graduate students were looking for housing in a relatively expensive area in northern New Jersey, or Metropolitan New York, depending on one's preference. The question was where to live? They were currently renting one-half of a small two-family house in Summit, New Jersey, close to their graduate school community. But to afford a house, they knew they would have to move to a town with less affluence, and possibly less security. "I'm looking for houses in Plainfield!" Michael exclaimed to my horror one day.

As a child raised in affluent Morristown, I knew the type of slum Plainfield was purported to be, so I was fairly sure we could afford a house in this small, crime-ridden city. Nevertheless, after much (much) cajoling, I was convinced to look in Plainfield for my first house together.

We found a new home within two months of our initial search, a split-level Postwar Cape Cod, neatly situated on a quiet tree-lined street with a diverse mixture of neighbors. Plainfield ended up being nothing like I thought it would be, and I was relatively surprised by the calm, serene nature of my surroundings absent as it was of gunshot echoes or constant blaring sirens.

As a woman of color, this would not be the first racially mixed neighborhood I would live in, but it was the first to raise my expectations of the possibility of a truly diverse community to live in harmony and share with one another the same basic needs,

hopes, wants and respect. I do not live in the safest city in New Jersey, but I live on one of the safer streets in Plainfield, and for eight years, I have been happy.

In the first months of residence, every day I looked for flaws in my seemingly idyllic neighborhood, waiting for a Stepford Wife to step out of the bushes or some crime most commonly associated with Plainfield. The neighborhood was almost too perfect. One day, as I tended to my new flowers in my new yard, I met the very friendly neighbor on the western side of my house. In the course of our conversation, I was delighted to discover that most of our neighbors had lived in their homes for decades, and with the mind's eye on diversity, I was happy to know this was a solid mixed-race community. The neighbor across the street, an eighty-year-old white woman, moved into her home when it was built in the 1950s, and across from her and next to me, was a black family that had moved into the neighborhood three years before I did and who were now expecting a new baby.

My friendly neighbor next door said she moved into her home during the late 1960s when she was in elementary school. She had moved from West 7th Street in the heart of West End Plainfield. When I asked why her family had moved, she answered, "***Because of the riot***."

That day, this project was born.

This dissertation is about an uprising that erupted on the streets of Plainfield, New Jersey in July of 1967.[1] But it is about much more than the riot. This is a story about the

[1] There is a dearth of literature on suburban uprisings although some can glean a picture of what each uprising was like by reading histories of larger, urban uprisings. The archival material is out there and this study serves to be one of many that will study the phenomenon of suburban rioting (see chapter 3 for a discussion on the differences

role that migration played on the suburban North, the shape of change in small cities like Plainfield as migrants become locals, and the role migration and migrants had in characterizing and fomenting public disorder. It is a story that insists upon questions of national identity, and how local community organizations are commonly and falsely accused of ineffectiveness, when, in fact, by sheer determination these organizations helped to quell tensions in communities. Finally, this is a story that posits and describes distinctions in mass uprisings. This dissertation is a history that illuminates the forgotten or misunderstood story of a small, suburban New Jersey city in its most conflicted moments. It is a history of known and unknown men and women that had to contend with change, limited town governance, and a growing town's population. Yet, Plainfield, New Jersey's story has relevance beyond itself. It can fill many voids in the larger historiographical picture. The suburban uprising is a new field of research that must rely on primary sources and contemporary accounts, as what is written now, in the past five years, is only the beginning of a robust area in need of study.[2] The forty preceding years

---

between uprising and riot), especially in the North where recent scholarship by Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Press, 2011), and Janet Abu-Lughold, *Race, Space and Riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) demonstrate how racial strife was prevalent.

[2] They include Kerner Commission / The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders / Kerner Report* (Washington, DC, 1968); *Report for Action: New Jersey's Governor's Commission on Civil Disorders* (State of New Jersey, 1968); David Boesel and Peter H. Rossi, eds., *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto Riots 1964-1968* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Robert M. Fogleson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers, 1971); David Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths, and the Ghetto Riots," *Psychiatry* 33, no 2 (1970): 265-80; Thomas J. Sugrue and Andrew P. Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 4 (May 2007): 568-601; and

left these unknown uprisings virtually buried in the depths of ancient or forgotten history.[3] One of the more recent articles on the Plainfield uprising by Thomas Sugrue and Andrew Goodman, entitled "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North" from the *Journal of Urban History* (2007), makes a compelling case as to why smaller cities should be studied. They argue smaller city and suburban uprisings "offer a glimpse into the simmering politics of black discontent that extended well beyond the large concentrations of African Americans living in segregated, central cities."[4] Scholars can find out much about a town when we attempt to filter out the chaos and study the big picture, beginning with the local political culture.

Plainfield became an oppressed and bifurcated community as more blacks moved into the city, characterized by many forms of racial discrimination that will be discussed throughout the following analysis. A ghetto, in a smaller city or suburban area—Plainfield's estimated 1967 population was 45,000[5]— is a hard thing to hide. Therefore, the problems that stemmed from the uprisings may be elucidated with a comprehensive study of that uprising itself and the context of it. Small cities, and suburbs like Plainfield, place race relations under a microscope. It is for this reason, I contend, that organizational activity, social services and civic engagement were an important part of

---

Thomas Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

[3] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 595.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Kerner Commission / The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory*, 43, hereafter referred to as *Kerner Report*.

the infrastructure in Plainfield. It is argued that such organizations were inadequate and floundered, but they did not fail; the system failed to support the organizations that were formed and fully organized to help ameliorate the tensions in Plainfield's West End black community. I witness this more as I compare and contrast the story of Plainfield with the story of other, larger city uprisings, such as those in Newark and Detroit, which occurred around the same time as Plainfield in 1967.

Plainfield's story reveals a web of community organizations that attempted to reach the community as a whole. With 16,000 black residents,[6] Plainfield was hardly a Bedford–Stuyvesant, a community in New York City, with 50,000 black residents living in the project communities alone.[7] An uprising took place in that New York neighborhood in 1964. Other larger urban uprisings that have been studied more frequently all have much larger black populations: Chicago 125,000 (1968),[8] Los Angeles 650,000 (1968),[9] and lower estimates for Detroit 487,000[10] and Newark 140,000[11] which are based on the 1960 census. These are just numbers of black

---

[6] The *1960 Census* shows the African American population at 9,941 but as Plainfield's black population grew to 18,749 in the *1970 Census*, the black proportion of the population had grown, too. Sugrue and Goodman report, "In 1960 blacks made up 21.7 percent of Plainfield's population; by 1970, their share of the population had risen to 40%," 570.

[7] Abu-Lughold, *Race, Space and Riots*," 161.

[8] Ibid., 86.

[9] Ibid., 200.

[10] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 351.

[11] Ibid., 354

Americans living in cities with uprisings. The uprising community tended to be a small proportion of those populations. For example, Newark had close to 140,000 black citizens in 1960, and out of that number, close to 75,000 lived in the area where the disorder took place.[12] But these are only estimates, mostly in the lower thousands, of who rebelled in the city that July, leaving twenty-three people dead and hundreds injured.[13]

Plainfield was a town with just under 45,000 citizens in the late 1960s, and the non-white population was growing during this decade. Out of 16,000 black citizens, 5,750 of them lived in the area of disorder with participation ranging from 50 to 300 individuals, at most, as estimates have varied.[14] These numbers demonstrate how small the Plainfield uprising was compared to the larger uprisings in 1967. Nevertheless, for its size, the damage was costly. *The Report of the National Commission on Civil Disorders*, also known as the Kerner Commission Report (1968), categorized uprisings based on severity. It ranked the worst eight major disturbances of the one hundred and sixty-three that took place in the summer of 1967, and Plainfield was one of those eight. The others included the aforementioned Detroit and Newark riots, as well as, Buffalo, New York City, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, and Tampa.[15] The term "major" was "in terms

---

[12] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 354.

[13] Ibid., 38.

[14] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*; *Report for Action: New Jersey's*; Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*; Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths"; Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion."

[15] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 3.

of violence and damage."[16] This means the largely untold story of Plainfield, New Jersey is a significant part of racial and regional history. It serves as an important lesson in the history of race relations in suburban areas during the twentieth century, and poses lessons for those of us in the twenty-first century. Something major happened in Plainfield, New Jersey in mid-July 1967; that something might be an important event to investigate its implications, then as much as now.

There were many commonalities among the major, serious and minor uprisings. Most disorders took place in the evening, and most often lacked a trigger event that led directly to uprising. Rather, "an increasingly disturbed social atmosphere, in which typically a series of tension heightening incidents over a period of weeks and months became linked in the minds of many in the Negro community."[17] During these public disorders, rock and bottle throwing led to looting and in some cases sniper fire.[18] They highlighted tensions between the local police and the African American community. Those involved were typically young and male, while most government officials were white.[19]

Plainfield converges and diverges from this typicality and the trends developed by the Kerner Commission in 1968. What can be surmised based on the findings of the committee is that those who expressed their grievances were demanding "fuller

---

[16] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 3.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 4.

participation in the social order and the material benefits enjoyed by the majority of American cities."[20] Like rioters in most disorders, Plainfielders attacked their city at night and had a "series of tension heightening incidents over a period of weeks," which involved the Plainfield Police Department and the West End community. Plainfield can be distinguished for its rock and bottle throwing, along with the sniper fire, which was linked to a break-in at a local gun manufacturer during the uprising in July 1967.[21] Those involved in the Plainfield uprising were typically young and male just as the city government and officials were mostly white.[22]

Indeed, Plainfield on paper is the typical "major" uprising addressed in the Kerner Commission report, but there are anomalies as well, and they remind us of the importance of studying these uprisings in context of the era and its consequences. The organization and even purpose of the uprising is one way that Plainfield diverges from common categorization. As social scientist and Kerner Commission member David Boesel observed, "The Plainfield uprising is significant as a sort of ideal type on a small scale, for it illustrates better than any other the leading definitive role of Negro youth, the political function of the uprising action, and the tendency toward black territorial control."[23]

---

[20] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report,* 4.

[21] Thomas Johnson, "Plainfield Negroes Say Ghetto is Safer Now Without Police," *The New York Times,* July 21, 1967.

[22] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 275.

[23] Ibid.

One significant element that characterizes the Plainfield uprising is the number of meetings and gatherings between those who were out looting and burning their town, and those in power, who were ostensibly there to listen to the rebels' grievances. This is an issue that is distinct in Plainfield as a suburban area: community leaders and government officials were accessible and visible throughout the period of the Plainfield uprising. The sheer number of protesters participating in the uprising and the ubiquity of leadership in Plainfield meant that there was communication between the powerful and the powerless; the effectiveness of this communication, however, is less clear. Not only did Plainfield have two black city council members, but the city also had black leaders in the community who were willing to step up and negotiate with the powers that governed the town. This is a characteristic I do not see in larger communities under siege, like Newark and Detroit. Louis Goldberg writes in the 1968 *Journal of Peace Research*,

> In Detroit, where there may have been tens or hundreds of bands of rebels at work, any kind of coherence or control over events was impossible. In Newark, the possibility for a political solution was quickly foreclosed by the severe political polarization between the mayor and the middle-class Negro militants, and the lack of control of the latter over the young. In Plainfield, the existence of a leadership group among the youth who were rioting, and their willingness to negotiate, made possible a political compromise of sorts.[24]

The plethora of organizations with goals to support the impoverished community, a community that grew throughout the twentieth century, were fledgling but operating. They assumed an active role attempting to unravel the misunderstandings between community members, and this aspect of Plainfield's story describes a quality of suburban

[24] Louis C. Goldberg, "Ghetto Uprisings and Others: The Faces of Civil Disorder," *Journal of Peace Research* 5, no. 2 (1968): 119.

unrest distinct from larger areas. These organizations played as important a role in the recovery after the uprising as they had played in the city prior to the event. Nevertheless, Plainfield's government, in the words of the Kerner Commission Report, was "fragmented and part-time,"[25] and so were the people of the town. There was no cohesive unit or "black community" to address, and there was a failure to communicate the larger message of the organizational models and the importance of the attempts at ameliorating growing racial tension. In the words of Francis Fox Piven, there was a failure in "the ability of organizations to secure incentives or sanctions that will command and sustain the required contributions and participation from masses of people."[26] Plainfield tried, but it still failed her people.

History of Research

Due to the small nature of suburban Plainfield, overshadowed by the larger cities in New Jersey, like Newark, Trenton, Camden, Jersey City, or even nearby Elizabeth, the city's unrest is often overlooked in studies about urban and suburban history, especially in relation to the riotous years of the late 1960s. Therefore, scholars are left to rely on technical sociological studies from the immediate period after the uprisings, like the *Report of the National Commission on Civil Disorders* (1968), the Governor's Select

[25] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

[26] Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), x.

Commission on Civil Disorder (Lilley Commission) of New Jersey, and archival research at local libraries.

The Kerner Commission report was a federal initiative of Lyndon Johnson's administration designed to specifically address "three basic questions about these uprisings." The President added "What Happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"[27] The commission famously concluded, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, and one white— separate and unequal."[28] The Report and the Supplementary Reports thoroughly examine a set of problems plaguing black communities throughout America and makes ambitious recommendations on what can be done "to prevent [this] from happening again." Unfortunately, the recommendations of enrichment and integration were largely ignored.[29]

Reports like the Lilly Commission and Kerner Commission detailed the actions of each uprising and specified a prescription on how to remedy each problem. They followed the directive New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes issued in organizing the Lilley Commission in 1967, "What I am seeking, and what the people of New Jersey expect, is not a meaningless and detailed repetition of studies, but a realistic analysis of the disorders...and practical proposal which, hopefully, will prevent their recurrence in

---

[27] The American Presidency Project, "Remarks Upon Signing Order Establishing the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders," Washington DC, July 29, 1967, accessed February 12, 2011, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28369.

[28] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 1.

[29] Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.

our State."[30] These studies were ambitious in what they attempted to achieve, but they were also activist responses to the uprisings that plagued America throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. The Kerner Commission Report is useful in detailing the timeline of the events regarding the uprising, and this study contains a full assessment, as a matter of analysis, of the conclusions the commission determined would quell tensions in towns and cities that have rioted.

A book from 1971, edited by sociologists David Boesel and Peter Rossi entitled *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto Uprisings, 1964-1968* provide a context to frame the 1960s uprisings in. This text examines the political nature of each disorder and includes a detailed assessment of the Plainfield Uprising of 1967. Like this research effort, these sociologists, who also include Louis C. Goldberg and Gary T. Marx, do not see Plainfield as a riot, in the strictest sense of the term, but rather a rebellion or uprising.[31] They write "The Plainfield riot in its inception, course of development, and consequences reflect a crisis which is as much political as it is racial. The term 'rebellion' is perhaps better for descriptive purposes than 'riot' for several reasons."[32]

The negotiations with city officials, the decision making that went into which stores were looted, and the significance of black city leadership make Plainfield a particularly interesting case study to show how negotiation in the realm of politics can

---

[30] Rutgers University Law Library, "Report and Hearing Transcripts of 1967 NJ Disorders," Newark, New Jersey, 1968, accessed May 13, 2013, http://njdll.rutgers.edu/handle/123456789/1.

[31] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 77.

[32] Ibid.

produce results or at least stop the uprising from growing.[33] The scale of the rebels' demands and the attempts at resolving the issues resulted in controversy, but by the third night of the uprising, and as negotiations were worked out, peace returned. In an article written by David Boesel in the journal *Psychiatry*, called "The Liberal Society, Black Youths, and the Ghetto Uprisings" (1970), he called what took place in Plainfield, "collective rationality."[34] He imagines that we "look through the fires and the mobs in the streets, which often obscure more than they reveal, one sees much more deliberateness in the uprising action than is evident at first glance."[35] What we see is negotiation, compromise, resolution and resolve, even when the fire embers make the scene murkier.

No scholar has taken up the topic of Plainfield with as much dedication as urban historian Thomas Sugrue, resulting in an article for the *Journal of Urban Studies*. His collaboration with Andrew Goodman for the article entitled "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North" (2007) literally gave me direction and a reason to start my own interpretation of the events and story. Sugrue and Goodman write,

The history of suburban and small town uprisings offers a fresh starting point to explore the still largely untold story of race relations and racial politics in the North while also shedding light on the largely overlooked history of racial diversity and conflict in suburban smaller cities.[36]

---

[33] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 78.

[34] Boesel, "The Liberal Society: Black Youths," 280.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 569.

This author is not in complete agreement with Sugrue and Goodman's arguments. For example, "Plainfield's city government did little to improve the situation of the town's black residents before the uprising occurred."[37] This dissertation aims to prove this false, for the archives in Plainfield are full of examples of attempts to ameliorate or quell the tensions prior to the uprising. Nevertheless, there is much value in this article's existence. As Sugrue and Goodman end their exploration, they write, "The 1967 Plainfield rebellion offers one small opening into a large complex, troubled racial world whose history remains to be told and whose legacies are still unresolved."[38] This is one attempt to open the space wider, to add another perspective to Plainfield and add to why smaller uprisings in suburban areas are important to study to achieve a fuller understanding on race relations in our recent past.

Sources and Methodology

Thomas Sugrue's ambitious and incredibly insightful effort, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (2008) was a refreshing analysis chronicling the recent historical past of the North and Northern suburbs. In this book, there is a great deal on the history of Plainfield and how the town fits into the overall framework of civil rights in the North during the civil rights era (1950s-1960s). This work explores the difficulty for upper class blacks to find accommodations in

[37] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 575.

[38] Ibid., 575.

Plainfield in 1947, ironically the same year New Jersey amended her constitution to outlaw the practice of discrimination.[39] It is through works like Sugrue's that one can build a historical context. For example, on the Plainfield Police Department in the 1960s, Sugrue writes:

> In Plainfield, New Jersey, where more than a third of the population was black by 1967, only five of the town's eighty-one law enforcement officers were black. Clashes between white police officers and angry black youth were commonplace in the town's black West End by the mid-1960s. In 1966, Plainfield's police department came under investigation after reports that police officers and radio dispatchers regularly used the word 'nigger' to describe suspects over the radio.[40]

It was the tension between community and police that not only encouraged the uprising but also led it to become one of the most violent days in New Jersey history and the brutal murder of an on-duty officer.[41]

Sweet Land of Liberty builds a framework to study concurrent events in the context of a long struggle and a reminder that change is possible, from top down to bottom up; the text is an all-inclusive tour of the struggle in the largely forgotten civil rights North. Sugrue's work lit the spark of this search as Kevin Mumford's effort *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Uprisings in America* helped shape the telling of this tale. Mumford, with whom I agree, debunks the theory of the "urban crisis" that historians like Thomas Sugrue and Nicholas Lemann (*The Promised Land)* subscribe to, that is, the interchangeable relationship between race, social and economic inequality

---

[39] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 144.

[40] Ibid., 330.

[41] Ibid., 346-47.

created a decline in the once thriving urban industrial North.[42] Mumford's challenge is very important for scholars of migration and the after effects of mass migration in the early and middle twentieth century. He writes on the urban crisis, "Despite their focus on the culpability of white politicians and economic forces, they argue for a conception of crisis that began and ended with the black southern migration from the South."[43] For those like Mumford, and other social historians like Heather Ann Thompson, this approach "fails to appreciate the historical impact of black political culture and initiative."[44] It is the initiative of government and grassroots led organizations that set out to cool the embers that would ignite into a flame via rebellion on July 14, 1967 in Plainfield, New Jersey. Mumford reminds us how civic engagement and those who participated in the engagement helped shape the community they live in.[45] His work is also an excellent retelling of the Newark uprising which began days prior to Plainfield—looking at the circumstances from the ground up, the organizers and activists who took part in or observed the largest uprising in New Jersey's history. Furthermore, he "offers a fresh analysis of the urban growth and economic change by exploring the politics of ethnic settlement and cultural recognition alongside a new framework for understanding

---

[42] Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[43] Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 5.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 7.

mobilizations for protest and modes of civil resolution."[46] After reading his work, it was clear where to look and what to look for in the material to tell this story with—archives of the times.

It was a relief to find the Plainfield Historical Archives with its amazing staff and very inclusive material selection where most of the research on organizations, mobilization and the town's overall history was housed. Here the researcher could review testimony, study civic organizations and track engagement in the functioning of the organizations prior to and immediately after the uprising. The documents revealed a limited municipality with a thriving civic community.

The Center for Human Relations, NAACP, Community Action Program, League of Woman Voters, were all limited in funding only, but they were not limited in effort and certainly not in heart. It was the local NAACP that posted a list of grievances up on city hall in 1963 that led Mayor Lester Maddox to organize an umbrella organization for civil leaders called the Center for Human Relations. This event shows how action can breed action in the context of Plainfield.[47]

Furthermore, there was black representation in Plainfield prior to and during the uprising in July 1967. The Plainfield Common Council had eleven members, of which two were African American, Republican Harvey Judkins and Democrat Everett

---

[46] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 3.

[47] Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report, 1963-1964*, 7, at the Plainfield Historical Archives, Plainfield Public Library.

Lattimore. Both represented black communities in Plainfield's first and fourth wards.[48] The visibility of blackness as representative in a community is a phenomenon not witnessed in many other uprisings researched for this report, but one can surmise from looking at larger uprisings that this is an important balance and voice for the community at the time of the disturbance. The Archives allowed for the voices of the displaced and those in power to be heard. It allowed for an examination of the goals set for this town and understand them as ambitious and reflective. The offerings at the Plainfield Historical Archives provided a broad perspective on the project. The methodology looks closely at major players of the event, their search for attempts at amelioration and their attention to the needs of the black community. This information provided a sufficient lens by which to look at statistics and migration patterns and uncover, in other uprisings, trends and patterns that might exist, as well as determine what made Plainfield unique in the history of urban uprisings.

By looking closely at how the Great Migration played a role in the North and in the town of Plainfield specifically, paying further attention to the town's position and tenor prior to the uprisings, and studying how civil organizations reacted to the changing demographics, I am able to see how Plainfield differed from larger urban areas. By studying the reports that came out shortly after the uprisings, one is able to trace the events, via testimonials, of the Plainfield Uprising and determine a timeline that is useful in telling this story. Newspaper sources in this project ranged from the *New York Times* to

---

[48] "Forbearance Cools Unrest in Plainfield," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

the local *Plainfield Courier Press*, from the *Newark Evening Post*, to the *Amsterdam News*. These papers assisted in the construction of the timeline, but they also paint a general picture of how the media portrayed the uprising, selecting certain events to report and ignoring others.

This project does not insist on one theoretical framework because this is an exploratory project, one that delves deeper into a story to shed light on the phenomenon of race relations in the twentieth century. Therefore, it relies on the field of social history and the writings of those aforementioned that influenced this work immensely. In *Challenging Authority, How Ordinary People Change America* (2006), Francis Fox Piven argues, "that ordinary people exercise power in American politics mainly at those extraordinary moments when they rise up in anger and hope and defy the rules that ordinarily govern their daily lives, and, by doing so, disrupt the workings of the institutions in which they are enmeshed."[49] The goal is to give voice to a voiceless past and help work toward preventing another turbulent time in our future. Common people can do uncommon things when discontent pervades or within the context of an "extraordinary moment," like those of the 163 urban uprisings in 1967. This disruption of "the workings of the institutions" have far-reaching implications that continue to this day. This work has the potential to uncover a forgotten uprising that still has far-reaching implications, and in bringing it forward, there may be a better chance of healing these still open wounds.

---

[49] Francis Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (New York: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006), 1.

Chapter Summary

Chapter Two, "The Shake Up," is the story of a changing national identity triggered by the Great Migration, the influx of black Americans from south to north during the interwar period of the twentieth century. It discusses the push and pull factors of the North and how opportunity hardly made the North the Promised Land it was perceived to be. This chapter discusses the affect of the migration in New Jersey, then it introduces Plainfield. First, I look at the migration in Plainfield. From this point, I begin to understand Plainfield's identity encompassing a bifurcated black community—those who lived in Plainfield prior to the migration and those who migrated. The chapter ends with a discussion of Plainfield prior to the uprising in July 1967.

Chapter Three, "Race Riots v. Urban Uprising" journeys away from Plainfield and looks at the semantics involving the term "riot." Using Paul Gilje as a model, it explores the differences between race riots and urban uprisings. It also looks into the terminology "violence as vengeance" and "violence as protest" to further develop a working definition of what happened in Plainfield and other cities and towns during the 1960s. Here there is a deep exploration into the history of twentieth century uprisings to show the difference between vengeance versus protest in the context of violent public disorder. Uprisings examined include East St. Louis (1919), Chicago (1919), Tulsa (1921), Harlem (1934, 1943, and 1964), Watts (1965), Detroit (1967) and Newark (1967). With the latter two, how these uprisings are interpreted is discussed, setting the stage for an argument in Chapter 4 on how similar and different these almost concurrent uprisings are.

Chapter Four, "Four Days in July," begins with a discussion on the civic organizations that worked with Plainfield's citizens from the early twentieth century to the period of the uprisings. It later argues that Plainfield is somewhere in the middle of two extremes, that characterizes communities in the 1960s. On the one hand, there is a suburban town that fits perfectly in 1950's sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver*, virtually absent are pesky civic problems and racial discord. The second is the community like Newark and Detroit, riddled with problems so complex they were largely ignored or insufficiently remedied. The chapter details a timeline of the Plainfield Uprising and tells the story of how almost 200 youth reshaped a town, discusses the media coverage during the uprising, and argues the similarities and differences between Plainfield and larger uprisings studied for this project.

Chapter Five, "The Closing Door," discusses the aftermath of the Plainfield uprising. It begins with the Kerner recommendations, and it explores the unrealized directives of enrichment and integration, though ambitious and practical, because they were never funded enough to realize full potential. It then moves on to Plainfield in "Myth and Memory," a section dedicated to how the uprising has been remembered through testimony, remembrance and in the media and the outside world. The chapter suggests there are differences with how blacks and whites interpret the uprisings. However, the uprising influenced the community. One only needs to be reminded of how this project started: "When did you move here?" "After the riots…"

Chapter Five reminds us, even in the Age of Obama, we are in the midst of culture wars where myth and memory play an important role, and that role may be predicated on the perspective of the observer. Baby Boomers and Generation X visualize

the world from completely different lenses. Therefore, what can be told of what happened in July 1967, a time when I was not alive, nor did it affect me as an individual, can be interpreted by the scholar differently than how it is interpreted by those who were involved or related to those involved in the Plainfield Uprising of 1967. What the historian can do is present the story the best way she can. The hope is that this story will lend its support to other scholars who want to study the 1960's disturbances, riots, rebellions, uprisings in big cities, small towns, rural areas, and suburban fantasyland.

Chapter 2

THE SHAKEUP: NATIONAL IDENTITY AND THE MIGRATION

UP NORTH: The Migration and "Land of Hope"[50]

A white man hit a colored man up north and that colored man hit that white man. Knocked him cold, and nobody did a damn thing![51]

Richard Wright

Black Boy (1945)

The Great Migration is a tale told by many in detail. Recent historical studies have shown an engagement between the historical record, pop culture and the story of the "ordinary" individual. Following individual stories has become a rich approach for receiving nuanced accounts of the migration and civil rights periods. Quite a few books have taken on the challenge of oral history to interweave a tale within the framework of a larger context. Uncovering the story of the millions of blacks who migrated from South to North in two "Great Migrations," both of which occurred as a consequence of the United States' involvement in European wars, can be read in the wonderful prose of historians like James Grossman, Nell Painter, Nicholas Lemann, and Isabel Wilkerson.

---

[50] James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago), 1989.

[51] Ibid., 38.

Wilkerson stands out because of the recent publication of her brilliant prose in *Warmth of Other Suns*, one of the most current and incredibly detailed accounts of migrants both from an individual and communal level.

African American migration from South to North began shortly after the Supreme Court decided *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the decision that officially recognized the system of legalized, *de jure*, segregation in 1896. Plessy could easily be interpreted by Southern blacks as a legally binding and systematic codification of Black Code laws from the middle nineteenth century to shortly after the Civil War; this decision was not surprising considering that "down south" laws with regards to blacks were defined by anarchy and enforced by the noose. Nonetheless, whether or not Homer Plessy's fight against the Louisianan law that allowed for segregation of railroad cars shocked an emotionally tattered Southern black community is most likely a moot point. Only two decades prior, newly freed blacks had reason to believe they would become full citizens after the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, the Federal government's guarantees of protection of black civil rights with the Freedmen's Bureau and the stationing of Federal troops tasked with protecting newly freed citizens. After a compromised election in 1877, the dream of a Southern Land of Hope dissipated. The *Plessy* decision, with twenty years of rollback after only ten years of true citizenship, cemented the black person's future in the South, and that future was grim.

Most scholars argue that the Great Migration began a few years before America's entry into World War I and would continue until the 1970s. Isabel Wilkerson suggests, "The Great Migration in particular was not a seasonal, contained, or singular event. It

was a statistically measured demographic phenomenon marked by unabated outflows of black émigrés that lasted roughly from 1915 to 1975."[52] In 1900, "nine out of ten blacks lived in the South, and three-quarters of black farmers were tenants or sharecroppers"[53] By 1930, one and a half million blacks migrated to mainly northern urban areas lured by job opportunities and a better life, spawned by industry, technical advancement and opportunity. Three million more blacks moved North between the years of 1940-1960, significantly changing the landscape of America overall and urban America in particular.[54] By 1970, the majority of black Americans lived outside of the South, in the North or the West Coast of the United States. This shift in demographics and dynamics defined the social milieu of the twentieth century.

In his work on the implications of migration in 20th century Chicago, James Grossman discusses the "push/pull" phenomenon as an explanation of why so many blacks took the chance for a better life, in his work *Land of Hope*.[55] Push factors are measured by the amount of oppression and exploitation and the realities of the Southern environment for the black migrant. Push factors, like the Ku Klux Klan, the threat of the lynch mob, and the sheer futility of the sharecropping system, which led to debt and limited mobility, set the context for this discussion. Once more, a boll weevil infestation

---

[52] Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 3622-24.

[53] Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company), xxi.

[54] Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago*, 17-18.

[55] Ibid.

and floods worsened the already horrific economic impoverishment of sharecropping. The evidence demonstrates that black migrants felt pushed out of the South by the factors listed above, but also because of the implications of technology and innovation. The mechanization of agricultural environs, more specifically the cotton crop innovation, or mechanical cotton picker, resulted in fewer opportunities for blacks to find steady work. Further, they were continually treated as second class citizens socially, and they were arguably treated as less than human with regards to agricultural employment, under which the majority of blacks were employed.[56] Therefore, the lack of opportunities could be considered a heavy "push" factor for mass migration. Nevertheless, one could also argue that the biggest push factor was the treatment of blacks in the South, treatment that has been well documented. Nicholas Lehmann writes "The South, and only the South, had to contend with the contradiction between the national creed of democracy and the local reality of a caste system."[57] This caste system located black Americans on the lowest rung of society and thoroughly disputed any notion of the democracy purportedly established by the Founders.

Freed black Southerners suffered through the indignities visited upon them from whites in the South because they were, after all, members of the Negro race. This basic assessment hinges on the contributions of socialization and acculturation of both whites

---

[56]Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 6. Lemann writes, "What the mechanical cotton picker did was make obsolete the sharecropper system" which placed limits on an already limited system of employment.

[57] Ibid., 6-7.

and blacks to the basic understanding of the nature of a black and a white identity. In other words, if the United States is purported to be a white nation, then those that are white deserve dominance and those that are black must know and accept their inferior place. The idea of race and caste was never completely a Southern machination, and the North can be indicted as well for a caste system that relegated black Americans to the lowest rung of society because blacks did not fit the general notion of the American identity. However, the difference between North and South, or these push and pull factors, diverges once the tensions between the two castes heighten to the point of violence. "Down South" the indignities were not merely injected into or imposed onto a world without mobility and wrought with internal crises of identity; the indignities were based on two impulses that shaped everyday life for codified, less than ordinary Americans—fear and violence. To live with fear is something that is taken lightly in this nation, yet fear can be at the root of any society. Fear hinders the true self and hampers identity. Therefore, Southern blacks had to develop coping mechanisms to navigate the rough waters of everyday life, and one of those mechanisms, for some, was acceptance of their learned inferiority.[58]

Violence was at the root of this fear. It has been well documented how black Southerners had to tread a tightrope when it came to communication with the higher-caste. White dominance, the outcome of black submissiveness, had to be mobilized in order to maintain the status quo system in the Jim Crow South. Jim Crow itself is a product of fear—if whites were truly dominant, they would never need signs to remind

[58] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration*, 6-7.

their subordinates where to eat, drink or sleep. Jim Crow gave allowance for the violence that could result in any challenge to its system. "You broke the law," which applied as much to behavioral expectations and norms as much as it did to segregation laws and legal vengeance could be handled judiciously, with the support of a unified dominant caste, or it could be handled extra judiciously with a mob, in the tradition of the Regulators and other vigilante movements that mark American history, most likely composed of formal and informal representatives of justice, that levied justice by their own hands with the tightening of a noose, strike of a match or bullet to the brain. The latter is what happened to 15-year-old Emmett Till after what now seems like an innocent confrontation with Carolyn Bryant in Mississippi.[59]

Nevertheless, well before Emmett Till's case came to national attention, extrajudicial violence was the default tool of justice—justice perceived from one actor's singular perspective, not always sanctioned by a thorough fealty for the law. Violence was part and parcel to race relations down south. "Across the South," Isabelle Wilkerson writes in *The Warmth of Other Suns* "someone was hanged or burned alive every four days from 1889-1929."[60] If a white man perceived that a black man disrespected him by looking at his white wife a certain way, justice would be served—the glance triggers the fear, and violence is most likely the outcome. In other words, Jim Crow was a system

[59] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration*, 43. Emmett Till was a teenage boy from Chicago who visited his uncle Mose Wright in Money, Mississippi. Upon his visit, he was murdered by local white men for saying "Hi baby," to a white female and local grocery store owner, Carolyn Bryant.

[60] Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 773.

with aspects of social anarchy that was based on fear and legislated with violence in order to maintain the racial caste system.[61] It was this violence and fear that pushed migrants "up north" and dramatically changed the demographics and social landscape north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Was there really a *PULL* to go North?

The consequences of the push for black migrants to escape the oppressive apartheid of the South played out in the North on a national character-changing level. Early 20th century black intellectual Kelly Miller lobbied in the 1920 article "The Farm the Negro's Best Chance" that the North "offered little chance for either independence or prosperity."[62] The Southern farm was the best option for Negro prosperity. Indeed, many blacks discovered upon their arrival in their northern destinations there were limited opportunities in the North. Once again, there is material that supports the notion of a pull factor. Nicholas Lehmann writes, "In demography, there is an important distinction between migrations driven by 'push' and 'pull' factors; the latter kind goes more smoothly."[63] For Chicago, the city considered in his study, the demographic shift was large, for the city's black population "increased by 77 per cent, from 278,000 to 492,000"

[61] Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago*, 81.

[62] Ibid., 59.

[63] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration*, 70.

during the Great Migration.[64] These migrations can be traced by railroad lines that traversed South to North on a quite regular basis by the turn of the 20th century.[65]

There is no doubt, as James Grossman suggests, "the availability of economic opportunities also influenced the choice, although jobs were available in most northern cities."[66] This implied a major pull for blacks living in the South, and in fact, especially during the war years, migration peaked with the lure of jobs and economic freedom, as many blacks moved North. Grossman writes, "Most of the migrants who left oral or written testaments to the migratory impulse conflated economic and social stimuli into the goal of 'bettering their position.' Variants of this theme abound 'better his standing;' 'better my conditions in the business world;' 'aspire to better my condition in life'"[67] Notwithstanding the sometimes harsh realities of Northern life for black Americans, the North had more opportunities for employment, and in some ways, there was less to be

---

[64] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration*, 70.

[65] In fact, one of the main impetuses of the migration, according to Grossman, is the number of black male porters railroad companies hired. Isabel Wilkerson traced the story of one such porter who had to walk a tightrope between black and white customers whilst crossing the Mason Dixon back and forth from his original home in Florida to his "adopted home" of New York City. Here he had to navigate the cultures of segregation and "freedom" while appeasing not only the white patrons he would sometime assist, but also the railroad company because like modes of employment, he had to be careful not to act rebellious, demonstrative, or anything even close to that. Grossman suggests that black railroad workers were "central" to the network, which led to the migration of hundreds if not thousands of blacks from the south. "By 1910, 103,606 blacks worked for the railroads," Grossman continues, and "spoke proudly of their home town as they traveled through the South" Land of Hope, Chicago: 74.

[66] Ibid., 99.

[67] Ibid., 35.

fearful of, but during the early part of the 20th century, conditions were arguably no better for African Americans in the North during and after the migration period (1910-1970). Indeed that is the framework that sets up the story of Plainfield's violent protest, and the riots, rebellions and uprisings that would come to characterize the 20th century as discussed in Chapter 3 of this work.

Up North, in cities like Chicago, "a black person could go anywhere, and could vote, and was not required to step off the sidewalk so that whites could pass, and was not called 'boy' and did not have to sit in the back of the bus."[68] Alternatively, as Richard Wright proclaims, "nobody did a damn thing" when a black hit a white man, because the North did not prey on the fear and violence in the demonstrable way that the South did. Therefore, on the surface, the North seemed like the Promise Land, as advertised by periodicals like the *Chicago Defender* and from letters written for Southern family members enticing them to come search to "better his (or her) standing."[69]

In the end, however, there was no Promised Land or Land of Hope in the United States of America for blacks during and after the Great Migration north. As previously observed, the consequences of a push to the North left the Northern cities and those who ran them to deal with the complex implications of thousands of new residents. Residents they were; full citizens they were not. A citizen is connected to a larger community, as the multitude of citizens make up a nation. As blacks shortly realized Up North,

---

[68] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration*, 41.

[69] See Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago*, 75-77 to find a discussion on the role northern black periodicals played in the Great Migration.

indignities came in a different form, and a system of social segregation limited similar opportunities lost Down South. Wilkerson writes of the migrants, "The people did not cross the turnstiles of customs at Ellis Island. They were already citizens. But where they came from, they were not treated as such."[70] "Money" and a semblance of (or something that could be perceived as) "Dignity" came at a cost.[71] In the North, blacks were usually limited to the worst jobs, forced into the worst housing and regions while paying more per square feet than whites who had just fled these areas. Meanwhile, they had to follow within the rules of an implicit or *de facto* segregation, which left them frustrated as much as challenged. *De facto* segregation meant they had to learn new rules and regulations that led them to recognize that they were considered the same second-class citizens as they were down South. The implication is that unclear, nonlegal, discrimination was a factor in uprisings because in the North, there was a promise of freedom, but no real freedom, yet there was freedom to precipitate disorder.

In the South, placed out of fear of the black other, signs codified the placement of blacks, laws denied the franchise, and the long term after effects of enslavement created a people that were subjugated to low incomes and limited housing options. In other words, Jim Crow—de jure segregation—alerted the individual to his or her place in society. Jim Crow in the North was more subtle. For example, in the North, race altered residential patterns.[72] In the North, the migration pushed city limits out into the suburbs, a place

---

[70] Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 190-91.

[71] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration*, 65.

[72] Charles M. Lamb, *Housing Segregation in Suburban America Since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), 2.

closed to the black resident or non-citizen, because blacks "simply threatened white owned property."[73] In the North, blacks never became fully free of the great duo of fear and violence, as race (white on black) riots broke out throughout the United States—east, west, north and surprisingly not as much down south, where race relations were codified and imprinted in law. Attempts to codify racial restrictions in the North were accomplished early in the century; however, these attempts at de jure restriction were squashed by Supreme Court decisions that included *Shelley v. Kreamer* (1948)[74] and the groundbreaking *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). In the North, as migrants and local blacks were expected to move between and betwixt each other in limited spaces, with limited opportunity, things were not much better. As Chapter 3 will point out, there were deaths in the riots of the 20th century as there were deaths of people tied to the lynching noose. There was just as much, if not more, backlash after the integration of schools up North as down South. Finally, residential segregation is so concentrated in the North that the New South of the 21st century is quite possibly more racially integrated and diverse than the North as I write this piece.[75] For example, a recent revelation that New York City has the most segregated school system in the nation.[76] The implications are deep,

---

[73] David Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 12-14.

[74] Outlawing racial covenants.

[75] Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation*.

[76] Kyla Calvert, "New York State Singled out for Most Segregated Schools," *PBS News Hour*, Mar. 27, 2014, accessed May 4, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/new-york-state-singled-segregated-schools/.

and the riots or violent protests help frame the narrative as to why that is. It all began with the migration.

The Migration and New Jersey

The Great Migration had a profound effect on the state of New Jersey. However, African Americans can trace their roots to New Jersey well before the 20th century. New Jersey historian Clement Price wrote, "While it is not certain exactly how long Afro-Americans have been in New Jersey, Dutch farmers had surely brought black slaves to the west banks of the Hudson before the first tide of English settlers arrived in the latter half of the seventeenth century."[77] During the early seventeenth century, the Dutch East Indies Company had a stronghold on the state with support of the famed explorer of the territory Henry Hudson.[78]

The Dutch role in the New Jersey-New York region has been well documented, and its implications are within the early name of New York City as New Amsterdam. Yet, the Dutch hold on the territory was short as England's interest in the "discovered" region peaked—the British colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts needed a connector. After 1664, when Charles II granted the land which would become part of New Jersey to the Duke of York, the Duke sent "a military expedition designed to intimidate the

---

[77] Clement Price ed., *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey* (Newark, New Jersey: New Jersey Historical Society, 1980), 2.

[78] Maxine Lurie ed., *A New Jersey Anthology* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1994), 3.

Dutch."[79] The act of intimidation worked and from that point forward the land of New Jersey became part of the English colonial enterprise in what would become the United States of America.

It is important to note the Dutch impact on New Jersey when discussing race relations in the state because the Dutch and their slave trade made Africans some of the earliest settlers of the land. For example, in 1680 there were 5,000 people living in New Jersey; 120 or 3 percent of them were slaves of African origin.[80] Yet, the Duke of York's control of the Royal Province institutionalized the commerce, trade and practice of slavery which had deep implications in the state for centuries. The Duke of York was also the president of the Royal African Company. He directed the colonies' leaders to facilitate "a constant and sufficient supply of merchantable negroes, at moderate rate."[81] Between the years 1726-1790 the African population grew from 2,581 to 14,185 — mostly slaves—as New Jersey became a safe haven for slavery.[82] As neighboring northern colonies began to abolish slavery, the practice of the "peculiar institution" flourished in New Jersey (and New York).

---

[79] Lurie, *A New Jersey Anthology*, 4.

[80] Giles R. Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey: A Short History* (Trenton, New Jersey: New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State, 1988), 19.

[81] Barbara G. Salmore and Stephen A. Salmore, *New Jersey Politics and Government: The Suburbs Come of Age*, 3rd ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rivergate Books, 2008), 11.

[82] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 21.

Historians often describe New Jersey history as "conservative," "gradual" or slow.[83] New Jersey scholar Maxine Laurie suggests "the fact that New Jersey moved slowly in some areas is shown dramatically in the length of time it took to abolish slavery in the state and the way this act was ultimately accomplished."[84] Although slavery was outlawed in New Jersey in 1804, the approach of manumission was gradual. Regulations required that Africans born prior to 1804 would be free from their masters once they reached adulthood—enslaved until then. Therefore, slavery existed in New Jersey long after the "abolition" of slavery in New Jersey. The numbers point to this. For example, in 1820, although the trend was free Africans outnumbering the enslaved, there were 12,460 freedmen and women, and sixteen years after slavery was "abolished," 7,557 slaves in the state.[85] Abolitionists had some influence in New Jersey, but unlike the abolition fervor in states like Massachusetts and New York, New Jersey was clearly behind in the anti-slavery thrust of the nineteenth century.[86] Writing in *Afro Americans in New Jersey, A Short History*, Giles R. Wright writes, "the continued existence of slavery in New Jersey during the antebellum period suggests that there was considerable sympathy in the state

---

[83] See Lurie, *A New Jersey Anthology*, and Salmore and Salmore, *New Jersey Politics and Government*.

[84] Ibid., 14-15.

[85] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 25.

[86] It is important to note the role that Quakers played in New Jersey during this era. For example, Quakers made up many of the early anti-slavery activists in New Jersey. John Woolman, a Quaker from Mount Holly started an effort to ban slaveholding amongst other Quakers in the region (Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 22). Wright continues, "Quakers from Chesterfield submitted the first petition every to the legislature for an abolition law" (23).

for the South."[87] There is substantial evidence to support this point. New Jersey was the last state in the North to abolish slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act was not only supported by the state, but also acted upon, even against freedmen and women during the antebellum period. Finally, New Jersey was the only state in the North to never vote for Abraham Lincoln. Not in 1860, and again, not in 1864.[88] Laurie further notes, "Slavery was not totally abolished in the state until the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted in 1865, as it became one of the last states to adopt this measure."[89]

This history demonstrates how New Jersey was slow to progress in race relations. Yet, blacks continued to move North to states like New Jersey seeking better opportunity and freedom from the oppression of Southern living. From 1790 to 1870, the black population grew 21%, and it only grew even more once the twentieth century began. By 1910, the population of blacks "tripled, mainly because of the arrival of Southern blacks."[90] The migration clearly reshaped the racial dynamics of New Jersey, as towns like Plainfield "experienced considerable growth in their black populations by 1910."[91]

However, with these numbers came exclusionary practices that Northern blacks would face throughout the twentieth century. Well before the migration was complete, "white workers increasingly viewed free blacks as a threat to their occupational

---

[87] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 27.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Lurie, *A New Jersey Anthology*, 15.

[90] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 45.

[91] Ibid.

security."[92] Even as early as 1863, New York City's Draft Riots spread to Newark in which whites accosted blacks to protest conscription in the Civil War as they "singled out blacks as targets for their violence."[93] This reveals the tension undermining the relationship between whites and blacks in New Jersey as a result of and in response to African American freedom and the Great Migration. In New Jersey, blacks hardly enjoyed the same freedom whites enjoyed because they were put at an economic disadvantage, as they were ghettoized and compelled "to occupy the lower rungs of the occupational ladder."[94] Black Jerseyans were denied opportunity because they were held in a state of second-class citizenship and regarded through the lens of negative racial stereotypes. For instance, the carpenters union of New Jersey refused to let blacks join their ranks because "their color and low instincts make them undesirable to associate with white men." The glass bottle makers held similar sentiments, "I don't believe the average Negro is capable of acquiring the skill necessary to become a successful glass blower. They are naturally lazy and are not clean in their habits."[95] Clearly the post-Civil War North, as represented by New Jersey, was not the opportunistic land of hope for which many were searching.[96]

---

[92] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 36.

[93] Ibid., 38.

[94] Ibid., 50.

[95] Ibid., 50.

[96] Ibid.

By World War I and the following decades, more blacks continued to migrate north into New Jersey. "By 1930 there were over two hundred thousand blacks in the state, a huge gain over the roughly eighty-eight thousand in 1910."[97] Many of these migrants moved into New Jersey urban areas and were forced to live side by side in communities made up of fellow migrants. Housing discrimination throughout the country ran rampant.[98] This is what led to many of the ghettos developing in cities like Newark, Camden, Elizabeth, Jersey City and even Plainfield. Like residents of black enclaves throughout the country, the African Americans that settled into these areas built up a community and delivered on services that were not available from mainstream society. The mixture of black Jerseyans and new migrants to the state helped develop a culture that developed and transmitted a sense of black pride that lasted well after the Civil Rights Movement. By 1960 there were well over six hundred thousand black citizens of New Jersey who, in one way or another, experienced a life designed, designated, and determined for them by the Great Migration and white New Jersey's response to it.

The Queen City

The story of Plainfield, New Jersey is one consisting of many generic elements that could describe any number of cities and suburbs filling the vast expanse of this country coast to coast. Plainfield's story is intertwined with the story of black America,

---

[97] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 54.

[98] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 53.

including slavery, emancipation, and migration. The story of Plainfield represents the glory and sorrow of this nation and its development. While regional influences certainly add to a seemingly unique trajectory for Plainfield, the city must and does reflect the national narrative. Plainfield fits in the national outline as a town, typical with an atypical story. Like many areas in the Northeast, Plainfield hosted slave-holding families, emancipated her slaves before the Civil War, and had an influx of migrants who traveled from the hostile regions in the South to the hostile regions in the North. The outcome of these factors has led to both good and bad—unequal opportunity and unequal living spaces. Therein lies the connection to the national story. Despite the influx and changes to population, those responsible for shaping, or landscaping, the suburban enclave ensured that Plainfield mirrored their visions instead of accurately depicting the true character of a city that was experiencing momentous population shifts and significant social change.

The large mass of land, which would include Plainfield, was "founded" by a wealthy Dutchman, Augustine Heerman, in 1643.[99] The story of settling this land in north and central New Jersey mirrors the commonplace story of purchase as a synonym for conquest. Heerman purchased the land from Watchung natives, part of the Lenni-Lanape tribe. The area purchased stretched from what is now Essex County into Union county. Cedar Brook Farm, which would eventually turn into what is now Plainfield, was one of

[99] Leonard Bethel and Frederick Johnson, eds., "Introduction," *Plainfield's African-American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom* (Lanham Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998). (Since there are no page numbers on the text the citation will remain as "Introduction." The introduction is heavily cited from a 1916 *Courier News* story entitled "Pioneers of Plainfield.")

the (if not the) first inland settlements of New Jersey (1684).[100] Henceforth, what would become known as Plainfield encompassed a vast number of plantations established by aristocrats from Holland and Scotland. From the period of the 1680s up through the 1850s, Plainfield was a fertile ground for wealthy and productive plantations. One famous plantation house, the "Nathaniel Drake House," still stands and is now the residence of the Plainfield Historical Society. This house happens to stand only a few blocks away from where one of the eight major racial disturbances of 1967 took place.

Leonard Bethel, writing in *Plainfield's African American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*, documents his findings on the church records of Plainfield, which date back to the eighteenth century. For Bethel, wills were the best source of information regarding the presence of slaves in colonial New Jersey.[101] The most famous African American slave in Plainfield was the Drake hand named Caesar, who, as a freedman, served as a soldier during the Revolutionary War.[102] By 1840, New Jersey, as the last state in the North to finally abolish slavery, had 674 slaves on record.[103]

Plainfield, incorporated into a township in 1847 with 2,339 white residents and 107 free black residents, according to an 1850 census.[104] The city of Plainfield was incorporated in 1869. As a city, Plainfield continued to have a relatively small black

---

[100] Bethel and Johnson, "Introduction."

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid.

population throughout the decades that immediately followed the Civil War. Yet, the number of black migrants continued to grow throughout the period. For example, the 1890 Census reported that there were 647 blacks in Plainfield while the total population had grown from 7,632 to 10,620 from the period of 1880-1890.[105] By 1920, Plainfield's black population had increased to 2,445 making up 9% of the 27,700 residents.[106] By 1950, the black population reached a total of 5,768, which was 13.5% of the population of 42,366.[107]

During the period following the Civil War and through the first half of the 20th century, Plainfield had become bedrock for the affluent, including a society newly acquainted with the thirst for extravagance and excess. Immediately following the Civil War, Plainfield became a summer resort town, with large Victorian homes to which the rich people in the surrounding areas retreated. Plainfield was a recreational town, hosting carnivals, tennis tournaments, horse shows, formal dances and live theater.[108] By the turn of the 20th century, Plainfield also had a bustling downtown area with every type of shop to fulfill the contemporary consumer's need. From *Paris Furs* to the local *Woolworth's* Five and Dime store, Plainfield set itself up for the next phase in her history when she

---

[105] F.A. Johnson, "The History of Bethel Presbyterian Church" *Plainfield's African-American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*, ed. Leonard Bethel and Frederick Johnson (Lanham Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998), 25.

[106] Ibid., 31.

[107] *US Census 1950*.

[108] John A. Grady and Dorothy M. Pollard, *Images of Plainfield* (Charleston S.C.: Arcadia Press, 2001).

went from being the home for summer, part-time residents to a town filled with residents who settled their families into what became known as a "Wall Street Suburb."[109] After a train line was developed in Plainfield, the Raritan Valley Line was chartered in 1830, and the town, according to a contemporary observer, "attracted the wealth and fashion of New York to locate here permanently, and its easy access to New York by any one of the 90 trains a day makes the town an ideal place for the busy New York man."[110] The Gilded Age established Plainfield as a town with character, charm and mass appeal. By 1950, she had become one of the most affluent and exclusive towns in the New York City metropolitan area. By 1980, she was the exact opposite, one of the most economically depressed areas with a significant portion of the population constituting an underclass and a downtown area virtually in ruins.[111]

Queen City Migration

In 1931, an interracial group called the New Jersey Conference of Social Work conducted a study "during the summer and fall months of 1931 with the cooperation of a local interracial committee formed from a group of interested white and colored persons who were anxious to see some steps taken toward eradicating some of the more vexing

[109] Grady and Pollard, *Images of Plainfield*.

[110] Ibid., 57.

[111] See Grady and Pollard, *Images of Plainfield*, Chapters 4 and 5.

misunderstandings existing in the community."[112] Its concern was the growth of the black population and making sure the needs were met for the new migrants to Plainfield. The report made many recommendations, from "the development of better community programs by existing characteristics and general welfare organizations for Negroes" to "securing a greater measure of justice and equality in the civic life of the community."[113] Although history tells us these measures were hardly implemented by the mid-1960s, this report does show that there were attempts at making Plainfield a comfortable place for the newcomer to live, at least on paper. It was the practice of inherent and systematic racial discrimination that hampered initiatives like this and allowed discontent to boil over thirty years later in the form of an urban uprising in the West End community of Plainfield.[114]

The Plainfield uprising of 1967 could have been predicted or at least that is the assumption made by the "Report of the National Commission on Civil Disorders" (Kerner) of 1968. The report cited the fact that the city was "geared to the needs of the suburban middle class, the part time and fragmented city government had failed to realize the change in character which the city had undergone, and was unprepared to cope with the problems of a growing disadvantaged population."[115] Eventually, this failure in the

---

[112] New Jersey Conference of Social Work, *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey, Report XX: Plainfield* (Department of Institutions and Agencies: State of New Jersey, 1932) 2, at the Plainfield Historical Archives in the Plainfield Public Library.

[113] Ibid., 18.

[114] Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 346-47.

[115] The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission*, 41.

local government caught up with those who governed and lived in Plainfield. The government was not prepared to deal with the influx of black migrants who moved to Plainfield during the early part of the twentieth century. In 1950, the percentage of black citizens in Plainfield was 13.5%; by 1960 that percentage would move up to 21.5%.[116] In 1967, the year of the riot, the estimated population of black Americans was well over 30% or about 16,000 of 45,000. From 1950 to 1970 a great influx of black Americans came to Plainfield to reap the benefits of a growing economy, booming industry, and for those who migrated from the Jim Crow South, to escape the calamities they were confronted with on an everyday social basis.

By the 1960s, most of Plainfield's black residents were concentrated within a mile long radius on the Northwest Side of town, although there was an area on the Southeast Side of predominately more middle class blacks. As reported in the *New York Times* and town promotional brochures printed on a regular basis from the Chamber of Commerce, no neighborhood in Plainfield looked like a slum in 1967.[117] Reporter Paul Hofmann wrote, "Many houses are neat. There are stores on some streets. However, Negroes who could afford better housing are discouraged or barred by many stratagems from renting white apartments houses or garden apartments developments, or from buying houses in white neighborhoods."[118] An optimistic reflection of Plainfield can be witnessed in the

---

[116] *US Census 1950-70*.

[117] Paul Hofmann, "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction," *New York Times*, July 20, 1967.

[118] Ibid.

"Fact Book" from 1958 that proudly remarked Plainfield could boast a good and growing newspaper, a well-known hospital...a number of quality department stores, well equipped hotel and convention facilities, a radio station, and such cultural attributes as a revolutionary past with a historic museum to commemorate it in the present, a symphony orchestra, community concert programs, little theater groups and a library and branch library with growing pains.[119]

Housing Discrimination: American Apartheid in Plainfield

On paper and in pictures, Plainfield looked like the ideal place to live: eclectic, harmonious, and industrious. But the facts could not be more different. Although Plainfield had civil engagements and activities between the races that many cities lacked, Plainfield's practice of residential segregation would factor into the causes of the uprising of July 1967.

Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton in *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* suggest, "Relatively high levels of black suburbanization in some metropolitan areas can be deceiving, however, because blacks 'suburbs' are simply poor, declining cities that happen to be located outside the city limits."[120] This holds true for the blacks who lived in the suburban area of Plainfield. Although Plainfield would not

[119] League of Women Voters, "What are the Facts about Housing in Plainfield?," Mar. 1958, 1.

[120] Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 69.

become a black suburb until the 1980s, when "the out-migration of middle class families from ghetto areas left behind a destitute community lacking the institutions, resources and values necessary for success in the post-industrial society;" the process of Plainfield's black community out-growing the white community began with deceiving real estate practices.[121] Residential segregation was real. For example, the Human Relations Commission in 1964 set out to stop the practice of blockbusting, where real estate agents steered black home renters and buyers to specifically black neighborhoods. The Commission vowed that, "these matters were thoroughly investigated and referred to the proper state enforcement agency with the result that the Commission has in a sense discouraged this type of practice in the Plainfield area."[122] The key words here are, "in a sense," meaning they tried but failed because residential segregation was a fact of life for those living in the West End of Plainfield in 1967.

But Plainfield goes against the trend that Massey and Denton find, which is "suburbs that accept black residents tend to be older areas of relatively low socioeconomic status and a high population density"[123] Plainfield's black community lived in a high-density area,; but Plainfield in the 1950s or 1960s was not suffering from a "low socioeconomic status." It was a burgeoning city with corporations and industries and most importantly, revenue. A brochure entitled The *Plainfield's in New Jersey* from

---

[121] Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 7.

[122] Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report, 1963-1964*, 10, at the Plainfield Historical Archives, Plainfield Public Library.

[123] Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 69.

1963 subtly supports the idea of residential segregation by reminding its readers "Residential sections are protected by zoning ordinances and afford the prospective renter, buyer or builder a wide selection of homes, apartments and building sites."[124] The *Plainfield's in New Jersey* also boasted of the number of jobs available for the Plainfield resident, jobs that many blacks were excluded from as mentioned above. "Industrialization in Plainfield has shown a continuous and steady growth. Large numbers of skilled mechanics, production workers, lab technicians and experienced office personnel are employed," leaving little room for the unskilled or semi-skilled worker.[125] According to the 1970 census, Plainfield had a population of 7,437 employed black workers. 2,208 of these worked in manufacturing, 1,077 earned their living in the service industry, 927 were clerical workers, 812 were classified as professionals, and 546 were engaged as household service workers, yet "more than 50 percent of Plainfield whites had professional or clerical jobs,".[126] The black workers were shut out of the companies that built railroad parts, adhesive and chemical materials, electronics, electric motors, metal research and steel fabrication, and they were barred membership into Plainfield's craft unions.[127] As a result, "ten times as many black as white Plainfield

---

[124] Plainfield Chamber of Commerce, "The Plainfield's in NJ," 1963, 2 in the Plainfield Historical Archives at the Plainfield Public Library.

[125] Ibid., 14; and for lack of blacks in these jobs see Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report*, 12.

[126] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 573-74. *US Census 1970,* 32-505.

[127] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 573-74.

households received Aid to Families with Dependent Children."[128] In 1963 alone, there were thirty-four industries in Plainfield, New Jersey providing an enriched, growing environment for her citizens.[129] Despite a positive environment, an uprising still happened, and that was due to the lack of housing and job opportunities for black people living in the city.

Plainfield Public Schools and *Booker v. Plainfield Board of Education*

The forms of implicit or *de facto* segregation characterized Plainfield from the neighborhoods down to the schools. As blacks moved into the cities, whites did not move out, but their children were removed from the local schools. For example, by 1962 there was a distinct racial imbalance in the Plainfield Public School district. Whereas whites made up 78% of the town's population, they only made up about 60% of the school population.[130] With this, there were 5 out of 11 elementary schools that had a black population under 15%. On the East End, Evergreen Elementary, with a 2% black population and Cook Elementary with no black students were the extreme cases of the *de facto* segregation of the Plainfield Public Schools.[131] On the West End, schools had more

[128] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 573-74.

[129] Plainfield Chamber of Commerce, "The Plainfield's in NJ," 14, 24.

[130] Max Wolff, "Racial Imbalance in the Plainfield Public Schools" in *Journal of Educational Sociology* 36, no. 6 (1963), 275.

[131] Ibid.

blacks and were even more segregated. Westside Schools like Bryant, Emerson and Stillman Elementary were at least 60% black in 1962. Washington Elementary, on Grant and West 7th, was 95.1 % black in 1962, clearly demonstrating the trend of segregation in Plainfield Public Schools for the rest of the twentieth century.[132] In fact, in 1963 parents sued the Plainfield Board of Education on behalf of 54 Washington Elementary school children.[133] The decision in the State Supreme Court case *Booker et.al v. Plainfield Board of Education* found that, like the famous *Brown v. Board of Education*, the separation of races was inherently unequal. It found, "extreme racial concentration in Washington elementary school constitutes a deprivation of educational opportunity under New Jersey law for the pupils compelled to attend it."[134]

Plainfield Public Schools were the result of defacto segregation not based on the Board of Education, but based on the spatial patterns of living spaces. Residential segregation forced the worst neighborhood to have the worst neighborhood school. The paradigm of bad neighborhood, bad school existed as a pattern throughout the Plainfield Public Schools as demonstrated in the numbers above. Washington School was not only the school with the most children from Plainfield's West End; it was also the most underfunded school in the district.[135] Nevertheless, the action of the parents of

---

[132] Wolff, "Racial Imbalance in the Plainfield Public Schools," 275.

[133] Decision of the New Jersey Board of Education in *Booker v. Plainfield Board of Education*, February 5, 1964 at the Plainfield Historical Archives in the Plainfield Public Library.

[134] *Booker v. Plainfield Board of Education*, 5.

[135] Wolff, "Racial Imbalance in the Plainfield Public Schools," 275.

Washington Elementary to sue on behalf of their children demonstrates a willingness of the community to protest, this time with litigation, in a coherent and effective manner. Unfortunately, the school never got the chance to integrate. By the 1908s, Plainfield had an all non-white public school system, mainly due to demographics but also because of the preponderance of private schools in the Plainfield area.

Sugrue and Goodman wrote on this point, "As the city grew blacker and poorer and as the school district became more segregated, Plainfield's tax base shrank and demands on the city services increased."[136] Although they leave out the growth of the Hispanic population in Plainfield during the 1970s and 1980s, the tax base did shrink as more and more affluent and upper middle class residents were moving out of the town and more middle to working class individuals were moving into the homes left by the fleeing upper classes. Furthermore, Plainfield Public Schools was not a failing school district because it was predominately black; its scores had risen and they had a proud and organized PTA that strove to make the schools the best in a town in spite of mismanagement and a smaller tax base[137]

The tensions that had grown by the mid-1960s, according to an editorial in the local paper the *Courier News*, regarded matters of economics and education more than emotion or despair.[138] Plainfield as a community followed the common situation of white-black relations throughout the North; that is, as long as blacks did not move into or

---

[136] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 593.

[137] Hofmann, "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction."

[138] Ibid.

moved in in small numbers into areas exclusive to white residents, there would not be any problems. The town was also representative of the larger northeast narrative; for towns like Plainfield did not openly protest against African Americans moving into the area, but those moving knew that space was based on knowing where one did and did not belong. The separation of the communities implied a peaceful cohabitation based on racism and subliminal inequalities. However, uprisings like the one that took place in Plainfield brought to the forefront the specific issues that were not being confronted by not only the government and administrators of a nation but with the complacency of white citizens who enjoyed, knowingly or unknowingly, in their hegemonic status in American society. They were, in the words of liberal journalist Tom Wicker, "violent assaults upon the conditions that minorities must face."[139] In other words, the uprisings proclaimed that a nation that systemically and historically has placed the black race into a role of secondary citizen would no longer be tolerated. The uprisings forced these issues to come into the forefront of the national agenda because they could no longer be ignored in the age of television and the nation had to deal with the issues, most importantly the systemic discrimination, i.e. white racism, that black America confronted. Both the Kerner Commission Report and the New Jersey's Commission on Civil Disorders, a report that dealt with the specific issues involving the riots and disorders in New Jersey, supported this. They concluded that the further separation of the races in the communities of America would continue to polarize the supposed differences between white communities and communities of color. Plainfield in 1967 was representative of this polarized milieu.

[139] Tom Wicker, "Ratting on Newark," *New York Times,* July 23, 1967.

Chapter Summary

The United States of America is a nation forged out of the blood, sweat, and tears of men and women whose blood was white blood, whose sweat was white sweat, whose tears were white tears. Most of the English who landed in Massachusetts did not imagine a city on a hill populated by natives; it was, after all, their city. The blacks who arrived on the North American shores, most brought against their will, were tools. They were the blood, sweat, and tears of whites by proxy. Their freedom was an encumbrance to the vision and imagination of many American whites, and the United States would be imagined and configured by their design. As a result, the black man and black woman were subject to the whims of white nation building, and expectedly, they would be excluded not only from the white imagination and vision of this country but also from the official means Americans used to participate in self-determination. Therefore, what is created is an almost permanent underclass subject to the vagaries of the overclass and its demeanor and charity. As subjects of that mercy or hate, black Americans had to endure and overcome either in the place where they were born or find a new land more amenable to their physical, economic, and political survival. The Great Migration was an outcome of that choice. As Wilkerson describes it,

> The Great Migration had more in common with the vast movements of refugees from famine, war and genocide in other parts of the world, where oppressed people, whether fleeing twenty-first century Darfur or nineteenth-century Ireland, go great distances, journey across rivers, deserts and oceans or as far as it takes to reach safety with the hope that life will be better wherever they land.[140]

[140] Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns, 3655-57.

This migration would have tremendous consequences for Plainfields across the country. And yet Plainfield had attempted to quell the tensions and reduce the chaos that was to occur in 1967. In the 1930s, an interracial group of concerned citizens would study Plainfield and write a report of recommendations that would help the community and her citizens adapt to the new surroundings. In the 1940s, New Jersey amended her constitution to forbid racial discrimination in facilities throughout the state; an important measure considering in 1947 "a good meal might mean a half-hour drive to Newark because in 1947 blacks were systematically excluded from five of eight downtown restaurants and three hotels" in Plainfield.[141] By the 1960s, with attention paid to housing concerns and civic duties, but never followed through, the assault on this systemic exclusion would come to Plainfield from the people in her West End. But, what really happened in Plainfield, and how does it fit in the context of uprisings prior to Plainfield? The answer lies within the significant differences between what is known and understood as a race riot vs. what is known and understood as an urban uprising in the twentieth century.

[141] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* 144.

Chapter 3

RACE RIOTS AND URBAN UPRISINGS: UNRESOLVED PROBLEMS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Riots, Ghetto Revolt, Urban Uprising

> Revolution is indeed inevitable, and as the cycle of change closes around America's racist environment, the issue of color becomes more pertinent.
>
> H. Rap Brown (1969)[142]

The term riot can actually be a misnomer when applied to the urban uprisings of the mid to late 1960s. Many scholars and lay people have used the term to connote racial disturbances throughout American history, but oftentimes the term is misused as part of common vernacular to describe general public disorder. In *Rioting in America*, riot historian Paul Gilje suggests rioting includes a multifacted assortment of public disorders to which the historian can connect the term *riot*. From the Boston Massacre to the Pickett Line, "the term *riot*" according to Gilje, "encompasses many different types of activity."

Depending on the context, a riot could be a parade with an effigy, or brutal manslaughter by a crowd, with a wide range of possibilities in between. Much depends

[142] H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Press, 1969).

on the perspective of the individual; one person's peaceful demonstration is another person's riot.[143]

Gilje defines riots "as any group of twelve or more people attempting to assert their will immediately through the use of force outside the normal bounds of the law."[144] But as we shall witness, this definition of riot is too broad and requires qualifiers or descriptors to describe the type of violence (including damage, injuries and death, etc.) that took place, let alone whether we can label an act of protest, or vengeance, simply, a riot. Gilje's sweeping history of riots makes a convincing argument that riots are an ever pervasive presence throughout American history; however, his argument is ambiguous. The inclusivity of his argument—and his usage of the term *riot*— discounts in degrees the historical significance of each act of public disorder, and it obfuscates the patterns we can glean to protect the future from our tumultuous past.

His study is effective in showing the pervasiveness of collective disorder in the American past, but it is too broad for suggesting patterns and how to study convergences and divergences of violent and even not so violent acts. In other words, riots, and other public disorders, must be observed through a microscope in order to understand what each one means in the context of the era in which they occur and the importance of the events themseves within a collective memory. Taking a closer look at riots in America during the 20th century might help us understand incidents less researched, more hidden

---

[143] Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 4.

[144] Ibid.

in the American history text. Furthermore, semantics may be at play, and it might be important to challenge the terminology we use to describe public disorder, uprisings or riots. At the core of this construction is violence. But how the violence is mete out might need to be qualified, possibly as an act of vengeance or an act of protest.

Race Riots

The inclusive, or Gilje constructed term, "riot," usually involves sporadic mass mobilization stiking violently at symbols of oppression as a matter of resistance in order to make a *loud* statement of dissent.[145] However, riots that take place against a group of people, in this case pre-Civil Rights, oppressed, African Americans, a descriptor is necessary to frame that event as to what it was, in this example, a *race riot*.

In 1863, New Yorkers took to the street in protest against the Civil War and the blatant inequalities in the draft.[146] This protest turned into a violent riot when the protesters began to destroy any symbol of power within reach. Like many of the other "riots" discussed in this chapter, the New York Draft Riots turned deadly, and symbols of dominance became human creatures of oppression. The protesters, many of them of Irish descent of the lower classes, began to take their frustrations out on black New Yorkers (the human symbol of the slave and "reasoning" behind the war thus forcing the

[145] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 10-12; Gilje, *Rioting in America*; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 330-33.

[146] Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 92.

protesters into a war they did not want to fight), actively seeking them out to harm, maim and kill.[147] The frustration of the system was displaced, and black Americans were used as scapegoats for the cause. The more subtle underpinnings and buried roots contributing to the causes of such riots are often not obvious enough for the non-rioting masses to see each incident for what they truly are and mean. Instead, they become passive and use the images presented in the media or the mind's eye to understand the riot on only a superficial level or to attribute a false cause of rioting.[148]

Echoing what would happen in East St. Louis in 1917,[149] Chicago in 1919 and elsewhere in the first few decades of the 20th century, the clash initiated between a mass of citizens (rioting New Yorkers) against a Federal Government initiative (the draft) turned into a collision that targeted black citizens, people used as symbols for the government.[150] The Draft Riots of 1863, along with most of the disturbances that occurred prior to the 1960s in America, can be characterized or called "race riots."

Race riots are a conflict of cultures, usually initiated by myth, rumor and misconceptions about the other group used as a target of riotous anger.[151] Race riots were also used to intimidate. In *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles*,

---

[147] Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 93-94.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Charles Lumpkins, *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Riot and Black Politics* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008).

[150] James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: America's Worst Race Riot and Its Legacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 81. Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 3.

[151] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 11.

Janet Abu-Lughod suggests that race riots "prevailed and were designed to discipline and punish potential insubordination."[152] This was certainly the case in East St. Louis in 1917 when whites systematically attacked innocent black citizens to both make a political statement and deter the miniority from realizing and gaining political empowerment brought on by wartime employment and the first large migration of blacks from the South during World War I.[153] Economics and opportunity are often at the center of race riots. But most importantly, it's in the name—race riots, i.e. riots involving more than one race. The contested and nonfluid racial group is seemingly pushed outside the mainstream (i.e., marginalized) and often becomes the target when that group gains power or is percieved to have gained power. Therefore, race riots are often political as well.

The political statement of a race riot is usually based on space and percieved encroachment.[154] Race riots were a common occurance in the first half of the twentieth century because of the mass mobility and migration of African Americans that began shortly after the Civil War but continued in greater numbers during the periods surrounding both World Wars.[155] The Great Migration witnessed one of the greatest population shifts in world history. Southern blacks who came north for better opportunities and to escape the dehumanizing effects of Jim Crow soon found that their

---

[152] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 11.

[153] Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 22.

[154] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 16.

[155] Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago*; Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration*; and Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States*.

new homes were wrought with similar issues, and most importantly, the North was just as racist as the South.[156] For some, the North would be considered worse than the South, for the South was unable to hide (nor did it care to) from the open system of apartheid created by Jim Crow laws.[157] *De jure* segregation is honest, blatant and sets up a demarcation of space easily understood by those the laws limited. The signs labeled "Colored" pasted throughout public spaces in the South are a good example of the blatant nature of *de jure* segregation. Such signs were absent in the North.

Race riots were frequent in the North during the first half of the twentieth century.[158] This is part of the equation that produces the false dichotomy of northern racial liberalism, which harkens back to the Draft Riots of 1863. Not only did race riots occur in almost every northern state, black Americans who lived in the North were tightly boxed into communities shaped by a trap of residential segregation, which led to poor educational resources, limited job opportunities and the lack of mobility, both socially and spatially.[159] It would be the realization of these disadvantages, mixed with frustration at the pace of progress, that would lead the young militants to revolt in the 1960s. Nevertheles, the race riots that occurred during the first half of the century must be placed into a context separate from, yet possibly related to, the ghetto or urban uprisings of the

---

[156] Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality 1890-2000* (New York: Viking Press, 2001), 17-18.

[157] Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Migration*, 70-71.

[158] Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 115-19.

[159] Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago*, 33.

1960s. To explicate the point, there is a significant difference between the Chicago Riot of 1919 and the Detroit Riot of 1943 and the uprisings of these same areas in 1968 and 1967 respectively. The former were race riots, the latter were urban uprisings, and the differences are larger and crucial.

From Violence as Vengeance to Violence as Protest: A Twentieth Century Evolution

All told, the shift from race riot to urban uprising was facilitated by many factors. It took two World Wars and an organized nonviolent movement to mainstream the issues that plagued oppressed African Americans.[160] By the mid 1960s and under the construct of Black Power as a movement and spirit, urban uprisings became a characteristic of the volatility of the mid 1960s into the 1970s. To highlight the difference between race riots and urban uprising would take more than a journey through riots and uprisings in 20th century American history; however, these differences are important in understanding the shifts and overall shaping of poor black inner cities across the United States. Race riots are characterized by:

1) White attacks on blacks, most likely the result of scapegoating and myth with the ultimate intent of encouraging blacks to flee the area.[161]

---

[160] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 201.

[161] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 11.

2) An assertion of power from those with power or those who can hold power[162]

3) The use of means to "keep blacks in their place"—a check on power that is similar to extrajudicial violence like lynching in the South[163]

4) Finally, race riots were often the result of a fear of black political, economic or social progress, no matter how real or perceptually false.[164]

The urban uprising common to the mid to late 1960s, on the other hand, were statements from the powerless to the powerful utilizing the only means many in the revolting community have: fists and sticks. Thomas Sugrue insightfully points out "black power and the riots fueled each other."[165] I contend that the transfer from race riot to urban uprising could have only taken place under the construct of black power—self-determination, pride and defense. Along with the black power thrust, urban uprisings are characterized by:

1) African American attacks on symbols of white power with the ultimate result of white citizens fleeing rebel areas.

2) An act of aggression with and through an "any means necessary" defensive position.

---

[162] Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos,* 6.

[163] Gilje, *Rioting in America,* 111.

[164] Hirsch, *Rioting and Remembrance*, 6-7

[165] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* 346.

3) A response to and rejection of the constant checks that "kept blacks in their place."

4) Finally, completely opposite in causation of race riots, urban uprisings were often a response to the limited or lack of political, economic and social progress.[166]

Ultimately, both race riots and urban uprisings were expressions of or the result of the institutionalization of white supremacy and power, however, in competing and differing ways.

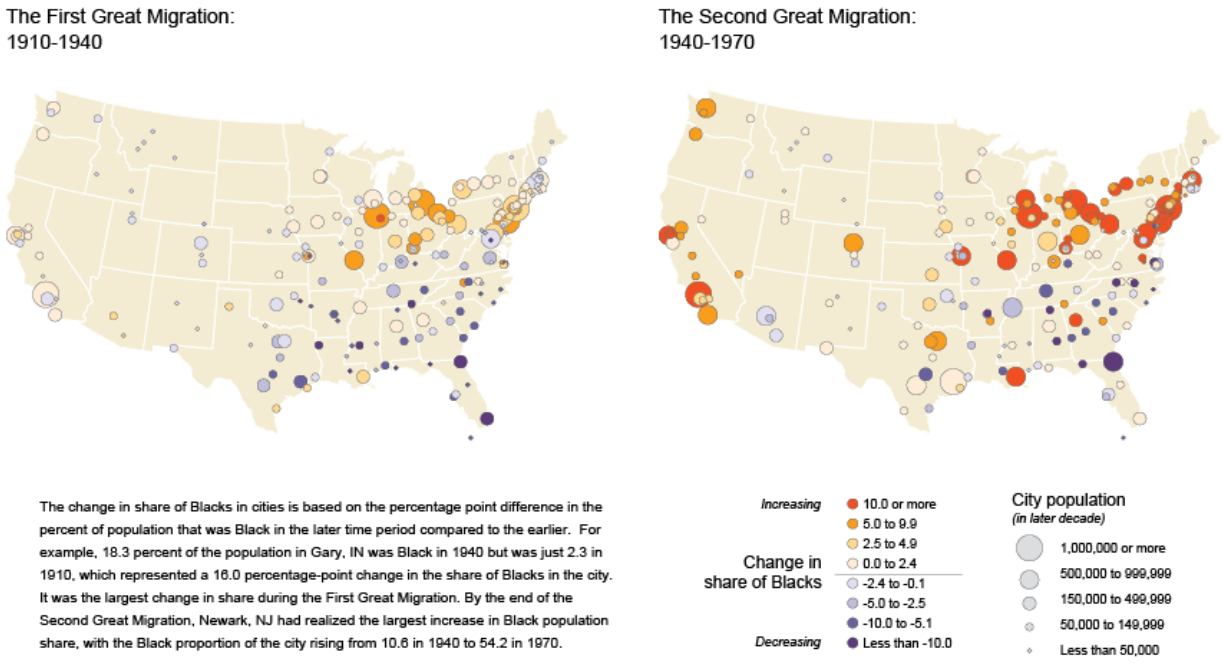
A simpler way of describing the evolution of riots/uprisings in the twentieth century is to track the pattern of violence and the actors who perpetrated the violence. Prior to the Harlem riot in the 1940s, what would be termed riots stemmed from the violence meted out against black communities from those with power, whites. Violence as vengeance characterized these riots as black communities were attacked when and where they were perceived to be threats in a given white community. We witness violence as vengeance in the period between 1917 and 1940 at a time when the Great Migration had produced a seismic population shift of African Americans from the South

---

[166] These characteristics are ones I gathered from a detailed analysis of the *Kerner Commission Report* (1968) as well as other secondary sources, books and articles written about specific riots in the 1960s including: Abu-Lughod, *Race, Place and Space*; Sydney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2007); Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America*; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty* and Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

to the North. By the 1950s, there were more blacks living in urban centers in the North than throughout the whole South.[167] The following graphic from the United States Census Bureau adequately expresses this population shift.

The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970[168]



Violence as vengeance needs a context bigger than the Great Migration. Although most major riots prior to World War II were sparked by the perceived threats against the white communities: the threat of employment because blacks were used as strikebreakers and cheaper labor and the threat of housing when whites closed their neighborhoods to

---

[167] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 88-90.

[168] "*The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970*," *Census.gov. Data, Data Visualization Gallery*, http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/.

anyone with a dark skin hue. The threats, as perceived by whites, were real. In popular culture, heavyweight black and proud Jack Johnson was champion of the world, and his visibility was contested because of his penchant for the highly taboo practice of carrying on with white women who wrapped themselves around his shoulders. This was considered its own assault and insult to many whites.[169] The 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* told a cautious, yet fallacious, tale of black domination, rewrote the period of Reconstruction as a period of inept black political leadership (inept white men with tar on their face) who triumph over the white man, and the ultimate goal of the black man's access to white women.[170] In this film, the Ku Klux Klan emerged as heroes, those who saved white society from the maladroit and scurrilous black leadership. During the early part of the 20th century, both Jack Johnson's image, and the reality of his sexual preferences, mixed well with D.W. Griffith's racist interpretation of Reconstruction and perpetuate a false myth based on a visible example but a general lie. As symbols, both represented for many whites a need to intimidate and ultimately curtail any gains made by black Americans. If they did not, their men, black men, would take "our" women and the white race would be reduced to subordination. It was these myths that fueled the events of May and July 1917 in East St. Louis, Illinois, Chicago in 1919, and Oklahoma in 1921, years when thousands of blacks were immigrating into these areas from the South.

---

[169] Robert J. Norrell, *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 70.

[170] Ibid., 69.

Post WWI Race Riots:

Violence as Vengeance in Tulsa, East St. Louis, and Chicago

When we perceive a threat, we rely on myths or stereotypes (fallacies that lead to racism) to inform our reactions in many different ways. Not all people have the fortitude to go out and commit an act of vengeance on another. However, many people did participate in these violent acts of vengeance. Mobs of whites participated in the Tulsa Riot of 1921, which led to the destruction of Greenwood, the black section of town. Houses, hotels and all symbols of black autonomy were burned to the ground as the race riot "was less about mass killing than about the physical and spiritual destruction of a community."[171] This riot was based on vengeance, both in a small sense and a larger context. Tulsa was a "white man's town where white Tulsa men ruled."[172] Yet, Greenwood became a thriving community, a self-determined community that became a safe haven for blacks from Tulsa and those migrating from other parts of the nation. Greenwood's church and local Stradford Hotel helped shape a pride in black ownership and autonomy in this very segregated city.[173] Both these buildings were burned to the ground during the Tulsa Riot. Both proved to be the "physical and spiritual" symbol of black power in white Tulsa.

---

[171] Hirsch, *Rioting and Remembrance*, 105.

[172] Ibid., 37.

[173] Ibid., 49-50.

Nevertheless, the ultimate threat that led to vengeance in Tulsa was sexual. Sexual taboos that were symbolized in both Jack Johnson's penchant for white women and D.W. Griffith's heroes in *Birth of the Nation,* and the KKK were on display when young Dick Rowland walked into an elevator with a young white woman Sarah Page. As we shall see, rumor plays a big role in instigating if not facilitating a riot. When Ms. Page cried rape, most of white Tulsa wanted vengeance, regardless of the evidence or even the police's skeptical attitude towards the claim.[174] Vengeance led a lynch mob to the jailhouse, but Rowland's life was spared for it was not the fact that Dick Rowland allegedly raped a white woman, but a group of Greenwood residents went to "rescue" Rowland and were successful. Rowland never met the white mob; instead, as a result of Greenwood's challenge to the white mob, Greenwood as a whole had to be decimated to reassert white supremacy. In Tulsa, violence as vengeance was heightened by the mobilization of the black community in defense of Dick Rowland.[175] They dared to challenge mob justice, and in doing so, they paid the deepest price, a loss of a community, all in the name of another group's desire for vengeance in the quest to protect white supremacy.

Vengeance played a role in the East St. Louis race riots of 1917 as well. Writing on the East St. Louis riots in his work *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*, Charles Lumpkins suggests that the riot was based on built up

---

[174] Hirsch, *Rioting and Remembrance*, 79 and Jerrold Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 147.

[175]Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, 148.

"animosities [that] had existed for decades before and after the 1917 riots." He continues, "The race riot, therefore, had much to do with white reaction to perceived threats to white racial entitlements by black community building and politics in context of the historic African American quest for freedom and equality."[176] Perception plays a key role in individual relations in general. For example, decades later, the perception of the ghetto as a wasteland produced by African Americans, not by an interwoven system of segregation, played a large role in the backlash against antipoverty programs in the 1970s and 1980s. The perception of the "welfare queen" of today could easily be replicated one hundred years ago by just one word, "Negro." These "negroes" were encroachers, job takers, rapists, along with many other popularized and blatantly racist and false representations of black people in the early part of the twentieth century.

It would be these perceptions that would lead a community to viciously attack innocent blacks in East St. Louis in 1917. Lumpkins writes, "White East St. Louisans with a racist political agenda were the first white northern urbanites during the war years to use mass violence to prevent black people from strengthening their political clout."[177] Lumpkins likens what happened in East St. Louis as a pogrom or "ethnic cleansing" for its brutality and the absolute wanton and excessive violence inflicted on innocent people, black people. Lumpkins' pogrom was "the organized, physical destruction of a racially defined community."[178] This mode of assault was characterized by incidents throughout

---

[176] Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 3.

[177] Ibid., 76.

[178] Ibid., 8.

the country, from New Orleans to New York, from Atlanta to Illinois. "In each case," according to Lumpkins, "local white business and political leaders, policemen, and others instigated, encouraged, or participated in assaults to destroy African American businesses, institutions, communities, and lives."[179]

Like East St. Louis, the riotous activity in 1919 Chicago involved attacks on blacks "hostility and resistance."[180] The year 1919 was a critical year in the history of race in America, for riots against blacks or clashes of cultures reverberated in at least sixteen locations around the same period of Chicago (1919).[181] From New Orleans to Georgia, Connecticut and Arizona, the period shortly after World War I was a period of racial tension and discord.[182] Much of the tension was based on race, place and space. First, the migration caused an increase in population in northern areas. Second, the northern areas did not necessarily accept the migrants as social equals. Third, since blacks indigenous to the North and migrants were perceived with many negative connotations (i.e. racism), but most importantly, encroachers of "owned" territory, they were forced into segregated residential areas, and they were literally kept in their space through violent intimidation or government action. Another issue in 1919 was that of the black World War I serviceman. The uniformed black soldier was another affront to white supremacy viewed through the lens of defining masculinity. Furthermore, the legal

---

[179] Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 8.

[180] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 52.

[181] Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 86.

[182] Ibid., 56.

processes of banking, insurance companies and realtors continued to stymie African American attempts at mobility. Finally, racial discord is also most visible in times of economic downturn, and this held true for the 1960s and 1970s as it did so for the period immediately following World War I.

Space, or at least perceived encroachment on space, led to the white on black violence that erupted in postwar Chicago.[183] Like East St. Louis, there was a threat of space and a competiveness with employment that festered long before physical action would take place. Unlike East St. Louis, the black Chicago community had a much more limited political voice, and the competiveness for jobs was not just with union organized whites but also with first and second generations of American ethnic immigrants.[184] In fact, the Irish Catholic community in Chicago played a major role in the violent acts of 1919, as they had in New York during the Draft Riots in 1863.[185] Borrowing from William Tuttle's explorative account on the bloody riot, simply entitled *Race Riot*, a young black male either crossed into the white side of the 29th Street beach or did not, but what ultimately occurred was the throwing of stones toward the young kid on his raft. The local police ignored the pleas of the attacked kid leading to "hundreds of angry blacks and whites swarmed to the beach...Then a black man, named James Crawford, drew a revolver and fired into a cluster of policemen, wounding one of them. A black officer returned the fire, fatally injuring Crawford...The gunfire had signaled the start of a

---

[183] Abu-Lughold, *Race, Space and Riots*, 69-70.

[184] Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 118.

[185] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 65.

race war."[186] Whites began to gather in gangs, and harkening back to East St. Louis two years earlier, began indiscriminately assaulting black Chicagoans. The attacks, from workspace to black neighborhoods, continued for six days. According to Janet Abu Lughod, "It was not until Friday, August 7, that the militia could begin to withdraw. She continues, "The final 'body count' was 38 dead: 23 of them black men or boys (of whom seven had been killed by the police)."[187]

Chicago was not only a turf war with whites rebelling against the perception that blacks had encroached on their space, but also it had a telling goal, quite similar to what had occurred in East St. Louis: "intensify segregation" which in the North meant intimidation and threat, sometimes even death.[188] Whether the goal was racial (protection of whiteness) or ethnic (the protection of connection oftentimes via ideations on whiteness) both East St. Louis and Chicago show white on black violence as indiscriminate and acceptable, for in fact there were hardly any arrests of perpetrators in either of these riots. Furthermore, the arrests made were often of blacks who were in the process of defending themselves and their homes. The irony here was not lost on the brilliant insight of journalist extraordinaire Ida Wells Barnett who found it rather telling that the only "criminals" of these riots were those who used "self defense" to avoid murder, so the perpetrator of murder was free to kill again.[189]

---

[186] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 60.

[187] Ibid., 63.

[188] Ibid., 52.

[189] Lumpkins, *American Pogrom*, 137.

Tulsa, Chicago and East St. Louis all exemplify the vengeance of one group of people towards another. These disorders exhibited an all out assault on a people, undertaken by a vengeful population reacting to a perceived threat and they fit under the rubric of race riots in that they demonstrate a willingness to attack others as individuals and symbols, based on stereotypes and scapegoating, to assert their power as the caste with power, to place a check on a nascent power that they perceived as encroaching, to act in an extrajudicial and violent manner to succeed in their goals, and finally, these riots of vengeance happened because of the fear or threat of black political, social and economic autonomy in a given place and period. The assertion of black empowerment led to vengeance in a very clear and straight forward manner.

Violence as Protest: The Harlem Shift

World War II was a defining point in American racial history for from this period on issues of race were contested, politicized and popularized in mainstream America.[190] Prior to World War II, the interceding years between World Wars, the nation went through a period of boom and bust that transformed the tenor of the country up to the present day.[191] The Great Depression was a period when African Americans were more vulnerable due to the ill effects of destitution and economic depression, but this period for blacks was also one that spawned hope encouraged by the major government

---

[190] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 185.

[191] Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*, 114.

initiatives of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.[192] If anything can characterize America in the 1930s, depression would be accurate; however, the expansion of government as an institution answerable to the needs of her people did lead many to believe that the 1930s was a decade of hope.

The hope, as opposed to despair, continued into the next decade, for Americans at home had something to bind them: an identity forged by the bombing of a naval base far from the contiguous land that most Americans lived in. Nonetheless, World War II brought forth a set of common goals infused with an American identity, much akin to the aftermath of the attacks on the Eastern Seaboard on September 11, 2001. Black men, specifically those who joined the armed forces in droves—around 900,000 African Americans joined the ranks of the 14 million person strong American military effort—felt that their mission was to fight for democracy while at the same time redefining the shape of democracy at home. [193] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) led the Double V campaign, victory at home and abroad. The campaign led many blacks to see the war as an opening to question some of the ideas contained in the creed American soldiers were sworn to fight to protect.[194] This was especially true since their participation in World War I resulted in the violence of bloody vengeance, as in the "Red Summer" of 1919. Furthermore, domestic advocates for civil rights found the war era an important and crucial time to press for progress in regards to civil rights for

---

[192] Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 104.

[193] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 185.

[194] Ibid., 186.

African Americans. The most famous of these efforts came from civil rights and labor activist A. Phillip Randolph and his 1941-1943 March on Washington Movement (MOWM). The MOWM in 1943 was a threat to organize black labor to descend on the capitol with a protest message for improvement of employment opportunities whilst the leaders in Washington were fighting a war in the name of progress.[195] In order to avoid embarrassment and the image of black masses in the District, President Roosevelt acted by signing an Executive Order 8802 that would integrate federally funded defense industries. Historian Thomas Sugrue argues that the MOWM achieved exactly what it wanted to achieve—a call to action—or "changing the course of the federal government through 'mass pressure."[196] Not only did the Executive Order set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee, it presaged future pressures levied by similar means onto an already activist Federal Government. Randolph likened the outcome of his success to "The Second Emancipation Proclamation."[197] Unfortunately, the feeling that "a change was gonna come" was rather premature; it would take a nation-wide movement to challenge many of the roots of black oppression. Yet, an analysis like the one that follows would be limited without an understanding of the era prior to the 1960s urban uprisings and the feelings of hope, oftentimes shattered, that led to the frustration and eventually revolt.

Organizational success, such as the March on Washington Movement and the growth of the NAACP from their Double V campaign, is the context for the riots that

---

[195] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 150-51.

[196] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 57.

[197] Ibid.

occurred during and immediately after World War II.[198] Due in no small measure to the Great Migration, cities like New York, Chicago and Detroit grew significantly. At least 1.6 million rural Southern African Americans had migrated North by 1940.[199] In order to argue how Harlem foreshadows the change from race riots/violence as vengeance to urban revolt/violence as protest, it is important to examine a race riot that happened in 1943 Detroit, Michigan.

The 1943 Detroit riot was a race riot, but Harlem, one year later, characterizes the urban uprising paradigm as it "prefigured the types of ghetto revolts that would come to be characteristic in other cities only in the late 1960s."[200] In Detroit, white-on-black violence was an example of assertive force by those with power. The violence reinforced white control, and the extrajudicial use of violence proves the point of white supremacy. Finally, as a result of the visibility of blackness and the effects of the Great Migration, race riots were often the result of a fear of black political, economic or social progress, albeit progress could also mean mere presence when battles over space were concerned.

Detroit 1943 began with a rumor of "race war," after a race fight erupted at Belle Isle Park on June 20. White Detroiters began to take their anger out on innocent black bystanders, accosting blacks throughout the city, more often than not, with the support of

---

[198] Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 121.

[199] Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality*, 205.

[200] Abu-Lughold, *Race, Space and Riots*, 129.

the Detroit police.[201] Thurgood Marshall called the Detroit police a "Gestapo."[202] Thomas Sugrue writes, "White mobs stopped buses and trolleys, pulled off black passengers, and beat them. The city's overwhelming white police force sided with the white rioters."[203] A poor relationship between the police and the black community in the North was nothing new for blacks living in segregated communities in twentieth century America. Their presence was often the cause or part of a "trigger" for many of the urban uprisings in the 1960s; for example, it was the refusal of a white officer to help a black youth at the White Star Diner that sparked the Plainfield Riot in 1967. The role of the police would not only be static in riots before and after the 1960s, it is also fair to say that the black community throughout America was not only highly suspicious of police activity, but they also saw the men in uniform as a symbol of their own oppression—exploitation actors in the same play for a stagnant second class community.

Relations between the police and community fueled the Harlem riots as well. As Sugrue points out in *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 1943 black Harlem was already suspicious of the police, especially after hearing about the violent attacks in Detroit.[204] Therefore, it was a logical, albeit false, conclusion that when a white police officer arrested a black former soldier in 1943 Harlem, the officer had killed the soldier. Yet, it was not only the suspicious nature of a Harlem black community that led to the belief and responsive

---

[201] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 58.

[202] Ibid., 68.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Ibid., 69.

action against the supposedly murdered-by-police service member. Harlem had already been witness to a similar incident eight years earlier in 1934 when riotous activity broke out after a white police officer arrested a young black male on suspicion of theft. Rumor spread that the boy was taken from the store where the alleged incident took place into a basement area where he was beaten to death.[205] The role of the rumor mill and how it plays in the black community will be explored in Chapter 3; however, the rumors were not necessarily built on falsehoods, for throughout this period in the North, police-community relations were at their lowest and stretched to the brink.

Historical accounts, such as Heather Ann Thompson's *Whose Detroit?* (2008), Kevin Mumford's *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America* (2008), and Thomas Sugrue's *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (1997) and *Sweet Land of Liberty* (2009) argue that a main cause of these problematic relations was the fact that blacks composed only a minute percentage of the police forces, especially in communities under constant surveillance by police units, often the most poor and the most black. However, I also argue that police officers are citizens, like any other citizen, with a job and purpose. But, once the badge is off, like taking off high heels after a long day of work, the normalized world of the individual is recontextualized to his or her norm, filled with a normal construction of right/wrong and white/black configured through subjective understanding. In essence, the police officer is as much human as he is a representative of the state; therefore, his or her understanding of norms informs his or her actions on the job. Therefore, if a cop feels the encroachment of blacks, along with the stigma of what

[205] Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 132-33.

"Negro" meant, and held his own assumptions based on myth and subjective interpreted experience, both on the job and in life, the idea of a racist police officer should be as comprehensible as it is detrimental. These white police officers caused harm on political, social and even economic levels, and when not checked, they wreaked havoc on a community with impunity, protected from consequence by their badges—which by the 1960s, symbolized to those opposed to the state a kind of freedom when it came to participating in the commission of crime. Harlem sets up the dilemma between a racist police system and a black community—but in a much more nuanced way than Chicago in 1919 or Detroit in 1943. For it is in Harlem that we see the new construction of riot—from race riot to urban uprising.

Harlemites in both 1934 and 1943 went on the offensive and attacked not only police officers, but also broke into and looted stores. In both cases, fires were set, and damage was immense. The total cost of the damage during the 1943 riot stood close to two million dollars.[206] The 1934 riot led to the death of a young male, but the police acted aggressively to stop the disorder, and it was quelled within 24 hours, only leaving the tensions between black urban communities like Harlem and the police, who are purportedly dedicated to serve and protect the citizens, irrevocably fractured. Police were reprimanded with words alone for their "overzealous" nature in activity during the 1934 disturbance and in arresting young people.[207] Harlem 1943 lasted up to two weeks and

---

[206] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 151.

[207] Ibid., 143.

left "six African Americans dead, hundreds injured, and more than 550 blacks arrested (mostly for looting or receiving 'stolen goods')."[208]

Important here is the kind or nature of the action. In these cases, it was retaliatory action or even protest. Harlem represents a change from what might be called "*communal*" rioting to "*commodity*" rioting.[209] Communal rioting is based on group dynamics and fits the mold of race riots because it usually sets one group of people against another. The communal riot is oftentimes an act of mob violence perpetrated on innocent people, as witnessed in East St. Louis in 1917, Chicago in 1919, and Detroit in 1943. Commodity riots rise against the system, and instead of a group being demonized or attacked, physical and more than likely non-human symbols are. However, this does not fully explain the purpose of such disturbances. The commodity riot is not a race riot; it is largely symbolic and destructive, not necessarily against a person or group of people; instead, the community, or territory, that, for many, represented years of struggle and immobility becomes the target. The commodity riot is the riot in which uncontrolled looting and arson occur and locals forcibly move to take down their surroundings—residential segregation creates limited mobility; therefore, what is closest is most vulnerable. The commodity riot is not a riot.[210] It is a rebellion or uprising. It is an act of political, violent if necessary, protest.

---

[208] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 150.

[209] Ibid., 152 and Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 132.

[210] Abu-Lughold, *Race, Space and Riots*, 152.

Violence as Protest: A Forgotten Book with a Fruitful message

When riotous violence is vengeance, there is an interracial aspect to the event. When violence is protest, there is usually a symbolic relationship involved. It is hard to term the hundreds of civil disorders in the 1960s as simply riots. They were not. Urban historian Robert Fogelson, in a very important yet somewhat forgotten book, *Violence as Protest: A Study of the Ghetto Riots* (1971), suggests, "the 1960s riots were articulate protests against genuine grievances in the black ghetto."[211] Harlem in 1943 becomes a watershed moment in the history of riots in America; Fogelson writes, "The Harlem riots, like the 1960s riots were spontaneous, unorganized, and precipitated by police actions."[212] As stated earlier in this chapter, the police played a role, the spark of ignition, for the riots in both Harlem and Detroit in 1943. This demonstrates the shift from violence as vengeance to violence as protest; the interracial aspect is not as significant because these riots did not pit groups of individuals against one another. Instead, what characterizes the riots in the Civil Rights and Black Power era is that the uprisings projected violence on symbols of oppression, and there was no doubt that oppression existed in black communities throughout the 1960s. As Fogelson notes, "the riots were a manifestation of race and racism in the United States, a reflection of the social problems

[211] Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos*, 21.

[212] Ibid., 18.

of black ghettos, a protest against the essential conditions of life there, and an indicator of the necessity for fundamental changes in American society."[213]

Protest was what made the Civil Rights Movement so effective; the idea of thousands marching to Jackson, Mississippi or four kids sitting at a segregated lunch counter is part of a glorified past of positive action. Violence ran counter to the Civil Rights Movement. However, in the late 1960s, violence became part of the conversation through the Black Power Movement and its forbearer Malcolm X. As we have witnessed throughout American history, or even current events in Syria, Egypt, and other countries undergoing revolutionary impulses, violence and protest do not have to be divorced to be acted upon. What made the Civil Rights Movement compelling was the non-violent civil disobedience that was practiced even while the protesters were met with violence. Nevertheless, if the Civil Rights Movement had a violent side to it, in terms of protest, it would be the urban uprisings of that era. That is why the uprisings of this time period were natural and integral to the Movement. As Fogelson explains, the uprisings or violence as protest of the 1960s were "attempts to call the attention of white society to blacks' widespread dissatisfaction with racial subordination."[214]

---

[213] Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos*, 49.

[214] Ibid., 21.

Case in Point: Violent as Protest in the 1960s

By 1963, civil rights mobilization had reached its climax. Many observed a "new spirit" or identity in many of the younger people who joined the mass mobilized civil rights efforts of the 1950s and early 1960s. From 1943-1964, America had experienced a reshaping on all levels. After World War II, American assertiveness ushered in a period of prosperity not matched in history. As much as the post-war period promoted wealth, the material gain of the era did not translate into domestic peace. Under the codes of Cold War rhetoric and the guise of patriotism, Americans in the post-war era conformed to newer molds of Americanism, namely commodity acquisition. Albeit this new peaceful and conformist America was hardly the reality for many living in the country, yet one only has to look at the contemporary media in order to see the ideal yet un-real American lifestyle in post war America.

Promoted by government financial support, many Americans were able to establish new homes with new technological features that ushered in a new age in living and space. The Age of Prosperity was also the age of the suburbs, when government incentives paved the way for new neighborhoods, new towns, and new infrastructure to support these areas. If the suburbs were "in," then the cities were "out." With this came truly damaging implications, for the flight of population, business, and manufacturing from cities wreaked havoc on American urban economies throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Therefore, the years 1943-1964 saw a nearly complete overhaul of the American way of life, focused more on and promoting the lives of those who have at the

expense of those who have not.[215] Not taking into account probably the most crucial barrier for African Americans in the 1950s (or at times being fully aware of this), residential segregation muted the ability for blacks to even attempt to take part in the prosperous age. A close reading of Thomas Sugrue's canonical text on postwar American Detroit, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, reveals that once white flight into the suburbs began, and after corporations followed them, the postwar city had hardly a chance for economic survival. In Detroit, according to Sugrue, at a time when whites were moving en masse to the suburbs, industries began to move out of the urban core (deindustrialization), and blacks found themselves boxed in, or trapped by the confounds of the decaying Metropolis. He wrote, "the disruption of old patterns of work, residence, and race coincided with a massive political challenge to the structures of racial inequalities nationwide."[216] Although I and other scholars find serious limits within the urban crisis paradigm, there is an important point to be made concerning mobility or the lack thereof for black Americans. Residential segregation is at the center of any stymied progress. The crisis of the cities was created by many factors highlighted above, but very importantly, the outcome of black-run and black-led cities ended up being one of the most positive legacies of the Civil Rights era. This study will return to that point later, but nonetheless, the postwar city, which in 1960 accounted for the largest population of African Americans in this country, was by 1964 in total flux.

---

[215] Norrell, *The House I Live In*, 166-68.

[216] Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 10.

1963 was a major turning point in the black movement for equality, for it was the beginning of the militant stage of black empowerment. The tide was turning, and more and more blacks began to dissent less peacefully, as was so effective and popularized in the Martin Luther King led southern campaign. Many, including myself, contend that the race riot to urban uprising shift from white-on-black violence to black violent protest begins in Harlem in 1943. However, that is only a hint of what would come. This work contends that the Black Power framework, that is, the systematic promotion of black cultural pride, territorial acquisition, self-defense, and the visibility of blackness sets the tone for the uprisings of the mid to late 1960s. In other words, what Harlem was lacking in 1943, was blossoming in 1963, the Black Power spirit, ideology, and a lot of anger.

This is not to dismiss other movements of black self pride and determination, for throughout American history there have been black nationalist impulses similar to the Black Power Movement of the mid to late 1960s, but the Black Power Movement in itself is a result of the neatly demarcated Civil Rights Movement, and it is indeed a response to the Movement for perceived inaction and gradualism. The early black power impulses during the time of Marcus Garvey (or Martin Delany for that matter) did not attack as much as it retreated into a black enclave, rejecting integration as whiteness and rejecting white supremacy. By the early 1960s, the idea that it was time to reject intergrationism gained momentum. Black Power played a critical role in the response that ignited revolt in cities across the nation from 1964-1972. In militancy of action and with the use of

violence as a means to protest, the rebels that took to the streets from Harlem 1964 onwards were acting in the spirit of revolution, the spirit of Black Power.[217]

By 1963, the Movement was taking a "revolutionary turn." Activists north and south felt the tenor change; frustration and dissent were at the roots of this transformation. The militant tenor, especially in the North, was a surprise for some, but many in the black community were prescient enough to know there was a tide turning and however it manifested itself, it would be complex if not dangerous. Sugrue quotes activist writer Louis Lomax in 1963 who virtually predicted the Harlem uprising of 1964: Lomax noted, "The mood of the Negro, particularly in New York City, is very, very bitter. He is losing faith. The Negro on the streets of Harlem is tired of platitudes from white liberals."[218] The 1964 Harlem revolt against the police was unlike any other uprising in New York City; it began in Harlem and took advantage of the Fulton Street subway line to end in the Brooklyn black neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

The uprising in Harlem started most typically with rumor, and it was initiated by the local police, characteristically representative of Watts, Newark, Detroit, New Haven, Plainfield and many others. James Powell was a summer school student, who along with friends, was playing in front of a building when the owner sprayed the youth with a water hose.[219] Powell's response was to chase the older man into his building. Once Powell

---

[217] See Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of the Black Power Movement* (New York: Henry Holt and Macmillan, 2007).

[218] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 288.

[219] Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 171-81.

came out of the building, seemingly jocular, an off duty police officer who witnessed the play but construed it rather differently, immediately fired a shot at Powell outside the building. The young kid died from a gunshot wound inflicted by an off duty, plain-clothed police officer.[220]

Powell was from Harlem, and once the community heard of the fatal shooting, it began to coalesce as a reactionary force. According to Janet Abu-Lughod, "In the tinderbox of black discontent . . . the charges of police brutality and the use of excessive force ignited the 'fire this time,'" a term used to connote the type of rage festering within the black community and explicated in a book of that title by James Baldwin.[221] For close to a week, black mobs roamed and dominated the streets, violently trashing stores, looting, and throwing homemade Molotov cocktails (a staple in the meager resources of a rebellious group) to set fires. Halfway through the violence that was mainly concentrated in Harlem, Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) representatives in Brooklyn held a meeting in response to the activities in subway stations northwest of Harlem. The CORE group was met with the presence of uniformed NYPD. As Abu Lughod writes, "Although the CORE speakers urged the police to withdraw and the crowd to disperse, neither retreated" thus sparking the Bed-Stuy portion of the uprising. Harlem's anger transferred into the Brooklyn community and "the combined costs of the Harlem and Brooklyn riots

[220] Abu Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 171.

[221] Ibid., 172.

were 465 riot-connected arrests, a million and a half dollars of extra police expenses, and some two and a half million dollars of damage suits filed against the city."[222]

However, most important are the implications of the action during the Harlem—transfer to Bed-Stuy Uprising. The activity was a spontaneous revolt, but also a commodity revolt, one in which common people went on the streets to physically damage the property in their immediate proximity. What most accounts on riots and uprisings suggest is that the properties that are destroyed and damaged are more than likely symbols of white dominance and oppression. Molotov cocktails are thrown into white owned stores, restaurants and other services devoted to a white population and exclusive of all others were mostly the commercial properties targeted by protesters. This was the case in many riots of the late 1960s from Harlem-Bed-Stuy to Plainfield, New Jersey.

Indeed, the rebels of the mid to late 1960s struck out against reminders of their constant placement within the confines of residentially segregated locales and dilapidated urban housing. This frustration was only highlighted by the most shocking, sudden and absolutely devastating urban uprising that would take place in the South Central area of Los Angeles: Watts.

Historically, Los Angeles has been one of the most diversely populated major cities in America. However, throughout the twentieth century, Los Angeles, like most of California, was highly segregated, with a mixed population of white, ethnic white, Mexican and African American.[223] Due to the far-reaching consequences of residential

---

[222] Abu Lughod, *Race, Space and Riots*, 176.

[223] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 214-19.

segregation, Los Angles and its surrounding areas were filled with tensions that originated with the competition for space and opportunity. Although racial tensions were elevated in this tightly constructed and segregated city, worse tensions festered between the black community in LA and the local Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD).[224] Residential segregation only added to the strain between the LAPD and black enclaves like Watts, located in south LA. During this period, all black enclaves, like Watts, throughout America were stigmatized by a consistent and oftentimes contentious police presence, perceived as a constant reminder of control in an already over-controlled space. As has already been determined as typical to the formation of riotous activity, the Watts rebellion began with an arguable case of police brutality followed by rumor. What followed was at first an outright assault on the Watts region, including looting, arson and structural damage, but the rebellion ended with a massive showing of force by law enforcement, loose handed and trigger happy police, who retaliated in the most brutal and intimidating way, by the bullet.[225]

Young black Los Angeles resident Marquette Frye was rightfully picked up by California Highway Patrol (CHP) because he had been driving as if he was under the influence of alcohol. Utilizing the account in Gerald Horne's excellent interpretation of the Watts Rebellion entitled *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, "the CHP was about to let him go when another patrol car pulled up containing officers with a

[224] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 35.

[225] Ibid., 35-36.

nastier attitude."[226] Mr. Frye was rather close to home when he was initially stopped, and his more sober brother, a U.S. Air Force veteran, was with him and cajoled, or at least tried to cajole, the officers into letting him take the car home, mere blocks away, rather than have it towed and pay a hefty fine. Marquette's mother arrived at the scene while a crowd was gathering around the site as well. Chastised by his mother and the terser CHP officers, Marquette resisted arrest, and what observers saw was him forced into a police car, and police ultimately shutting the patrol car door on his legs to force him in. By the time he was about to be driven away, once inside the police car, he was hit on the head by a police officer.[227]

Marquette's mother was none too pleased by the treatment of her son, so she reacted, and according to police accounts, she attacked an officer. According to Mrs. Frye, she was immediately accosted by the police and arrested. Regardless, the outcome led to all three Fryes, Marquette, mother and brother, arrested and taken to the local police station. Along with the misinterpretation or the perception of those who gathered to watch the arrest of the Frye family, rumors began to circulate throughout the Watts community that not only were the Fryes accosted then arrested, but a pregnant woman had been shoved and pushed by a police officer, angering the gathering crowd even more. (Accounts show that the woman was merely a bystander, and as a hairdresser, she was wearing a smock that gave her the appearance of pregnancy). This did nothing to deter the festering discontent of the crowd. From the night of the Frye arrests on August 11,

---

[226] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 54

[227] Ibid., 55.

1965 until August 13, law enforcement lost total control of the mob, and their response was limited by the overwhelming wave of disaffected black people; therefore, the looting, arson and mass destruction that began with a crowd watching the arrest of an intoxicated driver transformed into an all out assault on the surrounding areas. However, while this uprising lasted six days, the major chaos and loss of control only occurred within the first two to three days of the uprising. The slow-to-react police and their efforts at retaliation took over the remaining period of the revolt.[228]

The LAPD was inept in dealing with the destruction and crowds of people merging among the streets of the Watts area. Yet, as more and more law enforcement came to the area, structural destruction turned into human destruction. The official response was predicated on the power relationship as it existed between the government and the governed, the government and its "on-the-ground" force (the police and other such entities), and the on-the-ground force and the governed. The government's primary goal was the reassertion of power by re-implementing control of the governed, and the police and National Guard attempted to reassert their power by whatever means available to them. In this case, as with all police cases, it came down to weaponry. As Gerald Horne puts it, "A volatile situation had developed. A black community with deeply held grievances was revolting. A police department with a history of violence first had retreated, had been humiliated by stone throwers, then mystified by the carnival atmosphere, and it was eager to retaliate."[229] In other words, the initial experience of the

---

[228] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 67-78.

[229] Ibid., 68.

government's forces was one of ineptitude and impotence, as the governed had begun to assert themselves and their power; therefore, the state and its on-the-ground forces had to, in their view, in no uncertain terms, impress upon the governed their power and their control.[230]

The stakes in Watts were raised with the accidental shooting of a Deputy Sheriff on the third day of the uprising. Deputy Sheriff Ronald Ludlow was shot while trying to contain three suspects in the rioting.[231] "It was at this juncture," according to Horne, "that a community revolt against the police was transformed into a police revolt against the community."[232] What ensued was the retaliation of an overzealous police force and National Guard who used the running rebels for shooting practice and used the guise of law and order, via barricades, cordons and curfews, for all out vigilantism and murder.[233] The community had no means to retaliate; they were not only socially powerless but also defenseless. (In fact, the police made it illegal for members of the community to have any weapons, therefore leaving many blacks defenseless targets for the same people who took their physical power away). In the end, thirty-four were left dead, but this was by far the most devastating riot in American history, at least up to that point. Horne wrote:

At least 34 people died in Los Angeles during the Watts uprising of August 1965; 1,000 more were injured and 4,000 arrested. Property damage was estimated at $200

---

[230] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 68.

[231] Ibid., 72.

[232] Ibid.

[233] Ibid., 115.

million in the 46.5 square-mile zone (larger than Manhattan or San Francisco where approximately 35,000 adults 'active as rioters' and 72,000 'close spectators' swarmed.[234]

Watts is important for many reasons. First, it showed that blacks were not going to passively exist as victims of police power; instead, they would react when a seemingly unfair police action occurs. This was clearly a rejection of the nonviolent civil disobedience that had been characteristic in the black struggle for civil rights from 1954 to 1965. Gerald Horne writes, "It is hard to dispute the perception that Watts marked the point when masses of blacks were manifestly demonstrating that Dr. King's ideas were not accepted universally."[235] Secondly, Watts became a model for the over 200 racial rebellions that tore through the country in the later part of the decade. The model was not only defined for those who rebelled, it was set for law enforcement and the tactics it used to quell the uprisings in other urban areas. Horne notes, "Watts was a factor in subsequent major conflagrations in Detroit, Newark, Miami, and other urban battlefields."[236]

Though police in Detroit 'carefully studied' Watts, that did not help appreciably when the city went up in flames in 1967. "Tactics deployed in the streets of South LA by protesters were emulated by their counterparts across the nation."[237] Finally, Watts was *not* a race riot. Horne explains, "The turmoil was being characterized as a race riot, but

---

[234] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 3.

[235] Ibid., 105.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid., 120.

unlike the nineteenth-century variety, here blacks were much more on the offensive on a racial basis."[238] Watts was a statement; Watts was a rebellion or uprising that did not involve race-on-race violence per se, but one racial group struck out against the symbols of the system that kept them entrenched in the crumbling urban centers throughout America. These symbols were the local stores owned by the ethnic whites who gouged their customers with inflated prices because their business catered to the poor black community; they were also the banks that rejected the majority of black loan applications; and it included the realtor that told a family that they could only move a block away because of perceived pressure to keep the neighborhood safe. The symbol could also be the man in blue, who was an everyday, constant reminder of racialized and oppressive place and space or the lack thereof. Watts, in the most violent manner, demonstrated that violence, as protest, was here to stay.

The Detroit Urban Uprising and Interpretation

Historians Heather Ann Thompson and Thomas Sugrue agree that at the core of Detroit's postwar racial discord was a battle between which groups, liberals or conservatives, whites or blacks, would determine the future of Detroit in her post-industrial age. Thompson shapes her thesis of *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* by arguing city and labor power were intertwined, and

[238] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising*, 120.

control of the city was shaped by "complex political and racial alliances."[239] Thompson's nuanced assessment, by adding labor into a racial and spatial conundrum, details the link between a weakening Labor Movement and a weakening inner city core that took place contemporaneously. In the end, Detroit may have had the façade of urban blight, but it remained a bastion of liberal racial and social politics that can be traced back to Lyndon Johnson's vision of a Great Society. Economic pressure and depression, according to Thompson, should not discount the fact that the brutal Detroit uprising of 1967 ushered in a period of closely uncontested liberalism (after the election of African American Coleman Young in 1973), an actualization of black political empowerment. Thompson's work is crucial in understanding the racial discord that resulted in the 1967 uprising because she calls upon the legacy of the uprising to suggest that an increased black presence and power does not correlate to urban decline, because there is no direct link to the race of the preponderance of government officials. She reminds us that Detroit's decline was initiated by deindustrialization that was a direct result of concessions made by labor to big business in the 1950s and 1960s, thus weakening the position of a once powerful Labor Movement in this once heavily industrialized city. Deindustrialization is a result of economic advantage, when a company can move to an area with a lower tax rate.[240] In a coordinated effort, Detroit industry moved into suburban areas—areas that were exclusionary for black men and women. Therefore, jobs moved but a significant

---

[239] Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor*, 3-4.

[240] This is part of a longer argument involving the concept of neo-liberalism. For more see Jefferson Cowie, Joseph Heathcott and Barry Bluestone, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 2003).

portion of the employees could not move with the job. Thus, African Americans in Detroit were left behind in a decaying city ending up with the theoretically based urban crisis.

In *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas Sugrue has a more pessimistic view of Detroit's economic malaise. His construct of the 1967 uprising in Detroit is based on the city's "attempts to take advantage of the largesse of the Great Society programs offered too little, too late for Detroit's poor; but raised expectations nonetheless. Growing resentment fueled by increasing militancy in the black community, especially among the youth, who had suffered the brunt of economic displacement fueled the fires of 1967."[241] The urban crisis can be seen with the eye. The crisis is characterized by "factories that once provided tens of thousands of jobs [that] now stand as hollow shells, windows broken, mute testimony to a lost industrial past."[242] The crisis was fostered by a loss of industry, industrial tax base, and a decrease in a citizen tax base brought forth by depopulation in the city. Left behind is an "eerily apocalyptic" visual of a city and a devastatingly impoverished citizenry.[243] Discrimination was at the core of the crisis. During the boom period of industry in Detroit, African Americans took advantage of the industrial jobs, but when those jobs moved to the hinterland, residential segregation (both *de facto* and *de jure*) denied these former employees the needed mobility; thus, they were unable to uproot themselves

---

[241] Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260.

[242] Ibid., 3.

[243] Ibid., 3.

while industry uprooted around them. In the meantime, white employees with the means of mobility and acceptability were free to move with industry—and they did in impressive numbers—fostering a new industrial suburban base. Of course, the suburbs thrived while the cities decayed.

Since Sugrue places the roots of the crisis right after World War II ended (1945), 1967 seems like a long period for a vocalized or physical response by a minority group that was slowly becoming the majority within the fleeting city. Nonetheless, on July 23, 1967, a police raid on a purportedly "illegal" party in Detroit sparked and agitated a crowd that grew as more and more police officers reported to the scene. Tensions between the police and the inner city community in Detroit were stressed prior to 1967, and prior to 1943, a constant in the city's history. Most of the crowd was not involved in the party, but many perceived the arrest of partygoers as another instance of police encroachment on black communal space. By the next day, an all out revolt against the police and the city began, and it lasted four days. As eloquently pointed out by Heather Thompson,

> During this melee, the age-old hostilities between black urbanites and the Detroit Police Department boiled over in shocking ways. Rumors flew through city streets that black Detroiters in the riot zone were taking every opportunity to attack police cars and to snipe at officers from behind windows. Before confirming the truth to these rumors, local police officers unleashed their fury on city blacks.[244]

Once again, rumor, myth and police discontent played a pivotal role in this uprising. In the end, "thirty-three blacks and ten white Detroiters were dead"[245] thousands were

---

[244] Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor*, 46.

[245] Ibid.

injured, over 7,000 arrests and more damage to an already devastated city that cost in the tens of millions.[246]

Detroit was only one of the 164 racial uprisings of 1967. Newark and Plainfield were two of the eight that along with Detroit were considered "major" by the federal government. However, it is important to note that it was the Detroit uprising, which took place less than two weeks after Newark's fires were sparked, that impelled the Federal Government, more specifically President Lyndon Johnson, to coordinate a commission to study the causes of the numerous incidents. This push resulted in the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders led by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, thus giving the report the title of the Kerner Commission Report (1968).

Closer to Home: Newark 1967

By 1967, the black community in the former industrialized powerhouse of Newark, New Jersey felt a deep sense of "powerlessness." Unlike contemporaneous uprisings, black Newark's sense of powerlessness was not the same as the dispirited "left behind" citizens in inner city Detroit, or Chicago for that matter. As late as 1967, Newark was entrenched in machine style politics that is considered the root cause of discord in July of that year. Although there are particular differences with all the uprisings during the late 1960s, there were many similarities as argued throughout this chapter. Central to Newark's week of discontent was what was central to the previously discussed uprising

[246] Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor*, 46.

rubric, but there were also race riot characteristics to add, specifically to Newark but possibly elsewhere. As the review of previous uprisings have detailed, the Newark uprising was a physical response to police brutality. In his work *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America*, Kevin Mumford suggests that police brutality "fostered what might be called nationalization of the black public sphere, leading directly to the riot."[247] However, uprisings are sporadic, not planned; therefore, police brutality can only be part of the cause for one of the worst uprisings in American history, one that would leave over 25 dead, 1,100 injured, over 300 cases of arson and most significantly 13,324 rounds of ammunition used—solely by law enforcement.[248]

Regardless of the police retaliation that followed the initial uprising, many equated the heavy hand of law enforcement in the black community as akin to the threat of the lynch mob or symbols of oppression continuously reminding many innocent citizens of their place as second class citizens in the Northern city.[249] It is fair to equate the relations between the Newark police force and the black community to other oppressive forces and symbols in black America's perception. However, it is fallacious to equate the police assault on Newark, the aftermath of the uprising (if we can argue that an uprising occurred in Newark) to lynching in the South, because the differences between extra-judicial law and actual judicious law in the case of murder and murderers or intimidators are belied by the support of those who shape or frame law enforcement.

---

[247] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 114.

[248] Ibid.

[249] Ibid., 117.

Although those who were in power protected the specter and action of the lynch mob, lynching as a form of intimidation was purportedly outside the law—thus an extra-judicial way of doling out perceived "justice" to often innocent victims. The police reaction in Newark had all the markings of extra-judicial justice—but those doling out the justice were those who were meant to serve and protect the community—making the events in Newark much more than a mere uprising; rather, I hold that it was city sponsored vigilantism supporting an attempt to extinguish poor blacks in Newark. Therefore, Newark 1967 starts as an uprising, but ends as a race riot, but even worse, a race riot and assault by the forces in power. It was a no-win situation if one were poor, black, and living in Newark, New Jersey in 1967.

CORE-Newark leader Robert Curvin asserts that the Newark uprising "was a result of a breakdown in the city's political system, a system that represented a minority white population and was virtually closed to the black majority."[250] Kevin Mumford suggests, "It is possible to see the riots rather as an acceleration of crises and violations of everyday life."[251] Like most of the uprisings, Newark began with a police altercation and rumor, albeit the rumor was not far from the truth. John Smith was a cab driver, described more often than not as meek and humble. Later reports suggested that the idea he "started" a riot was nothing he took ownership of, for he argued he did nothing to launch a communal response because he was merely a man arrested in a traffic stop by the police. Similar to the Watts reaction, a crowd began to gather around the arrested cab

---

[250] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 121.

[251] Ibid., 134.

driver and the police. In addition, similar to Watts, the arrest was not peaceful and ended with police officers beating Smith into the patrol car while onlookers grew angry. "We're tired of this shit, it happens all the time," were responses heard amongst the crowd. [252] Anger in the crowd swelled, and eventually the gathering mass began to run into the streets and ravage community buildings in close proximity. The uprising began on July 12, 1967 with the arrest of the silent, friendless cab driver, with the most common of names: John Smith.

The official dates of the uprising are July 12, 1967 to July 17, 1967. Plainfield's uprising began a little over a day later but with different causation, but similar reaction; but no uprising was as retaliatory as Newark. One only has to read the news reports coming out each day from Newark—snipers, looting, bedlam. Arguments have been made that throughout the uprising era of the mid to late 1960s, the media had a tendency to focus on white deaths and rely on police reports to detail reporting of an incident.[253] The media tells a story much different from what field accounts detail, and all the while, journalists filed misleading reports from the trenches.

For example, one of the most touted symbols that came to signify the Newark uprising was the report of snipers and the reports throughout the media that framed an embattled police force and New Jersey National Guard valiantly staving off the forces of snipers who surrounded their position. The idea of snipers, which is similar to Plainfield, justified the strong police reaction. In Plainfield, it justified the cordoning off of 16

---

[252] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 128.

[253] Ibid., 140.

blocks in the West End of town; in Newark, it justified not only the cordoning of certain sections but the absolute vigilante style use of gun power the Newark police and National Guard utilized to assault the citizens of Newark—13,324 rounds of ammunition used, the reason, snipers.[254]

Kevin Mumford writes, "Despite the lack of verifiable reports central command sent patrols into the stairwells of public housing complexes armed with rifles."[255] The New Jersey Hughes Report, the report commissioned by then New Jersey Governor Richard Hughes to study the uprisings that ripped through the state, in the year 1967, actually surmised, "Snipers had been exaggerated."[256] Yet, one only has to peruse through the news accounts of the period to read about the threat snipers posed in the city of Newark. For example, *The New York Times* front page on July 14 reads "***Negroes Battle with Guardsmen—Soldiers Exchange Gunfire with Snipers on Newark Project's Top Floors."*** Though, as Mumford suggests, "the figure of the terrorist sniper was only a media image and an official explanation, not a real military target."[257] The following two accounts illustrate the disparity between the reality of the uprising and the sensationalization of it by the media.

> *A stench hung in the air inside the hallway and the walk up a creaky stairs to the third floor ended in darkness. The apartment where Ozell and Rebecca Brown once lived with their four children was still vacant and silent as death. Mrs.*

---

[254] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 140.

[255] Ibid., 142.

[256] Ronald Porambo, *No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House, 2006), 27.

[257] Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race*, 144.

> *Brown stayed home from her job as a nurse's aide during the riot and her husband was late getting home from his construction job that fateful night. His brother was with Mrs. Brown and the kids when the National Guard gunfire crashed through the front windows. As she ran to pull one of her children to safety, bullets ripped over her abdomen.*
> And later,
> *Mrs. Rebecca Brown, about 30, of 298 Bergen St., died in City Hospital of gunshot wounds in the abdomen,* the Newark Evening News of July 16 reported. *She had been sitting in her apartment yesterday when three bullets from a sniper's gun came through the windows and hit her.*[258]

What Detroit, Newark, and Watts demonstrate is that violent protest will be met with violent retaliation. No longer was there the vengeance of a community of citizens, but the vengeance was in its real sense a response to violent protests. The desire for and movement toward vengeance is created by those in power, and central to this were the local police. Fogelson suggests that these protests would not have occurred if it were not for the historic police brutality in these areas. This would hold true for Plainfield in 1967 as well. According to testimony from rioters, police resentment played a prominent role in almost every major uprising from 1963-1967, especially in the 163 uprisings during the first nine months of 1967. Fogelson suggests this is the case because 1) brutality and harassment existed in ghetto communities 2) the law was more enforced in urban or ghetto areas than in non-ghetto or more specifically white communities, and most importantly 3) there was no genuine way to protest police practice and presence.[259] The citizens of ghettos in Detroit, Newark, LA and eventually Plainfield, revolted in response to genuine grievances that were ignited by the poor relationship between police and

---

[258] Porambo, *No Cause for Indictment*, 19.

[259] Fogelson, *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots*, 52.

community, added the many other grievances that go with being marginalized in a prosperous society.

Chapter Summary

The term “riot” is an all-inclusive term that can have many meanings. According to Paul Gilje, riots can be mob activity or nationwide revolutions. In terms of race and American history, riots can be broken into two categories: race riot and urban uprising. Race riots are culture conflicts that result in the violence meted out on a human symbol of frustration, mainly whites attacking blacks initiating bloodshed with impunity. Race riots are about power relations; those with power lash out at those without. This is an example of violence as vengeance. Race riots are characterized by white attacks on blacks, most likely the result of scapegoating or myth, an assertion of power of whites over the powerlessness of blacks, used as a means to keep blacks “in their place,” and precipitated by a perceived gain in the black community. Examples of this violence as vengeance or race riot occurred in East St. Louis and Chicago, Illinois, and Tulsa Oklahoma. Shortly after the race riots in Detroit, Michigan in 1943, a seismic shift occurred in Harlem, New York City when the riot was instigated by African Americans as they took out their frustration on property and symbols of their collective oppression. Harlem ushered in the urban uprising.

The urban uprising, or violence as protest, that took place in Harlem in 1943 and throughout black communities in the 1960s was characterized by African American attacks on symbols of oppression, an assertion of aggression from a powerless position, a

rejection of the white supremacist norm, and a response to the lack of political and economic progress. Violence as protest crystallized at the climax of the Civil Rights Movement in 1963, but had its roots in the social environs of post World War II America. Violence as protest took place 164 times in 1967 alone, mainly in large cities like Detroit, Michigan and Newark, New Jersey but also in smaller towns, like the seemingly peaceful, sleepy community of Plainfield, New Jersey.

Chapter 4

FOUR DAYS IN JULY: THE PLAINFIELD UPRISING OF JULY 1967

Somewhere in the Middle: The Plainfield Complex

The makeshift plans put together every summer by city administrators to avoid rebellions in the ghettos are merely buying time...It is ludicrous to believe that these temporary measures can long contain the tempers of oppressed people.[260]

Stokely Carmichael (1968)

The Report on the National Commission on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission Report (1968), and the few texts that have been written about Plainfield, namely Thomas Sugrue and Andy Goodman's essay for the *Journal of Urban History* (2007) entitled "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North," paint a disturbing portrait of Plainfield prior to the uprisings. Both of these studies contend that Plainfield's black community was in tatters by 1967 and the local government did little to quell the tensions that precipitated the uprising. In some regards, the research for this project brings one to some agreement with Sugrue and Goodman when they state, "Plainfield's city government did little to improve the situation of the town's black residents before the riot occurred."[261] In studying the uprising, the Kerner

[260] Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 161.

[261] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 575

Commission's description of the city and its government as largely "part time and fragmented," is apt, considering the mayoral seat was "largely honorary" and paid a mere three hundred dollars a year.[262] However, a deeper look into Plainfield's pre-uprising history shows at least an attempt by city officials and residents at quelling the tension among the city's white residents and the growing black population during the middle part of the 20th century. These attempts and the mere recognition that there was a significant change in demographics taking place within the town's borders demonstrate a far from complacent or inept community.

In "Plainfield Burning," Sugrue and Goodman argue, "Plainfield's largely volunteer city government had little capacity and even less interest in the concerns of the town's black minority."[263] It seems Sugrue and Goodman failed to take a full account of such matters. Contrary to their position, a concerted effort to understand the needs of the Plainfield black community began in earnest in 1932 with Report XX of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work's *Survey of Negro Life* which was "conducted during the summer and fall months of 1931 with the cooperation of a local interracial committee formed from a group of interested white and colored persons."[264] Those who worked on the report and those who spent months researching Negro life in Plainfield "were anxious to see some steps taken toward eradicating some of the more vexing misunderstandings

---

[262] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 41.

[263] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 576.

[264] *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey, Report XX*, Plainfield Interracial Committee, New Jersey Conference on Social Work, August 1932, in Plainfield Historical Collections, the Plainfield Room at the Plainfield Public Library.

existing in the community."[265] This clearly represents an attempt at ameliorating the tensions that a burgeoning black citizenry elicited and for many, Plainfield felt like a new town. Indeed, the population increased every decade from 1870-1930 in both the white and black communities of Plainfield. As the population during that period increased a total 24.2%, the black population increased over 50% to 3,648 out of 34,432 or 10.6% of the town's population.[266] The Report acknowledges "the Negro population of Plainfield for the first time in its history forms more than 10 in every 100 persons in the city." It continues, "As the rate of increase between 1920 and 1930 was more rapid in this group than in any other racial one, the intensity of its social adjustment was more pronounced."[267] The "intensity of its social adjustment" was met with organizations like the Plainfield Visiting Nurse Association, which counseled residents in nutrition and baby health "conferences" among other things, and the Charity Organization Society, which "administered private relief given to Plainfield families and investigates cases referred to the Overseer of the Poor."[268]

What the Conference found was that "the chief problems attending dependency among Negroes in Plainfield are under-employment, unemployment, and insufficient income."[269] With this attempt, the underlying tie into the real problem that stymied the

---

[265] *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey*, 1.

[266] Ibid., 1.

[267] Ibid.

[268] Ibid., 6-13.

[269] Ibid., 14.

black community in 1930 as well as 1960 would be job discrimination and lack of economic opportunities.

The majority of black Plainfielders during the 1930s and 1940s were employed in the domestic services or semi to unskilled occupations.[270] For many, it was the lumber or laundry industry, and those were some of the lowest paying jobs in the community. Jobs were segregated throughout this period, even though organizations like the Plainfield Interracial Committee convened "to discuss racial questions and promote understanding" between the two races,[271] the PIC failed to address the most fundamental issue of low paying jobs and underemployment. Furthermore, there was a decline in the industrial base in cities like Plainfield in the 1930s as a result of the Depression, making it even harder to find employment when it was an option.[272] The circumstances continued and worsened thirty years later, for the same limited and diminishing job prospects remained as problematic in 1967 as it had been in 1932. The report concluded, "there is an astounding volume of misunderstanding, distrust and discord attending the work being done for and by Negros."[273] They cited the lack of unity and purpose among the people of color, the lack of people trained to deal with the problem and overall black and white tensions as causes of the divergences in the community. However, reports like the one

---

[270] *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey*, 5.

[271] Ibid., 16.

[272] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 573.

[273] *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey*, 16.

from the New Jersey Conference of Social Work show us that there was a lot of local and regional support given and attempts made to ameliorate the tension in Plainfield.

The NAACP, always fledgling in Plainfield,[274] was a small rallying organization that in 1931 was fighting against a segregated cemetery in Plainfield, and in early February 1963, the NAACP sponsored a march to City Hall, where its members "posted a list of nineteen complaints from West End's black citizens."[275] It was this action that led to the creation of the Human Relations Commission (HRC) which had a mission "to protect the civil rights of the individual whenever those rights are in jeopardy, to mediate between groups when mediation is called for, to educate when we feel that education in regard to a problem is needed to alleviate the misunderstanding."[276] The number of organizations in Plainfield is astounding for a small city with a reputation of being unorganized and ignorant of racial strife.

In the 1950s, the League of Women Voters and other supporters lobbied for a slum clearance program that would end in the building of public housing, "a subsidy to put decent, safe and sanitary housing within the reach of low income families from the slums."[277] Well before urban renewal became entangled with slum clearance, and the

---

[274] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 579 and *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey*, 16.

[275] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 579.

[276] Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report, 1963-1964*, 7.

[277] League of Women Voters of Plainfield, "The Practical Plan for Plainfield: Low Rent Housing for Low Income Groups" May 1951, Plainfield Historical Collection, Plainfield Room at The Plainfield Public Library.

slums were recreated in the "projects," the project housing planned for Plainfield in the 1950s was different from those planned in larger cities, like Newark and Chicago. There were no plans for concrete high-rise monstrosities; instead, what was developed were two low-rise housing facilities, West End Garden in 1954 and Elmwood Garden in 1961, adding 248 affordable housing units. What these projects did was "remove 160 deteriorated or substandard housing units."[278]

The slums of Plainfield were real and brutal, offering extremely difficult living conditions. In 1931, rents were high, three in ten homes had no bath and two in ten had no electricity.[279] Since residential segregation was a norm in Plainfield, "by selection and public approbation,"[280] blacks were pushed into the westside of town. This was not the only part of town with black residents, but this was the side of town where most new migrants to the city were forced to relocate. Fifty-four percent of the black population of this area, called the West End, was from the South, with forty-four percent of that number from Virginia alone.[281] These living spaces were federally subsidized for a "municipally financed program" was "deemed impractical."[282]

---

[278] League of Women Voters of Plainfield, "The Practical Plan for Plainfield: Low Rent Housing for Low Income Groups."

[279] *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey*, 4.

[280] Ibid.

[281] Ibid.

[282] League of Women Voters of Plainfield, "The Practical Plan for Plainfield," 2.

By 1963, the housing in the West End was something for the Plainfield Housing Authority to be proud of: "Inspections of apartments are made every quarter and their maintenance with few exceptions, have been at a high level and most tenants cooperate, fully, with management rules and regulations."[283] With proud living spaces, one could imagine a proud people living out their American Dream in the area, but such was not the case. Plainfield still had the "part-time and fragmented" government that Kerner described; therefore, it either did not or did not effectively respond to the issues relating to living space, hiring processes and social treatment, as expressed in Goodman and Sugrue's article. The fact remains, though, on the eve of the opening of the first Teen Center in the community, Plainfield's black community began an uprising by shattering windows and shooting bullets randomly at cars, causing destruction that would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair.

Larger cities, it has been well documented from social historians like Heather Ann Thompson, Thomas Sugrue, Gerald Horne, Janet Abu-Lughold, Kevin Mumford, Sidney Fine, and others who wrote extensive tracts on large urban uprisings, had complex relations with their citizens. More often than not, the ghettos in these communities were largely forgotten and the legacy of the amnesia came back to haunt city officials in the name of urban uprising, which spread to 163 cities alone in 1967. In cities like Detroit, where the NAACP and the UAW "lobbied hard for the construction of affordable housing for the new migrants but met with fierce resistance;"[284] to Watts where "the

---

[283] Housing Authority of Plainfield, *Annual Report 1963-64* 1, Plainfield Historical Collection at the Plainfield Public Library.

[284] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 66.

overall quality of black life fell precipitously during" the post World War II period;[285] problems within the black community fell on deaf ears. The same is only half-true for Plainfield, and one could hypothesize this was true for smaller towns in general.

Due to proximity, it is impossible to hide the ghetto community in small cities and towns. Also, due to proximity, whites and blacks most likely will come into contact more often in small cities and towns. Such was the case in Plainfield, where stores and public parks were patronized by both black and white citizens. The West End area was not dilapidated; it was an area of pride for those who lived in it. In fact, the rioters set up a perimeter and affectionately refer to their territory as "Soulville."[286]

It seems that smaller towns, or at least the Plainfield example, fall somewhere in the middle of two extremes: on one hand, there exists the suburban or small towns in America where race is not an issue because the community is nearly completely homogenous; the absence of diversity creates a distance from the challenges faced by interracial communities at the midpoint of the last century. On the other hand, there are big urban areas, like Detroit, Newark, and L.A., where problems were so complex they were largely ignored, or a proverbial band-aid was affixed to cover a deeper and irresolvable problem. The result is a large urban uprising.

But what about towns that carry the characteristics of both the smaller town and larger urban area, towns like Plainfield, New Jersey? They lie somewhere in the middle, where problems are hard to ignore and agencies or organizations are formed to help the

---

[285] Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*, 35.

[286] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 584.

displaced and marginalized, a task more likely to succeed given the smaller nature of such places. The Plainfield Human Relations Commission was organized in 1963 to deal with "various circumstances," including racial "tensions" and the "facts of poverty, complaints of all sorts, misunderstandings, hostilities, the practice of discrimination, [and] the existence of the racial ghetto."[287] The Plainfield Community Action Program had just opened a Teen Center for "volunteer tutorial activity, typing classes, an information office, Teen-CAP activities, and a Spanish speaking citizens room."[288] Maybe it was a case of too late, but Plainfield had organizational activity that could have helped quell the tensions of the community. But it was not enough, and the uprising was inevitable.

> **The Plainfield Uprising**[289]
> **Police Report: July 6, 1967**
> 8:59 p.m. Mrs. Mary Brown, 524 W. Second St., was jailed for hearing today on charges of disorderly conduct and assault and battery on Patrolman Edward Piatt, who alleged the woman bit him on the right forearm during her arrest.
> *Plainfield Courier News*, July 6, 1967[290]

The actual dates of the rebellion in Plainfield are July 14 to July 18 of 1967, but it has been documented that the actual spark that ignited the flame for uprising began on

---

[287] Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, *First Annual Report*, 1.

[288] "Forbearance Cools Plainfield Unrest," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 13, 1967.

[289] The following is a detailed description of the Plainfield Uprising as documented in the Kerner Commission Report, *Cities Under Siege* edited by David Boesel and Peter Rossi, the local news sources, and I have told the story in an interview for the 40th Anniversary Kerner Commission Report (2007).

[290] "Police Reports," *Plainfield Courier News*, July, 6 1967.

July 5 at the West End Garden Apartments. On that Wednesday night, police were called to deal with a family disturbance. The officer who responded to the call was known to have a "reputation for toughness and was disliked by ghetto blacks."[291] This officer handcuffed and arrested an "obstreperous" Mrs. Mary Brown, the woman involved in the argument, and while walking out of the apartment complex "she fell down a flight of stairs."[292] Although the police had suggested that Mrs. Brown was drunk and stumbled, which subsequently led to her fall, the black residents in the community were not convinced. Once she was released from jail, "her husband took pictures of her injuries" which would be shown around the community as an example of the police brutality black residents faced.[293] On Monday, July 10, the leaders of the black community, including representatives from the local NAACP "tried to lodge a formal complaint against the arresting officer," but the complaint was rejected by the city administrators.[294] Nevertheless, pictures of Mrs. Brown were circulated through the community, and the fact that the complaint was not accepted by the city angered many of Plainfield's black residents.[295] It especially angered the young adults who lived in the West End of town.[296]

---

[291] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 67.

[292] Ibid.

[293] Ibid.; Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581.

[294] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 67; Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581.

[295] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581.

[296] Ibid.

The Newark uprising began on July 12 and television accounts were broadcast in black communities throughout the United States by the thirteenth.[297] What was transpiring in Newark was no secret to Plainfield residents, and by Friday, July 14, rumors of an uprising in the city began circulating.[298] On that evening, the final spark ignited the fire when at around 10:00 pm a group of black and white teenagers were gathered at a local hangout, the White Star Diner.[299] At the diner, the arresting officer (Patrolman Piatt) of Mrs. Brown nine days earlier was working as an off duty guard.[300] Social scientists who studied the events in Plainfield shortly after this incident recount the events of the evening:

A fight broke out between two black youth, one of whom, Glasgow Sherman, was knocked to the pavement, his face bloodied. Other youths present demanded that the officer arrest the aggressor and call an ambulance for Sherman, but he refused to intervene. The youths saw his refusal as reflecting a double standard, thinking that, had the combatants been white, the officer would have acted differently.[301]

---

[297] David Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276.

[298] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 67.

[299] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581; Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 42; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276.

[300] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 42 and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276.

[301] Boesel and Rossi, *Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 68.

Officer Piatt allegedly said to Sherman, "Why don't you just go home and wash up?"[302] Although Sherman was eventually taken to the hospital, this angered the youths who began to discuss their "grievances" collectively in the project community.[303] Meanwhile, the number of youth on the scene began to grow to between 100-150.[304] Two black council members came to the scene to discuss the issues with the growing number of black kids in an effort to "reduce tensions," but this had proved a futile effort.[305] Young members of the community began to walk away. They went to the business district in town and began to break windows of stores like *Wald Drugs* on W. Front Street, and *Knights Cleaners* on W. Third, and then were confronted by the police.[306] The youths eventually went back to the housing project where they were met by the councilmen, a young black newspaper journalist David Hardy and Lenny Cathcart, a young militant community resident who eventually became one of the leaders in the negotiations between the city administrators and the residents of the black community.[307]

---

[302] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 42.

[303] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581.

[304] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 581.

[305] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276.

[306] Sugrue and Goodman, *Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion*, 582; and "Forbearance Cools Plainfield Unrest."

[307] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

A meeting was set up between the angry youths, the editor of the Plainfield *Courier News* and Mayor Hetfield for the following day.[308]

It is important to note that there were black leaders in the Plainfield community. The two black councilmen, Harvey Judkins and Everett Lattimore, played an important role in facilitating conversation with both sides of the Plainfield Uprising. They were present and felt the disruptions in Plainfield were their responsibility to help quell. Not all uprising areas had the representation of two of their own in the council chamber. However, not all uprising areas had a part time and seemingly lackluster, by contemporary accounts, town council.[309] This is not to say that the two men were wholly ineffectual, even if they had been called "Uncle Toms" and dismissed by young people in the community.[310] Nonetheless, because of them, a black voice of official authority was available to the rebellious young people; however, the weight of responsibility must have been immense, and with part time work, a citizen and a community can only expect and receive so much out of one or two individuals. Therefore, black Plainfield was represented, but all of Plainfield's representation was weak and limited.

On Saturday, July 15, the youth met with the mayor who seemed, according to those who spoke to the Kerner Commission, "complacent and apathetic."[311] As Hetfield suggested himself, he understood the frustration of the youth at the time, but the way the

---

[308] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 577.

[311] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

city administrative system was organized, he could not do anything about the youth's grievances without City Council's approval, so he felt his hands were tied.[312] Although the City Council stayed invisible throughout the uprising, the youth felt this was only "lip service," so after two hours of meeting, group by group, the youths began to walk out and release their frustrations on the streets of Plainfield.[313] Even though there were reports of broken windows, looting, and eight fires, no significant damage was registered.[314] By 10 p.m. that evening, the police began to arrive en masse, and units from other towns were called in to quell the tensions. Nevertheless, the town officials decided to contain rather than confront the rioters in the area; therefore, they cordoned off the 16-block area of the Westside where the rioting was taking place.[315]

"It was all out war in the streets!"[316]

As witnessed in other racial disturbances that took place that summer, the youths targeted symbols of the white hegemony that existed in their community. Most

---

[312] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 276.

[313] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[314] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[315] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

[316] Charles Dustow, "All-Night Gunfire, Looting, Burning Rakes Plainfield," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 17, 1967.

specifically targeted were the liquor stores and taverns in the area. The liquor was not stolen for consumption; it was ruined as a statement. Social scientist and Kerner Commission member David Boesel wrote, "Liquor stores and taverns were hit, but the protest character of the violence was evident in the fact that most of the liquor was destroyed on the spot, not stolen."[317] The Kerner report discussed how the "youths believed that there was an excess concentration of bars in the Negro section of town"[318] that were placed there to keep the Negro complacent in his current place in society; in their view, alcohol was a dubious social nostrum introduced into the black community to ameliorate the black man's frustrations and make the society that kept him down more acceptable. By this time, according to the commission, the situation was, albeit serious, manageable, as it "never appeared to get out of hand" as the Kerner Commission read it.[319] At 3 a.m., a rainstorm came into the area, and the young people began to go home.[320]

On Sunday, July 16, arguably the worst day of the uprising, angry youth met at the West End Garden Apartments to draw up a formal petition that expressed the grievances they and their community had. Since the group was growing, with about 200 youth attending, Lenny Cathcart, now a major leader of the young black community, and David Sullivan, a black member of the city's Human Relations Committee, decided to

---

[317] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[318] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 43.

[319] Ibid.

[320] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

move the meeting to a local park.[321] Around 3:30 p.m. at the local Green Brook Park, David Sullivan was addressing the group when the chief of the Union County Park Police told the group to disperse because the large public meeting was in violation of park policy.[322] In other words, the impromptu meeting designed to end the uprising in Plainfield in a democratic and peaceful manner was dispersed because they failed to obtain a permit. Cathcart, Sullivan, and more moderate members of the group plead with the police officer to allow them to conclude their meeting, but to no avail; the group was forced off the public property.[323] Most of the youths then got into their cars and headed back to the west side of town. According to a respondent to the New Jersey Governor's Commission (Hughes Commission), some of the young people left the park yelling, "Plainfield will burn tonight!" and "We'll fix you."[324] "Within an hour, looting became widespread: cars were overturned" and white residents were occasionally accosted.[325] Planning for widespread disorder, Mayor Hetfield had already called the National Guard in to assist in stopping the chaos. However, at 6 p.m., when the uprising was once again at full momentum, there were only eighteen policemen on duty, and they, along with the fire department, were ill prepared to deal with the extensive chaos.[326] With the eventual

---

[321] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[322] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 584 and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[323] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[324] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[325] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[326] Ibid.

arrival of the National Guard, police from other areas were once again called in, but by the early evening, "the riot was beyond the control of the authorities."[327]

Therefore, the city decided to once again cordon off the section of town where the uprising was at its most critical, and they established checkpoints at "crucial intersections."[328] It was at one such intersection, the corner of West Fourth and Plainfield Avenue (where the West End Garden Apartments were located) that Officer John Gleason was stationed.[329] At around 8 p.m., Gleason noticed that two white youths, chased by a twenty-two year old black Plainfield resident, Bobby Williams, were running toward him.[330] Gleason left his post alone and chased after Williams into the West End Garden Apartments area.[331] A fight between Williams and Officer Gleason ensued, and after Gleason was hit, he drew his gun and shot at Williams, much to the amazement of the black residents who had crowded around at the scene.[332] After shooting at Williams, Gleason was chased by some of the crowd; he tripped and fell to the ground.[333] A group

---

[327] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 69.

[328] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[329] Dustow, "All-Night Gunfire, Looting," 1; Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277; and Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[330] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 277.

[331] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 44.

[332] Ibid.

[333] Ibid.

of individuals began to pounce on Gleason, stomping on him, kicking and beating him near death.[334] He would die at a nearby hospital less than an hour later.[335]

Blacks in the area began to worry about the vengeance that would be enacted by the police after one of their own was killed.[336] Energies were high on both sides, and both sides attempted to protect their respective communities. Meanwhile, a local gun manufacturing company, The Plainfield Machine Company, was burgled, and 46 semi-automatic weapons were stolen and handed out to blacks located in the community.[337] And, a few of the rioters began to snipe shoot at police officers and fire fighters responding to calls in the community. Not only were patrolmen the target, the sniper fire was random, attacking innocent bystanders and people looking to get away from the violent area (or trying to get a look at the area). A 22-year-old woman from Somerville, Rosemary Va Dasz, was shot in the leg by sniper fire.[338] As a demonstration of how

---

[334] "Insurrection Rakes City," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 17, 1967.

[335] There is a lot of controversy surrounding the story of the murder of Officer Gleason. Reports and articles on Plainfield describe the officer as one who had a bad reputation in the black neighborhoods in Plainfield. Furthermore, there has been reporting on the Gleason killing, while in uniform, by a young black Plainfield resident. I have found no evidence of this murder; yet it has been written about and witnessed throughout the five years of my research. After an extensive discussion with Gleason's daughter Ms. Latore, I have concluded that Gleason is a tragic figure at the wrong place, at the wrong time. I will not report or distort more than how Gleason's death relates to what happened those nights in Plainfield. I leave it at that out of respect to the Gleason family.

[336] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 278.

[337] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45; Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 278; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 584.

[338] "Insurrection Rakes City."

much gunfire was used during the uprising, Va Dasz's car was riddled with "twenty four bullet holes."[339] A man from nearby Rahway, Frank Bardecker, was assaulted in his car, pulled out by rioters, and his car overturned.[340] A local fire station was a target for sniper attacks, and virtually "put under siege."[341] "Sniper firing, wild shooting and general chaos" continued well after 3 a.m.[342]

On Monday, July 17, state officials like Paul Ylvisaker from the Department of Community Relations and State Attorney General Arthur Sills arrived in Plainfield to discuss solutions to the violence that had taken over 16 blocks of the six-mile square city.[343] The most pertinent concern for these administrators was the question of what to do about the stolen weapons that had been dispersed throughout the area and were being used to attack police and fire officials. Early that evening, the state representatives decided to talk to a group of black youths about their grievances and about ways to recover the stolen carbines.[344] It was decided to keep the police out of whatever discussion would take place (this completely dissatisfied the police force who felt that

---

[339] "Insurrection Rakes City."

[340] Ibid.

[341] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 70.

[342] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45.

[343] Ibid.

[344] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 278; and Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45.

their concerns were being dismissed in favor of a group of outlaws and renegades).[345] The protesters made two essential demands of the state officials: 1) They wanted to be responsible for policing their own area, considering that they were fearful of an attack by the police due to the killing of Officer Gleason, and 2) the youth demanded the release of all people who were put in prison over the uprising.[346] What was agreed was that 12 jailed rebels would be released by early Tuesday morning if members of the community would stop the violence, including the sniping, and return the stolen weapons by Wednesday afternoon.[347] Although there were some accounts of sniping in the community later that evening, there were no accounts of violence in the area. At 4 a.m. on Tuesday morning, 12 prisoners were released, much to the chagrin of the police force.[348] Later that week, the residents of the West End began the cleanup effort. Boesel writes, "A ghetto clean-up campaign initiated on Tuesday and carried through to the end of the week, was apparently successful enough to cause one public official to complain that the sewers were being clogged with refuse."[349] Unfortunately, there was $700,000 worth of sewer damage from the uprising.[350]

---

[345] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 278; and Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45.

[346] Sugrue and Goodman, 585, Boesel, "Liberal Society," 278, and *Kerner Report*, 45.

[347] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 279.

[350] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 569.

By Monday, July 17, the uprising was for the most part over, but the stolen weapons were still a major concern for the city and state administrators.[351] The deal was that the weapons would be returned to the police station by noon on Wednesday.[352] When that time arrived, there was no sign of the weapons. Claiming that Plainfield was under a "state of disaster," Governor Richard Hughes ordered that the apartments in the Westside of town be searched for the stolen weapons, without warrants.[353] At around two p.m. Wednesday afternoon, the local and state police, with the help of National Guardsmen who loaded up their armored personnel carriers with weapons, began an apartment-by-apartment search for the missing guns, which ended up damaging the personal belongings of people who lived in 143 units;[354] many of the apartments were broken into by the police and guardsmen.[355] Paul Ylvaisaker, Director of the State Department of Community Relations, eventually got the search to end, claiming that it was against the agreement with the residents and the city to allow local police in the area.[356] He feared that the riot would start up again. This angered an already irate police force who decided

---

[351] "Riot Truce Negotiated Here," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 18, 1967.

[352] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 585.

[353] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45; and Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 585.

[354] Boesel and Rossi, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy*, 71.

[355] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45.

[356] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 585; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 286.

that if Ylvaisaker did not leave, they would resign.[357] Nevertheless, the search ended only an hour and a half after it began, and it ended with the recovery of none or up to 5 (as evidence varies) of the stolen weapons and an incensed black community that felt that its rights had been trampled on by the Governor in issuing this type of search in the private homes of American citizens.[358] It led one resident to ask a *New York Times* journalist whether or not the paper would print the actual account of the story to "show what you white people do to black people."[359]

What the town of Plainfield and the state of New Jersey did to black people after the uprising was questionable and a clear violation of civil rights. To move in on a community and occupy it with the National Guard who were given permission to enter any person's house is a dangerous precedent to set in America, a place which prides itself on individuality and freedom.

Not Shocking

The Plainfield uprising did not shock a community, it rocked a community. Residents had been told in their newspapers and through the television as they screened

---

[357] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 585; and Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 286.

[358] Sugrue, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 585 (says 5); Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 45, says none; and that is supported by Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 279.

[359] Hofmann, "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction." Eventually about 66 residents were compensated for the damage done by the police and guard during the search.

the news for information on Newark that an uprising in Plainfield was imminent, time and place to be determined.[360] In Trenton, the state capitol, Director of the State Department of Community Affairs Paul Ylvisaker warned the week of the Plainfield uprising, "Each summer is getting more dangerous than the past. Each summer means more young people in the street, more young people unemployed and more broken promises."[361] He continued, "[B]ut the problem is that if the thing's going to blow, there's a good chance it's likely to happen where it's least expected. The places you really worry about are the places like Watts where there is no dialogues."[362]

What Ylvisaker portended came to fruition in New Jersey where riotous activity presented itself throughout the state in towns such as "Rahway, Livingston, Elizabeth, East Orange, Paterson, Englewood, Irvington, Jersey City and Montclair."[363] Yet Plainfield had an open dialogue, and not just with the many organizations, including the Human Relations Committee and local social services, but an actual communication center set up in the West End by Ylvisaker's own Community Affairs Department. Nevertheless, any outside source of assistance was ill timed or ineffective in quelling the tensions of Plainfield's West End community.

---

[360] "Each Summer More Dangerous," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 13, 1967; and "Youth Riots Expected to Increase," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 6, 1967.

[361] "Each summer more Dangerous."

[362] Ibid.

[363] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 569. This is ironic because a report from the July 15 edition of the *Courier News* ran a report titled "Some N.J. Big City Mayors Doubt Possibility of Riots" *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

A report from the Associated Press in *Plainfield's Courier News* warned: "Youth Riots Expected to Increase." This article suggested a riotous diaspora, the spread of youth led uprisings by not only high school aged, but college-aged students.[364] With 163 disorders in a nine-month period in 1967, uprisings had become commonplace in America, and as with the bees and the flowers, each summer an uprising was guaranteed; and that guarantee should have shocked no one.

However, the city mayor was not only shocked, he was incredulous that this type of devastation could take place in Plainfield. "Our community relations in the city were very harmonious and our Human Relations Commission was holding monthly conferences with minority groups to discuss and iron out any problems."[365] What Plainfield demonstrates is that no matter how many attempts at community organization a town or an individual made, it did not guarantee community harmony and success. Progress was slow, as the mayor lamented, "I tried to tell them that progress was being made and that nothing could be achieved by violence, but they're too full of bitterness to listen."[366] Maybe it was bitterness, but no one can challenge the fact that the West End community was fraught with problems and tensions. Warnings occurred because the stage was set for a public disturbance, and although the Mayor may have been shocked,

---

[364] "Youth Riots Expected to Increase."

[365] "Mayor Lays Riots to 'Agitators' from Newark, Elsewhere," *Plainfield Courier News*, July 17, 1967.

[366] Ibid.

many others were not. The Plainfield uprising is "a reminder of how little white authorities...knew about black Plainfield and its residents' long standing grievances."[367]

Perceiving Plainfield

This is an important point and one that will be explored in the next chapter because perception plays a key role in the events in Plainfield. Indeed, the weak government had to act in strong measure to appease the majority white town in what many call a quaint "bedroom community."[368] With Newark fires raging and small conflicts brewing in many cities, 163 in the first nine months of the year, many whites did fear a Negro take over. Furthermore, when the era is put into context, we are reminded that after 1966 the Civil Rights Movement was in disarray while younger movement workers were turning inward and presenting a *cause de jure*, Black Power. If we look at the uprisings through the lens of the Black Power Movement, we can see an attempt, using violence as protest, as a means of empowerment—taking back something perceived to be lost—in this case, a local community. The looting and firebombing concentrated on symbols of white dominance in a black community: liquor stores were burned; clothing stores looted; and, downtown commerce firebombed. But as that was going on, whites, some of whom went to try to help white firefighters and policemen, but were

---

[367] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 586.

[368] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*; and "Fire and Looting Plague Plainfield," *New York Times*, July 16, 1967.

immediately ushered home, believed in and feared the rhetoric of the likes of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. These men both called for revolution and denounced US racism in an appeal for making "communities of our own."

Black nationalists scared white America, and part of black America as well. There was a reason why Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale wore all black and carried rifles when the Black Panther Party went on activist missions; they wanted to incite fear. No longer could progressive white America have faith in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s agitation and his non-violent message, as King found himself drowning in opposition for his methods, which had been in effect for well over a decade. Aggressive agitation added with black nationalist thought occurred even with the judicial success of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the legislative success of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act which addressed systemic economic problems and discrimination in jobs and housing. By 1966, the time had come, as Stokely Carmichael yelled "loud and proud" during the Meredith March Against Fear. "What we need is Black Power! Black Power! Black Power!" The Panthers knew power was necessary as they battled the Oakland police department, for they were the forbearers of black self-defense against police practices in black communities across the country. To empathize with the spirit of Black Power, Plainfield's rebels labeled the cordoned off West End area "Soulville," and made sure they labeled black owned stores, or even cars, with the words "Soul Brother."[369]

[369] Sugrue and Goodman, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion"; and Dustow, "All-Night Gunfire, Looting," 1.

An important fact about the Plainfield uprising is that blacks had control of their own streets for twenty-four hours.[370] In a report by Thomas Johnson for the *New York Times*, "Plainfield Negroes Say Ghetto Is Safer Now Without Police" suggests not only a desire for self determination, but the feeling the community had against the local police. Assistant Director for Plainfield's HRC stated, "There has not been a single fight, not a single house robbery or stickup in this area since the police pulled out."[371] "Talk squads" wandered through the streets to help keep law and order.[372]

And herein lies the heart of the conflict—police/community relations. Thomas Sugrue writes in *Sweet Land of Liberty,* "In Plainfield, New Jersey, where more than a third of the population was black by 1967, only five of the town's eighty-one law enforcement officers were black." He continues, "Clashes between white police officers and angry black youths were commonplace in the town's West End by the mid-1960s. In 1966, Plainfield's police department came under investigation after police officers and radio dispatchers regularly used the word 'nigger' to describe suspects over the police radio."[373] This was emblematic of a larger problem with police community relations highlighted in this and other texts. One lament from a young man who patrolled the streets in the "Talk Squad" noted, "You don't have [the police] pulling up to the corners

---

[370] Dustow, "All-Night Gunfire, Looting."

[371] Johnson, "Plainfield Negroes Say Ghetto is Safer."

[372] Ibid.

[373] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty,* 330.

and yelling, 'Nigger get off the street.'"[374] As Sugrue points out, "Nearly every riot in the 1960s...was sparked by a police incident, usually an arrest, injury, or alleged harassment of a black person by a police officer."[375] This is what happened in Harlem in 1964, Watts in 1965, Detroit and Newark in 1967. This is what happened in Plainfield, New Jersey in July of 1967. This is what happened in the majority of urban uprisings, that is hundreds, throughout the decade.[376] There was a reason why the police were asked to stand back when the disorder began on July 15th. Their presence only exacerbated the problems; the relationship between blacks and the police was tattered, and it was best if they were left outside the inner core of the West End. Yet, the town still allowed for a search of the area, and the police were part of this search, so maybe the residents had a reason for this violent protest. Maybe the police sparked the uprising. Mary Brown, the White Star diner incident, and the police official who asked the youth to leave Green Brook Park are all pieces of the same puzzle that when put together show a picture of alienation between the police and the black community. All of these incidents exacerbated the situation and did nothing to quell the tensions between black and cop in Plainfield, New Jersey.

This is also how it can be suggested that the Plainfield uprising was a political statement as much as it was an urban revolt. David Boesel sees Plainfield as a political statement as well as a rebellion. He wrote that Plainfield "is significant as a sort of ideal type [of uprising] on a small scale, for it illustrates better than any other the leading and

---

[374] Johnson, "Plainfield Negroes Say Ghetto is Safer."

[375] Sugrue, "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion," 327.

[376] Ibid.

definitive role of Negro youth, the political function of the riot action and the tendency toward black territorial control."[377] The grievances were stated clearly, as reported about the first open "grievance" session on July 14 that the issue ranged from "police brutality to a lack of public facilities in the city."[378] They stated their concerns time and time again, in meeting after meeting with civic officials during the uprising. There was even a negotiated truce, with 12 of 102 arrestees released as part of a plan to bring peace to the community.[379] This is a political action: to call for the release of prisoners is an act of defiance; these protesters had the power to make a demand and have it met, and this is an achievement with a statement—power was checked.

Immediate Justification

How did this happen? An article written in *The New York Times* on July 20, 1967 sums up why the uprisings happened in its compelling article "Plainfield Beset by Contradiction." The simplest explanation was that with a burgeoning black community concentrated in a small part of the city, "influential whites in Plainfield seem not to have grasped the fact that this new black population has changed the character of the city's social and political relations." Politically speaking, Mayor Hetfield was somewhat correct

---

[377] Boesel, "The Liberal Society, Black Youths," 275.

[378] "Councilmen Hear Youths Complaints" *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

[379] "Insurrection Rakes City" and "Riot Truce Arranged" *Plainfield Courier News*, July 18, 1967.

in his admission to the Kerner Commission that his hands were virtually tied, because in order for the mayor to do anything in the city, the proposal first had to be voted on by the City Council. He could not enact any major initiative without the Council's support; therefore, he was prevented from making any major decisions regarding the discontent of the black community during and shortly after the uprising. The question, however, is whether or not he would have been willing to enact any large-scale changes, for his apathy and aloofness was taken by many as a sign of his own racial bias. Socially speaking, however, Plainfield emerges after the uprising as a polarized community whose secrets of racial tensions, de facto practices of racial segregation, and sheer instances of racial inequality were out now in the open.

The *Times* article calls Plainfield a "communal split personality with many facets."[380] Plainfield in 1967 was statistically affluent and had only a 2% unemployment rate at the time. Out of the close to 50,000 in population, one third was black, and blacks had been in Plainfield since its inception. Yet, Plainfield's affluent were situated in the exclusive "white only" sections of town, including the exclusive community of Sleepy Hollow located on the Southeast section, far away from the major disturbances of 1967. Furthermore, the 2% unemployment rate, albeit impressive, reflected the number of people who had or did not have jobs, not each resident's type of employment. Many blacks were relegated to menial jobs in the local plants, like Lockheed Electronics, which employed a significant number of Plainfield's black residents. Finally, there had been, according to Paul Cohn from the Human Relations Commission, "poor communication

[380] Hofmann, "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction."

between white and black" residents in Plainfield, which further exacerbated the racial tensions between the two groups who lived in the same town.[381]

The tensions are demonstrated, according to an editorial in the local paper the *Courier News*, in matters of economics and education more so than in emotion.[382] Plainfield seemed invested in the assumption about white/black relations throughout the North; that is, as long as blacks did not move into areas exclusive to white residents, there would not be any problems. The separation of the communities implied a peaceful cohabitation based on racism and subliminal inequalities. However, uprisings like the one that took place in Plainfield brought to the forefront the specific issues that were being ignored by the government and administrators of a nation, as well as, with the complacency of white citizens who continually supported, or at least accepted, their hegemonic status in American society. They were, in the words of liberal journalist Tom Wicker, "violent assaults upon the conditions that minorities must face."[383] In other words, the uprising proclaimed that a political status quo that systemically and historically had subjugated blacks into secondary citizenship would no longer be tolerated. The ideology of white supremacy that created and sustained the system in which blacks were forced to live under had to go. The uprisings forced these issues and the ideology of white supremacy that created and sustained these systems to the forefront

---

[381] Hofmann, "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction."

[382] Ibid.

[383]Fred Graham, "A Man's Home is His Castle—Until the National Guard Arrives," *New York Times*, July 23, 1967.

of the national agenda, most importantly addressing the systemic discrimination, i.e. white racism, that black America confronted on a regular basis. Both the Kerner Commission Report and the NJ Commission on Civil Disorders, a report that dealt with the specific issues involving the uprisings and disorders in New Jersey, supported this. They concluded that the further separation of the races in the communities of America would continue to polarize the supposed and real differences and inequalities between white communities and communities of color.

The Kerner Commission report, which was released in February of 1968, reported that "our nation [was] moving toward two societies; one white, one black—separate and unequal."[384] The uprisings of 1967 pushed these two societies further apart. One 16-year-old Plainfield High School student summed up these tensions best when he reflected how "there is a time the white person was accepted in the Negro community and feel comfortable. The Negro couldn't go into his community and feel comfortable, but that was okay. But now neither one feels comfortable in either community nor is this how they have drawn further apart."[385] Out of the multitude of reports published after the uprisings that studied and theorized the causes of and solutions for the issues that black Americans confronted, all of them recommended ways to ameliorate the tensions that precipitated the tumult and assist in the assimilation of black Americans into mainstream American society. However, the nation had abandoned this process since Reconstruction,

---

[384] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 1.

[385] "Introduction to Report by the Commission on Civil Disorders," *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1968.

and even President Johnson failed at improving the issues with his "Great Society," which some regarded as the second Reconstruction. However, the promises of a Great Society had come too late, and the inner cities were demanding change. Many policies and programs might result in effective relief for the issues that plagued black America. For example, strengthening the programs of the Johnson Administration such as the establishment of the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal, the instituting of the Model Cities program and the promotion of welfare could be seen as valuable ways to allow black Americans to catch up to the American Dream that many whites, and far too few blacks, had been living especially since the 1940s. But what all of the reports, studies, and analysts agreed with in 1968 and thereafter, was arguably never achieved: the best way for black Americans to attempt to assimilate in society, was for whites to change their behavior and to dismantle institutionalized racism.

The Real Spillover

The Plainfield uprising was not caused or initiated by outside sources. Mayor Hetfield blamed TV coverage for the uprisings, which led to the scores of outsiders coming to Plainfield to revolt. The media, according to Hetfield, "gave the impression that the whole town was going up in flames. Soon we had busloads of people coming in from Philadelphia and Newark who were professional manipulators."[386] These comments are unfounded. Plainfield's uprising was caused by Plainfield and enacted by

[386] "Broadcasting: Riot Coverage, Plus & Minus," *Time*, Aug 25, 1967.

Plainfielders. Therefore, the violent protests had their own unique dimension, but the real spillover was not from outsiders coming into Plainfield to cause violence. The spillover was the reaction of the Plainfield police, the Mayor, the Governor of the state, the National Guard, and other officials involved in government tasked with controlling the town and the erupted protests. The reactions of cordoning off blocks, not allowing groups to meet to discuss their grievances, introducing the presence of the National Guard to the situation were all similar reactions to what was going on a much grander scale in Newark.

Plainfield was by no means Newark, but Plainfield was treated as such. Both events were colored by myths of sniper shooting. Both were reacted to with a heavy hand *after* allowing for riotous activity for the first day or two. Both ended with assaults on people and property. It could have been fear; it could have been reality or both; but, the retaliatory factor here is glaring. We can say that Plainfield and Newark had similar grievances. We can say that the Plainfield and Newark uprisings had similar concluding events. However, we cannot say the Plainfield and Newark incidents were the same, but handled in differing ways. They were two separate events. One was a large-scale riotous protest with death, injury and millions of dollars of damage. The other was a violent protest that went on at night for 3 nights, and the only report of actual sniping concerned a local fire station. Only one death and limited injuries does not a Newark make. But the conclusion here is in understanding the role of retaliation and vengeance. It is the one characteristic that describes both events as an uprising in the tradition of violence as protest.

Chapter 5

THE CLOSING DOOR: ATTEMPTS AT CITY AMELIORATION, LOSS OF FEDERAL FUNDING AND PLAINFIELD IN MEMORY

The Kerner Commission and Plainfield

After the liberal domestic agenda of President Lyndon Baines Johnson, which included two major civil rights initiatives, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the passage of many of the Great Society's War on Poverty legislation, and no matter how much was legislated in Washington, nothing could quell the tensions and the protests arising coast to coast. Unlike the protests on campus communities, the violent protesters who perpetrated disorder in their communities were not fighting against an unwarranted war waged in the Far East. Rather, these non-collegiate protesters' grievances were not only a commentary on the Vietnam War, which by 1967 more and more Americans were against, they were, in a broader scope, objections to the system that allowed such things like racially contingent poverty, unequal access, political exclusion, and, of course, a war. In many ways, the riots as protest, or more accurately uprisings, were "bringing the war" home and waging battles of freedom against their own repressive government.

Part of the issue was not only what Vietnam symbolized, but it was also the effect of Vietnam on domestic programs, as many resources were diverted away from Johnson's liberal agenda in order to wage war. As it was reported by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak on July 13, one day before the Plainfield uprising, "Johnson Orders Severe

Cuts in Spending." They write, "In a secret order personally delivered to his Cabinet, President Johnson has directed spending reductions of unprecedented severity for all domestic programs because of Vietnam."[387]

In what would amount to a fifteen percent across the board cut in War on Poverty spending, the domestic-austerity-for-war budgets marked "a turning point in the President's philosophy on how to finance the Vietnam War, ending the tacit assumption that the U.S. could afford both guns and butter."[388] The butter programs, like Community Action and Model Cities, were weakened because President Johnson budge was limited by his refusal to exit Southeast Asia. Essentially, Vietnam annulled the mandate Johnson had to help fix two of the nation's major problems: inequality and poverty.

The violent protesters of the time also weakened the mandate for change as well. After the passage of the Voting Rights Act, the Watts uprising commenced, leaving many Americans to ask, "What more can they want?" Legislation seemed to be carried out to support the needs of those communities, yet what many mainstream Americans saw was a "thank you" in the form of Molotov cocktails, looting, and general disorder. On paper, the civil rights revolution seemed to succeed, but even President Johnson knew his work had not gone far enough. When asked about the rioting in New Jersey specifically, he said "all these things (his legislation) have not remedied the situation that exists. Until we

[387] Robert Novak and Rowland Evans, "Johnson Orders Severe Cuts in Spending," *Courier News*, July 13, 1967.

[388] Ibid.

can improve and correct them, we are going to be confronted with an unpleasant situation."[389]

In 1967, the Report of the National Commission on Racial Disorders, also called the Kerner Report, was commissioned to address the Johnson Administration's concerns over the growing tensions in the black community. These tensions had exploded in 150 cities during the first nine months of 1967, and with such volume of violence, the President wanted to find out what was at the root of these uprisings. As a response to these racial disturbances, the Kerner Commission (from here on called the Commission) wrote an extensive report that analyzed what had caused the racial disturbances, and it discussed how such disturbances could be mitigated. The underlying concern for the Commission is addressed on the very first page of the Report, on which the Commission delivered its conclusion on the state of race in American society. As noted earlier, the Report stated, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, and one white—separate and unequal."[390] The uprisings of the 1960s echoed a public outcry of residents who were attempting to expose what Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael called the "core problems within the ghetto." These problems, according to Carmichael, were "the vicious circle created by the lack of decent housing, decent jobs and adequate education" in segregated black communities across the nation.[391]

---

[389] "Text of President's News Conference on Rail Mediation and Other Matters," *New York Times*, July 19, 1967.

[390] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 1.

[391] Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, 155.

The primary issue that black Americans faced was the inherent inequality of the two societies the Kerner Commission acknowledged at the beginning of its Report. The main purpose of the Kerner Commission was not only to detail the problems facing the black community, but it was also charged in recommending ways to ameliorate the issues by suggesting myriad options by which American cities might curtail the further separation of the races. They concluded that if these issues remained unaddressed in the halls of government and in the minds of the community, then the further polarization of races in America would continue to relegate black Americans to the margins of society. This marginalization, in the opinion of the Kerner Commission, could possibly incite more rage from the ghetto communities in the forms of riot and revolution.

The Kerner Commission suggested that an unequal nation repudiates "the traditional American ideals of individual dignity, freedom, and equality of opportunity."[392] In order to support a society that promotes these ideals for all, the Commission recommended two choices to promote positive relations "between central cities and suburbs and patterns of white and Negro settlement in metropolitan areas"[393] and to merge the two societies into one indivisible nation. The "Enrichment Choice," according to the Report, "would aim at creating dramatic improvements in the quality of life in disadvantaged central city neighborhoods."[394] This choice would promote a strengthening of Johnson's "Great Society" programs by increasing the level of funding

---

[392] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 226.

[393] Ibid., 218.

[394] Ibid.

for inner city communities in education, housing, employment and other social services. The second choice, the "Integration Choice," would be an attempt to reverse the trend that had led to the bipolar nature of American society, meaning the implementation of "programs designed to encourage integration of substantial numbers of Negroes into the society and outside of the ghetto."[395] The Kerner Report further proposed that

> Suburban residents must understand that the future of their communities is inextricably linked to the fate of the city instead of harboring the illusion that they can maintain invisible walls or continue to run away. Such change is possible only when people in our most fortunate communities understand that what is required of them is not an act of generosity toward the people in the ghettos, but a decision of direct and deep self-interest[396]

The enrichment and integration choices laid out in the Kerner Report advocate a joint effort, of all Americans, including those who hold the power and those who could enjoy the fruits of the system, white, black, Latino and Asian, to contribute and make an effort in working toward one goal: a unified, integrated, economically and socially equal society.

Shortly after the riots, Plainfield became one of the test cities for the enrichment programs of the Johnson Administration's Great Society. By 1969, Plainfield was designated as a "Model City," and it was awarded grants to improve the social and

---

[395] Kerner Commission, *Kerner Report*, 224.

[396] "Introduction to Report by the Commission on Civil Disorders."

economic standings of the ghetto community.[397] In addition, under the Johnson and Nixon Administrations, the city was granted "annual allotments of more than $4 million from Federal and state agencies with the funds distributed through 50 different programs" throughout the city's depressed communities.[398] By the early 1970s, Plainfield was one of the "largest beneficiaries in the state, with about 4,000 people being helped by programs."[399] In fact, according to Kerron Barnes, the city's Public Information Officer in 1973, Plainfield was "the only city in New Jersey with one of everything in terms of Federal programs," making it the largest recipient of government funding and support in the state.[400]

With assistance from both the federal and state governments, Plainfield emerged from the riots as a community committed to change. War on Poverty funding helped create and support organizations like the Community Action Program that met the fourth Monday of every month; the Model Cities Council met the first and third Friday of every month; the Human Relations Committees, Recreation Advisory Commission, the Beautification Committee and the Safety and Accident Review Board met on a monthly

---

[397] "Plainfield Model City," *Courier News*, Jan. 4, 1969.

[398] Martin Gansbeg, "Plainfield: Long Live Queen City," *New York Times* Mar. 4, 1973.

[399] Ibid.

[400] Ibid.

basis.[401] These were all attempts at bringing the tattered Plainfield Community together and demonstrated how all residents could have a stake in the investment of their society.

Furthermore, the Plainfield government had a major overhaul after the 1967 violence. A new charter was commissioned and voted on in 1968 that granted the local government more powers. The League of Women Voters published a City Guide to Plainfield which suggested "the new charter was intended to streamline administration of city government, utilize the expertise of full-time, professionally trained administrators, strengthen the powers of the Mayor and centralize authority in the Mayor and City Administrator."[402]

These changes helped land the Queen City the distinction of 1976 All American City, an award given to 10 cities that demonstrated "active participation by residents" to help "shape a better life" and achieve "improvements in community institutions."[403] Although many whites had moved out of the area after the riots, the white population had only dropped about 6% from 1967-1970. Many whites stayed and formed coalitions to help bring relief to economically disadvantaged communities and residents. For example, the Plainfield Area Urban Coalition was a multi-racial organization formed in 1968 to "tackle local problems" by concentrating their "efforts to meet unfulfilled community needs" like youth organizations, recreational facilities, and the rehabilitation of damaged

---

[401] League of Women Voters, "This Is Plainfield a Guide to Local Government 1972," 1972, 13.

[402] Ibid., 15.

[403] Alfonso Navarez, "Plainfield, Site of 1967 Racial Disorder, Emerges as All American City for 1976," *New York Times,* Apr. 15, 1976.

homes. The aim of the coalition was to bring "together representatives from business, labor, government, religion, community and social groups to coordinate the work of existing agencies and avoid duplication—plus an extension of services to cover neglected needs."[404] It was the Coalition's hope that they would eventually be able to "disband leaving well established programs [in place] which would continue within existing agencies."[405] Meanwhile, black residents of Plainfield were given room to voice their concerns by gaining more representation in the local government and on the school board. By 1976, only nine years after the riot, Plainfield looked like a model for the success of the enrichment and integration choices recommended by the 1968 Kerner Commission Report.

Unfortunately, the outlook for a bright future for Plainfield, New Jersey was more encouraging than the reality of life in Plainfield during the 1970s. During this period, Plainfield still faced the "problems of inadequate public transportation, severe flooding, and [an] exodus of industry and an unemployment rate of about 11.6%."[406] As early as 1973, the talk of cutbacks for welfare programs was surfacing throughout communities that depended on government support. Plainfield was still given a substantial amount of financial support from state and federal programs, and for the residents that meant, in the words of Public Information Officer Barnes, "[that] we can pull our wagon out of the mud, but we need the rope." The rope, for Barnes and the Plainfield citizenry, was

---

[404] "Plainfield Area Urban Coalition," *Courier News*, Jan. 3, 1968.

[405] Ibid.

[406] Navarez, "All American City."

financial assistance. With the possibility of a fraying and snapping rope, Plainfield's survival as a viable city was on the line. By 1976, Plainfield experienced cuts in social programs: Urban Renewal Assistance, housing subsidies, and community development.[407]

The cuts in federal aid and the "white backlash" against urban structural and economic reform have been well documented in scholarship from the past two decades. In their compelling study on the "white backlash" against federal funding and shifts within the base of the liberal Democratic party entitled *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, authors Mary Edsell and Thomas Edsell suggest that the Carter Administration's claim "that it could manage the economy and produce sustained growth—collapsed under the combined weight of inflation, escalating oil prices, unemployment, high interests rates, and industrial stagnation."[408] Their central thesis posits, "The years from 1964 to 1980 had produced an accumulation of pressures and grievances—creating a chain reaction pulling together the interactive issues of race, rights and taxes."[409] This eventually reflected a movement away from the Democrat party's ideals of social support and welfare to the fiscally conservative Republican view of limited government spending in local communities and budget cutbacks to slow

---

[407] Navarez, "All American City."

[408] Thomas Byrne Edsell with Mary D. Edsell, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 134.

[409] Ibid., 135.

inflation. Writing on Detroit in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Thomas Sugrue suggests that

> the virulence of the white backlash of the 1970s and 1980s seems to lend support to the thesis of many recent commentators that the Democratic party made a grievous political error in the 1960s by ignoring the needs of white, working class and middle class voters in favor of the demands of the Civil Rights Movement, black militants, the counterculture and the 'undeserving' poor.[410]

Without questioning what was lost in the white community, this backlash proved lethal for cities like Plainfield, New Jersey.

Scholarship like Sugrue and Edsell and Edsell's do not simply show but perpetrate the fallacy that programs of the Great Society failed; because of this fallacy, they indicate that America's support for the enrichment and integration ideal of the Kerner Report had waned. It did not, only the federal funding was diminishing year by year so that by the time Reagan was sworn into office in 1981, the death knell for the federal funding that had helped Plainfield become an "All American City" had been rung. Writing for the *New York Times* in 1981, columnist Daniel Akst noted, "Some people say that Plainfield is in the midst of a small-scale renaissance, but they are fearful that the delicate resurgence here will be harmed by cutbacks in social programs."[411] At that point, Plainfield's tax base had become stagnant, the crime rate had skyrocketed, retail and industrial businesses were moving out of the area, and agencies like the Plainfield Action Services which helped those in need with food stamps and day care, were being phased

---

[410] Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 267.

[411] Daniel Akst, "A City Long on Charm, Short on Aid," *New York Times*, July 19, 1981.

out.[412] Meanwhile, rents were rising, expenditures for school resources were curtailed, and food stamps and free lunch programs were cut. Although a renaissance may have been simmering, it was soon deprived of essential fuel, as funding for Plainfield and cities like it throughout the nation declined.

Writing in response to the fear that many Plainfield residents had over the Reagan Administration's continuous cutbacks, Mayor Paul O'Keeffe reminded his constituents of their strength and commitment to ideals that had made Plainfield a great city. Although he grieved that the "abruptness of the budget cuts" was a concern, he had faith in the "basic strength of the people of Plainfield and their willingness to face and solve issues that are of the magnitude" of the Reagan era cutbacks. In his message, he figuratively placed in the hands of the people the responsibility to respond to the drastic changes soon to be encumbering the community. He had faith in his city. In his words, Plainfield was "the city for this decade."[413] The mayor was suggesting that it was up to the people to support the integration ideal of the Kerner Report, as the enrichment ideal, which by the 1980s, was faltering without the support from the conservatives who took control of the nation's bureaucracies. This confirmed a new, overwhelming assumption that the people of Plainfield, especially its growing underclass, were now going to shoulder the entire burden for the socially and politically conservative environment supported by the "silent majority" of American citizens.

---

[412] Akst, "A City Long on Charm."

[413] "Plainfield's Mayor Sees Silver-Lined Cloud" *New York Times,* Aug. 9, 1981.

In 1965, the Plainfield public schools were partially segregated; by 2007, the Plainfield Public Schools were completely segregated. Moreover, in a similar backslide, the West End of town, the area where the riots took place, physically looks the same as it did in 1967. Thirty percent of Plainfield's population, 16 and older, is unemployed, while 12% of families live below the poverty line.[414] The process of "white flight" began in the city shortly after the riots. During the time of the riots, white Americans made up around 65% of the city's population. Throughout the remaining decades of the 20th century, the proportion of white residents dropped on average of 16% each decade, from 1970-2000. As of now, whites make up around 11.5% of the population, concentrated on the East End of town.[415]

Neither the enrichment nor integration ideal held. Census data from 1980 through 2000 and the trends in the public school system show that Plainfield went through a change in demographics, especially in terms of diversity. Between 1980 and 2000, white residents of Plainfield began to move out in remarkable numbers. In 1980, white Americans made up around 40 % of its population, and by 2000, as mentioned earlier, that number had dropped to 11.5%. Meanwhile, Latinos began moving to Plainfield in large numbers, replacing the declining white population. In 1980, they only made up 7% of the population. By 2007, Latinos accounted for over one quarter of Plainfield's population.

---

[414] *2010 Plainfield City Census*.

[415] *US Census 2010*.

Changes in the racial makeup of the Plainfield Public School district from 1962 through 2004 reveals in microcosm the significance of this trend toward a more segregated community. In 1962, black students made up 37 % of the elementary schools, 28% of the junior high schools and 19% of Plainfield High School.[416] At that time, there were schools in Plainfield that enrolled very few or no students of color. The population of white residents at the time was around 78%. Ten years later, black students made up 80% of the elementary schools, 75% of the junior high schools, and 62.3% of Plainfield High School.[417] At that time, whites made up 60% of the Plainfield population. Given these numbers, there is enough evidence to argue that the traditional "white flight" trend is inapplicable to Plainfield because the statistics demonstrate the tendency for white residents to remain in Plainfield after the uprising; though, they refused to allow their children to attend the same schools as black residents. There had been earlier attempts to desegregate the Plainfield Public Schools. For example, during the late 1960s, the active local chapter of the NAACP lobbied intensively to even up the racial imbalance in the public schools. However, these attempts had failed for two reasons. First, many white parents rejected forced integration of their children's schools by supporting organizations such as "Save our Schools." Second, the attempts to desegregate the Plainfield Public Schools failed due to the predominately white Board of Education failing to address adequately the needs of a polarized segregated society, which grew even more polarized

[416] Wolff, "Racial Imbalance in the Plainfield Public Schools," 275.

[417] H. Kenneth Schoonover, "The Desegregation of Plainfield Public Schools 1962-1972: A Case Study" (Ed.D diss., Rutgers University, 1988).

after the riots because of tensions between black and white students in the public school district itself.[418] In fact, in 1969 there was a racial brawl at Plainfield High School that forced the school to close its doors for two weeks and led to a police presence at the school, which continued for the rest of the school year.[419] This led to the disengagement of white students from the school district in droves.[420]

In the later part of the first decade in the 21st century, there were 7,573 students enrolled in the Plainfield Public School district. Out of that number, there were 44 white students enrolled. This means that out of the nearly 12% of white residents who currently live in Plainfield, well less than 1% are enrolled in the local schools. These numbers reflect the overall failure to achieve the integration ideal promoted by the Kerner Report in 1968. On the whole, the Kerner Commission Report's recommendations have not been successfully implemented; arguably, they have never been. One decade after Kerner, the *New York Times* wrote a piece that suggested that the division of black and white America still existed. It cited a practice known as "greenlining" as a factor that kept the Plainfield communities segregated. Greenlining is when blacks move into suburban areas and subsequently the real estate values of the area automatically depreciate. This indicates that blacks, at least by 1976, had not been accepted by the mainstream

---

[418] Schoonover, "The Desegregation of Plainfield Public Schools."

[419] Robert Smith, "Plainfield Studies Racial Brawl at High School," *New York Times*, Mar. 2, 1968. Security guards eventually took the place of the Plainfield officers.

[420] Ibid.

community, and it could lend insight into why property values in Plainfield have remained undervalued since 1967.[421]

Two decades after the Commission's Report, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that there was still a gulf between whites and blacks in many communities, and that the hopes that had been raised by the original 1968 Report had been, for the most part, unfulfilled. The article noted, "In the Kerner Commission's study, a torrent of statistics and testimony detailed the isolation and disrepair of the nation's mostly black central cities in 1968; many of those same statistical measures paint a depressingly similar picture today."[422]

We have marked the passing of the 40th anniversary of the Plainfield riots. Efforts are being made to reinvigorate the city, promote its cultural heritage, and raise its citizens' morale. In 1968, the Kerner Commission Report eloquently challenged society to invest its energy in helping the welfare of its underprivileged citizens. They suggested that in order to effect change new measures would have to be enforced and many commitments would have to be made. The support of enrichment programs, like the ones administered by President Johnson and his "Great Society" vision, would be one-step in eradicating the problematic issues that black America, that all of America, faced. Taking part in an integration ideal would help quell the tensions between black and white citizens, for, if successful, it would allow the two societies to meld together as one and

---

[421] John Herbers, "Decade after Kerner Report: Division of Races Persists," *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 1978.

[422] "Twenty Years after Kerner," *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 26, 1988.

live in peace and harmony fulfilling the dream of which Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once spoke.

Nevertheless, the story of Plainfield, New Jersey shows that neither choice was given the chance it needed succeed. Arguably, a divided nation still exists. The dismantling of the liberal social programs in the 1970s and 1980s contributed to a self-perpetuating disheartened underclass that still exists in numbers much too large for a country so prosperous.[423]

Plainfield Myth and Memory

Anniversaries are a time when events are remembered, either fondly or with remorse, and pay tribute to what has been gained or lost since that given event. Over forty years have passed since the Plainfield Uprising, and every ten years there have been accounts of change and regret when pondering the implications of those days and nights in Plainfield in July, 1967. John Herbers wrote on the ten-year anniversary of the Kerner Commission Report, "the division between white and black Americans still exists, and the prospects of healing the rife may be more dismal today than it were 10 years ago."[424] The problems stemmed from the reaction to the riots of the late 1960s. Although "the riots eventually stopped as the police became more sophisticated and learned how to nip

[423] William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

[424] Herbers, "Decade After Kerner Report."

them in the bud" the disinvestment and loss of federal aid accounts for the stagnation that characterized cities like Plainfield. Disinvestment occurred with the exit of factories and downtown stores that moved further into the suburbs and burgeoning New Jersey malls; fewer opportunities for investment and employment was the outcome.[425] The loss of financial assistance points to, according to the *New York Times* in 1978, growing skepticism "about the effectiveness of government programs, a number of which had become corrupted by those appointed to run them."[426] Racism and discrimination led to stagnation. However, a good portion of the federal money was used to fund inadequate community/social ventures, that made the skepticism towards programs like Model Cities and Community Action Programs grow. Thomas Sugrue writes that the Plainfield Community Action Program "faced complaints that it did nothing other than provide a few social workers with jobs. Funding it, argued a critic, was 'like throwing money down a rat hole.'"[427]

White flight was hastened by the act of greenlining, when more and more blacks, and later Latinos, moved into Plainfield and "real estate values went down because of the concentration of blacks," creating what University of Michigan scholar Reynold Farley and Plainfield's own former resident George Clinton would call "Chocolate cities and Vanilla Suburbs." [428] According to a Rutgers professor in 1978, and reported in a *New*

---

[425] Peter Dreier, "Riot and Reunion: Forty Years Later," *The Nation*, accessed August 31, 2007, http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070730/dreier.

[426] Herbers, "Decade After Kerner Report."

[427] Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 373.

[428] Herbers, "Decade After Kerner Report."

York Times article, there was a remedy to the ills that continued to plague communities like Plainfield a decade after the uprising, and "the ultimate answer," Professor Sternlieb suggested, "is the metropolitan-wide acceptance of black communities."[429] However, this acceptance was and is hardly at hand, as Plainfield turned into a majority black town by 1980.

Douglass Massy and Nancy Denton suggest in *American Apartheid* "segregation concentrates poverty to build a set of mutually reinforcing and self-feeding spirals of decline in black neighborhoods."[430] Their thesis is quite simple: residential segregation is often ignored as the cause of the urban underclass.[431] Plainfield is not currently residentially segregated even though its history with residential segregation led to greenlining, and greenlining coupled with a negative reputation and insufficient support has made Plainfield a "Chocolate City" (with a small portion of vanilla inside) populated by an underclass majority with a need for more social services. Massey and Denton write, "Relatively high levels of black suburbanization in some metropolitan areas can be deceiving, however, because many black 'suburbs' are simply poor, declining cities that happen to be located outside the city limit."[432] Plainfield has become a poor suburb and a forgotten suburb. Many New Jerseyites consider Plainfield as its own city with urban problems in a suburban facade.

---

[429] Herbers, "Decade After Kerner Report."

[430] Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 2.

[431] Ibid., 8.

[432] Ibid., 69.

Alternatively, others remember what Plainfield was and allow their nostalgia to counter the reality of what it became. Occidental College professor, writer for *the Nation*, and former Plainfield resident, Peter Drier, went to his high school reunion hoping to relive some of the good times he had experienced as a kid who grew up prior to the riot. Yet, as an urban historian, he also went to his reunion on a mission to see what his class remembered about not just the happy times but also the bad times, like the riot. To his surprise and to his chagrin, no one wanted to talk about the riot. He explains: "We reminded one another of favorite and not so favorite teachers, the music and performers we enjoyed, the TV shows and movies of our high school years, our favorite hangouts and restaurants, 'what ever happened to? Questions about missing classmates and memories of classmates who had died."[433] And yet "What I found most interesting—and troubling...was that my classmates hardly discussed the most dramatic event that shaped our hometown and our school—the 1967 riots—or the racial and economic conditions that led up to it."[434]

The Plainfield uprising is something that many in the community do not like discussing. Drier remorsefully saw something that harkened back to his early days in Plainfield at his reunion: disunity between black and white. When he went home to check out the reunion website and look at the photos to remind him of the reunion "with some exceptions, the photos reveal that my white classmates and black classmates sat at

[433] Dreier, "Riot and Reunion."

[434] Ibid.

separate tables and joined in separate conversations." With some regret, he concludes, "Forty years later, and, still, two separate worlds."

Memory in Black and White

The PBS program *All Things Considered* ran a segment on the Plainfield uprising in 2007, once again part of the fortieth "anniversary" of the July dates. Allison Keyes interviewed two people from Plainfield about the riots, a black female Ms. Lillian Jamar, a member of the Democratic City Committee, and a white male, Mr. Frank Meeks, a former member of Plainfield's City Council. Ms. Jamar was a woman "who wouldn't let NPR give her exact age but the petite, feisty African-American is close to 80 and has lived at the same house on the east side for 50 years."[435] Mr. Meeks was a 98-year-old "white former city councilmen."[436] These two members of the Plainfield community have differing recollections of Plainfield forty years ago.

Mr. Meeks remembers how prior to the migration of blacks who moved into Plainfield, "everybody was equal" as "we went to school together. And there was no difficulty or animosity." Yet, Mr. Meeks remembers a time when blacks and whites lived together in seeming harmony. The living environment in Plainfield was described a bit differently from the perspective of Ms. Jamar who noted, "blacks and whites were not

---

[435] Allison Keyes, "Plainfield Riot Remembered 40 Years Later," *All Things Considered*, aired July 28, 2007, on *NPR*, accessed Mar. 21, 2008, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12329840.

[436] Ibid.

that close" nor were they "happy with the way things were happening here."[437] Jamar found that the major issue was housing and limited employment opportunities, "if you had the money, you couldn't buy a house. If you had the education, you couldn't get a job."[438] It was an economic downward spiral from which black Plainfielders could not recover.

Mr. Meeks suggested the uprising was caused by blacks who wanted to control government and "make some of the decisions themselves," since he admits, "All major things were decided by the white population."[439] Jamar spent the time of the riot in the West End of town where the rioting took place, and "the reason we had gone," she explains, is "because we heard that they were going in these people's homes in the projects and turning the furniture over, looking for guns, which they never found."[440] Meanwhile, Frank Meeks, who owned an auto dealership "set up a cot in the place and borrowed a shotgun from a friend." He said, "And I stayed in there for two days and two nights. And I was determined that I was not going to let them just come in and destroy my place."[441]

Ms. Jamar and Mr. Meeks were coming from totally different positions, so their actions and their memories were shaped by what they saw happening in front of them.

---

[437] Keyes, "Plainfield Riot Remembered 40 Years Later."

[438] Ibid.

[439] Ibid.

[440] Ibid.

[441] Ibid.

However, in many ways, their differences shape the overall conversation for Plainfield and her history during July of 1967. Whites protected their property and were leery of the whole of the black community, even though the youth involved in the disturbances were a small representation of that community. Blacks saw the injustice in how blacks were treated not only during the riot, but prior to the riot, and they were able to justify the violence as a real protest against the living conditions in their community.

There is a similar pattern of memory in the few blogs written on Plainfield, including the one that followed the *Nation* article written online by Peter Drier. A good portion of the negative tone had to do with how Peter Drier treated the slain Officer John Gleason in his article, especially where he wrote, "Gleason was known in Plainfield's ghetto as a racist—he was reported to have shot a black child the previous year."[442] I have already gone through the Gleason story as honestly as I can and none of my research has led me to a murdered child; it does mention how a rumor was spread the night of Gleason's murder that he shot a kid named Bobby Williams, but Bobby Williams was the adult who would eventually be charged as one of many in the murder of the officer.[443] This statement, in the Drier article, was just fodder for the community who believed Gleason to be a murdered hero; the people that believed and still believes this are more often than not white. Comments of such included "My uncle was friends with officer Gleason (sic), what was written about him was false," and "besides killing John Gleason the blacks ambushed and shot and killed another officer and wounded a second. We were

[442] Dreier, "Riot and Reunion."

[443] Ibid.

at war in those days, and not the one in Vietnam."[444] Although some do not like discussing the riot in public, they do not mind discussing it with the anonymity of the internet.

Conversely, black respondents were easy to identify because these writers hammered on Drier's assessment as racist. "Everyone is always trying to put Plainfield down. Why? Because we're black!!!" to the compelling "I was nine years old at the time of the riots in Plainfield. The most frightening events for me was seeing the National Guard in their tanks traveling the streets and scrambling under my bed when the bullets hit my bedroom window." To which the next responder replies "the previous writer claims he was scared of the National Guard vehicles. Why wasn't he scared of the roaming gangs looting and destroying his neighborhood, and hacking a police officer to death just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time?"[445] There is an obvious disconnect in the varying interpretations of the Plainfield uprising. As Ms. Jamar, who represents the blacks who stayed in Plainfield after the riots, suggested, "We still have a lot of unrest here in this city. The system really hasn't done what it should do . . . it's going to go back to what it was before." Mr. Meeks could clearly be a representation of the white community (all of whom responded to the topix.com forum currently lived out of town) when he suggests that after the riots whites "packed up and moved . . . the circle has reached rock bottom or worse, I guess." Like whitewashing a dirty fence, it could be

---

[444] "Plainfield Forum," *Topix*, accessed Aug. 2010, http://www.topix.com/forum/city/plainfield-nj/TUEP10G2F15T0338E.

[445] Ibid.

easy to take the events of Plainfield lightly or ignore them altogether, but to believe that they did not have an effect on anyone would be ignoring reality.

Reflecting on the uprising, as leader, Linward Cathcart, now over 70 years old, spoke at a small meeting for members of a grassroots organization People's Organization for Progress in 2007, forty years after the uprising. He reminded the audience of the tenor of that era, "We had no political clout," he remembered, and he reminded the audience that if it had not been for the uprising, Plainfield would have never elected her first black mayor (former councilman) Everett T. Lattimore in 1981.[446] The riots, according to Cathcart and other activists meeting that evening, "served as a step forward for the black community," and yet "they could not avoid lamenting what had become of the community today."[447] Cathcart provided the audience with a reminder of the shape of the West End since the riots suggested "We are in trouble. We need help."[448]

Chapter Summary

An activist federal government questioned why 1967 was such a watershed year in terms of violence in urban areas throughout the country. The Kerner Commission set out to answer the question of why 1967 happened and came up with a conclusion that

---

[446] Annie Correal, "Plainfield Ponders the Legacy of Its Own Bloody '67 Riots," *New York Times*, July 22, 2007.

[447] Ibid.

[448] Ibid.

American society was divided, and its various components were growing more alienated from each other each day. Shortly after the uprising in July 1967, Plainfield became an experiment in the enrichment ideal set out by the Kerner Commission in 1968. By 1970, Plainfield became the beneficiary of one of the largest investments in public funding of social programs on the East coast, while its local government commissioned a new charter to allow for more accountability on the part of city representation. In 1976, Plainfield had a positive outlook and a possible bright future.

By 1976, welfare and city public expenditures were cut, as white backlash against reform created a "chain reaction" movement away from activist culture toward conservative cutbacks. The Great Society did not fail; it was killed by the lack of support for the ideals incorporated in the Kerner Commission Report, i.e. a failure of city and public structures. Integration and enrichment were ignored, leading to a segregated culture within a segregated city that is best illustrated by the public schools during the 40 year period between the uprising and 2007. Divided Plainfield remained.

The 40th anniversary of the uprising was commemorated with a few publications and news stories broadcast over the radio and internet. Memory casts a shadow of myth over reality. The memory of the riot differs between those who felt grievances at the time of the uprising and those who do not understand why Plainfield burned in 1967. The anonymity of the internet allows for those to communicate more freely. As part of this project, this author has tried to talk to people about the uprising, and it is not a topic people feel comfortable talking about, black and white. When they do talk about it, the perspective changes depending on the race of the individual. For example, whilst discussing this project with a librarian aide at the *Plainfield Public Library*, I was

reminded that people do not want to talk about the “riot” because it was when blacks killed that “poor” police officer. For main character Linward Cathcart, the uprising “served as a step forward for the black community.” He reminds us all that help is still needed, even 40 years later.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION: THE DOOR IS OPEN

"You don't have to have yourself walking with black people."

These are recent words of by now infamous LA Clippers owner Donald Sterling. It was his words that caused one of the most recent racially charged discussion in today's American social climate. Words, names, and innuendo in slander of blacks in the Age of Obama have become common enough that one might become inured to such offbeat attacks of a racial group in this country. However, the Donald Sterling controversy uncovers an even more hideous reality regarding race in America today, and this reality has a lot to do with the story of Plainfield, New Jersey.

As reported by sports journalist Bomani Jones, as early as 2006, Sterling's comments and outrageous slip-of-the-tongue remarks are a norm with him and his financial occupations. His racial attitudes are best understood by understanding how he manages his real estate holdings.[449] It has been known throughout many communities in which Sterling manages properties that he refuses to sell or rent some of his properties to blacks and Latinos for prejudicial reasons. For example, he purportedly stated that he did not want to rent apartments to blacks because "they smell and attract vermin."[450] These

[449] Bomani Jones, "Sterling's Racism Should Be News," *ESPN.com*, Aug. 10, 2006, accessed May 1, 2014, http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=jones/060810.

[450] Nathan Fenno, "Clippers Owner Donald Sterling Is No Stranger to Race Related Lawsuits," *LA Times*, Apr. 26, 2014, accessed May 1, 2014,

stereotypes lie right at the heart of why events like Plainfield happened almost fifty years ago. As Jones states, at the heart of the entire controversy is housing discrimination, and this is the root of the evils that currently plague black America.

Each day we are reminded of a tragedy in a black neighborhood in Chicago about innocent victims of violence. Chicago is a segregated American city. As long as this segregation continues, events like innocent victims shot by gun violence will continue to occur. Sterling's comments are only a telling reminder that the conundrum of race has hardly dissipated. There are many Donald Sterling's out there with racial notions that have no place in a society dedicated to equality. But it was the practice of housing discrimination that forced blacks into impoverished and unacceptable neighborhoods. It was these same sorts of policies that provided them with no options to leave. These policies propagated a vicious cycle of poverty that has been written about countlessly by sociologists and historians.

I have asked, if there was no housing discrimination during the Great Migration, how many racial uprisings would have occurred in 1960s America? Although it is not the historian's job to make guesses about "what-if" history, one could only imagine an America in the 1960s that was not segregated; as one could not imagine a millennial America without discrimination.

Sterling's comments should shock no one. There is a method to his madness. He understands the world and business through a lens of race, and he realizes that he can

---

http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-donald-sterling-past-controversy-20140426,0,1205990.story.

have a hand in making the world by controlling race: who lives where; who talks to whom; who does business with whom, etc. Yet such preconceived notions and misrepresentations lead to actions that can have terrible repercussions. For example, Chapter three's story might be different if other owners of housing, real estate representatives and neighborhood residents eased the restrictions on housing for minorities. But racism existed, as it exists today, albeit in a moderately lesser form. Migrants were forced into areas with other migrants, and without the freedom to choose where and how one should live, the same freedom that white migrants would enjoy, black migrants became disillusioned and discontent. That disillusionment showed itself on the streets of 164 cities in 1967.

What this dissertation does is open the door for more stories to be told. Chapter 1 opens the story. It goes back to when this project was born, with a conversation between two new neighbors and the uncovering of an uprising that happened in the new town I had moved to. Suburban uprisings is a new field of study, and only recently have there been publications that study such incidents. One of the first such studies, and one important to my work, is the 2007 article by Thomas Sugrue "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North." This paper demonstrates how suburban uprisings allow the researcher to understand the total of black discontent in the era of the late 1960s.

Due to housing discrimination, Plainfield became an oppressed and bifurcated community, Chapter 2 demonstrates how this is so. Up North, was supposed to be a land of hope for the millions of black migrants who travelled from the South to make homes in the North. The shifts in demographics defined the social milieu for blacks living in

cramped northern communities, communities forced upon them by housing discrimination. But Up North, blacks had a share of freedom that they lacked in the South. But the North was no Promised Land, so residents they became, but full citizens they were not. In the North, blacks were normally relegated to the worst jobs, forced into the worst housing and had to follow the unwritten rules of *de facto segregation*.

The Great Migration had a profound effect on the state of New Jersey. By 1910, blacks began moving into New Jersey as their population tripled and towns like Plainfield experienced significant growth.[451] Yet, black New Jerseyans hardly enjoyed the same freedoms as whites in the state, for they were ghettoized and forced to work in "the lower rungs of the occupational ladder."[452] Furthermore, due to housing discrimination, ghettos began to develop in cities like Newark, Camden, Elizabeth and Plainfield mixing native black New Jersey residents with migrants coming from all over the South. By 1960, there would be over 600,000 blacks living in New Jersey, and the uprisings that riddled New Jersey help tell the tale of black New Jersey and the ramifications of this migration.

The city of Plainfield was incorporated in 1869. From that point on, black migrants began to move into the city at first at a slow pace. Yet, by 1950 blacks made up over 13% of Plainfield's population. Attempts at confronting the changing demographics of Plainfield came in earnest with the 1932 publication of *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey, Report XX: Plainfield*. This report made recommendations to develop community programs to give black Plainfielders a chance to assimilate into the community. Most of

---

[451] Wright, *Afro-Americans in New Jersey*, 45.

[452] Ibid., 50.

the measures discussed in the *Survey* would not come to pass, but the effort shows us that there were attempts at making Plainfield a comfortable place for a newcomer to live, regardless of race. Nevertheless, housing discrimination won out, and segregation became a characteristic of Plainfield.

Chapter 3 is a discourse on semantics. Was Plainfield a riot, ghetto revolt or urban uprising? Race riots occurred during the first half of the twentieth century, like those in East St. Louis and Chicago in 1917 and 1919 respectively. Blacks were attacked as symbols of a threat to white supremacy by white citizens. These are race riots, exemplified by the Civil War Draft Riots of 1863 and the Chicago riots of 1919. In this chapter we also dissect the terms violence as vengeance and its corollary violence as protest, using Robert M. Folgeson's construction of violence as protest explicated in a pivotal 1971 book. Violence as vengeance was demonstrated in Tulsa, Oklahoma and the aforementioned East St. Louis and Chicago riots of 1917 and 1919. Harlem in 1944, however, provided a shift in the violence as protest, also understood as urban uprising, paradigm. This was based on volition. It was the black community that went out and looted and broke into stories, set fires and damaged their overall communities. Here there was retribution or a retaliatory act against perceived notions of inferiority when the local police had crossed a line of violence.

Violence as protest is witnessed throughout the uprisings of the 1960s, particularly once again in Harlem, New York. This shift occurs contemporaneously with the revolutionary turn in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. When James Powell was shot and murdered by a police officer, this violent action brought about, to borrow the famous phrase by James Baldwin, a "fire this time" throughout the boroughs of New

York. Another term introduced was the idea of the commodity riot. This, as witnessed from Detroit in 1943 to Rodney King in 1991, is a revolt in which common people went into the streets to physically damage property in their immediate proximity.

Watts in 1965 demonstrates and sets the pattern for a discussion about the urban uprisings of the 1960s. Segregation, racial tensions, rumors, and incidents involving police officers and the black community became the essential elements that sparked the uprisings that took place throughout the nation in the late 1960s. Watts was important for many reasons because it reveals the wherewithal of blacks to refuse a passive existence as victims when confronted by a seemingly unfair police action. But most importantly, Watts was a rejection of the Civil Rights Movement's passive resistance. The black citizens of Watts and later Detroit, Newark and Plainfield were not going to remain passive when a perceived injustice transpired. They were going to revolt.

Chapter 4 discusses the four days in July 1967 that are still remembered as among the most calamitous events for the community of Plainfield, New Jersey. As told, there were many attempts at quelling the tensions between the growing black Plainfield population and the white government and community. Their efforts and struggles remind scholars and Americans alike the difficulty in hiding inequalities between populations in small urban environments that host in close proximity well-to-do neighborhoods and ghetto communities. This situation further exemplifies both the similarities and differences between suburban riots and those of larger metropolises. Large cities can better veil their segregated neighborhoods, but the consequences remain the same, only in greater form and fury. Furthermore, there was nothing dilapidated about the urban housing in Plainfield. Yet the ingredients for uprising were there and fermenting, and all

that was needed came with the arrest of Mary Brown. Fires were set, looting occurred, shots rang out, and ordinary citizens injured, but none of this was shocking. New Jersey officials were already preparing for another "hot" summer, and uprisings were expected. Plainfield demonstrated no matter how many attempts at community organization a town made, it did not guarantee community harmony, especially when the attempts at harmony were lackluster at best.

The Plainfield uprising was initiated by black Plainfield youth. I argue that Plainfield authorities overreacted because Newark was in flames at the same time, and Plainfield was treated as Newark. The cordoning off of blocks, rejection of group meetings, the presence of the National Guard, myths of massive sniper shootings, the *heavy* hand of the government led and ended in assaults on people and property. And the consequences of these reactions most assuredly affect and heighten the tensions between the police and the black communities they "protect and serve" to this day.

Chapter 5 tells of the closing door. It shows there were attempts at amelioration with federal funding, but those efforts were cut or made inadequate by a more intensive, real or not, threat in Vietnam. Violent protest also weakened the mandate for change witnessed in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. The Kerner Commission rightfully, and aggressively, answered the Johnson Administration's growing concern over the tensions throughout black communities across the nation. The primary issue black Americans faced was inherent inequality. Their recommendation for an "enrichment choice" and "integration choice" advocated for a unified effort for integration and an economic and socially equal society. If fully carried out, these options might have repaired the tensions between community and government,

blacks and whites. Funding was necessary, and Plainfield received funding to support the infrastructure, its citizens through better welfare management, and overall financial support. Nevertheless, cutbacks began as early as 1973. The enrichment and integration ideal never held as more and more whites began to move out of Plainfield to nearby towns like North and South Plainfield and Scotch Plains. Changes occurred in the school districts as schools became predominately black throughout the 1970s.

In memory, people only want to talk about Plainfield's present rather than its past. Nostalgia was what Peter Drier wanted to bring to his reunion as he wrote in his article for *The Nation*. But to his shock, no one wanted to talk about the uprising. The demarcation of black and white was too tough for Drier to cut through. Yet if one reads the comments to Drier's article, more people wanted to talk about race relations, behind the screen of a computer rather than in face-to-face conversation.

The conversation in black and white about the differences in white and black perceptions of the event is summed up in the story of Ms. Jamar and Mr. Weeks. Whites protected their property and were dismissive of the qualms brought up by the black community. Meanwhile, blacks witnessed injustice as the uprising was perceived as a protest against the living conditions in Plainfield. For many whites, like my good friend and neighbor David Payne, the riot is about the slain Officer John Gleason. Mr. Payne reminded me as I finish my project to "not forget they murdered that innocent police officer." For many others, like Ms. Jamar, "the system hasn't done what it should."

Memory creates a shadow reality in myth. The story of the Plainfield uprising offers a glimpse into the tensions between the races in late 1960's America. There are limits to this work that might be carried into future projects. For example, this account is

heavily reliant on secondary sources, primary sources were rare, but they are out there, much like there are a number of Plainfield residents, current and past, most likely willing to talk about Plainfield in 1967. In fact, interviews are an essential primary source in a project such as this, but eyewitness accounts become more difficult to catalogue as this generation ages. Another weakness is a lack of statistics, graphs and numbers for this whole project. I am not a statistician, but more specific numbers for blacks and whites living in the community would make this account fuller. I attempted a bottom up reflection, but the end result is that this account comes from the middle, somewhere in the middle is the theme of this work and although I do not give a fully top down account here, it is not a work of the grassroots.

The next step for a project like this is to compare Plainfield with smaller communities with uprisings. For example, there were similar uprisings not only in towns throughout America, but right here in New Jersey. A comparative analysis of towns like Englewood, New Brunswick or nearby Elizabeth would add to the collection on openly aired grievances of the 1960s. Is there a trend between towns that revolted that were the same size as Plainfield, New Jersey? Are there regional specifics that led to other small cities in New Jersey to rebel? Are there other towns, somewhere in the middle of the flawed ideologies of urban decay and suburban bliss? What makes these ideologies flawed?

This dissertation only opened a chapter on a very tumultuous era in our collective past. It is by no means perfect. What I hope I accomplished was getting the conversation started. As it leaves my hands into a general readership, I hope that there are things learned and to be learned by what happened in Plainfield in 1967. Maybe as we uncover

more stories of our rebellious past, we can continue the process of amelioration started decades ago in places like Plainfield, New Jersey.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race Space and Riots in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Akst, Daniel. "A City Long on Charm, Short on Aid." *New York Times*, July 19, 1981.

The American Presidency Project. "Remarks Upon Signing Order Establishing the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders." Washington DC, July 29, 1967, accessed Feb. 12, 2011, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28369.

Bethel, Leonard and Frederick Johnson, eds. "Introduction." In *Plainfield's African American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998.

Boesel, David and Peter H. Rossi, eds. Cities *Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto Riots 1964-1968*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

Boesel, David. "The Liberal Society, Black Youths, and the Ghetto Riots," *Psychiatry* 33, no 2 (1970): 265-80.

Booker v. Plainfield Board of Education.

"Broadcasting: Riot Coverage, Plus & Minus," *Time*, Aug. 25, 1967.

Brown, H. Rap. *Die Nigger Die*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Press, 1969.

Calvert, Kyla. "New York State Singled out for Most Segregated Schools," *PBS News Hour*, Mar. 27, 2014, accessed May 4, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/new-york-state-singled-segregated-schools/.

Carmichael, Stokely and Charles Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1967.

Cloward, Richard A. and Francis Fox Piven. *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

Correal, Annie. "Plainfield Ponders the Legacy of its own Bloody '67 Riots." *New York Times*, July 22, 2007.

"Councilmen Hear Youths Complaints" *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

Cowie, Jefferson, Joseph Heathcott and Barry Bluestone. *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*. Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 2003.

Decision of the New Jersey Board of Education in *Booker v. Plainfield Board of Education*, February 5, 1964, at the Plainfield Historical Archives in the Plainfield Public Library.

Dreier, Peter. "Riot and Reunion: Forty Years Later." *The Nation*, accessed Aug. 31, 2007, http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070730/dreier.

Dustow, Charles, "All-Night Gunfire, Looting, Burning Rakes Plainfield," *Plainfield Courier* News, July 17, 1967.

"Each Summer More Dangerous." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 13, 1967.

Edsell, Thomas Byrne with Mary D. Edsell. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1992.

Fairclough, Adam. *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Inequality 1890-2000*. New York: Viking Press, 2001.

Fenno, Nathan. "Clippers owner Donald Sterling is no stranger to race related lawsuits." *LA Times*, April 26, 2014, accessed May 1, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-donald-sterling-past-controversy-20140426,0,1205990.story.

Fine, Sydney. *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967*. East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2007.

"Fire and Looting Plague Plainfield." *New York Times*, July 16, 1967.

Fogelson, Robert M. *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1971.

"Forbearance Cools Plainfield Unrest." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 13, 1967.

"Forbearance Cools Unrest in Plainfield." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

Freund, David. *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban Amer*ica. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010,

Gansbeg, Martin. "Plainfield: Long Live Queen City." *New York Times*, Mar. 4, 1973.

Gilje, Paul A. *Rioting in America*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Goldberg, Louis C. "Ghetto Uprisings and Others: The Faces of Civil Disorder." *Journal of Peace Research* 5, no.2 (1968): 119.

Grady, John A. and Dorothy M. Pollard. *Images of Plainfield*. Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Press, 2001.

Graham, Fred. "A Man's Home is His Castle—Until the National Guard Arrives." *New York Times*, July 23, 1967.

"The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970." Census.gov. Data, Data Visualization Gallery, http://www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/.

Grossman, James R. *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners and the Great Migration*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Herbers, John. "Decade after Kerner Report: Division of Races Persists." *New York Times*, Feb. 26, 1978.

Hirsch, James S. *Riot and Remembrance: America's Worst Race Riot and Its Legacy.* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.

Hofmann, Paul. "Plainfield Beset By Contradiction." *New York Times*, July 20, 1967.

Horne, Gerald. *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1997.

Housing Authority of Plainfield, *Annual Report 1963-64*, 1, Plainfield Historical Collection at the Plainfield Public Library.

Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report, 1963-1964*, 10, at the Plainfield Historical Archives, Plainfield Public Library.

Human Relations Commission of Plainfield, New Jersey, *First Annual Report, 1963-1964*, 7, at the Plainfield Historical Archives, Plainfield Public Library.

"Insurrection Rakes City." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 17, 1967.

"Insurrection Rakes City" and "Riot Truce Arranged." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 18, 1967.

"Introduction to Report by the Commission on Civil Disorders." *New York Times*, Feb. 11, 1968.

Johnson, F.A. "The History of Bethel Presbyterian Church." In *Plainfield's African American: From Northern Slavery to Church Freedom*, edited by Leonard Bethel and Frederick Johnson. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1998.

Johnson, Thomas. "Plainfield Negroes Say Ghetto is Safer Now without Police." *The New York Times*, July 21, 1967.

Jones, Bomani. "Sterling's racism should be news" ESPN.com, Aug. 10, 2006, accessed May 1 2014, http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/page2/story?page=jones/060810.

Joseph, Peniel E. *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of the Black Power Movement*. New York: Henry Holt and Macmillan, 2007.

Kerner Commission / The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders / Kerner Report*. Washington, DC, 1968.

Keyes, Allison. "Plainfield Riot Remembered 40 Years Later." *All Things Considered*, aired July 28, 2007, on NPR, accessed Mar. 21, 2008, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12329840.

Lamb, Charles M., *Housing Segregation in Suburban America Since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

League of Women Voters of Plainfield. "The Practical Plan for Plainfield: Low Rent Housing for Low Income Groups." May 1951. Plainfield Historical Collection, Plainfield Room at The Plainfield Public Library.

---. "This is Plainfield a Guide to Local Government 1972." 1972.

---. "What are the Facts about Housing in Plainfield?" March 1958.

Lemann, Nicholas. *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991.

Lumpkins, Charles. *American Pogrom: The East St. Louis Race Riot and Black Politics*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008

Lurie, Maxine, ed. *A New Jersey Anthology.* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

Massey, Douglas S. and Nancy A. Denton. *American Apartheid*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993.

"Mayor Lays Riots to 'Agitators' from Newark, Elsewhere." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 17, 1967.

Mumford, Kevin. *Newark: A History of Race, Rights and Riots in America.* New York and London: New York University Press, 2007.

Navarez, Alfonso, "Plainfield, Site of 1967 Racial Disorder, Emerges as All American City for 1976." *New York Times*, Apr. 15, 1976.

New Jersey Conference of Social Work. *Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey, Report XX: Plainfield*. Department of Institutions and Agencies: State of New Jersey, 1932. The Plainfield Historical Archives in the Plainfield Public Library.

Norrell, Robert J. *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Novak, Robert and Rowland Evans. "Johnson Orders Severe Cuts in Spending." *Courier News*, July 13, 1967.

Packard, Jerrold. *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002.

Painter, Nell Irvin. *Standing at Armageddon: The United States 1877-1919*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Piven, Francis Fox. *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006.

"Plainfield Area Urban Coalition." *Courier News*, Jan. 3, 1968.

Plainfield Chamber of Commerce. "The Plainfield's in NJ," 1963, 2. The Plainfield Historical Archives at the Plainfield Public Library.

Plainfield City Census 2010.

"Plainfield Forum." Topix, accessed August 2010, http://www.topix.com/forum/city/plainfield-nj/TUEP10G2F15T0338E.

"Plainfield Model City." *Courier News,* Jan. 4, 1969.

"Plainfield's Mayor Sees Silver-Lined Cloud." *New York Times,* Aug. 9, 1981.

"Police Reports." *Plainfield Courier News*, July, 6 1967.

Porambo, Ronald. *No Cause for Indictment: An Autopsy of Newark*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Melville House, 2006.

Price, Clement, ed. *Freedom Not Far Distant: A Documentary History of Afro-Americans in New Jersey.* Newark, New Jersey: New Jersey Historical Society, 1980.

Report for Action: New Jersey's Governor's Commission on Civil Disorders (State of New Jersey, 1968).

"Riot Truce Negotiated Here." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 18, 1967.

Rutgers University Law Library. "Report and Hearing Transcripts of 1967 NJ Disorders." Newark, New Jersey, 1968, accessed May 13, 2013, http://njdll.rutgers.edu/handle/123456789/1.

Salmore, Barbara G. and Stephen A. Salmore. *New Jersey Politics and Government: The Suburbs Come of Age*. 3rd ed. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rivergate Books, 2008.

Schoonover, H. Kenneth. "The Desegregation of Plainfield Public Schools 1962-1972: A Case Study." Ed.D diss., Rutgers University, 1988.

Smith, Robert. "Plainfield Studies Racial Brawl at High School." *New York Times*, Mar. 2, 1968.

"Some N.J. Big City Mayors Doubt Possibility of Riots." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 15, 1967.

Sugrue, Thomas J. and Andrew P. Goodman. "Plainfield Burning: Black Rebellion in the Suburban North." *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 4 (May 2007): 568-601.

Sugrue, Thomas. *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

---. *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. New York: Random House, 2008.

Survey of Negro Life in New Jersey, Report XX. Plainfield Interracial Committee, New Jersey Conference on Social Work, August 1932. Plainfield Historical Collections, the Plainfield Room at the Plainfield Public Library.

"Text of President's News Conference on Rail Mediation and Other Matters." *New York Times*, July 19 1967.

Thompson, Heather Ann. *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001.

"Twenty Years after Kerner." *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 26, 1988.

US Census 1950.

US Census 1960.

US Census 1970.

US Census 2010.

Wicker, Tom. "Ratting on Newark." *New York Times*, July 23 1967.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Vintage Press, 2011, Kindle II.

Wilson, William Julius. *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Vintage, 1996.

Wolff, Max. "Racial Imbalance in the Plainfield Public Schools." *Journal of Educational Sociology* 36, no. 6 (Feb. 1963): 275-286.

Wright, Giles R. *Afro Americans in New Jersey: A Short History*. Trenton, New Jersey: New Jersey Historical Commission, Department of State, 1988.

"Youth Riots Expected to Increase." *Plainfield Courier News*, July 6, 1967.

VITA

Full Name: Madera Marie Edwards

Place and Date of Birth: Morristown, NJ; September 2, 1974

Names of Parents: David C. Edwards
Elena A. Feliz

Educational Institutions:

Secondary	Morristown High School, Morristown, NJ	High School Diploma	June 1992
Collegiate	University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan	Bachelor of Musical Arts in Music History	May 1996
Graduate	Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan	Master of Arts in American History	December 2002
Graduate	Drew University, Madison, NJ	Master of Philosophy in Intellectual History	October 2007
Graduate	Drew University	Doctor of Philosophy in Modern History and Literature	August 2014

.