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Course: ENC1145-0032

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1/20/14

Police Action with Protests in the United States

1963: Birmingham

Children's Crusade

When Gwen signaled for us to grab our stuff and go, I could hear the fear shriek in everyone's minds. But perhaps they hushed the cries, because we stood up, threw our coats over our shoulder, and strode out of the school together. Soft objections came from teachers- they knew we were up to something bigger than them, but couldn't stand to see any of us leave for the last time. I marched with the confidence of a general leading his army, but glancing at reflections in store windows, all I could see looking back at me were the baby cheeks of a 13-year-old girl with pigtails and a terrified look in her eye.

Down the street, I could see the Birmingham police had let the dogs and fire hoses loose on the other black kids from my neighborhood. I tugged at the tight braids my mama had done for me that morning, buttoned my coat, and tied my sneakers. I was ready for war. (1)

1968: Chicago

Vietnam

Tear gas drowned Lincoln Park in a fog as masked officers swept through with clubs in hand. The dodgy dance between protester and policeman is occurring all over the country from all walks of life. Radicals, pacifists, mothers, fighters, officials, sisters, comrades, brothers, chanters, fathers, students and lovers plead for the end of the war to once again see the faces of their loved ones. In Chicago, thousands of young adults march against the beat of an unrighteous war outside the Democratic Convention. Inside, Vice President Humphrey plots to run for office with the same repugnant Vietnam policies as the unpopular president before him.

The marchers already have fire in their blood ignited from the violence of that year- the murder of a pivotal civil rights leader, the attempted assassination of a certain Campbell's soup can artist, and the police abuse towards the students protesting at Columbia University. The world seems perverse when the ones who are supposed to be protecting are the ones hurting. Police, army, the national guards, and the secret service are at war with innocents: the press, assisting doctors, and nearby pedestrians. In the end, injuries mark both the assaulters and the assaulted. Mayer Daley gives each of his noble Chicago police a pat on the back and a promotion. (2 and 3)

1988: New York

Tompkins Square

Out with the old, in with the new. Police of New York are enforcing a new curfew that extends to merely 1 am. To the people planting their feet firmly in the soil of Tompkins Square Park, it is so much more. East Village teems with brilliance and sparkling creativity. Beat poets and jazz musicians created a collective rhythm that attracted migrating hippies and artists like tattered moths to a fire. The scene is a drug-infused haze of dancing, sexually uninhibited free

thinkers. Police enter the picture as part of the process to deplete the area of its dicey way of life and replenish it with charismatic carbon copy condos for the masses. The anarchists struggle for their culture and are met with flying batons. Blood paints the victims' faces. Gentrification sneakily ensues. (4 and 5)

1992: Los Angeles

Rodney King

Rodney watched from afar as the people who were standing up for him, for themselves, tried to burn their city to the ground. The pockets under his eyes deepened when he saw the black men and women of his community fighting, looting, and destroying the buildings around them. One man was in the way and took a brick to the face.

Rodney has seen the birth of his three daughters, a divorce, and now he's at the end of another marriage. Would this all have happened if he had been at home with the kids he never sees and the woman he no longer loves? He knows he is no saint. He remembers back when he beat a store owner for a measly 200 bucks, laughed nervously when he thought he got away with it, only to be accosted by an officer a few minutes later. Alcohol and pot were his closest friends and stuck with him through the lonely nights when his regrets kept him awake. They were with him when he led the cops on a high-speed chase through the streets of LA, and they were even with him now.

To the rioters, the anger was about more than four officers attacking Rodney and getting off with a slap on the wrist. They were done with the police brutality towards people of shades darker than white. It was about much more than Rodney; in fact it wasn't much about him at all. (6 and 7)

1999: Seattle

WTO Conference

There are 100,000 people packed into the streets of Seattle outside of the conference on trading regulations. The protesters hail from all across the globe and each present their unique reason for being there with scrawled letters on posters and roars of defiant slogans. The sea of humanity flows through the swarms of riot police and out trickles the most rebellious. There are the sadistic bunch who seek opportunity in chaos by attempting loots, but the wave is mostly made out of those who are simply requesting improvement in the system of global trade. All of a sudden, peace is replaced by emergency. Inside, developing countries were uniting against their First World bullies. Outside, a rain of tear gas, rubber bullets, and pepper spray were falling on their people's heads. (8)

2011: Oakland

Occupy

The other protesters yell at my friends, the boys I grew up with, to stop while they grab any rock or bottle they can find to peg through the windows encircling us. I watch a surrealistic parade of kids pull up their jackets' hoods and slip on World War II style gas masks before dispersing into the crowd. I clutch my bandana and tie it just below my eyes, but I can still smell the gas coming from the bottle in my hand. I toss it into a trashcan and chase it with a lit match, but the burst of flames licking the sky meant nothing compared to the turmoil going on around me. I yank a spray can from my backpack. I sprawl out my tag across a charred wall. The scraggly letters seem to match my rapid heart-beat as they pulse in the flickering yellow light.

I thought about what led up to this, what led up to me standing here pissed as hell at my city and the other protesters. They stood for something I thought I believed in, but there were so many motives that most of the time I couldn't even tell what we were fighting for. I was sick of sitting around chanting, and especially being pushed around from place to place by cops. I spun around and whipped the empty can at a nearby patrol car, only to get the response of shocking pain as a bean bag round hits my rib cage. I shout but it comes out as almost a growl when I see a herd of the Pigs coming to stop me. The throbbing letters on the wall seem to grow bigger and bigger as the edges of my vision fade dim. Maybe it was the hit, maybe it was the spray paint fumes, but I sway drunkenly and meet the pavement head-on. The screaming chorus of people and sirens sings on. The blackness engulfs me. (12)

2012: California

University of California Davis

I came here so that one day I can become a writer, but all I can think about, better yet write about, are the weighty expenses my school is piling on my shoulders. If you add up tuition, meal plans, housing, books, and other sly costs, you can easily put a price tag on knowledge. I don't want to be an engineer or a scientist, but that doesn't make me worth any less than those who do. Right? Maybe? Apparently financial aid would disagree, thus why I spend my nights switching off between bagging groceries and huddling over a 200 dollar textbook.

My best friend was pepper sprayed for standing up against this system of indebting students. A cop nonchalantly pushed his finger on the nozzle, and in one motion blinded him with an orange, stinging spray to the face. He was simply a college student sitting in peace for

cause he believed in. He was assaulted for exercising his freedom of speech, in a school he pays to attend, by cops whose salaries are partially supplied by his checks.

Today, a week after the incident, he is leading us in a silent protest in response to the Chancellor's actions, or lack thereof. We echo his orders as we link arms and make a fence of bodies, forming a path from the building in which the Chancellor was holding a press conference. Somehow all thousand of us remain completely silent as she walks past, avoiding direct eye contact. If her eyes fell on ours, they would be met with absolute disappointment.

In silence she backs up and drives away into the darkness. In silence we all stand up and disperse. In silence we wonder if anything has really changed at all. (9 and 10)

2013: New York City

Trayvon Martin

Tim fiddles with the buckle of his belt under his overlapping belly and then moves his hand over to check the snap holding his pistol in its holster- a habit he developed within the first month of police academy. Twenty-nine years later, this habit has become more of a nervous twitch than an inspection. Before hoisting himself out of the car, he checks for the baton and taser hooked onto his belt. He grabs the radio too- just in case. Tim isn't new to the game, he knows about the Rodney King riots. With his palms a bit sweaty, he slams the door, and shuffles down the street. He knows that around the corner are the Martin protests. Across every television set in America have been reporters and "experts" predicting public terror if Zimmerman got off. How did he get stuck with this? He should have known this would happen and asked for the day off. Tim clenches his jaw. His fingers trace the buckle, pistol, baton, and taser again. Buckle, pistol, baton, taser, repeat. He turns the corner and sees a mass of people.

Silence.

New York citizens of who knows what sexual orientations, heritages, political backgrounds, careers, or religious beliefs are sitting in stillness as a single entity with fists stretched for the sun. Some are wearing beaten hoodies, some are holding signs. A few look like they just came from work; others brought their kids. Tim's face drops as he scans their faces. Where he once held fear, he felt something else. He saw it reflected so familiarly in all of those faces looking back at him. They saw the sadness in his face as well. (11)

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