

# “Intolerable Conditions”: Teaching About Northern Racism Through Rosa Parks’s Detroit

BY SAY BURGIN, JEANNE THEOHARIS, AND URSULA WOLFE-ROCCA

ON JULY 24, 1967, THE *NEW YORK TIMES* reported, “Thousands of rampaging Negroes firebombed and looted huge sections of Detroit last night and early today. Gov. George Romney ordered 1,500 National Guardsmen, backed by tanks, to quell the riot.” It took 10 paragraphs (and required reading beyond the front page) to learn anything about causes: “The trouble began when the police raided a ‘blind pig,’ or after-hours drinking spot, on 12th Street near Clairmount and arrested 73 persons.” The *Times* offered no context for the salient social facts of that sentence — the long history of police harassment of Black Detroiters and the conditions that pushed people to recreate in unpermitted bars — nor did the coverage note the steely resistance of the patrons of the blind pig. The crowd at the bar refused to leave (and in fact grew in size) when the police showed up and started arresting people. Rep. John Conyers said, “People were letting feelings out that had never been let out before, that had been bottled up.... It was the whole desperate situation of being Black in Detroit.”

Rosa Parks’s apartment was only about a mile away from the raided blind pig. She and her family had been forced to leave Montgomery, Alabama, a decade earlier because even after the bus boycott’s successful end, she and her husband (who had both lost their jobs) still couldn’t find work and were still getting death threats. She had joined movements in Detroit challenging school and housing segregation and said the uprising was “the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand.”

While Rosa Parks is typically associated with Montgomery and the Southern civil rights movement, she actually spent half of her life fighting



Washington Post

*Rosa Parks as one of the speakers at a rally near the Washington Monument, Washington D.C. on June 19, 1968 held as part of the Poor People’s Campaign.*

Northern racism, what Conyers called “the whole desperate situation of being Black in Detroit.” This lesson, which focuses on the Detroit Uprising of 1967, will equip students to “talk back” to official accounts of the riot — like the one quoted from *The Times* above — by focusing on its root causes. Additionally, the lesson will provide students an opportunity to get a fuller sense of Rosa Parks’s life and politics and to learn about the Black freedom struggle outside of the South. Finally, the lesson will begin to equip students with how to think about how different institutions reinforce racism in different ways. The lesson asks students to investigate four crucial sites of racial inequality

— schools, housing, jobs, and policing — drawing upon excerpts from *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks: Young Readers Edition* and several primary sources: tax records, redlining maps, oral histories, newspaper stories, and more. In conversation with each other, students will learn

how inequality and segregation was created and maintained, shaped Black lives in the city, and how people — like Rosa Parks and the vibrant Black community in Detroit of which she was a part — responded to it.

### Note to Educators:

We have drafted the instructions below as a three- to four-day dive into the deep injustices that contributed to the 1967 uprising. We understand that you may not have the time or curricular space to undertake the lesson as described. There are many ways you might adapt the materials below.

For instance, if you have only one day, you might choose to have the whole class tackle just one of the four topics (housing, policing, education, or employment). Housing alone, for example, would surface many of the important concepts of the lesson. Restrictive covenants (enforced by courts) and redlining (which directed federal housing money) make clear that there was nothing de facto about Northern segregation; racism in the North was law and policy. Housing also reveals the economics of Northern segregation: White people, subsidized by government loans, pay more to move to the suburbs, from which Black people were excluded; with virtually no choice about where they could live, Black people were forced to pay exorbitant rents to white landlords, for substandard housing in redlined neighborhoods. Another option, if you only have one day, would be to choose “education,” and this lesson could be paired with a unit or day following the Supreme Court’s decision *Brown v. Board* to think about educational inequality and movements against school segregation outside the South. A third option, for a single day assignment, would be to use this to think about Rosa Parks’s life and activism outside the South as a way to marry a discussion of the Montgomery bus boycott with her activism in Detroit in the second half of her life.

### Suggested Procedure

1. Ask students to share what they know about Rosa Parks. Assuming you and your classes have not already studied her life in depth, you can expect these basic answers: “She was a civil rights leader.” “She’s the one who refused to give up her seat on the bus.” “She started the Montgomery Bus Boycott.” Once students generate this standard, thumbnail sketch of Parks, tell them, “During the boycott, both Mrs. Parks and her husband Raymond lost their jobs. Even after the boycott’s end, they continued to get hate calls and death threats in their home. The Parks eventually decided to leave Montgomery for

Detroit, where Rosa’s brother Sylvester lived.” Ask students to predict how life for the Parks family will be different in the North.

In our experience, students may not have many specifics, but will generally believe that the North was less racist than the South — indeed, this is a major misconception held by many people, not just young people. Finally, reveal to students that in 1965, after living in Detroit for close to a decade, Rosa Parks told an interviewer, “I can’t say we like Detroit any better than Montgomery.”

Tell students that, unfortunately, the interviewer did not follow up to ask Mrs. Parks,



Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University

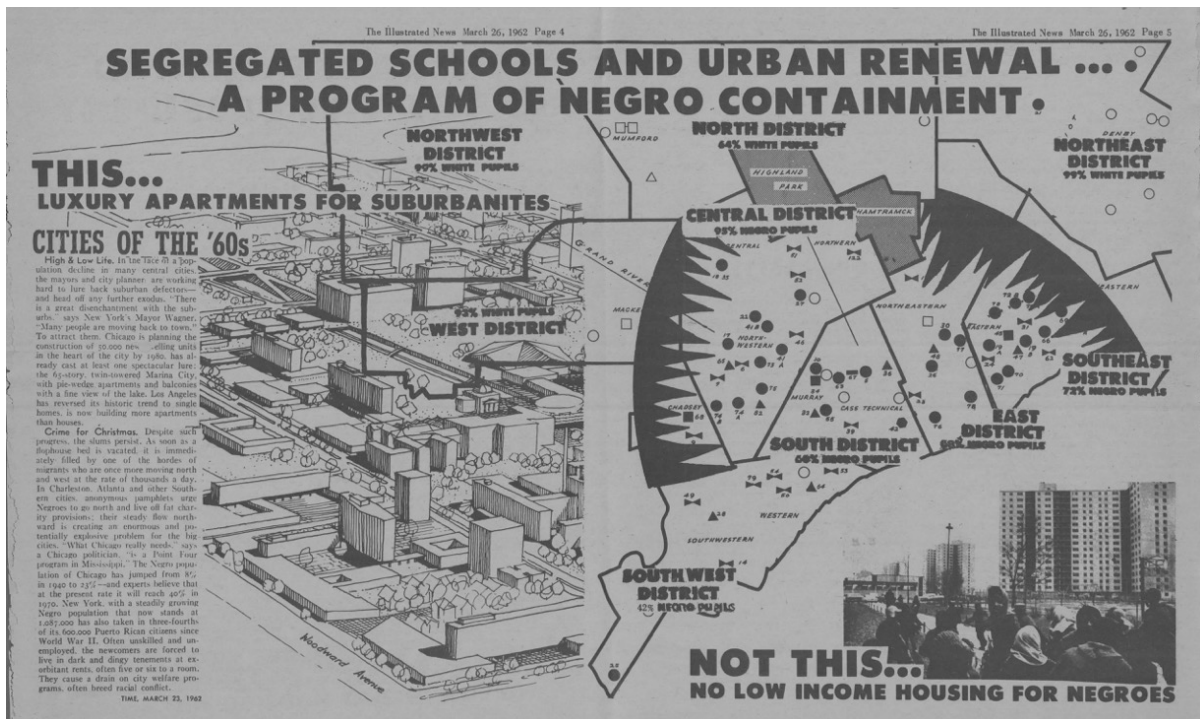
*Algiers Motel, July 26, 1967. Courtesy Detroit News Photographs*

“Why? What has life in Detroit been like for you?” But that *will* be the focus of this series of activities: to understand what life was like in the North for Black people in the middle of the 20th century, and why in many ways it wasn’t “any better than Montgomery.” Rosa Parks would call Detroit “the Northern promised land that wasn’t.” Tell students they will be investigating why she said that.

2. Tell students some key facts about the Detroit Uprising of 1967. It is sometimes called the Detroit Riot or Detroit Rebellion. Over the course of five days, confrontations between police (and other law enforcement agencies, including the U.S. military) and Detroit residents led to 43 deaths, hundreds of injuries, more than 1,000 fires, and more than 7,000 arrests. Rep. John Conyers would refer to it as a “police riot” because most of the arrests made by police were illegitimate. You might show students one or two [powerful photographs](#). Be careful, however, not to share *causes* of the uprising with students. Identifying causes will be one of their key tasks.
3. In small groups, individually, or as a whole class, have students examine [this collection of headlines about the uprising](#). Ask, “From

these headlines, what do we learn about what happened? Who or what seems to be at fault? Do we learn anything about the causes of the violence?” Next, ask students to bring those same questions to a [New York Times article published the day after the uprising began](#). In this article students will find virtually no information about what sparked the resistance, other than a small paragraph about the police raid of a “blind pig,” an after-hours, illegal bar. Discuss with students what they learn. Ask: Why would a run-in between the police and bargoers escalate into a massive, days-long riot?

4. Tell students, “Now we are going to spend a little bit of time studying what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had to say about the Detroit rebellion” — which is different from what students saw in the *New York Times*. Tell students that in March 1968, King came to the elite, all-white Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe. ([King said afterward](#) that he had never received such vocal opposition at an indoor speech.) Provide students copies of the [Close Reading handout](#) and divide them into discussion groups of three or four. First, ask students to read the quotation all the way through a couple of times on their own.



Walter P. Reuther Library, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University

“Segregated Schools and Urban Renewal ... A Program of Negro Containment,”  
*Illustrated News*, Vol. 2, No. 13, March 26, 1962.

Then ask them to carefully read and talk about the four sets of discussion questions in their small groups. Tell them that the reason you’re asking them to read this so carefully is that they’ll come back to this excerpt again, later in the lesson, and they’ll want to feel confident in their understanding of King’s words. When students have discussed all four sets of questions in small groups, debrief question #3 as a class. Ask students, “What was happening in the last 12 to 15 years related to the struggle for civil rights before King made this speech?” Students will recall that they have just talked about Rosa Parks, so they will likely mention at least the Montgomery Bus Boycott; you might also want to mention some other key Civil Rights struggles and victories — *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Acts, etc. Ask students, “What is King saying about these civil rights successes for folks in Detroit?” Finally, ask students how King’s account is different from the one they read in the *New York Times*. Together, steps 1, 2, 3, and 4 will take about one 90-minute class period.

5. Divide students into four groups ([Housing](#), [Policing](#), [Education](#), and [Employment](#)). Tell them that they are each going to take a deep dive into one area of life in Detroit before and during the ‘67 uprising to learn more about what King means when he refers to the “intolerable conditions” of the North. Each handout will lead students through an investigation that involves reading, discussing, and analyzing documents and resources. The instructions assume that students will have some time to work independently (this could be homework), and come back together with a small group or partner to discuss and collaborate. This will take about one class period.
6. Ask students to prepare to share what they learned in their investigations of housing, employment, education, or policing with their classmates. Remind students that King said that the unrest in Detroit was caused, at least in part, by “intolerable conditions.” Tell students, “Your job is to explain how the history and information you learned

# Primary Document: Tax Return

This is one of the dozens of documents available to students in the handouts.

**FORM 1040 U. S. INDIVIDUAL INCOME TAX RETURN—1959**  
 U. S. Treasury Department Internal Revenue Service  
 or Other Taxable Year Beginning Jan 1, 1959, Ending Jan 1, 1960  
 (PLEASE TYPE OR PRINT)

Name Raymond A. + Rosa L. Parks  
 (If this is a joint return of husband and wife, use first names and middle initials of both)  
 Home address 1930 W. Grand Blvd  
 (Number and street or rural route)  
Detroit 8 Mich  
 (City, town, or post office) (Postal zone number) (State)

Your Social Security Number 419 07 8624 Occupation Barber Wife's Social Security Number 418 32 7180 Occupation Seamstress

**Exemptions**

1. Check blocks which apply. (a) Regular \$600 exemption  Yourself  Wife Enter number of exemptions checked 2  
 Check for wife only if all of her income is included in this return, or if she had no income. (b) Additional \$600 exemption if 65 or over at end of taxable year.  Yourself  Wife  
 (c) Additional \$600 exemption if blind at end of taxable year.  Yourself  Wife  
 2. List first names of your children who qualify as dependents; give address if different from yours. Enter number of children listed 0  
 3. Enter number of exemptions claimed for other persons listed at top of page 2. 0  
 4. Enter the total number of exemptions claimed on lines 1, 2, and 3. 2

**Income**

5. Enter all wages, salaries, bonuses, commissions, tips, and other compensation before payroll deductions (including any excess of expense account or similar allowance paid by your employer over your ordinary and necessary business expenses. See instructions, pp. 5-6.)  
 Employer's Name Michigan Barber School, Inc Where Employed (City and State) Harvey's Barber Shop (a) Wages, etc. 191.70 (b) Income Tax Withheld 6.60  
Sewing (W) 219.36  
250  
 Enter totals here 661.06 6.60

6. Less: Excludable "Sick Pay" in line 5 (See instructions, page 7. Attach required statement.) \$  
 7. Balance (line 5 less line 6) \$  
 8. Profit (or loss) from business from separate Schedule C.  $\diamond$   
 9. Profit (or loss) from farming from separate Schedule F.  $\diamond$   
 10. Other income (or loss) from page 3 (Dividends, Interest, Rents, Pensions, etc.)  $\diamond$   
 11. Adjusted Gross Income (sum of lines 7, 8, 9, and 10)  $\diamond$  \$ 661.06

12. TAX on income on line 11. (If line 11 is under \$5,000, and you do not itemize deductions, use Tax Table on page 16 of instructions to find your tax and check here . If line 11 is \$5,000 or more, or if you itemize deductions, compute your tax on page 2 and enter here the amount from line 9, page 2.) \$ none

13. (a) Dividends received credit from line 5 of Schedule J.  $\diamond$  \$  
 (b) Retirement income credit from line 12 of Schedule K.  $\diamond$  \$  
 14. Balance (line 12 less line 13) \$  
 15. Enter your self-employment tax from separate Schedule C or F.  $\diamond$  \$ none  
 16. Sum of lines 14 and 15. \$

17. (a) Tax withheld (line 5 above). Attach Forms W-2, Copy B.  $\diamond$  \$ 6.60  
 (b) Payments and credits on 1959 Declaration of Estimated Tax (See page 8, instructions.)  $\bullet$  \$

18. If your tax (line 12 or 16) is larger than your payments (line 17), enter the BALANCE DUE here  $\rightarrow$  \$  
 Pay in full with this return to "Internal Revenue Service." If less than \$1.00, file return without payment.

19. If your payments (line 17) are larger than your tax (line 12 or 16), enter the OVERPAYMENT here  $\rightarrow$  \$ 6.60  
 If less than \$1.00, the overpayment will be refunded only upon application.

20. Amount of line 19 to be: (a) Credited to 1960 estimated tax \$; (b) Refunded \$ 6.60

Did you receive an expense allowance or reimbursement, or charge expenses to your employer?  Yes  No (See page 6, instructions.)  
 If "Yes," did you submit an itemized accounting of expenses to your employer?  Yes  No (See page 6, instructions.)

County in which you live. Wayne Is your wife (husband) filing a separate return for 1959?  Yes  No. If "yes," enter her (his) name and do not claim the exemption on this return. If you owe any Federal tax for years before 1959, enter here the Internal Revenue District where the account is outstanding.

I declare under the penalties of perjury that this return (including any accompanying schedules and statements) has been examined by me and to the best of my knowledge and belief is a true, correct, and complete return. If the return is prepared by a person other than the taxpayer, his declaration is based on all the information relating to the matters required to be reported in the return of which he has any knowledge.

Sign here. (Taxpayer's signature and date) (If this is a joint return, BOTH HUSBAND AND WIFE MUST SIGN) (Wife's signature and date)

(Signature of preparer other than taxpayer) (Address) (Date)

70-16-75313-1

Rosa Parks Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress

This 1959 income tax return form shows the acute financial reversal the Parks family incurred after Rosa's arrest. They reported an annual income of only \$661.00. From 1959 through 1964, Rosa Parks worked as a seamstress at the Stockton Sewing Company. She sewed aprons and skirts for seventy-five cents apiece. Raymond Parks was unemployed from January to August 1959. In October, they moved into the Progressive Civic League as the building's caretakers to reduce expenses.



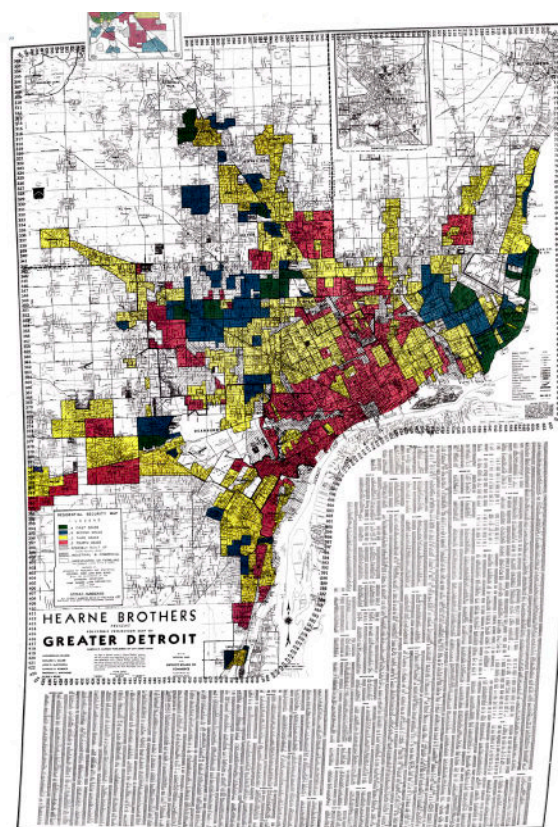
In 1964, Rosa Parks volunteered on John Conyers' campaign to represent Michigan's First Congressional District. After he won, he hired Parks in March 1965 to work in his Detroit office as a receptionist and administrative assistant. She answered phones, met with visitors, handled constituent cases, and assisted the Congressman with scheduling. The position restored the Parks family's financial stability. She retired in 1988.

about might be used as evidence to support King's argument." Tell students to first meet in groups with those who learned about the same topic. In these groups students should develop answers to two questions, which they'll be sharing with other students in the class.

- What are the most important facts you learned? Try to narrow down your answer to only a few, powerful examples, statistics, or events.
- How does what you learned help explain why the '67 Detroit Uprising happened?

7. Ask groups to select two or three "travelers" from their group who will move from table to table, meeting with other groups. For example, two members of the housing group will "travel" to the policing group's table; meanwhile, two members of the employment group will travel and fill the empty desks or chairs at the housing group. *Both* groups should share, listen to each other, and [take notes](#) during each of the three rotations. Encourage students to ask each other clarifying questions. Tell students that they will be using the information they gather to draft a response to a government official's statement about the causes of the rebellion, so they want to make sure they feel relatively confident with what they have written down, including both key details as well as the bigger picture of education, policing, housing, and employment in Detroit. After the final rotation, each student should have some notes on all four of the topics.
8. After the final rotation, when students are seated back in their original groups, give them a bit of time to debrief together. Although both the travelers and those that stayed will have spoken with representatives of all the groups, they will not have met with the same students, and may have heard slightly different versions or come away with different understandings or questions. Remind them again that they will be doing some writing using their notes, so they want to make sure they feel relatively confident with what they have written down. Steps 6, 7, and 8 should take about one class period.
9. Tell students that they are going to use what they've learned about the causes of the Detroit Uprising to evaluate and talk back to the governor of Michigan's account of the unrest. Hand out copies of [Gov. George Romney's memo](#), which is a list of reasons he believes the uprising occurred. Tell students they are going to get multiple chances to read, respond to, and discuss this document.

- First, ask students to read the document on their own and mark up what they notice and what stands out to them. Tell them to also keep track of questions that emerge.
- After this first read-through, give students a chance to debrief in small groups or with a partner.
- Next, ask students to read through the document again, and this time, focus on the accuracy of Romney’s account. Tell students, “You’ve collected a lot of information about housing, employment, education and policing in Detroit. Pay attention to what Romney says about these topics — and to what he does *not* say.”
- Once again, ask students to debrief and discuss in a small group or with a partner:
  - A. Which of Romney’s numbered points is the most *accurate*, based on what you learned?
  - B. Which of Romney’s numbered points is the most *inaccurate* based on what you learned?
  - C. In Dr. King’s Grosse Pointe speech, he said, “These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention,” and that “a riot is the language of the unheard.” What evidence do you see that Romney agrees or disagrees with King? What were the people of Detroit saying in the uprising that they wanted policymakers like Romney to hear?
- Ask groups to share out to the whole class. As students share, the teacher should take notes (on a white board, chart paper, or Google Doc) documenting the class’s collective analysis.
- For the final read-through of the document, ask students to pay attention to what is missing from the account — what causes of the uprising does Romney not include?
- In their final group or partner activity,

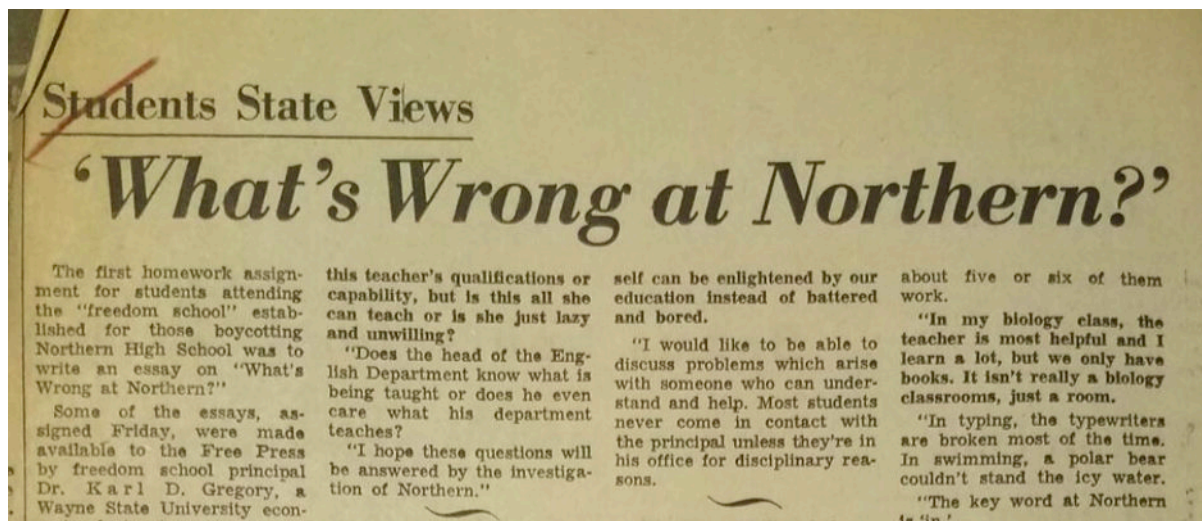


Robert K. Nelson, LaDale Winling, Richard Marciano, Nathan Connolly, et al., “Mapping Inequality,” *American Panorama*, ed. Robert K. Nelson and Edward L. Ayers, accessed July 21, 2022, <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining>

*This is a map of housing inequality in Detroit. The Parks lived in one of the poorest areas This is one of the dozens of documents available to students in the handouts*

ask students to cross out two of Romney’s most inaccurate points and add two additional points, drafted by the students. Tell students, “OK, you now have the power to revise this document, to get rid of its worst takes, and to add some of the facts and evidence you learned about Detroit over the last several days.” The idea here is not to have students address *all* of the points in the Romney memo. Remind students that they should address the ones that have the most to do with the evidence they have gathered.

- Alternatively, you could have students imagine themselves talking directly to Gov. Romney, either through a newspaper (letter to the editor), or in the form of a Twitter thread or TikTok video. Here students might choose one major point Romney misses or gets wrong and provide evidence and examples to support their claim.



Headline of article in the *Detroit Free Press* April 27, 1966. "Students State Views: What's Wrong at Northern?" This is one of the dozens of documents available to students in the lesson handouts.

10. Lead a full group discussion. Start off by asking students to share some of the major factors that Romney's memo missed or important history he left out, and how their interpretation of the rebellion differed from his. Some possible additional discussion questions:

- How did our analysis differ from Romney's? What were the big differences in the approaches we took?
- How would different groups (people who participated in the uprising, white people in the suburbs, Black Detroiters, police, white people outside of Detroit, Black people outside of Detroit, etc.) respond to Romney's list compared to ours? Which points would cause particularly strong (negative or positive) reactions? Why?
- What might Romney have been trying to achieve in his "official account" of the uprising? What might have been his

motivation in telling the story in the way that he did?

- Rosa Parks described the Detroit Uprising in the following way: "the result of resistance to change that was needed long beforehand." Based on what you learned, is that accurate? Explain.
- Rosa Parks described Detroit as "the Northern promised land that wasn't." Based on what you learned, what is she trying to say about Black life and opportunities for Black people in Detroit?

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