When Watts Burned

Rolling Stone's The Sixties, 1977

Stanley Crouch

It burst like a Mexican piñata stuffed full of statistics about economics, racism and frustration. Some said that it was a set-up, that the men who exhorted crowds on the streets in those first days and nights were not from Watts, but were strangers working for some violent cause—Marxists, or the ubiquitous CIA. I think it had more to do with younger blacks who were exchanging the Southern patience and diligence of Martin Luther King for the braggadocio of Malcolm X, made attractive by the Muslims' self-reliance program.

It also said something about the concepts of manhood, self-defense and "justifiable revenge" that dominated much more television time than did the real suffering of the civil rights workers. Every tactic of King's was contradicted by weekly war films, swashbucklers, Westerns, and detective shows. *Men* did not allow women and children to be beaten, hosed, cattle-prodded or blown up in Sunday school. Nonviolence, both as tactic and philosophy, was outvoted.

For all that, even though I was a member of the community and had seen many a confrontation between community people and police, I was not prepared for what I saw in these days. Sure, I had seen my street filled before with gang members beating each other over the head with tire irons, chains, bottles. But it was almost always possible for two police cars to break the thing up. And a year before the *big* riot, I had seen a smaller one take place at Jefferson High School when a pillhead had been arrested, and his sister, who had been trying to intervene, was pushed away. Bricks and bottles knocked down many police officers that day—but three drawn guns brought an end to it.

I had also read LeRoi Jones and James Baldwin, had felt enraged, but considered most of their threats no more than romantic literature, or at best, impotent fist-waving. Then, too, barbershops were always full of "would've, could've and should've" conversations about violent reactions to the racial tensions of the period.

I was hearing all of this, at nineteen, while writing speeches for an important person in Los Angeles's very nearly worthless poverty program. Since this person was an *expert* on the community, I was sent out there to find out what the disturbance was about in case the official ever had to speak authoritatively

from a wellspring of hired information. Another street disturbance, I thought. Of course, I was wrong.

I never saw the very important woman who finally sparked it all. She was actually seen by very few, but for a moment she was every black woman victim of white racism. She was part of a crowd that gathered to watch the arrest of a black man. As the scene got heated, the story goes, she was singled out by the police and physically abused. But momentum swept away symbols, and she was soon forgotten as windows shattered under the weight of hurled bricks, tire irons and feet.

People were in the street that night, Wednesday, August 11, talking rebellious talk, throwing bottles, milling around the projects on Imperial Highway, a six-lane artery that ran east toward the white suburbs and west toward the Harbor Freeway, passing the borders of Watts.

They were still there the next day, and by that night they had started tearing things up. The next day, Friday the 13th, the crowds were bigger, covering the sidewalks of 103rd Street, a strip of stores that sold overpriced second-rate merchandise.

The police were obviously frightened—these black people did not avert their eyes, did not tremble and stutter, but stared into their white faces with a confident cynicism, a stoic rebelliousness, even a dangerous mischief. This was unusual for Los Angeles blacks, who long before had literally been whipped into shape by Chief Parker's thin blue line, a police force known in the community for shooting or clubbing first and asking questions later. No one was afraid of them now, and no one would follow the bullhorn orders to disperse. The police did not understand.

The store owners did. They left for home. Windows were smashed and goods snatched. A few arrests were made and bottles bounced off the windows of police cars. The police made a show of force, a slow-moving line of fifteen or twenty police cars, provoking more bottles and more bricks. The police pulled out and the surge began in full force, taking 103rd Street before leaping like the proverbial wildfire over the whole black community.

I had never seen anything like it before. It was a bloody carnival, a great celebration. Warring street gangs that had been shooting each other for the past two years were drunk in the park, laughing at overturned cars, stoning or stabbing random whites who mistakenly drove through the area, jubilantly shouting how "all the brothers are *together.*" Men stood in front of stores with their arms full of dreams—new suits, appliances, hats. The sky was full of smoke and there was occasional gunfire. Well-known local winos reached for Johnnie Walker Black and Harvey's Bristol Cream, leaving the cheaper stuff to feed the flames. The atmosphere at first was festive. Then on Saturday the National Guard went into action. With their arrival, the blood really began to flow. Within two days they had cordoned off the whole community.

Rumors sparked like random lightning about women and children being shot, and about subsequent cover-ups. Most of all, there was a feeling of occupation as the Jeeps rolled down the streets and the machine guns glinted in the sun, bayonets offering ugly invitations. Romantics thought the riot would take the state. But through the smoke I saw an older black woman emerge from a display window from which she had just stolen a new domestic worker's uniform. To me, she seemed to say what it was really all about.

After Watts

Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?

A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots

The New York Review of Books, March 31, 1966

ELIZABETH HARDWICK

The Disaster and then, after a period of mourning or shock, the Report. Thus we try to exorcise our fears, to put into some sort of neutrality everything that menaces our peace. The Reports look out upon the inexplicable in private action and the unmanageable in community explosion; they investigate, they study, they interview, and at last, they recommend. Society is calmed, and not so much by what is found in the study as by the display of official energy, the activity underwritten. For we well know that little will be done, nothing new uncovered—at least not in this manner; instead a recitation of common assumptions will prevail, as it must, for these works are rituals, communal rites. To expect more, to anticipate anguish or social imagination, leads to disappointment and anger. The Reports now begin to have their formal structure. Always on the sacred agenda is the search for "outside influence," for it appears that our dreams are never free of conspiracies. "We find," one of the Report goes, "no evidence that the Free Speech Movement was organized by the Communist Party, or the Progressive Labor Movement, or any other outside group." Good, we say, safe once more, protected from the ultimate.

It is also part of the structure of a Report that it should scold us, but scold in an encouraging, constructive way, as a mother is advised to reprimand her

child. For, after all, are we to blame? To blame for riots, assassinations, disorderly students? The Reports say, yes, we are to blame, and then again we aren't. Oswald, friendless, and Watts, ignored. Well, we should indeed have done better—and they should have done better, too.

Watts—a strip of plastic and clapboard, decorated by skimpy palms. It has about it that depressed feeling of a shimmering, timeless afternoon in the Caribbean: there, just standing about, the melancholy bodies of young black boys—and way off, in the distance, the looming towers of a Hilton. Pale stucco, shacky stores, housing projects, laid out nicely, not tall, like rows of tomato vines. Equable climate, ennui, nothingness. Here? Why here? we demand to know. Are they perhaps, although so recently from little towns and rural counties of the South, somehow longing for the sweet squalor of the Hotel Theresa, the battered seats of the Apollo Theatre? This long, sunny nothingness, born yesterday. It turns out to be an exile, a stop-over from which there is no escape. In January there was a strange quiet. You tour the streets as if they were a battlefield, our absolutely contemporary Gettysburg. Here, the hallowed rubble of the Lucky Store, there once stood a clothing shop, and yonder, the ruins of a super market. The standing survivors told the eye what the fallen monuments had looked like, the frame, modest structures of small, small business, itself more or less fallen away from all but the most reduced hopes. In the evening the owners lock and bolt and gate and bar and then drive away to their own neighborhoods, a good many of those also infested with disappointments unmitigated by the year-round cook-out. Everything is small, but with no hint of neighborliness.

The promise of Los Angeles, this beckoning openness, newness, freedom. But what is it? It is neither a great city nor a small town. Sheer impossibility of definition, of knowing what you are experiencing exhausts the mind. The intensity and diversity of small-town Main Streets have been stretched and pulled and thinned out so that not even a Kresge, a redecorated Walgreen's, or the old gray stone of the public library, the spitoons and insolence of the Court House stand to keep the memory intact. The past resides in old cars, five years old, if anywhere. The Watts riots were a way to enter history, to create a past, to give form by destruction. Being shown the debris by serious, intelligent men of the district was like being on one of those cultural tours in an underdeveloped region. Their pride, their memories were of the first importance. It is hard to find another act in American history of such peculiarity—elation in the destruction of the lowly symbols of capitalism.

And now, how long ago it all seems. How odd it is to go back over the old newspapers, the astonishing photographs in *Life* magazine, the flaming buildings, the girls in hair curlers and shorts, the loaded shopping carts, "Get Whitey," and "Burn, baby, burn," and the National Guard, the crisis, the curfew, and Police Chief Parker's curtain line, "We're on top and they are on the

bottom." In the summer of 1965 "as many as 10,000 Negroes took to the streets in marauding bands." Property damage was forty million; nearly four thousand persons were arrested; thirty-four were killed. A commission headed by John A. McCone produced a report called, "Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?" (Imagine the conferences about the title!) It is somewhat dramatic, but not unnerving since its cadence whispers immediately in our ear of the second-rate, the Sunday Supplement, the *Reader's Digest.*

The Watts Report is a distressing effort. It is one of those bureaucratic documents, written in an ambivalent bureaucratic prose, and it yields little of interest on the surface and a great deal of hostility below the surface. (Bayard Rustin in *Commentary* shows brilliantly how the defects of Negro life are made to carry the blame for Negro behavior in a way that exonerates the conditions that produced the defects.) In our time, moral torpor and evangelical rhetoric have numbed our senses. The humble meters of the McCone Report are an extreme example of the distance a debased rhetoric puts between word and deed. A certain squeamishness calls the poor Negroes of Watts the "disadvantaged" and designates the police as "Caucasians." "A dull, devastating spiral of failure" is their way of calling to mind the days and nights of the Watts community.

The drama of the disadvantaged and the Caucasians opens on a warm night and a drunken driver. Anyone who has been in Watts will know the beauty and power of the automobile. It is the lifeline, and during the burning and looting, car lots and gasoline stations were exempt from revenge. Watts indeed is an island; even though by car it is not far from downtown Los Angeles, it has been estimated that it costs about $1.50 and one-and-a-half to two hours to get out of Watts to possible employment. One might wonder, as he reads the opening scene, why the police were going to tow the drunken driver's car away, rather than release it to his mother and brother who were trying to claim it? For this is a deprivation and frustration not to be borne in the freeway inferno. Without a car you are not truly alive; every sort of crippling, disabling imprisonment of body and mind attends this lack. The sight of the "Caucasians" and the hot night and the hatred and deprivation burst into a revolutionary ecstasy and before it was over it extended far beyond Watts, which is only the name for a small part of the community, into a much larger area of Negro residence.

And what is to be done, what does it mean? Was it gray, tired meat and shoes with composition soles at prices a little starlet might gasp at? Of course we know what the report will say, what we all say; all that is true and has nevertheless become words, rhetoric. It's jobs and headstarts and housing and the mother at the head of the family and reading levels and drop-outs. The Report mentions some particular aggravations: the incredible bungling of the poverty program in Los Angeles; the insult of the repeal of the Rumford Fair Housing

Act; the Civil Rights program of protest. The last cause is a deduction from the Byzantine prose of the report which reads: "Throughout the nation, unpunished violence and disobedience to law were widely reported, and almost daily there were exhortations, here and elsewhere, to take extreme and even illegal remedies to right a wide variety of wrongs, real and supposed." *Real* and *supposed;* in another passage the locution "many Negroes felt and *were encouraged* to feel," occurs. These niceties fascinate the student of language. They tell of unseen enemies, real and supposed, and strange encouragements, of what nature we are not told.

Still, the Watts Report is a mirror: the distance its bureaucratic language puts between us and the Negro is the reflection of reality. The demands of those days and nights on the streets, the smoke and the flames, are simply not to be taken in. The most radical re-organization of our lives could hardly satisfy them, and there seems to be neither the wish nor the will to make the effort. The words swell as purpose shrinks. Alabama and California are separated by more than miles of painted desert. The Civil Rights movement is fellowship and Watts is alienation, separation.

> "What can violence bring you when the white people have the police and the power? What can it bring you except death?"
> "Well, we are dying a little bit every day."

The final words of the Report seem to struggle for some faint upbeat and resolution but they are bewildered and fatigued. "As we have said earlier in this report, there is no immediate remedy for the problems of the Negro and other disadvantaged in our community. The problems are deep and the remedies are costly and will take time. However, through the implementation of the programs we propose, with the dedication we discuss, and with the leadership we call for from all, our Commission states without dissent, that the tragic violence that occurred during the six days of August will not be repeated."

How hard it is to keep the attention of the American people. Perhaps that is what "communications" are for: to excite and divert with one thing after another. And we are a nation preeminent in communications. The Negro has been pushed out of our thoughts by the Vietnam war. Helicopters in Southeast Asia turned out to be far easier to provide than the respect the Negro asked for.

> "The army? What about the army?"
> "It's the last chance for a Negro to be a man . . . and yet it's another prison, too."

The months have gone by. And did the explosion in Watts really do what they thought afterward? Did it give dignity and definition? Did it mean anything in the long run? We know that only the severest concentration will keep the

claims of the Negro alive in America, because he represents all the imponderables of life itself. Anxiety and uncertainty push us on to something else—to words which seem to soothe, and to more words. As for Watts itself: the oddity of its simplicity can scarcely be grasped. Its defiant lack of outline haunts the imagination. Lying low under the sun, shadowed by overpasses, it would seem to offer every possibility, every hope. In the newness of the residents, of the buildings, of the TV sets, there is a strange stillness, as of something formless, unaccountable. The gaps in the streets are hardly missed, where there is so much missing. Of course it is jobs and schools and segregation, yes, yes. But beyond that something that has nothing to do with Negroes was trying to be destroyed that summer. Some part of new America itself—that "dull, devastating spiral of failure" the McCone Commission imagines to belong only to the "disadvantaged" standing friendless in their capsule on the outskirts of downtown Los Angeles.

The Brilliancy of Black

Esquire, January 1967

BERNARD WEINRAUB

Jesus Christ, His arms outstretched and pleading, is painted in lush blues and pinks in the lobby. Inside the church, the aisles are filling with teen-agers, curiously quiet and solemn, who grip programs ("Harlem Youth Unlimited presents . . . 'The Role of Negro Youth in Shaping Their Destinies' "). Stepping through the crowd a slight woman with a lost, desperate smile hands out a "Come Ye Disconsolate" leaflet and cries out that Brothers and Sisters you are all invited to view the Southern Baptist Stars on their twenty-second anniversary at Mount Moriah Baptist Church.

Outside, bare-chested little boys in sneakers watch the white television men set up their cameras. A white cop, a pudgy man with roly-poly fingers and a hard, blue-eyed Irish face, removes a handkerchief from his rear pocket, scrubs off his forehead sweat and gazes up, up, up at the church—a De Mille Corinthian setting that was once a movie theatre, the Alhambra. The Black Muslims are distributing *Muhammad Speaks*, and the television men are nervous and the teen-agers keep surging into the sweltering lobby past the mural of Jesus. It is dusk on Seventh Avenue and 116th Street in Harlem and it is warm and they are waiting for Stokely Carmichael.

Three months earlier, Stokely had taken over the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and had coined those two words "Black Power" that aroused all the white folks and dismayed some of the powerful black folks. He had been on *Meet the Press* television and on the front page of *The New York Times* and had visited Mississippi and Washington, D.C. and Boston and now, finally, he was in Harlem.

The kids waited. They were fifteen, sixteen and seventeen, the boys in pressed olive-drab suits and seersucker jackets, the girls in sandals, dangling earrings, A-line skirts, and kerchiefs, quite chic, on their African cropped hair. They carried paperbacks and chatted quietly. For the past few months they had been in the Haryou-Act anti-poverty program where they worked with the community, and baby-sat for working mothers, and were taught what to wear when they took the A train downtown to apply for a job on Fifth Avenue. And they had read—and discussed—James Baldwin and Chester Himes and explored in heated talks The Role of Negro Youth and The Problems of Negro Youth and What's Ahead for Negro Youth. And now Stokely, who used to play stickball on 137th Street, comes onstage with a half-dozen other speakers and the curious tenseness among the teen-agers bursts. They break into wild applause.

Stokely is surrounded by friends. "Hey, baby, how ya' doin'?" he cries. . . . "Hey Thomas, why the hell aren't you back in Alabama doin' some work. . . . Hey, boy, you lookin' *good*." Stokely looks good too. He wears black Italian boots, a tight blue suit, white shirt, striped tie, a name chain on his wrist. He is six-feet-one and has the build of a basketball guard: a solid chest, slender waist, powerful legs. His smile dazzles—an open, unguarded, innocent smile.

The first speaker is seventeen-year-old Clarissa Williams, a striking girl in a loose green dress. She has a gentle voice: "*Newsweek* and *Life* have conducted their own surveys of black people. Well, baby, no one has to tell us what the black community is like because we know it, we live it. We intend to be the generation which will make black youth to be unlimited. We intend to be the generation that says, Friends, we do not have a dream, we do *not* have a dream, we have a plan. So, TV men, do not be prepared to record our actions indoors, but be prepared to record our actions *on the streets*. . . ." The audience, and Stokely, applaud and cry, "Hit 'em hard, Sister."

Clarissa hits them harder and by the time she winds up her tough little speech the audience is electric. And then Stokely rises. His style dazzles. He shakes his head as he begins speaking and his body appears to tremble. His voice, at least in the North, is lilting and Jamaican. His hands move effortlessly. His tone—and the audience loves it—is cool and very hip. No Martin Luther