

A Journey into the Mind of Watts

Thomas Pynchon, 1966

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The night of May 7, after a chase that began in Watts and ended some 50 blocks farther north, two Los Angeles policemen, Caucasians, succeeded in halting a car driven by Leonard Deadwyler, a Negro. With him were his pregnant wife and a friend. The younger cop (who'd once had a complaint brought against him for rousing some Negro kids around in a more than usually abusive way) went over and stuck his head and gun in the car window to talk to Deadwyler. A moment later there was a shot; the young Negro fell sideways in the seat, and died. The last thing he said, according to the other cop, was, "She's going to have a baby."

The coroner's inquest went on for the better part of two weeks, the cop claiming the car had lurched suddenly, causing his service revolver to go off by accident; Deadwyler's widow claiming that it was cold-blooded murder and that the car had never moved. The verdict, to no one's surprise, cleared the cop of all criminal responsibility. ...

But as far as Watts is concerned, it's still very much open. Preachers in the community are urging calm – or, as others are putting it: "Make any big trouble, baby, The Man just going to come back in and shoot you, like last time." ...

In the back of everybody's head, of course, is the same question: *Will there be a repeat of last August's riot?*

An even more interesting question is: Why is everybody worrying about another riot – haven't things in Watts improved any since the last one? A lot of white folks are wondering. Unhappily, the answer is no. The neighborhood may be [teeming] with social workers, data collectors, [government] VISTA volunteers and other assorted members of the humanitarian establishment, all of whose intentions are the purest in the world. But somehow nothing much has changed. There are still the poor, the defeated, the criminal, the desperate, all hanging in there with what must seem a terrible vitality.

The killing of Leonard Deadwyler has once again brought it all into sharp focus; brought back longstanding pain, reminded everybody of how very often the cop does approach you with his revolver ready, so that nothing he does with it can then really be accidental; of how,

especially, at night, everything can suddenly reduce to a matter of reflexes: your life trembling in the crook of a cop's finger because it is dark, and Watts, and the history of this place and these times makes it impossible for the cop to come on any different, or for you to hate him any less. Both of you are caught in something neither of you wants, and yet night after night, with casualties or without, these traditional scenes continue to be played out all over the south-central part of this city.

Whatever else may be wrong in a political way, ... lying much closer to the heart of L.A.'s racial sickness is the co-existence of two very different cultures: one white and one black.

While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly ... the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen – and can afford – to ignore. The two cultures do not understand each other, though white values are displayed without let-up on black people's TV screens, and though the panoramic sense of black impoverishment is hard to miss from atop the Harbor Freeway, which so many whites must drive at least twice every working day. Somehow it occurs to very few of them to leave at the Imperial Highway exit for a change, go east instead of west only a few blocks, and take a look at Watts. A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning. But Watts is country which lies, psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem at present willing to travel.

... Yet in the daytime's brilliance and heat, it is hard to believe there is any mystery to Watts. Everything seems so out in the open, all of it real, no plastic faces, no transistors, no hidden Muzak or Disneyfied landscaping or smiling little chicks to show you around. Not in Raceriotland. Only a few historic landmarks, like the police substation, one command post for the white forces last August, pigeons now thick and cooing up on its red-tiled roof. Or, on down the street, vacant lots, still looking charred around the edges, winking with emptied Tokay, port and sherry pints, some of the bottles peeking out of paper bags, others busted.

A kid could come along in his bare feet and step on this glass – not that you'd ever know. These kids are so tough you can pull slivers of it out of them and never get a whimper. It's part of their landscape, both the real and the emotional one: busted glass, busted crockery, nails, tin cans, all kinds of scrap and waste. Traditionally Watts.

An Italian immigrant named Simon Rodia spent 30 years gathering some of it up and converting a little piece of the neighborhood along 107th Street into the famous Watts Towers,

perhaps his own dream of how things should have been: a fantasy of fountains, boats, tall openwork spires, encrusted with a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris. Next to the Towers, along the old Pacific Electric tracks, kids are busy every day busting more bottles on the street rails. But Simon Rodia is dead, and now the junk just accumulates.

A few blocks away, other kids are out playing on the hot blacktop of the school playground. Brothers and sisters too young yet for school have it better – wherever they are they have yards, trees, hoses, hiding places. Not the crowded, shadeless tenement living of a Harlem [New York]; just the same one- or two-story urban sprawl as all over the rest of L.A., giving you some piece of grass at least to expand into when you don't especially feel like being inside. ...

Overhead, big jets now and then come vacuum-cleaner in to land; ... Watts lies under the approaches to L.A. International. The jets hang what seems only a couple of hundred feet up in the air; through the smog they show up more white than silver, highlighted by the sun, hardly solid; only the ghosts, or possibilities, of airplanes.

From here, much of the white culture that surrounds Watts – and, in a curious way, besieges it – looks like those jets: a little unreal, a little less than substantial. For Los Angeles ... belongs to the mass media. What is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube, as four-color magazine photos, ... as new songs that survive only a matter of weeks. It is basically a white Scene, and illusion is everywhere in it... .

Watts lies impacted in the heart of this white fantasy. It is, by contrast, a pocket of bitter reality. The only illusion Watts ever allowed itself was to believe for a long time in the white version of what a Negro was supposed to be. But with the Muslim and civil-rights movements that went, too.

Since the August [1965] rioting, there has been little building here, little buying. Lots whose buildings were burned off them are still waiting vacant and littered with garbage, occupied only by a parked car or two, or kids fooling around after school, or winos sharing a pint

At the Deadwyler inquest, much was made of the dead man's high blood alcohol content, as if his being drunk made it somehow all right for the police to shoot him. But alcohol is a natural part of the Watts style; as natural as LSD is around Hollywood. The white kid digs hallucination ... because he is conditioned to believe ... in escape, escape as an integral part of life, because the white L.A. Scene makes accessible to him so many different forms of it. But a Watts kid, brought up in a pocket of reality, looks perhaps not so much for escape as just for some calm,

some relaxation. And beer or wine is good enough for that. Especially good at the end of a bad day.

Like after you have driven, say, down to Torrance or Long Beach or wherever it is they're hiring because they don't seem to be in Watts, not even in the miles of heavy industry that sprawl along Alameda Street So you groove instead down the freeway, maybe wondering when some cop is going to stop you because the old piece of a car you're driving, which you bought for \$20 or \$30 you picked up somehow, makes a lot of noise or burns some oil. Catching you mobile widens The Man's horizons; gives him more things he can get you on. ...

If you do get to where you were going without encountering a cop, you may spend your day looking at the white faces of personnel men, their uniform glaze of suspicion, their automatic smiles, and listening to polite putdowns. "I decided once to ask," a kid says, "one time they told me I didn't meet their requirements. So I said, "Well, what are you looking for? I mean, how can I train, what things do I have to learn so I can meet your requirements?" Know what he said? 'We are not obligated to tell you what our requirements are'."

He isn't. That right there is the hell and headache: he doesn't have to do anything he doesn't want to do because he is The Man. Or he was. A lot of kids these days are more apt to be calling him the little man – meaning not so much any member of the power structure as just your average white L.A. taxpayer, registered voter, property owner; employed, stable, mortgaged

The little man bugs these kids more The Man ever bugged their parents. It is the little man who is standing on their feet and in their way; he's all over the place, and there is not much they can do to change him or the way he feels about them.

A Watts kid knows more of what goes on inside white heads than possibly whites do themselves; knows how often the little man has looked at him and thought, "Bad credit risk" – or "Poor learner," or "Sexual threat," or "Welfare chiseler" – without knowing a thing about him personally.

The natural, normal thing to want to do is hit the little man. But what, after all, has he done? Mild, respectable, possibly smiling, he has called you no names, shown no weapons. Only told you perhaps that the job was filled, the house rented. ...

[Police officers'] surface style has changed some since last August. "Time was," you'll hear, "man used to go right in, very mean, pick maybe one kid out of the crowd he figured was the

troublemaker, try to bust him down in front of everybody. But now the people start yelling back, how they don't want no more of that, all of a sudden The Man gets very meek.”

Still, however much a cop may seem to be following the order of the day read to him every morning about being courteous to everybody, his behavior with a crowd will really depend as it always has on how many of his own he can muster, and how fast. For his Mayor, Sam Yorty, is a great believer in the virtues of Overwhelming Force as a solution to racial difficulties. This approach has not gained much favor in Watts. In fact, the Mayor of Los Angeles appears to many Negroes to be the very incarnation of the little man: looking out for no one but himself, speaking always out of expediency, and never, never to be trusted. ...

In Watts, apparently, where no one can afford the luxury of illusion, there is little reason to believe that now will be any different, any better than last time.

It is perhaps a measure of the people's indifference that only 2% of the poor in Los Angeles turned out to elect representatives to a [government-sponsored] “poverty board.” For a hopeless minority on the board (7 out of 23), nobody saw much point in voting.

Meantime, the outposts of the establishment drowse in the bright summery smog: secretaries chat the afternoons plaintively away... ; white volunteers sit filing, doodling, talking on the phones, doing any kind of busy-work, wondering where the “clients” are; inspirational mottoes like SMILE decorate the beaverboard office walls along with flow charts to illustrate the proper disposition of “cases,” and with clippings from the slick magazines about “What Is Emotional Maturity?”

Items like smiling and Emotional Maturity are in fact very big with the well-adjusted, middle-class professionals, Negro and white, who man the mimeographs and computers of the poverty war here. Sadly, they seem to be smiling themselves out of any meaningful communication with their poor. Besides a 19th-century faith that tried and true approaches – sound counseling, good intentions, perhaps even compassion – will set Watts straight, they are also burdened with the personal attitudes they bring to work with them. Their reflexes – especially about conformity, about failure, about violence – are predictable.

“We had a hell of a time with this one girl,” a Youth Training and Employment Project counselor recalls. “You should have seen those hairdos of hers – piled all the way up to here. And the screwy outfits she'd come in with, you just wouldn't believe. We had to take her aside and explain to her that employers just don't go for that sort of thing. That she'd be up against a lot

of very smooth-looking chicks, heels and stockings, conservative hair and clothes. We finally got her to come around.”

The same goes for boys who like to wear Malcolm [X] hats, or Afro haircuts. The idea the counselors push evidently is to look as much as possible like a white applicant. Which is to say, like a Negro job counselor or social worker. This has not been received with much enthusiasm among the kids it is designed to help out

There is a similar difficulty among the [poverty] warriors about failure. ... You are likely to hear from them wisdom on the order of: “Life has a way of surprising us, simply as a function of time. Even if all you do is stand on the street corner and wait.” Watts is full of street corners where people stand, as they have been, some of them, for 20 or 30 years, without Surprise One ever having come along. Yet the poverty warriors must believe in this form of semi-miracle, because their world and their scene cannot accept the possibility that there may be, after all, no surprise. But it is something Watts has always known.

As for violence, in a pocket of reality such as Watts, violence is never far from you: because you are a man, because you have been put down, because for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Somehow, sometime. Yet to these innocent, optimistic child-bureaucrats, violence is an evil and an illness, possibly because it threatens property and status they cannot help cherishing.

They remember last August's riot as an outburst, a seizure. Yet what, from the realistic viewpoint of Watts, was so abnormal? “Man's got his foot on your neck,” said one guy who was there, “sooner or later you going to stop *asking* him to take it off.” The violence it took to get that foot to ease up even the little it did was no surprise. Many had predicted it. Once it got going, its basic objective – to beat the ... police – seemed a reasonable one, and was gained the minute The Man had to send troops in. Everybody seems to have known it. There is hardly a person in Watts now who finds it painful to talk about, or who regrets that it happened – unless he lost somebody.

But in the white culture outside, in that creepy world full of pre-cardiac Mustang drivers who scream insults at one another only when the windows are up; of large corporations where Niceguymanship is the standing order regardless of whose executive back one may be endeavoring to stab; of an enormous priest caste of shrinks who counsel moderation and compromise as the answer to all forms of hassle; among so much well-behaved unreality, it is next to impossible to understand how Watts may truly feel about violence. In terms of strict

reality, violence may be a means to getting money, for example, no more dishonest than collecting exorbitant carrying charges from a customer on relief, as white merchants here still do. Far from a sickness, violence may be an attempt to communicate, or to be who you really are. ...

It is, after all, in white L.A.'s interest to cool Watts any way it can – to put the area under a siege of persuasion; to coax the Negro poor into taking on certain white values. Given them a little property, and they will be less tolerant of arson; get them to go in[to] [debt] for a car or color TV, and they'll be more likely to hold down a steady job. Some see it for what it is – this come-on, this false welcome, this attempt to transmogrify the reality of Watts into the unreality of Los Angeles. Some don't. ...