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Three Riots: A Biotext for Watts, Rodney King, and George Floyd

Wayde Compton

1: Watts, 1965

My parents were an unusual couple in the 1950s: my father was black, born in Texas, an airman stationed in Washington State when he met my mother while on a trip from there to Vancouver; she was white, born in Vancouver, a working-class young Irish Catholic woman. They both liked the nightlife of Main Street and the archipelago of clubs down there that, in their stories, to me, always had such magical names: the Elegant Parlour, Dante's Inferno, the Harlem Nocturne, the New Delhi. When my mom and dad told me and my brother stories of how they met, they could never agree on which of those clubs they first met in, but it was one of them.

After they married, and after my dad finished his enlistment in the air force, they moved to California. Later they would settle in Vancouver for the rest of their days. But in those early years, the place they chose to start their life together was Watts, Los Angeles.

Fairly or not, I think it's true to this day that when you mention Watts, the first association for most people is the 1965 riots. Five days, thousands arrested, thirty-four dead. Indeed, whenever it came up in conversation that my parents had chosen there to live as an interracial couple, the common response was surprise and sympathy. It was like saying you had chosen to build a house in the centre of a hurricane. But they moved there before the neighbourhood acquired that patina of history. And, according to my dad, the racism they experienced there was no worse than what they experienced in East Vancouver. Their stories of facing prejudice are, in my memory, stories first, cities second, each regionally interchangeable. A cop forcibly held my father's arm inside his squad car driver's side window while gunning the engine, forcing him to run alongside it till he could pull his arm away: did that happen in LA or in Vancouver? A different cop used to follow my mother, telling her he would not leave her alone until she left my father. Was that

in LA or Vancouver? Does it really matter? Both things, and more like them, happened.

Nevertheless, my parents were haunted by the Watts Riots, which happened in the very place they had lived, on streets they had spent time on, merely two years after they had left. They spoke of it like a near miss, the same way my dad spoke of choosing not to re-enlist in the US Air Force only to hear, shortly after, that his entire base was being moved to active duty in Vietnam. These were some of the close calls of our family lore, the times that luck cosmically seemed to break our way.

The Watts Rebellion was not a "race riot" as it is often misremembered. It was an uprising against police repression. The incident that started it was a traffic stop in which police beat Marquette Frye, an unarmed black man, in front of witnesses on the street. While the details of what kicked it off are blurry, as with all such unrecorded events, the truth is that this particular moment became the one time too many.

I want to think for a second about how such riots start, how this one started, and how much a riot is a matter of perception: the police regularly abuse their power against black people; a particularly egregious instance of this is witnessed by onlookers; and it boils over in rage and resistance. That's the ground-level view of it. But when you pan away from the black community, perception works another way, and this moment of resistance meets white denialism: a disbelief in the repression; a jacketing of the original victim with blame; and the mischaracterization of the riot as an act of supposedly illegible chaos. The summation by non-black people becomes: "They burn down their own neighbourhood" or that it is a "race riot" — a term borrowed from riots in which whites attack black communities, an entirely different phenomenon, and a galling inversion. The way the white public witnesses the riot, without the original witnessing of the inciting incident, is a failure of empathy and imagination. To understand it would require active listening in good faith, for many a step too far, a task asking too much from their critical and altruistic faculties. In Watts, it is said that a crowd of onlookers were outraged by the arrests of Marquette Frye and his mother Rena Frye, as well as by a reported incidence of violence by the police against a pregnant woman at the scene. Those who saw whatever happened there at that traffic stop spread the tale by word of

mouth quickly through their community. The circle of outrage widened, and it eventually engulfed the entire neighbourhood and beyond.

For black folks, the original eye-witnessing, however, is unnecessary because experiences like it have happened to them already. For my little family, with its experience of Watts and other cities, there was never any question that police repression was the cause of the riots. That knowledge comes from the context of life. How is it transmitted? Around the kitchen table; through story piled on story; through matching anecdotes from family and friends; like I'm telling you now. Here is the kitchen table today. Right here, right now. I've invited you to have a seat.

2: Rodney King, 1992

The Watts Riots were the worst Los Angeles had seen until the Rodney King Riots of 1992. That event was something my family and I witnessed entirely from Canada, at that distance. But I do recall my father saying, "Now they see with their own eyes," after watching the video that started it all playing on the news. Because the only difference between the beating of King by the LAPD and any of a hundred other such examples of repression since Watts was that it was recorded by chance on a hand-held camcorder, a new technology at that time, by a chance witness named George Holliday. Once that happened, the circle of "onlookers" encompassed everyone, worldwide, who saw that footage. And it is important to note that the Rodney King Riots did not happen after the beating took place, as in Watts. They happened after we had all seen the video for months on the news, and yet a jury acquitted the police. After we saw with our own eyes *and the police got away with it anyway*. That is what led to five days of rioting, 12,000 arrests, and sixty-three deaths. People outside the black community could not deny seeing it, could not deny knowing it, and yet many neither saw nor knew. *That* was the outrage: their failure to perceive.

However, the shift in technology did facilitate a qualitative change in response. The 1992 LA Riots spread to other cities. In some places, riots took place simultaneously with LA; in other places, there were demonstrations. And it crossed over from the black community to other communities. It is in fact when I saw the riots on TV and then saw that there was a demonstration in Vancouver in support of the black community in LA that I first became politically active. Here in Vancouver. It was the beginning of my life as an activist. An echo of Watts in the

life of my family, a riot there, again, that drew me in at age twenty to political consciousness.

3: George Floyd, 2020

Neither of my parents lived to see the George Floyd Riots of the spring and summer of 2020. But what they did live to see was the advent of yet another widening of the circle of onlookers. In the years preceding the police murder of George Floyd, in an age when everyone's phone is George Holliday's camcorder and everyone's Twitter account is the news, the names of black people murdered by police on camera for all to see is a list finally something like the whole iceberg rather than just the tip. The onlookers are everyone; the onlooking is whenever you open your social media. I can't quite put my finger on the first social media viral experience of police brutality caught by cellphone camera, but an early one would be the 2009 police killing of Oscar Grant, an unarmed black man shot to death on a public transit platform in Oakland, California. He was shot in the back while subdued. Footage of the incident was captured on the phone cameras of multiple people and uploaded to Twitter, a social media platform which was, at the time, only three years old. The incident inspired the film *Fruitvale Station* (2013) as well as Angie Thomas's novel *The Hate U Give* (2017).

From at least that point forward, the 21st century has been a time of regularly surfacing cellphone camera evidence of police repression against black people. If we mark 2009 as the approximate start of this phenomenon, then we have basically had a decade of Rodney King videos increased by orders of magnitude. By 2020 and the George Floyd Riots, it is not just this vast increase of videos; it is the vast increase of who has seen them. If it can be said that we all saw the injustice against Rodney King, it can now be said that we have all seen it on repeat and to such an extent that to not see it can only be done by actively avoiding it.

It is an uncanny mathematics that from Watts to Rodney King was a space of twenty-seven years, and from Rodney King to George Floyd, a space of twenty-eight. And so, what is the evolution of the situation within this temporal symmetry?

Not only was the George Floyd uprising international, it was truly global. Not only were protesters and rioters outside the black community involved, these were the first truly interracial riots against the police

repression of the black community in US history. And not only that, the extent of this uprising was unprecedented. In Minneapolis, a police station was set on fire. In Seattle, police were run out of a precinct and an entire part of the city was occupied for days and declared a liberated zone. As much as the mainstream media went to sleep on it, the uprising continued for months afterward in Portland, Oregon.

And the responses were multifaceted, pointed, and creative, with serious movements to defund the police, rather than cosmetic reforms. The backlash is real, but less effective than in the past, where the common wisdom that riots poison the public against a cause proved at least immediately untrue, with sympathy for Black Lives Matter *increasing* in the wake of the uprising. All this has been unprecedented in scope and scale.

To be realistic, there are still repression denialists, but they are now of a piece with the conspiracy theorists who peddle a myriad of unhinged beliefs. Police repression against black people is factual. The arguments against this fact are now owned by only the far-right — which has, to be fair, itself been mainstreamed by Trumpism. The unhinged quality of the backlash can be seen in the movement to shut down the teaching of factual history in the form of the right-wing hysteria around Critical Race Theory and the movement to silence teachers who teach the truth of systemic racism.

So where does this leave us? I have three points.

I. Shifts in technology can stimulate social change, but technology can also be curbed. All movements are cyclical and this will be too. It's a mistake to look to the technology of cellphone videos and suggest that the tech itself wholly determines the phenomenon. In many ways, the Arab Spring is a similar example to the George Floyd uprisings, where the use of social media facilitated a spasm of action, but the follow-through had more to do with embodied organizing, activism, and argument; and the seeds of resistance were different in each region, leading to different results.

II. The hotter the struggle, the greater the innovation and creativity. In the summer of 2020, the concept of defunding the police was put on the table; challenges to anachronistic monuments of colonialism spread; experiments such as the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle, and two others, in Portland and DC, became realities. As in Hong Kong recently, we see how an uprising can change the terms of what previously seemed impossible, and how young activists can develop quickly

and spontaneously. We can think of the creativity of resistance as the opposite of the cult-like "thought-stopping" of hegemony: the mind closes in defeatism, but opens broadly in struggle, when diverse tactics flourish.

III. I will end where I started, on a personal note. In my original metaphor, the circle of onlookers to an act of repression has widened, and that onboarding of a broader range of activists is welcome, but it won't be without its resentment. I want the example of my own family to show how, for people of colour, the realization of injustice happens *before* birth, multi-generationally, and with great nuance and personal investment; to bring into the circle the newly-conscious is exhilarating, but it also has an aftertaste of bitterness. That it took such *orders of magnitude of evidence* for white people to finally meet us in the streets in such numbers is something we cannot help but notice. It can feel like a trend, rather than a repositioning of thought or the creation of a sturdy movement. Which will it ultimately be? That has yet to be written.