

THE REPRESSED ANGER OF OPPRESSED INNER-CITY LOS ANGELES

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Many riots, protests, and demonstrations can be attributed to a growing bubble of anger and frustration that eventually pops. This explosion of repressed emotion is seen both in small scales, as in a child who has suddenly decided to throw a tantrum; and large scales, as in events where large groups of people vehemently fight for what they believe to be right. When these outbursts are purposefully stifled, however, the actions and routines of daily life change in order to allow the gradual release of emotions. This was especially true in Watts, Los Angeles, where black communities felt oppressed by repeated violations of racial equality and the militaristic retardation of their demonstrations.¹ These community members' gradual release of emotion is shown in Charles Burnett's 1978 film *Killer of Sheep*. Instead of feeling able to explode into demonstration, the characters in the film release their anger in common actions of daily life. This release ultimately drives the actions of men in their continual labor, women in their moments of seemingly uncalled-for retaliations, and children in how they choose to spend their time.

Although one may expect a gradual release of anger and frustration to be mostly violent, the protagonist of *Killer of Sheep*, Stan, demonstrates that the feelings running through the veins of the Watts community were much less simplistic. Throughout the film, Stan both shows and mentions that he is unable to fall asleep, presumably due to the stresses that he faces. Indeed, in another scene he confesses to his friend, Oscar, about his stresses.² These feelings of stress that cause Stan's insomnia are not unwarranted and reflect the happenings of real-world Watts, which Manning Marable describes as a “decaying inner-city” in which residents felt “trapped.”³ The stresses that segregationist America imposes upon Stan and those around him build-up, causing him to spend his sleepless nights repairing his home.⁴ This constant will to repair speaks both about the rapidly deteriorating Watts neighborhoods

1 Daniel Widener, Lecture. *Discussion of post-riot Watts*. October 26, 2015.

2 *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett (1978; United States: New Yorker Video, 2007), DVD.

3 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 152.

4 *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett (1978; United States: New Yorker Video, 2007), DVD.

and about how Stan chooses to release his anger. Although still performing physical tasks, the things he chooses to do are mostly productive, implying that the stresses he feels are due to economic constraint. As Daniel Widener mentions with reference to tourist guides during this time period, Watts could not escape its reputation as a ghetto,⁵ and Stan is attempting to change this. Even more examples of men continually working in order to improve the state of their “ghetto” can be seen when Stan's friend spends all of his money on repairing a car.⁶ Instead of using the money for more important things, he is influenced by the oppression he faces and spends every last penny to improve the state of his surroundings by repairing a nice car. Thus, the actions of many men in inner-city Los Angeles as depicted by *Killer of Sheep* were fueled by their frustrations, where they acted in a way where they felt compelled to improve the state of Watts to match the standards of those who oppressed them.

The economic frustrations were felt by the heads of households, who often complained about not being able to find jobs.⁷ The women of the households, however, also held repressed anger due to their constant oppression. Very much in alignment with Manning Marable's claim that “the ghetto's black rage was unleashed against itself,”⁸ Watts women in *Killer of Sheep* were consistently found violently retaliating against fellow members of their community. For instance, when her husband, Stan, was being bothered by men trying to recruit him for a shady job, Stan's wife verbally attacked. Although the men were nothing but an annoyance, her pent-up anger caused her to unleash a stream of verbal attacks such as telling the men to use their brains and that “they have some nerve.”⁹ This pent up anger causing acts of aggression that are not necessarily warranted is shown in another scene. After being asked “How come me and you ain't never got together?” and being called a “bitch”, a woman violently kicks her pursuer in the head without concern.¹⁰ Although this may sound appropriate, the

5 Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West* (United States: Duke University Press, 2010), 226.

6 *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett (1978; United States: New Yorker Video, 2007), DVD.

7 Ibid.

8 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 152.

9 *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett (1978; United States: New Yorker Video, 2007), DVD.

10 Ibid.

tone of the name-caller is very similar to the tone of other characters throughout the movie, suggesting commonality. Thus, the violent kick-to-the-head is an unleashing of repressed anger. In all, with the men unleashing their repressed frustration through acts of hard labor and women unleashing their frustration through acts of violence, Manning Marable's thoughts that "many black families began to splinter under the forces of oppression"¹¹ seem aptly represented.

The oppression of Watts was not only felt on an adult level, but was also felt by the children of the Watts community. Scenes of children playing consist of them tackling each other, throwing rocks, or attempting to push entire train cars over each others' necks.¹² The importance of these scenes is two-fold. First, *Killer of Sheep* clearly depicts a community in which resources were not provided for recreation centers, playgrounds, or other areas for children to play. This is just one factor contributing to the second point of importance: the fact that the children are constantly fighting with each other. Indeed, in several scenes children are shown to be seriously hurt by other members of the same group. This violence, even among young people, can be attributed to the pent-up anger due to the oppression of their community. As they feel oppressed and angered in all aspects of life, they take out their frustrations by tackling and hurling rocks at friends. It may be argued that these actions are normal for young kids; however, a scene in which a teenager caught stealing a TV repeatedly shouts obscene threats at the onlooker¹³ suggests that there is more than childish rowdiness, but rather an explosion of pent-up emotions caused by the world around him. Thus, throughout the film, the young are described perfectly as "young blacks [who] were filled with a sense of anger, self-hatred, and bitterness" that "lashed out against the symbols of white property, power, and privilege,"¹⁴ but within their own community.

The Watts community depicted in *Killer of Sheep* is perfectly described by Daniel Widener as "a

11 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 153.

12 *Killer of Sheep*, directed by Charles Burnett (1978; United States: New Yorker Video, 2007), DVD.

13 Ibid.

14 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion* (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 152.

community defined by the inability to escape.”¹⁵ Thus, feeling oppression from the outside communities, the men, women, and children of inner-city Los Angeles act out their pent-up anger in ways that would subtly retaliate against the oppression surrounding them. Thus, by depicting a neo-realistic view of post-segregation Watts, Charles Burnett depicts a community driven by repressed emotion and a will to fight against oppression.

15 Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West* (United States: Duke University Press, 2010), 263.