

Jerry G. Watts

“It Just Ain’t Righteous”

On Witnessing Black Crooks and White Cops

On numerous occasions I’ve seen police cars come to a screeching halt and policemen scatter in apprehending a suspect. Each time, save one, the apprehended black male was dragged along the pavement, smacked in the face, or otherwise abused. This happened as a matter of course, after he was handcuffed, and before he was thrown into the van.

It has become an unstated rule in the black community that a crowd should quickly gather around an arrested suspect in order to restrain the behavior of the police officers. In some instances, for reasons that still baffle me, one of the arresting officers will almost impulsively, as if by instinct, kick the handcuffed black man in the groin. Deduce what you may from this, but I’ve long since realized that in all important respects stereotypes of black men might as well be true. Such was the nature of law enforcement in my neighborhood.

Like many Ivy League institutions located in old neighborhoods, Yale is situated between an affluent, predominantly white neighborhood, and a deteriorating, predominantly black one. I belong to that decreasing number of Yalies who live in the black neighborhood. For reasons of ignorance, limited funds, indifference or design, we have chosen to place more importance on lower rents than on the probability of physical assault or burglary.

My apartment rests conspicuously within New Haven’s four-square-block prostitute district. By daylight it is a relatively safe, black working-class neighborhood with an interracial spattering of Yalies and a smaller community of elderly whites who were unable or, in some cases, unwilling to move when the composition of the neighborhood changed. By night, the streets become the province of the prostitutes

and their business partners in the underground economy.

In first adjusting to the realities of this environment, I decided not to let it restrict my movement in any measurable degree. I regularly frequented all-night cafes and spent far too many 4:00 A.M. hours browsing in an all-night bookstore. This freedom I assumed because I was large, black, and male. More important, I had also acquired the appropriate night-time ethnic accouterments. My vocabulary became more “down.” I wore a rather large-brimmed black hat and occasionally would go so far as to wear sun glasses at midnight, to block out the glare of the moon. Regardless of what I wore, I would walk with a black, urban “dip” that I had inadvertently acquired while growing up in D.C. This night uniform, which became my passport through the streets of New Haven, was quite successful, or so I thought, at keeping young hoodlums away. It also attracted a great deal of attention from passing police cars. I kept late hours until several conversations with authentic street people convinced me of the unpredictability of street crime. I had not become a victim but it was primarily due to chance. Now I rarely venture out at night.

In my apartment building I have been reduced to maintaining a constant crime vigil. At least once every night, I abruptly turn off the sound on the television only to discover that the steps on the stairs are nothing more than someone late for a waiting cab, or screams down the hall merely boisterous laughter. I have broken up fights in the hallways.

On those occasions when it was too dangerous for me to intervene, I would call the New Haven police. More often than not my plea for

emergency help would result in a police cruiser one-half hour later. Nothing unusual, I'm told. Yet when Jimmy Baldwin, Huey Newton, and Nicki Giovanni were hollering about white ghetto cops as occupational troops, I was living in a stable, middle-class, black neighborhood in Washington, D.C., teaching my younger brother to find "Officer Friendly" whenever he felt lost. The police were, as I recall, quite amiable to those like myself who kept our faces clean, our shoes polished, and waved at passing bus drivers. Though my image of police officers has changed drastically, I still think it ridiculous to label white policemen in black ghettos the primary repressive arm of the capitalist state. What about the ghetto itself?

Once, while I was listening to Cosell's baseball commentary, the blaring of rapidly approaching sirens suddenly came to a halt in front of my building.

I cut off the light and peered through the crack at the side of my shades, expecting to see another episode of "Bravado Police in Action." Instead I saw firemen darting into a house across the street. Others were racing with hoses to the nearest hydrant. I switched my light back on. The drizzle made the smoke billowing from the upstairs windows all the more intense.

The inhabitants of the house, three young white guys who had only recently moved in, were running up and down the stairs bringing out many of their valued possessions and placing them in the first-floor foyer. I was not sure whether they were racing against the spreading second-floor flames or the axes and hoses of the firemen. There was a lot of excitement. A crowd was gathering.

An hour or so later, the baseball game was over. I joined the remnants of the crowd in the rain, attired (but of course) in my ethnic veneer. The last of the firemen were now leaving the house, while others were folding the hoses back into the rear of the truck.

Standing now across the street from the smoldering house I could see the three white guys engaged in animated discussion in their backyard. An almost midget-sized black guy, who looked to be well over 35, stood next to me, holding a newspaper over his head as a shield

against the drizzle. He asked me if I wanted a "square" (cigarette). Looking at the three white guys, he muttered something about white people and fire.

"You shoulda seen these white dudes. The fire was burning and jumpin' out the window and they went running back into the heat just to save a few nickels and dimes. You know they got insurance or money in the bank to buy back anything they lose, so why all this hero action?"

I nodded, and he continued to talk about whites in general.

"A white man will take a chance on his whole life just to save some old plates, raggedy suits, and other kinds of nonsense like that. A brother would've been out that house the first sign that somethin' was burnin', and he ain't even got no money, no insurance, or nothin' like that. Am I right? Am I?"

I took one last drag on the cigarette, nodded again, and bid the fellow goodbye.

After coffee, I heard the trucks pull away. Now barefoot and dry, I squeezed behind the sofa to lower the window shades. I immediately noticed an incongruity. Though the trucks had departed, four or five teen-agers were still mingling around the front of the house. I wondered what they were looking at. The action was over and the drizzle, though light, was steady. And why was the short black fellow whom I had just spoken to standing, newspaper over his head, in exactly the same spot where I had left him?

Suddenly I realized that they may not have been there for the fire at all. They were up to something else. But what? The firemen were gone, and the three white guys were probably sifting through their wreckage upstairs. So why? The front door leading to the foyer was open and whatever had been rushed from the smoke-filled upstairs to the foyer was there for all to see. I couldn't be sure, but they certainly appeared to be casing the house. Perhaps I was sure but worried that the origin of my certainty was racist, for hadn't it been based upon the fact that these teen-agers were black and Puerto Rican?

A week or so earlier I had informed, that is, warned a young white waitress that I had left a tip for her on the table. She seemed to be an industrious person for not only did she wait on

the tables but, unknown to most customers, she was the co-owner of the establishment. Consequently, I felt angry that the fellow who took the booth after me looked like the tip-stealing kind; a tall, unevenly bearded, sloppily clothed black man. The waitress seemed to be too naive to appreciate the source of my anxiety. She said thanks and that she would get the tip in a minute. By the way, she asked, had I ever met Fred, the guy who was co-owner of the place and whom she had recently married? She always told me that he read as much as I did. Fred was seated, tall and unshaven, in my booth.

The teen-agers were fidgeting as if nervous. Remembering Fred, I reminded myself of my intraethnic racist beliefs. But why were they waiting? I became increasingly angered at the white guys who lived there for not being smart enough to come to the front of their house after the firemen had left. Socially naive people are burdens to those of us who live in these neighborhoods. I know many Yale feminists who refuse to be escorted by males when they walk through this neighborhood at night. This "take back the night" assertiveness is fine, but the burden of worry and ultimate intervention rests upon the shoulders of the responsible residents in this area who have to look out for these people, since the night hasn't quite yet been taken. The social naiveté of these white guys increased my anxieties, for now I would have to act.

In a situation similar to this a few years earlier, I had shouted down from my fourth-floor window to the bystanders, letting them know that I was watching them. In that instance, I am convinced, I saved both the possessions of the negligent owners and kept the young guys from committing a felony. This time, however, I was concerned that my second-floor apartment window would make me a less-than-anonymous responsible citizen. A brick could reach the second story. I hesitated to say anything. Remembering the instructions from the "Crime Stoppers" segment of a Dick Tracy comic, I fastened my eyes on one of the teen-agers so as to be able to give an accurate description of him if necessary.

As if aware of my neutralized commitment, several of the young men sprang into the foyer

just then, grabbed something, and ran with the others down the street. The short guy standing on my side of the street darted away, newspaper held in hand. I cursed myself, the white guys who lived there, and the black and Puerto Rican thieves. If the white guys had more common sense they would have eliminated the opportunity for these lads to steal. If I had been more confident in my intuitions and less concerned with appearing racist, I would have done something to dissuade them.

I put my clothes on, crossed the street, and called out to the inhabitants of the house, who were, if you believe it, still around the back talking. I described what I had seen and suggested that they inventory the items in the foyer.

"Damn it!" the tall, blonde-haired guy retorted. "Two stereo amps are missing. I don't believe this damn world."

Chance would have it that while we were talking, a police car cruised toward us. They stopped it, reported the theft, and described the stolen equipment. I described two of the five individuals, including the short guy who had offered me the cigarette. The cop took my address, name, phone number, and date of birth. One of the white guys got into the police car in case he was needed to identify the stolen goods. I went back upstairs, and prepared to go to bed. There was no chance that they would catch those people in this neighborhood.

An hour later, the cops were knocking at my door.

"Mr. Watts, would you come to attempt an identification?"

Once again, I put my clothes on. Only this time I came outside without my ethnic attire. I was with the police, so who needed that? Or was it fear of the police? I had seen lineups on television before, but I had never attempted to identify someone. I really didn't want to go down to the station but it was, I thought, what I had to do. Emerging from my front door, I immediately saw two police cruisers, each with a suspect seated in the rear. I was trapped. There would be no ride to the station, and no lineup. Instead of taking any precautions to protect my identity, I was supposed to identify

these suspects while they and the rest of this black community identified me. As each police car arrived, the arresting officer would introduce me to his colleagues and the gathering crowd.

"This is Mr. Jerry G. Watts. He is the only known witness to the crime."

I had only gotten to know the faces of the suspects. But they would know my face, name, address, and testimony.

I was led to one car where I was told to look at a young man who appeared to be 17 or 18 years old. Chance would have it that he was the one on whom I had focused my attention.

"Yes, he's one of them."

The young man attempted to stare coldly at me, but, perhaps because of the window between us and the police officers with us, the stare did not intimidate me. Instead, I perceived the fear in his eyes.

"A kid," I said to myself. "Damn." I repeated my answer to a second officer, whereupon the arresting cop decided that it was now time for what he called a "positive ID." I soon discovered that this meant I would have to identify him face-to-face. He was now only a foot from my forehead, far taller than he had looked from my second-story window.

"Yeah, that's him. He has on the yellow-orange leather jacket, the high-top white tennis shoes and the hooded orange sweat shirt I told you about."

Only now his hood was inside his coat collar. I boldly reached inside his coat and placed the hood on the outside in order to validate my earlier description. Needless to say, this was done while the guy was handcuffed. The cop was either unimpressed by or indifferent to my precision. I wanted to believe that he wasn't the impressionable type.

The short, old-looking, black guy was being detained in the second car. I told the police that he ran with the others but hadn't entered the house. His handcuffs were released. Almost immediately, he began talking about how he was going to get the arresting white officer reprimanded for unjustly stopping him.

"If you're a black man you can't even walk the streets around here without y'all messin' with him. I wasn't even doing nothing and end up getting handcuffed. What about my rights?

If I was a white boy y'all woulda strolled right past me. But naw, you saw me and said let's throw that nigger there in jail. Oh yea, I know what the deal is."

Though I knew he had in some way been involved in the theft, it wouldn't occur to me until several days later that he had in fact signaled to the others when it was safe to enter the foyer. Unlike them, he could see the white guys in the backyard. As he was unable to decipher my attitude toward these white guys and whites in general, my mere presence next to him must have delayed, if not threatened, the entire operation.

The short guy continued to "rap." The officer in charge, a stout-faced Irish-American named O'Rourke, began shouting at the short guy, warning him to shut up. A black officer who had just arrived spoke softly to me, as if he too were scared of the Irish cop.

"That guy had betta keep his mouth shut before he gets 'jacked-up.'" I knew that he was referring to the phenomenon that involves the police van making one stop before it reaches the police station. A little "justice" is executed on the suspect's head, away from the crowd, and before the suspect reaches the "safety" of the jail cell. One place for such a stop was behind a vacant mansion near the Yale Divinity School.

The little guy talked louder and louder while the white officer became increasingly angry. The black cop jumped into his car and drove away. I felt trapped between the aggressiveness of the police officer and the stupidity of the black guy. Fortunately, a lieutenant, white of course, arrived on the scene. The aggressive sergeant mentioned to the lieutenant that he felt like "booking" the short guy even though he wasn't a suspect in the crime. The lieutenant rhetorically asked the sergeant on what grounds he could arrest the man since he wasn't doing anything but talking. Relieved, I asked the lieutenant for a cigarette.

The short guy, now free of suspicion, began to use street psychology on me. It was clear that he didn't connect me to the fellow who only three hours earlier had stood next to him and smoked one of his "squares." I had looked then much like one of the locals, and neighborhood folk surely would never call the cops on

some black dudes in behalf of some white boys. I had clearly “de-ethnicized” my style in the presence of these white police officers, which further kept the short guy from recognizing me.

“The guy in the orange leather coat was definitely not one of those dudes who ran into the house. Naw, it was two other dudes who ran off with them stereos.”

“A conflicting testimony, huh?” uttered the lieutenant to the arresting officer.

The short guy continued, occasionally pausing and gesturing to the crowd.

“Yeah, that’s right, cause he was out there but he wasn’t one of ‘em that went in there. I never seen them other dudes before. They must not live round here, but Slim here [pointing to the guy seated in the rear of the cruiser whom I had just identified] lives right down the block and it don’t make no sense for him to be taking anything from up here. Now you know that don’t make no sense.”

Though I had been sure that he was one of the culprits, I was now uncertain. Had I been mistaken? I’m sure that he was standing in front of the house but was he really one of those that went in? Oh, what the hell, I thought, if he wasn’t personally guilty, he knew who was.

Here I was, a Yalie, fingering these black and Puerto Rican youths in behalf of some white guys who for all I knew could have been racist as hell. As if to apologize for my behavior, I heard myself tell the black loudmouth that these white guys were friends of mine and that I had known them for a long while. Automatically, I turned on the lingo.

“It just ain’t righteous for me to let these young boys rip off these white dudes, man. No bet! If these white boys weren’t alright [implying that somehow they weren’t racist] then I wouldn’t mind, but naw, they’re buddies of mine and I ain’t gonna let these guys get away with this.”

The white guys heard me talking to the short guy and could not understand what I was doing. They didn’t make my task any easier, considering the physical distance they kept from me, but I wasn’t discovered until their blank stares turned into questions.

“What are you saying? Why did you tell him that? I never saw you before tonight.”

From the crowd of onlookers came a rhetorical, “You mean, he don’t even know them white boys!” I was trapped again.

The short guy pleaded, “You’d better look again cause you’re about to send an innocent man to jail. Jail ain’t fit for no man. I know, I spent four years at Sommers [Connecticut’s maximum-security prison]. Man, they treat you like dogs.”

I really didn’t want this young kid to go to jail. All I wanted was the white guys not to have had their stereos ripped off. I knew jails were unfit for any human. I also knew that the cop who was now talking to me in a civil fashion, was in no way my friend. I’ve seen how racist New Haven cops really are.

On two occasions I’ve been called “Nigger” by a New Haven cop, once for having the audacity to request the exact hour of the night. “Nigger, do I look like a clock?” was the reply.

The racism of urban police forces is certainly not baffling. Most of the cops are from working-class white ethnic backgrounds, particularly Irish and Italian-American. They see themselves as the enforcers of order. One is never quite sure, however, on whose behalf the order is being enforced, for all of us who live here are suspected of being criminals. This is not one of those neighborhoods where the cops are interested in establishing good community relations. A more representative image is the cop who stands speechless in the middle of the sidewalk staring at everyone who approaches and daring you to brush against him when you walk around him. It’s strictly Hollywood macho.

Nor is this to deny the presence of cold-blooded, black hoodlums in this neighborhood. They abound. The crimes of the police could never challenge the crimes of the local thugs. The police do not set houses on fire after breaking into them, nor do they smash 70-year-old ladies in the head with bricks after knocking them to the ground and robbing them of their groceries and Social Security checks.

What’s more, nihilistic violence is growing. To hand over one’s wallet to a robber is no longer the end of the affair. One might still get shot or maimed. The police have numerous

reasons for being afraid. That I cannot deny. Neighborhood persons such as myself and disciplined cops such as the lieutenant only confuse the drama and, ultimately, get in the way.

So why was I cooperating with a racist police force? I tried to convince myself that it was not them I was cooperating with, but *Justice*.

Now the sergeant was filing the testimony of the short guy. I was leaning against the police car's front door when one of the victims, who had been seated in the front seat of the police cruiser in which the handcuffed suspect was seated, came over to the seated cop and told him that the suspect had whispered that he would help him get his stereo equipment back if he didn't press charges. I felt relieved. I hadn't been mistaken after all. Yet I was troubled, for surely this kid was on his way to jail.

"Hey brother," the short hipster pleaded, "I don't know, but you say that he's the dude, man, but he ain't one of 'em. I ain't bullshitting either, bro."

The sergeant repeated that we had conflicting testimony. I assumed that he was attempting to trap the short guy, for this little "rap" artist hadn't heard the white guy tell us that the suspect had practically admitted to the crime. After a few minutes of conversation it became clear that the cop wasn't concerned with trapping the short guy. He simply ignored him. He had apprehended a suspect and found someone, in me, who was willing to say that he could positively identify him.

It had now really begun to annoy me that my name, address, and testimony were so recklessly thrown around in front of those I had accused. When the white cops left and the white fellows moved away, I would still have to survive in this neighborhood. The white cops were so caught up with racist assumptions concerning black victimizers that they couldn't suspend them to deal professionally with me, the key to the success of their entire operation. I felt stupid for feeling betrayed. Why had I expected otherwise?

What continues to plague me most about that evening is the moral ambiguity of my actions. By orthodox American mores, I had responded as a responsible citizen. I hadn't shied away from involvement. I should have

entertained good feelings. Instead, I wondered if I hadn't been used. Had there been a physical attack on someone, I would not have hesitated to call the New Haven police. I have not yet discovered a convincing argument that would legitimate wanton violence against either affluent or poor persons.

During the late '60s prominent black activists conferred upon those who behaved in an "Up against the wall, motherfucker . . ." fashion the title of revolutionary. The armed robbery of white folks was supposed to be the black man's means of redistributing wealth. This romanticizing of violence did not discriminate between visionaries and thugs. No, I would feel little guilt in aiding the police in the arrest of an assaulter. But nonviolent thefts of deluxe property, I had always argued, were different.

Yet when given the chance to actualize my antiprivate-property leanings, I wilted. Instead, I had worked with a racist and repressive arm of the capitalist state, and on my own initiative.

The pity of it is that much of my action was neither well-reasoned nor principled. At worst I probably didn't think at all, responding instead in knee-jerk fashion as Dick Tracy had taught me. At best, I had acted out of simple self-interest. Had it been my stereo that was stolen, I would have expected any eyewitness to aid the police department. You might ask, on what grounds can the person who steals not justifiably claim socioeconomic distress? I have no rational response, but emotionally I defend my right to give to others only that of my own which I choose to give. More explicitly I defend my freedom to live selfishly, though I think selfish living is unethical.

I had digested a sufficient amount of cant to justify Abby Rockefeller losing her priceless art collection or Diana Ross her wardrobe. They were, it was argued, living so far above subsistence that it was justified, if not mandated, to take from them in the name of poor people everywhere. Only now do I realize that the grandiosity and distance of these justifiable thefts kept me from confronting my emotional attachment to my own property. My leftist intellectual buddies and I could probably cope

with losing our stereos and television sets, but if someone were to steal our collections of Lukács or Simmel's *Philosophy of Money*, we would be outraged. When I saw those young guys running with the stereos, I must have subconsciously visualized someone riding off with my collection of Monk. The horror registered immediately.

I hesitate to admit the other rationale that influenced my behavior that night. In many respects I acted with the intent of showing these white guys that "all blacks weren't like that."

In offering myself here as a witness I was in no small degree ethnically apologizing for the crime. In doing so, I was in some sense trying to reclaim a sense of black humanity in a neighborhood that seemingly tolerated anything inflicted upon a white person. Though I am quite certain that I would not have acted differently had the victims been black, I would at least have been spared this feeling of ethnic responsibility.

In any case, I acted. The certitude of my theoretical defenses left me at that crucial moment of decision. My antiprivate-property ideology was skin-deep. I acted as many Americans seem to think they would act, and as most seem to think is correct. But my ethical (read ethnic) ambivalences made my actions that night far more complex and anxiety-ridden than I would ever have thought they could be.

Yes, I have seen the racist sergeant since then. I once said hello to him on the street, whereupon he responded with a cold stare as if I were the fool I must have been for speaking. I have seen the suspect I identified on numerous occasions. He has not recognized me for I go nowhere without my ethnic attire. As for the three white guys who live across the street, I never heard a word from them after that night, not even a resigned thank you. They simply moved. I believe that they saw me as a part of the ethnic totality responsible for their trouble. This time, I wasn't surprised. □



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