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To Meet Violence with Violence: *Riot Baby*

Tochi Onyebuchi's story *Riot Baby* does incredible work in spotlighting the systemic struggles of Black Americans in the United States, while also taking on a voice of resistance and perseverance without the filtering for white fragility. When Black stories are told, it often takes on an "inauthentic" voice in hope of being able to be palatable enough for a broader array of audience, but this will frequently result in not fully acknowledging the deep rooted hurt that has been embedded into these communities after countless years of hatred, racism, and violence. The word "riot", as can be seen in the title, along with its connotations play such a pivotal role in engraving the themes of the fight against racism along with the backlash it receives, through its frequent and important references to the real riots that have occurred in America. One of the most well known events referenced within this story are the 1992 L.A. Riots, a reaction from the public toward the unjust beating of Rodney King. The L.A. Riots are referenced early within the story and serve as the meaning behind the title *Riot Baby*, with the main character Kev being born amidst the time of the riots. The Charleston Church Massacre also plays a vital role in the character Ella's exploration of the concepts of fighting violence with peace, or fighting violence with violence. Onyebuchi takes on a great deal of concepts centering around the struggles and lives of Black Americans and thoroughly dissects and processes them in this fascinating display of Science Fiction.

In order to understand the relations of these events to the story, it is important to understand the complexities and reasons for their occurrences. The pivotal point of the start of the 1992 L.A. Riots is associated with the release of a video, showcasing the brutal beating of Rodney King, a black man, by four police officers. Leading up to this, King had been pulled over

by two California Highway Patrol officers for drinking and driving along with being on probation for a robbery conviction (SCPR). After being pulled over, four LAPD officers by the names Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Brisenio arrived on the scene and began to intervene with the traffic stop. These LAPD officers then began their brutal assault on Rodney King, beating him viciously with metal batons and repeatedly kicking him even after he was already on the ground. In the apartment across the street was a man named George Holiday who managed to get a recording of the officers and brought the video to local television stations, which led to the rapid spread of the video (*Rediscovering Black History*). While he may not have been aware of his impact at the moment, George Holidays' recording opened up a new way of fighting against the injustice that often goes unheard of through the use of video evidence. This recording is the first video evidence of police brutality, and though incredibly devastating that more events similar to this have occurred, many have been able to record other acts of police brutality and use it as evidence to not only fight the system, but unite with each other in grief. In *Riot Baby* Ella can be seen viewing these videos and transporting herself to the place of these crimes, in a way, absorbing the violence of the events. Here is when we see Ella have her enlightening idea that maybe she could be the source of change in the world, putting an end to the injustices as she thinks, “What if I’m the answer? she had asked herself. What if I’m the one we’ve been praying for? (Onyebuchi 65)

Following the release of the footage to the public, the four officers were charged with felony assault and other offenses, with all four pleading not guilty in court. Instead of the trial occurring in the downtown L.A. area, it was moved about 30 miles north to a town called Simi-Valley. The court reasoned that the decision for moving the trial was out of fear it would be “unfair” as the political climate of the area was uneasy due to the outrage of the public. Despite claiming reasons for the possibility of an unfair trial, the town of Simi Valley is made of almost an entirely white population with an incredibly high rate of officers living within that area. The jury of this trial included no Black Americans (Felker-Kantor).This town's population played an

incredibly shameful role in defending these officers, with the court acquitting all charges but one assault charge against Powell (SCPR). Observing the ways in which the court and law enforcement were able to protect these four men, despite the presentation of video evidence of their crimes, really brings light to the deep rooted corruptness that lies within the system.

Within *Riot Baby,* we can also see these similar acts of police brutality on multiple occasions, happening to both Kev and his friends, one example of this being when Kev is wrongfully profiled by an officer who shoves him to the ground and puts a boot to his face. Here Kev says to the officer, “What suspect I look like this time?” (Onyebuchi 31) which so subtly but distinctly allows the audience to understand this is not the first time a situation like this has occurred. While many readers may already be aware of the issues of profiling and violence, to have a character, who the audience has followed since birth, be victim to such violence multiple times outside of what was written, does an incredible job of showcasing how frequently such things happen to the point it simply becomes a fact of life. Despite the frequency of these crimes, none of the cops ever face any consequences other than the insults that Kev and his friends are able to throw at them.

In an interview with Onyebuchi, he describes the law enforcement to be “little more than white militia” (Mayer and Onyebuchi), perfectly encapsulating the ways in which this group operates. Despite preaching its purpose to protect the people, law enforcement does little more than protect the people like themselves, which is done in return as was seen in the trial of the four officers. Furthering his point, to date back to the origins of modern policing in America, that being slave patrols, makes the connections between the corruptions of the system and why it disproportionately affects Black Americans quite evident. While laws have been changed and legislation has passed to rid the inequalities between White and Black people, the standings of racism are so embedded into the ideologies of many in power of these government operations that corruption is able to bloom and spread. Then those who do such wrongful acts are already surrounded by others just as corrupt as them, it makes a grey area for them to get off free of

charge. While many may believe this to be a flawed or broken system that needs reform, Onyebuchi says it perfectly when he describes it to be a system working as designed. What changes or “fixes” could be made to a system that is working as intended?

Following the court's verdict of the officers was when the outrage bubbled over in LA, marking the start of the riots. With the majority of the population of south LA being Black, the anger and hurt was shared throughout the community, displayed through the burning and looting of stores, along with attacks on non-black passerby (Felker-Kantor). These riots were an incredibly naked display of the emotions of the Black Community after facing continuous acts of violence and discrimination, which had too often been brushed off and pushed aside in fear of fighting something bigger than oneself. After police had retreated from these uprisings, the looting and burning sky rocketed with the media portraying these individuals as criminals without any motive other than to commit crime. This idea was furthered when President George Bush declared the outbreaks of rioting “not about civil rights” but the “brutality of a mob, pure and simple”, blatantly disregarding the disparities the community was facing at the time (*Rediscovering Black History*). While change was made because of the riots, it was not the kind to fix the struggles of the community or ending of police brutality, but rather to strengthen police forces to be able to control future uprisings. *Riot Baby* explores this difficult concept of complacency in the means of change, where peaceful protests struggle to make real difference but hostile acts are regarded more seriously in exchange for loss of meaning.

The L.A. Riots quite perfectly embody the message that Onyebuchi pushes throughout the story *Riot Baby*, as the complexity and build-up of the riots are almost always disregarded when talked about within the media. While Rodney King became a symbol of these riots, the police brutality he faced was just a tipping point in the long buildup of the mistreatments that Black Americans faced in regards to law enforcement, housing, economic struggle, and employment within the Los Angeles area (*Rediscovering Black History*). To ignore all the other struggles leading up to the riots does not showcase the full picture behind this event and easily

allowed for those who participated to be looked upon as senselessly violent and reactive. When observing many social justice movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement, so much backlash is given to those apart of these organizations when any ounce of outrage/violence is shown, and often times are used by those of the opposing side as a means to disregard the motives behind the movement entirely. While peaceful protests are both protected under law and received better publicly, Onyebuchi brings up the question of why should Black Americans be forced to push through hatred with peace, when it could be more powerfully countered through violence? Years of fighting against inequality, and Black Americans along with other minorities are still subject to it even within this modern age. A powerful scene at the end of the story showcases a world where Black Americans are truly free from racism that is accomplished through the means of violent change, “So much death, but there’s joy in it” (Onyebuchi 101).

The other mentioned act of violence against Black Americans in *Riot Baby* was the Charleston Church Massacre, taking a step away from police violence by showcasing the threats of White Supremacy. On June 17th, 2015 in the town of Charleston, South Carolina the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal was having bible study, with a white man Dylann Roof who had been invited into the church as a guest by Senator Pinkney. Pinkney then pulled a gun from his fanny pack and said to the church members, the African Americans were “taking over the country” and open fired. This resulted in the death of 9 members, including Senator Clementa C. Pinkney, Tywanza Sanders, Susie Jackson, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton Doctor, Daniel Simmons, Sharonda Coleman Singleton, Myra Thompson. These individuals became known as the Charleston Nine, and are a symbol of racial violence and the effects of White Supremacy. Following his arrest, Roof had been placed in jail with his cell block neighbor being a former police officer who had murdered Walter Lamar Scott, a black man. Understanding the distinct overlap between white supremacy and the police force, it is understandable how Roof had found himself comfortable with sharing the reasons of his

mass killing to this former officer. Here he described the desire to start a “race war” and even detailed the fact that he had almost changed his mind on committing the murders as the members of the church had been “very nice to him” (Momodu). Roof was sentenced with 9 charges of murder along with other charges including hate crime, leading to an original sentence of the death penalty which was later reduced to a life sentence.

This Massacre sparked uproar, which led to the removal of the confederate flag from the state grounds, but ultimately no other change was made besides an increase in White Supremacist attacks. In relation to *Riot Baby*, the massacre sparked an eye-opening perspective in Ella where we see her discover her prayers differ from other, while they pray and show how grateful they are to simply be on this Earth, Ella prays for change and revenge, “Praying for frogs and locusts and for rivers of blood, for every Confederate flag to find its own funeral pyre.” (Onyebuchi 65). Ella's wishes directly mirror those of the real people who had pushed for change in removing the symbols of Confederacy, yet she also makes mentions of rivers of blood, which give a more violent yet sort of biblical feeling to the message.

With the church playing a pivotal role in developing her own understandings for change, paired with the powers that she has, make way for this sort of “chosen one” idea to be brought to life, understanding that her powers are not just a violent part of her that should be hidden, but rather something that can be used for the sake of change and doing good by her people. It denounces the idea of God with her ownself being the one who could answer her prayers, directly reflecting the need for complete demolishing of current systems, God in this instance, in order for a new society where black people can prosper to be created. The exploration of religion tied with the sci-fi elements of this story are so fascinating, as the audience is presented with a character like Ella, who holds the literal powers within herself to bring about change to the world, juxtaposed by her brother Kev, who is a young black man that has fallen into the cycles of violence that are systemically. Kev serves as the tie between the sci-fi concept of powers to bring about change and the real change that can be created through human force, as his sister

projects the visions of that free world onto him, and understands he too can unlock powers of his own. The “powers” are symbolic of freeing one's mindset from the system set into place and understanding how to channel the rage of unjust to Black Liberation.

The Black American experience is one that is so incredibly intricate and unique, something that the story of *Riot Baby* captures in such a powerful way. To have one of the main characters be born during such a time of violence and calls for change, sets up the audience to understand how black people are forced to operate and live their lives in reaction to the systemic pressures of America. The concepts of liberation, protests, and police brutality are explored through not only the lens of the characters but told in relation to real events showcasing violence against Black Americans, such as the Charleston Church Massacre and the L.A. Riots. Through his precise applications of sci-fi powers to real world feelings of deep rooted anger and hurt, Onybuchi portrays the ideas of black liberation in such a profound way, that the story of change does not leave the reader feeling as if it is some fantasy, but a change that can be accomplished.

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