

Robert Birt, currently professor of philosophy at Bowie State University, was fifteen years old at the time of the 1968 riot and living with his mother and sister in the Latrobe Homes public housing project in the heart of the East Baltimore riot area. Here he gives a close up view of the rioting and assesses the long term impact of King's assassination and the subsequent rioting on his own personal philosophy, as well as on Baltimore as a whole.

Nyasha Chikowore and Maria Paoletti, students at the University of Baltimore at the time of the interview and Maria Paoletti, interviewed Birt on July 7, 2007.

I was fifteen in 1968 and I lived in the Latrobe Projects, the 900 block to be exact. It's in East Baltimore, bounded by Madison, Eager, Greenmount, and Aisquith. I was a student at Mergenthaler High School¹ at the time. I was somewhat of a precociously dweebish or nerdish kind of kid because I did use to read, which was - I wouldn't say nobody did it, but it wasn't the most popular activity in my neighborhood. It rarely is in very poor neighborhoods. But for me it was something that gave me a world outside of my environment and also enabled me to look at my environment differently. And particularly after King was shot, I started reading his books, and I think that partly contributed to my getting involved in what you might call the life of the mind. He's the first philosopher I ever read.

Mergenthaler at that time was still predominantly white. So I had a bit of interaction with other white students. But the African American part of the student population was growing. And there were some black teachers there. They were a minority, but they were definitely there, and there were enough of them for me to notice them. I guess you could say we were a small but growing minority. Of course, now it's predominantly black, like what has happened throughout much of the city. In the beginning, we'd make an appearance, and there'd be a few of us, and then gradually the whites or their parents would start pulling them out. and then the school would become predominantly black. Even in the schools that were in some sense mixed, unfortunately they didn't stay that way.

Prior to high school, my frame of reference was the neighborhood and, of course, it was a black neighborhood. There just weren't that many white people around, and the ones that were, were people like the store owners, the police, and a lot of folks that most people didn't like very much. But in high school and then in college is when I developed some significant number of friends who were white and eventually Latino and Asian

The racial mood in Baltimore before the riots was more or less like the mood in most communities during the sixties. Civil rights was large enough for everybody to know about it. People were talking about what was happening in the South. Kids talked about things, too. Dr. King had come to Baltimore. He came to the Civic Center, and I think it

¹ Mergenthaler Vocational-Technical Senior High School is a public high school and trade school in Baltimore.

was around '66 or '67. It would have been after Birmingham, Selma, and all that.² I wasn't there when King spoke, but I remember being in a group of teenagers, we were about thirteen or fourteen, and we had gone skating. On the way back we took a wrong turn or something, and we ended up in this clearly predominantly white area, which - let's put it mildly - was not very friendly. We started getting cat calls; we were called porch monkeys and niggers and what have you. We had girls with us, and we're teenage guys, thinking, well, we have to at least get the girls out of here and get ourselves out as soon as we could. Rocks were thrown, but fortunately we were at enough distance that nobody connected. Once we had gotten safely out of their range, one kid, I think he was called Pretty Boy Norman, says, "Well, they'd better not cross this track. If they do their asses are ours. And he says, "By the way, I heard it was a very good talk he gave at the Civic Center, but I'm not so sure I believe in Dr. King's nonviolent program." So, we were aware of things. Everybody had heard their parents talking about what was happening in the South.

Baltimore wasn't as mobilized as Bull Connor's Birmingham where you had children facing police dogs.³ And of course the authorities here weren't quite as extreme as in the deep South. I don't think Baltimore had the extreme racial tension that some cities had. It was there - it still is there - but it seemed sort of under cover, so maybe that's the reason why there was - I don't know if it's civility, but there was something. But the tensions were there. And there had been activism here. Some churches were involved, and there were activists in communities who were always telling you to get off your butt and fight for your rights. The activists, at least the - I wouldn't call them career activists, but the ones that were the most persistent, were usually not the majority, although at times significant numbers of people could be drawn into something. But not everybody was always on the barricades. That's the image of the sixties that's a little naïve. But there was an attitude that was at least receptive, at least sympathetic with the activists because after all they're supposed to be for us. But everybody wasn't an activist.

I recall that King was assassinated on the 4th of April. It was a Thursday, and it was somewhere in the neighborhood of 6 p.m. That I do remember. I think it was Walter Cronkite who announced it on television, and my mother broke down and cried. She broke down and cried. And I said this is something I will never forget. I even remember what the weather was like. It was warm - I remember that. I told my mother, "I'll never forget they killed King."

Baltimore, if I remember, did not immediately erupt as some cities did. But you could feel something in the air. It seemed that almost anything might trigger something. There was school Friday, although my mother wasn't sure whether she wanted me to go because everybody felt that something wasn't right. But I did, and students were talking

² King visited Baltimore several times between 1953 and 1966. Birt is probably referring to his visit of April 22, 1966, when he spoke to Methodist clergy at the Baltimore Civic Center. Birmingham and Selma had been key sites of the struggle against racial segregation and for civil rights in the early to mid-1960s.

³ Theophilus "Bull" Connor (1897 - 1973) was police commissioner in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights movement. He employed fire hoses, attack dogs, and other extreme measures against civil rights protesters. During the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's 1963 Birmingham Campaign, he authorized the use of these methods against demonstrating children and young people.

about it at Mergenthaler. I started noticing a certain uneasiness in the interaction between black and white students, more so than usual. Everybody knew what the deal was, but nobody really wanted to talk about it, but it would come out anyway, and then emotions would blow up in classrooms, and teachers would have a difficult time just trying to keep things civil.

I remember '67.⁴ That was everywhere. Troops were on television, with their bayonets. And people were talking about it. My mother said she was talking about it at her job, students were talking about, kids were talking about it. People saying people in Detroit, they've had enough of this. Another group didn't think that it was a good idea. But when King was assassinated, there was just this funny kind of feeling just everywhere. And some people had lowered flags. Some people wore black. There were people who threatened that any white businesses in the neighborhood that didn't show some sort of remorse would be torched. I actually heard people saying that if they didn't wear something black or lower a flag or something and they operated in our neighborhood, they shouldn't be here.

I seem to remember it was Saturday that it happened. It was as if people had two days of mourning and then a day or two of rage. It was a weird thing because Saturday, I think it was Mayor D'Alesandro⁵ who got on the radio or on television and made a nice liberal speech about mourning the loss of this great American. He said he thought that it was commendable how black citizens of Baltimore in this trying time didn't resort to an explosion of mass anger. And I remember he was saying that just as I started noticing some things were happening. It's almost as if the riot was beginning as he was commending us for not doing it.

I had gone to the store. Coming back, I bumped into some people and was talking with them. Eventually I found myself around by Eager and Asquith Streets. There were people standing around, but there were people standing around everywhere. Then suddenly a group of young guys came up, and they were saying things like they killed King so we're gonna burn them out. And there was a store there run by a middle-aged or elderly white couple, and they attacked the store. "We're going to make them pay for this." And just as this was happening, somebody had turned on a little transistor radio, and some white official, I think it was D'Alesandro, was commending the black community for its dignified restraint in this time of sadness. And people laughed because the riots were just starting. And one person says, "Well, I guess white folks got confused." I don't think D'Alesandro or whoever it was had any sense for what people were feeling.

⁴ In the summer of 1967 deadly race riots broke out in both Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, Michigan. Birt here is referring to the Detroit riot, which began in the early morning of July 23rd, after police raided an after hours drinking club in a predominantly black neighborhood, arresting dozens of patrons. At the end of five days of rioting, 43 people were dead, 467 injured; and more than 7200 had been arrested. More than two thousand buildings were burned.

⁵ Thomas J. D'Alesandro, III (1929 -) was the Democratic mayor of Baltimore from 1967 to 1971.

I stayed out for a while and then I went home. My mother was having a fit because by this time it was on the news. "Where were you all this time? You know they're going to send in the National Guard. They'll start shooting people." But I said, "As far as I'm concerned, they started it." That is, I regarded the riots as a reaction. To be quite frank, I was not unsympathetic to the people who did riot because I thought we had to do something. I know people who said that we ought to take out some of their leaders, maybe the mayor, or a governor, or even the president. "They killed ours. Let's kill theirs." People said things like that. But a lot of it was just people venting. But I didn't believe that the persons who did these things were criminals. And I know that some of them were my neighbors. So I said "Well you know Mom, they started it."

There's no telling what started it. I heard that police were driving around saying, "What are you people doing on this corner?" This was very bad timing. That was fairly common in those days - they would order you off the corner. They were known to be quite abusive, and the police - I would guess the police force in those days was maybe eighty to ninety percent white - many of them had an in your face attitude. I don't know whether one of those incidents was the spark that provoked the rioting, but that's one of the things I heard that happened. And there were cases where a person would throw rocks at police cars.

One guy I know claimed that he was in the Oldtown Mall⁶ when rioting there started. Now Baltimore was fortunate insofar as we didn't have organized gangs like the Cripps and the Bloods like they have in California. We didn't have that sort of thing. However, what you sometimes did have was confrontation between people who came from different projects. So some guys from Latrobe might have a tiff with some guys from Lafayette. Say one guy would see a guy with a girl from the projects that's he's from, he wants to know why he's dating this person. Or when guys from Lafayette and guys from Latrobe bump into each other, something often happens. Or Somerset project and some other group, Flag House, what have you. The guy I know said that he saw some people from our project, Latrobe, and some young toughs from Lafayette projects meet at the Oldtown Mall. And, of course, very often that meant a dispute if not an outright fight. But he said that everybody was so taken up with Martin Luther King's assassination that it didn't happen. They formed a kind of common bond. They decided instead of fighting each other, they were going to loot these stores. And one person - my friend tells me - from our project actually gave one of those power signs to a person from the other project. They reciprocated, and instead of the usual gang fight, they teamed up against the white merchants and started tearing up their property and looting things. Now that's hearsay, but it was hearsay from a friend who says he was there.

I didn't go back out on Saturday. And very shortly, if not the next day, the National Guard came to town, and then they imposed curfew. Then parents started pulling their kids off the streets for fear they might have a fatal encounter with the National Guard. Eventually, though I had a difficult time at the time distinguishing one from the other,

⁶ The pedestrian-only Oldtown Mall was developed in the mid-1970s, on the site of the old commercial corridor along East Baltimore's Gay Street. Many stores on Gay Street were looted and burned during the 1968 riot, and the incident Birt is describing likely took place on or near Gay Street.

some detachment of the regular military arrived with all their paraphernalia. Of course they had their weapons. We would see them with their bayonets. I didn't have all the words I might use for it now, but on a certain emotional level, I just saw them as an occupation. They were here to defend white property and to enforce white law.⁷

In the house we turned on the television and there were films of people out in the streets. They even had pictures of people here in Baltimore. It was kind of weird, because I was thinking to myself, wait a minute, the camera's there, but the cops aren't there. In fact, I think the National Guard had actually arrived in town, but they didn't stabilize the whole place all at once. They probably got control of some places before they got control of other places. I remember seeing some black ladies on television going into a store and trying on dresses and other clothes. It was like they were shopping, but of course they weren't paying for it. Somebody had even brought a shopping cart and she went shopping, basically. I guess even then sisters had fashions on their minds.

I don't remember seeing that kind of thing on the street as it was happening. What I saw on the street were some people smashing windows and burning some things, but I didn't see them taking things. In fact, I get the impression that even in the riots there was a gender difference in what happened. That is, the physically violent parts were mainly carried out by young guys. They smashed in the store windows, threw things out, threw the owner out, and made him watch his store being burned. I don't think there were a lot of cases where women physically confronted the police or directly threw Molotov cocktails. Everybody that I saw doing that were guys. But sometimes females would be cheering what the guys were doing, and after they broke into a store, they would come in and do their shopping. I guess they figured that it was the guys' responsibility to do the war part. We'll take care of the commodities. I did notice that.

I was aware that people in my neighborhood got arrested. Some of our neighbors got arrested. There were a good number of people whom you didn't see for awhile. They hadn't been killed, and I didn't think all of them were just penned up in their homes. Some of them had probably gotten arrested, because they might have got caught taking something out of a store or may have just got arrested because they were out after the curfew.

The fact that the riots happened should give you a clue to the mood in my area. Everybody was hurt and angry about what had happened to Dr. King. I even heard one person, I think it was a minister of all persons, say something to the effect that while he's not happy about the riots, if we didn't do something, then they would think they could get away with anything, and we'd be back to the days of our parent and grandparents when

⁷ Governor Spiro Agnew activated the Maryland National Guard shortly after 10 pm on Saturday, April 6, two hours after he had declared an official state of emergency. On Sunday, April 7, President Lyndon Johnson authorized the use of federal forces to join the National Guard. In all, nearly eleven thousand troops were deployed in the city over a period of approximately a week. An initial curfew was imposed from 11 p.m. on Saturday, April 6 to 6 a.m. Sunday, April 7. A 4 p.m. curfew was in effect on Sunday, the 7th and Monday, the 8th. On Tuesday, the 8th, the curfew was relaxed, starting at 7 p.m. and ending at 5 a.m. Wednesday. The curfew was lifted on Thursday, the 11th.

they could just take you out and hang you whenever they felt like it. I've heard some older people who remember lynching say, "At least now they know there is but so much we will take from them." I've heard people who didn't want to condone this activity also say that it was provoked by the other side and that they have to know that there is a limit to what we'll put up with. So, I think even people who were unfavorable towards the riots often had that addendum they'd add to it: it's unfortunate, but they provoked it.

Of course, school was out for a while. I know schools would have been officially closed, but I don't remember for how long. Could it have been a couple of weeks before it started up again? I know it wasn't the same week, and it wasn't the week after that, so at least two weeks had to have passed before I went back to school, and maybe before school was reopened. But I don't remember exactly.⁸ But when some people began returning to classes, then the riots themselves became part of the conversation. Like I said, at that time at Mergenthaler the student population was still majority white, so you got to listen to the white students trying to talk about this. One guy says, "This is terrible. My father says that they are a bunch of criminals. They ought to lock them all up and shoot them." And another guy says, "Well, I don't know. Because my father said that if he was colored I'd probably do the same thing." So I started observing the divisions of opinion among whites, which was interesting, because you could easily think that whites all thought the same way about things, that they all regarded us as inferior. Some black people felt that way.

Then somebody said, "Nobody's asked any of the 'coloreds' (a lot of people still used the word 'colored' even then) in the class what they think." So the teacher asked whether any of us had anything to say. And I said, "We didn't start the riots. You did." People had very different reactions to that. One said, "How did we make you go out and do this?" I said, "The last thing you did was kill Dr. Martin Luther King. And that's just the last thing you did." "But I didn't do it!" And I said, "Some of your people did." I started telling them things my parents talked about, that whites were always messing us around. They grew up in the South. They talked about that, because there was a lynching on both sides of my family, I was told. What happened in families was just part of the lore of the time. So I said, "Y'all started it. You're always starting it, and this time you just have to pay for it." I was angry about this.

Eventually tensions between the white students and the black students got back to normal in that the tensions weren't right at the surface. But there was a certain sense in which something had changed, even when it was no longer being talked about. The volume of the tension subsided, but it was there on a lower frequency, you could put it.

The school then started trying to do things like introducing little elements of sanitized black history into the curriculum. Some teachers started trying to talk a little more about Africa, but nobody was really prepared. People were reacting to this crisis. But there

⁸ Baltimore city schools were closed on Monday, April 8, as were city offices, per order of the mayor, who had declared that day an official day of mourning for Martin Luther King. Although schools reopened the next day, Birt's memory of "being out for awhile" probably reflects the fact that he, like many students, remained out of school for some days.

was also pressure because the black student population was demanding more in the line of black studies. That was happening in other schools, too.

I sometimes wonder how my life would have developed if King hadn't been murdered. I eventually went to college, and I studied philosophy, of all things, the subject Dr. King had studied in Boston. The first piece of philosophical literature that I ever read was his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."⁹ I read that maybe a year or two after his assassination. I was very impressed by it because it talked about the moral grounds of what we then called civil disobedience and the whole idea that law in and of itself is not sacred, but that justice is what is sacred. The law is justified as an expression of justice. I hate to think of it this way, but in a certain respect what happened to King and the whole tragic situation at the time precipitated my entering into what might be called intellectual life. I wanted to find out who all these names that King kept mentioning in this letter were. Who's Martin Buber? Who's Nietzsche? Who's Augustine? Who are all these people? I was wondering about King – what led him – so I read the things that he kept mentioning.

After the riots, I also began thinking more about the way I was treated by other people. For example, were I stopped by the police for some reason, even if it was just to ask a question, I now had another attitude about this. Of course, the police were never the most favorite people in the neighborhood, but it was something that had always existed. And now I sometime took an attitude of questioning or challenging what right do you have to stop me, on what grounds, for what reasons. I developed an attitude of being less accepting towards authority. Initially, less accepting towards white authority and after a while less accepting of authority, period. I began to think it was very important for people to think for themselves. I don't mean that everything goes, but I developed this attitude that there's too much respect for authority, which is one of the reasons - aside from force and violence - that things like Jim Crow lasts this long. It's one reason why we're in Iraq.¹⁰ People are too accepting. They don't question things.

At this time you also had the beginning of people talking about black consciousness. A lot of people began taking stock: This is serious, if they can kill King, we need to know what's happening. So black consciousness started developing. It began to make its appearance in some churches. Certain students were talking about it, and it did make me more sensitive to racial issues. I started reading Malcolm, also writers like Baldwin, Richard Wright, others.¹¹

⁹ King wrote this open letter on April 16, 1963, after being arrested and jailed during nonviolent civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama.

¹⁰ Birt is referring to the Iraq War, begun on March 20, 2003, when United States troops led an invasion of Iraq on the grounds that it possessed weapons of mass destruction. The war was on-going at the time of the interview, despite evidence that the country did not, in fact, possess such weapons.

¹¹ Malcolm X (nee Little, 1925-1965) was a minister and national spokesman for the Nation of Islam and, after becoming disaffected with that organization, his own Muslim Mosque. James Baldwin (1924 - 1987) and Richard Wright (1908 - 1960) were African American writers whose work addressed both racial and sexual themes.

The Black Panther Party also managed to establish a presence here in Baltimore and after the assassination of Dr. King, they found some people were willing to listen to them. They had a certain influence. I was reading more of their literature. My mother, of all people, had started buying their newspapers, and one of the Panthers who worked the neighborhood became friends of the family. This is not very well known, but the fortunate thing is that where the Panthers had an influence, one of the things they did was link racial and economic justice. The problem of economic injustice then connects you with a lot of folk besides black people who have to deal with the matter of poverty or economic injustice. So, that partly contributed to my thinking evolving in a certain way. There was a misconception that the Panthers were an anti-white group. They weren't, but there were a lot of them like that who were. I can tell you that. I remember all of them. There were some black nationalist groups for whom the white man was the enemy, plain and simple - and not just the Nation of Islam. But the influence of the Panthers and their writings and their papers made me ask, "What is the relationship between the racial injustice and economic injustice?" Or they would often say more bluntly, racism and capitalism. They would often talk about international issues. So, you could say that the assassination of Martin Luther King helped prepare the way for my becoming radicalized in a certain way. It prepared me to renegotiate how I viewed these things, you know.

After the riots Baltimore went through the kinds of changes a lot of cities went through. It was after '68 - well, who knows when it really started - that a sizeable white flight got to be noticeable. I think it was after '68 that the city became predominantly black. When I was growing up it was, I'm told, sixty percent white, thirty-five percent, forty percent black, something like that. I remember shortly after the riots, a teacher, a white teacher, said that the city was about half and half. I don't know how accurate her figures were, but that's what she said. But going to the seventies, more white people left the city. This is before the black middle class flight, of course. And gradually a number of the schools that were in the city that had been predominantly white became predominantly black, or if they were predominantly black and had a sizeable white population, then the white population became less sizeable. And obviously, the complexion of some neighborhoods changed.¹² I didn't notice this so much in my neighborhood - it was already black. There were a few white people who lived there. Are there any now? I don't know - there may be. I was driving through yesterday, and I saw something that you did not see in those days. And that is interracial couples. I can remember a time when that was a real eye stopper. When I was coming up, it just didn't happen - maybe it was illegal. But then during the seventies, that became more noticeable, at least in certain parts of town.¹³

As for the businesses in my neighborhood, buildings that were destroyed were boarded up and some of them were never rebuilt. There was one Jewish store owner on Eager and

¹² As Peter Levy's article elsewhere in this volume suggests, white flight and racial change in Baltimore were well underway by 1968, and the impact of the riots on these processes is unclear. In 1950, blacks comprised just under one-fourth of the city's population (19.3%); in 1960, just over one-third (34.7%); in 1970, almost half (46.4%). During the same twenty-year period, the population of surrounding Baltimore County more than doubled, while the number of African Americans remained nearly stable; the percentage of black residents in the county therefore declined from 6.6 to 2.7 between 1950 and 1970.

¹³ Maryland law prohibited blacks, Filipinos (Malays), and Asians from marrying whites until 1967, when the law was repealed.

Valley Street, that's a block or two down from the one on Asquith Street that I saw attacked. They, I understand, had been attacked too, but not damaged as much. They recuperated, remained for awhile, but eventually retired in the seventies, maybe early eighties. There was a place - I think they were said to be German - up on Madison or Monument Street. They were demolished, they never returned. When it reopened, some black guy who had married a Korean woman took it over. You go there now, you'll see a racetrack.

There were a number of businesses that began to take on the cultural symbols of black consciousness or black nationalism. Some would have the red, black, and green insignia in their stores. A number of barber shops would have pictures of distinguished black people, whether it was the Kings or Malcolm or Angela Davis. There was a barber shop which appeared where what is now the Oldtown Mall. You'd go in the barber shop and see pictures of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. One of the outcomes of this is that eventually most of the white businesses, at least the store owners, disappeared from the area. The larger ones near Oldtown were able to hang on, I guess because they had more capital, but they eventually reopened with black owners.

Of course, there are a lot of places boarded up now, but that can't be explained by '68. That's something else that's going on. In the area where I grew up is, they've torn down most of the buildings. The market's gone, the stores that were there are all gone. There are fewer businesses there now than there was after the riots. I suppose it has to do with things like gentrification, and probably small or medium size businesses being edged out by larger chains. I remember there were more small businesses around, regardless of their ethnic mix. There were more movie houses around. There were movie houses in even the poorest neighborhoods. And there were all sorts of movie houses all over downtown, which I heard had been segregated. But they were there until sometime in the eighties. I'm reluctant to say that the riots exactly caused these businesses to leave because much of that has happened quite a bit of time after that. I'm not sure whether 1968 helped it along, but it doesn't explain it. Of course, many businesses didn't come back after the riots. But businesses did survive, including some white ones. They were there in the seventies, they were there in the eighties. And since they were still there twenty or thirty years later, their disappearance now can't be explained by '68. Maybe indirectly, white flight has something to do with it. .

King's assassination was an event that changed a lot of people. In a way it changed all of us. For some people, it was the beginning of their awakening. For some people, it might have been the beginning of their radicalization. It created a situation where there's no going back. One thing, of course, is that I, unlike most of my contemporaries, did end up going to college and eventually even to graduate school.¹⁴ Graduate school meant a predominantly white, very upper class, private school in the south, which wouldn't have happened without the civil rights movement. Pursuing an education affects ways in which you view the world. While in the universities I met not only, of course, white people but people from different countries, people from the Middle East, from Latin America. I've met people whose families were refugees from El Salvador because of that

¹⁴ Birt received his PhD in philosophy from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee.

mess that happened down there in the eighties. I've met people in the seventies who had been in Soweto during the fight with apartheid.¹⁵ Over time you could say my view of the world became more globalized, both by meeting people and just by studying. My understanding of the world became a bit more complex.

So, for example, now I tend to look at things like the institutional basis of power, rather than saying it's simply the white man. Things aren't quite that simple, particularly when I look at things like social and economic justice. One of the things made possible no doubt by the 1960's is that there are some black people, mainly from the elite, who are also involved in the game of injustice. So you've got to reexamine things.

We're naturally sensitive to the injustice we experience, but it's important we realize there's a lot of injustice, and it's all over the country and all over the world. There's a certain sense in which I'm always rooted in the African American community and African-American experience, but I also think of injustice in a global way. Beginning with that experience and dealing with that, I eventually got to a point where I could be sympathetic to the situation of people in Latin America, for example. I've had people ask me about El Salvador, "Are they black people?" Well, there are some black people there. The thing is that there's injustice there. As Dr. King says, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere". That's a saying of his which has become part of my conviction.

Could happen again? Of course, it could happen again. I wouldn't look forward to it happening again. One thing that I'm thinking about more and more now is Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign - that's what he was involved in before he was killed.¹⁶ He was working toward certain things he wanted to present to the government as necessities. One was going to be an Economic Bill of Rights, because there's a Bill of Rights, but it's not an economic Bill of Rights. And this would obviously have an impact on the black community, with the high rates of poverty, but he thought that he could unify a large part of the American population around this idea because there's no group that doesn't have to deal with poverty or economic injustice. Since I mentioned the Panthers - this is an unlikely parallel, but it's interesting that the Panthers also were opposed to rioting.

¹⁵ Civil War waged in El Salvador between 1980 and 1992, pitting the right-wing military government against a coalition of rebellious left-wing militias. More than seventy thousand people, many of them non-combatants, were killed during the war, many by government agents in brutal violation of their human rights. Soweto was a designated black township near Johannesburg, South Africa, during that country's Apartheid government. Home to many anti-Apartheid activists, it was the site of numerous protests against Apartheid, including the Soweto Uprising in June 1976, in which black students and their supporters protested the government's policy of requiring instruction in Afrikaans.

¹⁶ Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference initiated the Poor People's Campaign in late 1967, seeking, as Birt explains, a biracial, multiethnic movement for economic justice. Its Economic Bill of Rights called for a federal jobs program, unemployment insurance, a fair minimum wage, better housing, and education for the poor. The campaign continued after King's assassination, culminating in a march from Mississippi to Washington, D.C., where participants demonstrated and lobbied federal agencies for more than a month. Resurrection City, a makeshift settlement of tents and shakes along the Mall, housed the demonstrators. There they ate, slept, strategized, and made visible the plight of poor people in America. The campaign exacted some small concessions from the federal government, but its broader call for economic justice was unheeded.

People don't know that, oh yeah, but for a different reason. Actually, Huey Newton and Martin Luther King both agreed that at the end of the day, unless something, some new initiative, comes out of it, it turns out to be fruitless. If nothing in terms of either organizing or mobilizing or conscientizing or politicizing or educating, if nothing comes out of that, then it's useless and people die for nothing. And so King thought that riots were fruitless. The Panthers weren't exactly committed to the philosophy of non-violence; they simply thought undisciplined, disorganized violence is ineffective. If you have a riot and then you go home and things go back to the way they were, at least in the sense of the objective conditions of people's lives, then we haven't gotten very far. Now some people may have been inspired by the riots of the sixties to try to do some things. And that's fine, but riots in and of themselves produce very little. You know, there has to be the long term commitment to community and the fight for social justice.