

article

BY BUDD SCHULBERG

*its founder and mentor tells
how creativity and hope
have risen from the ashes of
the beleaguered black ghetto*

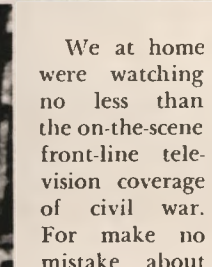


THE WATTS WORKSHOP



IT WAS BLACK FRIDAY, the 13th of August, 1965. Like millions of other dazed or complacent Angelenos, I was watching an unscheduled "spectacular," the damnedest television show ever put on the tube. Not long before, I had written an introduction for a new edition of *The Day of the Locust*, in which Nathanael West projects a Hollywood art director whose masterwork is an apocalyptic canvas entitled *The Burning of Los Angeles*. West's painter saw his vapid, vicious city consuming itself in angry flames. Here, on television, in prime time—in fact, around the clock for eight days that shook not only Los Angeles but the entire country—was Nathanael West's nightmare vision as if it had leaped from the canvas and was coming *live* from Watts.

Fires broke out not only in Watts but in most of southeast and central Los Angeles. Television cameras hanging from helicopters brought the action into our living rooms. Flames from the supermarkets were licking the sky. Crowds were looting pawnshops, drugstores, liquor stores, radio-TV stores, clothing



stores and all the other establishments that had been quietly looting the community on the installment plan over the years.

An effervescent Negro disc jockey, Magnificent Montague, had popularized the phrase "Burn, baby, burn!" for a platter that sizzled on his turntable. Now his innocent zest became a battle cry—not burn with musical fire but with real, live, crackling, dangerous, revolutionary fire. To the frightened Caucasians living in their white ghettos far to the north and west of the barricades, "Burn, baby, burn!" was an ominous and threatening invocation. But to the black people who finally had taken possession of their own streets, "Burn, baby, burn!"—expressed in the symbol of three fingers raised jubilantly into the humid summer air—was charged with revolutionary zeal. It was the "Don't tread on me" and "Damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead" of the rebellion of Watts.

We at home were watching no less than the on-the-scene front-line television coverage of civil war. For make no mistake about it: This was no riot. A riot it may have been in its first, spontaneous hours; but as the hated Los Angeles Police Department now tried to contain what they had triggered, it transformed itself into a full-scale revolt that had been years in the making in the festering black ghettos of Los Angeles, a rebellion the affluent city of the white man was unaware of because he was looking *north* and *west* while hundreds of thousands were sweating out poverty, hunger, unemployment, the lack of education and recreation, and hurting with the humiliation of it all, to the *south* and *east*. (continued on page 162)

WATTS WORKSHOP *(continued from page 111)*

Abruptly, the "dramatic" pabulum spoon-fed to us happy vidiots by our patronizing sponsors was flung from our trays. Into our living rooms raged an element that is usually forbidden on television—*life*, and its dark, red underbelly, *death*. Not spurious, TV-gun-smoke death but the undignified red hole in the flesh and the unrehearsed crumple of the wasted corpse—the real thing. A ragged army of thousands was surging through the burning streets spewing its hatred of white cops and "white devils" in general. The angry black braves found excitement and release in the fires lighting up the skies over the city they considered their enemy.

A guest in my house for this impromptu television show was a New York columnist who had come to write funnies on Lotusland, the hippies of Sunset Strip and topless waitresses serving luncheon pizzas to pie-eyed patrons of the arts. Los Angeles is a "pigeon" at point-blank range for visiting humorists. But this time our guest had a serious question: "What the hell is going on down there?"

I didn't know. The more I watched, the more I realized that I had no idea what was going on down there. Or if I knew the *what*, I could make only an educated guess at the *why*. But I knew it only in my head. And it wasn't something one could read up on in books. I had read my share, from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass to Dr. Clark's *Dark Ghetto*, the angry essays of Baldwin and the abrasive *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

What was I to do? As an American writer still oriented toward social fiction, I felt an itch, an irresistible urge to know. I held to the old-fashioned notion that an author has a special obligation to his society, an obligation to understand it and to serve as its conscience. Melville and Whitman had known this. So had Twain and Howells, Norris and London, Sandburg and MacLeish, Sinclair and Dos Passos, Wright and Steinbeck. The responsible American writer makes it his duty to report on his corner of the nation. Los Angeles is my corner. I was raised there. I had gone to Watts in my youth to hear T-Bone Walker and other local jazzmen in the honky-tonks of what was then a small rural chunk of the South tossed into the outskirts of the crazy-quilt sprawl that was and is Los Angeles. In the Sixties, Watts was no longer 6000 but 30,000; the black ghettoland of south Los Angeles had leaped to 320,000 in an exploding county population of 6,000,000, but was still the bottom-dog tenth.

I was there in Los Angeles. I was self-appointed to go to Watts while the fires

were still smoldering. So out of lush, plush, white, bright Beverly Hills, my New York-columnist friend and I drove south to the Santa Monica Freeway and east to the Harbor Freeway, and turned off on Century Boulevard, which runs from the 21st Century silhouette of the International Airport on the west to the dilapidated railroad station of Watts on the east. The first cliché reaction of the traveler to Watts is: Why, what's all the complaining about? This looks a hundred percent better than Harlem or the Negro slums of any Eastern city. Look at the nice wide, tree-lined streets and the attractive little individual houses with their neatly trimmed flower beds and their well-kept lawns. Yes, there are such houses, block after block, and the first impression might be of a comfortable lower-middle-class city in the Midwest. We found sunshine in Watts, and a deceptive suburbia, with small palm trees. But when we took a harder look, we could see that the palm trees were growing like the people, as if they really did not have their hearts in it. Then, moving on beyond Success Street, we also found 103rd Street, the mainstream of Watts that had won notoriety a few days before as Charcoal Alley Number One. I had not seen such devastation since, as a member of an OSS team in World War Two, I had driven into German cities to collect incriminatory documents. Burned-out supermarkets were smoldering. Pawnshops and liquor stores were piles of rubble and shattered glass. There hung over the heart streets of Watts that terrible silence that descends on battlegrounds the day after a truce has been declared.

Just off embattled, embittered 103rd Street stood a pale-green two-story stucco building. It stood alone now, because everything around it had been burned to the ground. This was the Westminster Neighborhood Association, a social-service agency founded by the Presbyterian Church. There were a few shabby offices and some bare classrooms and a recreation room that looked more like a forlorn pool hall. Troubled young men were being encouraged to come in off the hot streets, where there was nothing to do but grumble about the Man and how he finally had thrown more firepower at the brothers than they could handle. Westminster was offering classes for illiterates, teenage and adult. There was a dancing class, lacking instruments or a record player, and some basic English and Negro history. In an unadorned assembly hall, kids banged on an old out-of-tune piano and formed spontaneous singing groups and put on haphazard variety shows. There was some psychiatric help and some efforts to assist severely depressed families in the nearby housing project, and that was about it,

a far cry from the great settlement houses teeming with self-improvement in the old East Side Jewish ghetto of New York.

An energetic, plain-talking young socialworker from Harlem and CCNY guided this first tour of Miseryland, the dark side of the shimmering Los Angeles moon. In the poolroom, I tried to shake hands with young men whose eyes would roam the floor and the walls when mine tried to meet theirs and who would not put out their hands in the somewhat meaningless gesture of greeting our white civilization cultivates.

"Most of these brothers have just gotten out of jail," our spirited escort from CCNY explained. "Some of them were leaders in the revolt. Others were just standing on corners watching when they were handcuffed and dragged in. Even before the revolt, it was a miracle if a young man on the streets without a job could avoid building up a record. Once they've got a record, it's practically impossible to get a job. Not that there are jobs to get—in rich, beautiful L.A., we've got an unemployment problem worse than the country had in the Depression thirty years ago."

One of the teenagers, very shabby and very black, missed his shot at the lumpy pool table and growled at me, "I was on a motherfuckin' chain gang in the South. Every goddamn day, the Man takes me out and beats my ass. Finally I get away and hitchhike to L.A. New scene. Another chance. Two days later, I'm busted here. Not doin' nothin', jus' huntin' me a place to sleep. The Man picks me up and whops on me jus' like back home. Sheeit, man, I had it with Whitey." He glared at me as if I were all the white Kluxers whose gauntlet he had been running all of his 17 years, and turned back to his game of pool.

"I didn't mean to get you insulted," said our bustling guide from Westminster. "But if you come down here, you might as well see it like it is. I don't have to tell you these kids are hostile. They feel so trapped and frustrated they're almost going out of their minds. We don't want to turn off their hostility and turn them into Uncle Toms. But we want to guide them so they can turn those energies into constructive works. It's discouraging. Every day there are a hundred human crises. I figure if we help one in a hundred, we're doing something."

I sat down on a box behind a group of young teenagers who were staring dully at daytime television on a set that looked like a throwback to the middle Fifties. I squirmed when the commercials came on. Like most upper-middlebrows, I am conditioned against commercials. The cigarette sells and the instant relief from body odors that introduce you to a whole new world of romance and acceptance—it's all too much and we laugh at it, put reverse American on it

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propelled plays such as Jimmy Sherman's *Ballad from Watts* and musical entertainments are performed weekly. There are Happenings and political discussions that lean toward extreme black nationalism, and a record player that swings everything from the Supremes and Lou Rawls to grand opera. If the Westminster Neighborhood Association had been the first beacon of hope I had been able to find in Watts, the Watts Happening Coffee House was an oasis of self-improvement and self-expression.

The Watts Writers Workshop was adding new members at every meeting. Young poets Alvin Saxon, Jr. ("Ojenke"), and tall, willowy, vague and deep Emmery Evans. A 40-year-old from Indianola, Mississippi, Harley Mims. Our first Mexican contributor, warm, enthusiastic Guadalupe de Saavedra. Young black militant and talented Vallejo Ryan Kennedy. A 20-year-old product of 103rd Street who stammers badly but whose words pour out on paper with a "deep blue feeling," Edna Gipson. Young matrons in their early 30s who tend toward the *Ebony*-reading middle class but who seemed to find new life in brushing shoulders with the troubled or angry kids of the Watts ghetto—Jeanne Taylor and Blossom Powe.

By summer 1966, the Watts Writers Workshop was becoming a kind of group celebrity. *Los Angeles* magazine published the poetry of Johnie Scott, Jimmy Sherman and Leumas Sirrah and they found themselves attracting national attention. Irving Stone called to express his enthusiasm and suggested I come to a dinner of a local authors' circle to read more of the works of Scott, Sherman and Sirrah and to describe the activities of the Workshop. Edward P. Morgan broadcast several of the poems by Leumas on his radio program and a special advisor to Sargent Shriver called from Washington to say that Mr. Shriver had been tremendously impressed. Vice-President Humphrey seemed to dig Leumas also, and could we come to Washington and perhaps discuss cultural possibilities in the antipoverty field? *Time* magazine reprinted the poems from *Los Angeles* magazine with an article in the "Education" section on new approaches to school dropouts in the ghetto. Finally, NBC-TV devoted an hour of prime time to *The Angry Voices of Watts*—Johnie Scott, Harry Dolan, Leumas Sirrah, James Thomas Jackson, Birdell Chew and Sonora McKeller reading their poems, essays and stories under the imaginative direction of my brother, Stuart Schulberg, whose camera roamed the streets of Watts, from the soaring Simon Rodia towers to the grubby back streets, as the writers of Watts became their own narrators.

A moving poem such as Johnie Scott's

Wrefreshing.



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Watts, 1966 could be brought to life realistically on brooding, blistering 103rd Street. But the abstract, metaphysical poetry of Leumas Sirrah was a puzzling challenge. "How would you illustrate your poem *Infinite*? Stuart asked Leumas. Leumas, high school dropout, on probation, police-harassed, penniless, living the desperately marginal life of the man-child in the unpromised land of Watts, went off to meditate. In a few moments he returned. His answer was a question: "Are you able to photograph a teardrop?"

Stuart promised to try. For weeks, he and his integrated camera crew, guided by our Workshop writers, roamed the main streets and the back alleys of Watts photographing and recording what had been considered dangerously unphotographable—the angers and the fears and the frustrations and the teardrops of the inner ghetto. The program was presented on the first anniversary of the holocaust and the national reaction exceeded the most sanguine expectations. The reviews from coast to coast sounded as if they had been written by Stuart Schulberg or Harry Dolan or Johnnie Scott. NBC monitors reported that there were more phone calls and letters for this program than for any since the Huntley-Brinkley telecast of the Goldwater Election Night debacle.

I do not mean to suggest that everything was hunky-dory. There was many a hard day's night in the Coffee House. The Man was still a target for abuse and I was the only one available. Young angries would walk up to our large circle and heckle. "Absurd! A white man trying to teach black men! What can a white cat tell the brothers about art? We've got soul, man. You ain't got no soul. You got white shit in your heart!" Other angries would bang the piano or the bongos to drown out the poets or would turn up the hi-fi until it sounded as loud as the sirens of the police cars forever screaming up and down 103rd Street, the shrill and ever-present voice of the enemy.

One day we tried a writing exercise: to choose the one word that would sum up the aspirations of Watts, with a 500-word explanation. Harry Dolan said, "A chance." Birdell Chew said, "Justice." Ernest Mayhand said, "Respect." Leumas Sirrah said, "Identity." Jimmy Sherman said, "Dignity, or pride."

Some young painters and musicians on the periphery of our group burst in with fierce impatience:

"Why fool around with a lot of fancy words for what we want? We all know what we want—freedom. It's the one word. The one true thing. We're tired of all the maybes. We're tired of talking about hopes. Without freedom, we aren't alive. We're walking dead men. We

can't wait for your President's Great Society . . ."

They were interrupted by a young man who had taught himself to play moving jazz on the clarinet and flute: "What's the use of writing what we want? We've been trying to say what we want for years, but who listens to us? We're not people. If you really thought we were human beings, you wouldn't allow us to live like this. Just look up and down this street. The rubble hasn't even been cleared away. It's full of rats. All of us have been raised with rats. Uptown, you're sleeping two in a king-sized bed and we're sleeping four in a single bed. A game of checkers or setting up little Teen Posts won't solve this. If we were some foreign country like the Congo, you'd be worried that we might go Communist and you'd send us millions of dollars to keep us on your side; but here at home, you just take us for granted. You think you've got us on the end of your string like a yo-yo. Well, we're not going to hang on that string anymore. . . . I tell you, we're ready to take our stand here and to die for our freedom in the streets of Watts."

Do these words frighten and shake you? I heard them week after week. I saw a young artist hang on the wall an effective charcoal sketch dedicated "To my brother, a Marine—put to death by the white man's war in Vietnam." I must confess that many evenings I walked out into the oppressive darkness of 103rd Street shaken and frightened by the depth and intensity of the cumulative anger.

A full year had passed since the terrible cost and the resultant creativity of the fires of 1965. Despite the faint claims of the Honorable John McCone, in our debate in the *Los Angeles Times*, there have been few objective changes in Watts. A year later, there was still no hospital, still no movie theater, still no recreation center, still no transportation, still no jobs, still no day-care nursery and still no genuine concern from the city authorities. And yet there were some unmistakable signs that Watts was not stagnating. It was undergoing some profound psychological change. A local psychiatrist, Dr. Frederick J. Hacker, put it this way:

What the McCone Commission fails to understand is that from the standpoint of the lower-class Negroes living in Watts, the riots . . . were not riots at all but a revolution. They thought of themselves as freedom fighters liberating themselves with blood and fire. It could be argued that the Negro community was much better after the riots than before. Because the riots served as a safety valve against the feeling of apathy that was the strongest characteristic of life in Watts.

Camus, in his profound essay on man in revolt, might have been writing about Watts 1965 when he said, "Resentment has been defined as an auto-intoxication—the evil secretion, in a sealed vessel, of prolonged impotence. Rebellion, on the contrary, breaks the seal and allows the whole being to come into play. It liberates stagnant waters and turns them into a raging torrent." And later, "The spirit of rebellion can exist only in a society where a theoretical equality concedes great factual inequalities."

Albert Camus, amen. On a television symposium discussing the implications of Watts, I had said that the black militancy, the feeling that it was too late for integration, that the Blood had had it with the Man, was tragic but understandable, especially in a vast conglomerate city-suburb such as Los Angeles, where it was galling for the black man on the bottom to salute the flag of one city distinctly divisible, with liberty and justice for the affluent white and the complacent middle class. Having shucked apathy for militancy, and subservience for a new pride in Negritude, would the postrevolt Afro-Americans of south Los Angeles express their new attitude and personality through more fires and snipers and Molotov cocktails or through creative acts of self-development and self-fulfillment?

The answer came in late summer 1966, when a new spirit of unity and a fascinating ambivalence toward the white man produced the Watts Summer Festival. The angry young blacks who found their poetic voices in the works of our Workshop writers or through their paintings and indigenous jazz were ready to take to the streets. There was talk that they would celebrate the Six Days That Shook Los Angeles a year before by moving out into restricted neighborhoods and burning Whitey out. Gun stores reported a run on weapons in white communities and black. Souder (or more creative) heads prevailed. But they were not the city-hall Uncle Toms nor the middle-class Negroes who had "made it" and moved away from Watts and south-central Los Angeles, never to look back or lend a hand to their ghetto-locked brothers. There was a new breed of militant Negro leadership personified by young men of proved ability, such as Stan Sanders, the first Rhodes scholar from Watts (who now serves on the advisory board of our Writers Workshop), who was able to go to Oxford and later to Yale Law School without taking the familiar road to passive, self-serving middle-class values. Stan and a team of young progressive nationalists decided to turn a potential violent outbreak into a peaceful demonstration of community alliance and productivity. I referred to *ambivalence* because the Watts Summer Festival was a double-edged celebration: If it resisted the temptation to invade the

ends, heavy wool Pendleton shirts appear and continue to be worn throughout the winter.

Sweaters: Wool V-necks are a fashionable must, along with bulky-style cable-patterned crew-neck pullovers. Surprisingly enough, turtlenecks have not as yet been widely accepted by Midwesterners.

Outerwear: Plaid bench warmers, ski parkas and pile- and fleece-lined hip-length coats are all favored. For more formalized outings, you'll want a polo or chesterfield overcoat and a single-breasted raincoat with zip-in lining.

Shoes: Arm yourself for the inevitable blizzard blitz with a couple of pairs of lined mid-calf-length boots in rough hide. Sneakers are the favored footwear during fall and late spring.

THE SOUTHWEST: Students in this section of the country have painted a fashion picture all their own by tastefully combining conservative Ivy-inspired styles with the latest in way-out Western wearables.

Suits: A dark vested model is preferred for Saturday-night socializing or, if you're studying at Baylor, the Baptist bastion, Sunday-morning go-to-church-meeting sessions. Other Southwest-favored styles to select include plaids, pin stripes and, for warmer weather, a light-tan suit that preferably should be worn with a wide, bold-patterned tie.

Sports jackets: A navy-blue double-breasted blazer is this year's casual favorite. In addition, round up a thick-corduroy sports jacket or two and a light-weight model in a bold solid shade.

Slacks: Make your selection from permanent-press wash-and-wear styles available in checks, plaids, stripes and dark worsteds. Wheat jeans, white poplins and seersuckers are usually worn to class.

Shirts: Southwesterners often sport buttondowns in such off-trail shades as pink, raspberry and peach in addition to donning more conservative offerings in blue and white. Turtleneck and polo-neck knit sport shirts also have a wide following.

Sweaters: Down here, sweaters have found a home on the range. All styles, from the classic cardigan to crew-neck bulky knits, are being worn. Include at least one worsted wool high-V-neck pullover, a Shetland turtleneck and a cashmere crew.

Walk shorts: You'll want plenty of denims and corduroys, as well as a random sampling of madras and poplin styles.

Outerwear: Although Southwesterners usually don't have to face lengthy frigid freezes, an occasional "Northern" storm does blow South, necessitating a need for cold-weather garb. Be prepared for the sudden change by having on hand a cotton duck double-breasted outercoat with wool-blanket lining, several light-weight golf jackets to wear over heavy

sweaters, a herringbone or houndstooth topcoat and a reversible raincoat.

THE WEST COAST: In spite of the publicity given to kookie California clothes, the majority of West Coast collegians prefer to make the scene in styles that more closely resemble Ivy League than avant-garde.

Suits: Let the thermometer be your guide when it comes to selecting fabric weights. Generally speaking, you'll want a natural-shoulder dark three-button model with vest, a double-breasted gray wool flannel and a single-breasted chalk stripe.

Sports jackets: Classic tweeds and Shetlands, a navy-blue blazer (either single- or double-breasted), wide-track stripes and bold plaids are all being worn from Reed to San Diego State. Unless an evening out is superdressy, most West Coast collegians prefer to don sports jacket and slacks rather than a suit.

Slacks: Take along several hopsacks and cavalry twills, plus denims, poplins, corduroys and worsteds. For a colorful change, pick up several pairs of bold-patterned slacks—they're great for pool- and deckside lounging.

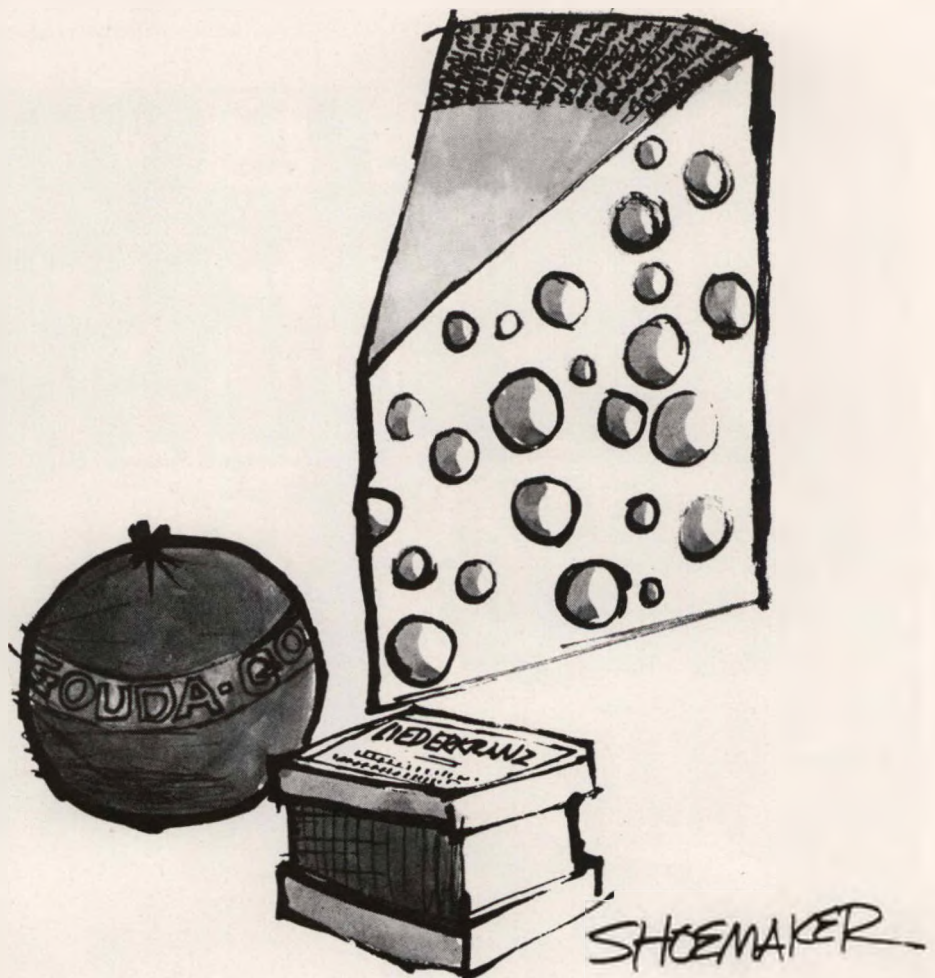
Shirts: Pink buttondown shirts are

being worn on some campuses. For daytime doings, you'll want plenty of solid-color knit pullovers with open necks, as well as turtle and mock turtle ones.

Sweaters: The West Coast, like the Southwest, is strong on sweaters. Pay particular attention to bulky fisherman's knits in natural colors, wool crew-neck pullovers and Shetland turtlenecks.

Outerwear: Farther North, you'll need a double-breasted Mackinaw jacket, a dark-tone topcoat, several raincoats with zip-in linings and a belted hip-length suede coat. Students in warmer sections can shed the heavy duds and concentrate on acquiring several golf jackets, a hip-length corduroy coat and a nylon sailing parka with hood.

All across the continent, collegiate clothing styles are shifting. The traditional Ivy League look is still favored by the majority of students, but European-inspired fashions, such as the shaped suit, are also being worn. For a look at what best-dressed men on campus are wearing at five geographically diverse schools—Dartmouth, Duke, Wisconsin, Houston and the University of California at Berkeley—we commend to your attention the photo section of this feature.



"I can't stand his holier-than-thou attitude."

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