

Mask Magazine

Remembering the Watts Rebellion

- Conor Tomás Reed



August 11, 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of the start of the Watts Rebellion, which emerged from South Los Angeles to ignite a new Black militancy that used guerrilla tactics more akin to Saigon than Selma. During and after a week of intense clashes with the police, the August 1965 rebellion's participants enacted freedom schools – already familiar in the southern nonviolent context, but refashioned in Watts as urban methods of insurgent study, creative action, and critical assessment. In today's renewed movements for liberation, we can dive into and learn deeply from this “fire last time.”

A little history: from the early 20th century through World War II, a major migration of African Americans North and West transformed cities like Los Angeles, California. Black veterans returned to the daily slap of US elite white supremacy's inequalities in education, healthcare, housing, jobs. Racial and sexual assaults on Black, Chicana/o, Arab, and Asian residents were meted out by an increasingly militarized Los Angeles Police Department. As persisted across the country, a wave of government repression against the California radical left – including the Communist Party, but more widely any group or individual who opposed capitalism and advocated multi-ethnic anti-racism – gutted intricate networks of social justice. People were blacklisted from jobs, forced out of towns, hounded and imprisoned by authorities, estranged from close friends. This vast dissolution of the left is difficult to fathom today. These conditions acted as both a pressure cooker and a political freeze for an entire segregated generation.



By summer 1965, the air crackled with the promise of Northern urban unrest, in response to unchecked violence against the Southern Freedom Movement, riots during the previous year in Harlem and several Northeastern cities, and demands to avenge the February 1965 murder of Malcolm X. In the South Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts, an August 11 traffic stop between police and Marquette Frye – which became a brawl when his mother and passersby got involved – further escalated over seven days into a full-scale combat zone resulting in 34 deaths and 4,000 arrests. Gerald Horne writes, “Property damage was estimated at \$200 million in the 46.5-square-mile zone (larger than Manhattan or San Francisco) where approximately 35,000 adults ‘active as rioters’ and 72,000 ‘close spectators’” faced 16,000 National Guard, LAPD, and state police officers.

Pre-existing relationships between families, friends, neighbors, and co-workers were quickly mobilized when this strike moment opened. The civil rights Non-Violent Action Committee and an ad hoc group of LA socialists and communists supported the rebellion. An underground network – including Black veterans who used their WWII and Korean War training, and street gangs which redirected inter-conflict into collaborative strengths – coordinated secret meeting points, hand signals, police radio disruptions, phone booth and walkie talkie updates, and false 911 reports to lure police into battles and overwhelm phone operators. Rioters burned down businesses that had refused to serve or hire Black and Brown residents, blockaded fire department trucks, raided liquor stores daily to get bottles for molotov cocktails, and shot at police helicopters from rooftops. In Watts’ self-contained epicenter, churches and open homes coordinated the less visible but equally vital work of food preparation, child and elder care, and medical attention to those injured and killed (especially with the nearest emergency room 12 miles away).

Adapting from the previous few years’ student sit-ins and radical education programs in the South, the Watts Rebellion enacted freedom schools in motion to entwine study and direct action – people highlighted social problems, mapped out resources and obstacles, and made high-risk decisions to improve their immediate well-beings. During the first few days, mostly youth freed goods from grocery and department stores, sometimes donning clerk aprons to fool police. They brought back home news of where was best to go, at which point whole families went out to shop for free, destroying the stores’

credit records in the process. For these Black and Brown residents who had long endured segregation, unemployment, inflated prices, and humiliation, these swift commodity grabs were not accompanied by hand-wrung anxieties on respecting private property. Through study in the streets, they understood that these goods were only valuable if put to immediate community needs.

The federal government was initially slow to respond to the uprising's rapid escalation, as Watts' model of mass disobedience exchanged nonviolence for direct physical confrontations with the police and white vigilante racists. Joseph Califano, a top White House domestic adviser, recalled that President Johnson "refused to look at the cable from Los Angeles describing the situation... He refused to take the calls from the generals who were requesting government planes to fly in the National Guard. I tried to reach him a dozen times." Johnson was unable to comprehend how these Watts "dropouts" of his envisaged Great Society were lucidly critiquing how their fundamental needs had already been expelled from the national reforms he proposed.

In Los Angeles, Mayor Sam Yorty initially urged the LAPD to exercise restraint during the first two days of the riots, which created a false sense of protection among the rioters, who were then caught by a surprise deluge of police and white power vigilante violence from August 13 onwards. Black, Chicana/o, Arab, Asian, and other nonwhite residents of all ages were widely targeted by cops for sidewalk beatings, traffic stop arrests, and round-the-clock murders. White supremacist groups like the Minutemen, the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, and the John Birch Society (of which, some estimated, one-third of the LAPD were members) regularly held meetings in police precincts, and encouraged members to buy up guns en masse. Some began conducting night patrols where they shot up Black and Brown South LA residents.

The LAPD assault on the Nation of Islam Temple in the early morning of August 18 signaled a bloody end to the rebellion. After a police informant falsified a tip that the mosque stored guns, the LAPD rained several hundreds rounds of ammunition into the building, injuring several Black Muslims inside with flying glass, and arresting 59. (We see these police tactics of firing on Black religious spaces have been inherited by white supremacists of today like Dylann Roof.) This action's resulting significance was two-fold: the police violently regained control of south LA after several days of decentralized uprising, while elevating the Nation of Islam's status in the Black community.

After the rebellion, the Nation of Islam's emphasis on Black middle class self-determination meant that they refused to make demands upon the city government for economic redress that would benefit the multi-ethnic working poor constituency that made the riots possible. Ironically, this rise of the Nation of Islam's notoriety leveraged the anti-police militancy that Malcolm X had initially infused into the organization, even though it had ostracized him and was instrumental in his murder mere months beforehand. An ideological vacuum in Los Angeles created by previous decades of McCarthyist repression was suddenly filled by a Black radicalism that focused on cultural nationalist pride and a fierce loathing of European Americans of any class.



Simultaneously, Watts underwent a radical artistic metamorphosis. Residents gathered in unscathed community centers that served people's needs like the Westminster Neighborhood Association, and new cultural spaces such as the Watts Happening cafe: "a community theater, a jazz venue, a painting and sculpture studio, a writers' workshop, a filmmaking class, and an all-around neighborhood hangout," writes Gerald Horne. In these two community hubs, the Watts Writers Workshop was formed in September 1965. Budd Schulberg, the screenwriter of the 1954 film *On the Waterfront* with broad connections to the Hollywood radical left, decided to learn about the Watts rebellion from its participants firsthand. The workshop initially featured all young Black men, although soon older folks, women, Chicanas/os, and mixed writers joined the group. Every week, participants shared poems, stories, essays, and novels in progress, while reading new books like Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*.

What started as a core group of 20 with events that drew hundreds quickly mushroomed into a network of writing workshops around California, with poets like Quincy Troupe, Wanda Coleman, and performance group the Watts Prophets coming out of its circles. In the Black radical traditions of public orature and group reflection as forms of direct action, these writers embraced the roles of documentary street speakers and griot-poets. They called out hypocrisies and ways forward in an urgent attempt to stay woke. After word quickly spread about the project, the Rockefeller Foundation donated funds, NBC televised the documentary "The Angry Voices of Watts," and the actor Sidney Poitier narrated an LP of workshop writings. Schulberg personally funded two new cultural spaces in the neighborhood from 1967 onwards, including one specifically for the Writers Workshop called the Douglass House (named after Frederick Douglass).

To circulate word of this local transformation, Schulberg compiled the 1967 anthology *From the Ashes: The Voices of Watts*. In Harry Dolan's speculative fiction piece, "Will There Be Another Riot in Watts?" he likens the Watts underground to WWII French resistance to Nazism, suggesting a web of urban ruses in which private dance parties and church prayer meetings are actually secret revolutionary cells.

Maps that are covered with pencil marks indicating long-forgotten entrances and rust-covered locks that open silently and iron gates that move on well-oiled hinges; stumbling winos who drink colored water and practice runs past storage tanks that could spray flaming oil miles in all directions; locksmiths who make two keys.

Sonora McKeller's "Watts – Little Rome" details the inflated prices in clothing, groceries, and housing. She describes how "Rats as large as cats and healthier than children [...] run in and out of houses," as well as the record of "sexual sadism" by police who kidnap and rape women walking home alone at night, and who regularly enact the public ridicule of stop and frisk strip-searches. Johnie Scott's poem "Watts, 1966" measures that even though "nothing was gained," and "It was a ship only fools / chose to ride," "the sight / of routed white colonialists // was heady wine." The poem concludes, "The man named Fear has inherited half an acre / and is angry." In Birdell Chew's prose-poem "A Black Mother's Plea," which could have been written in 2015, she entreats the reader:

Please do not pick my son up off the street and beat him into admitting he committed a crime that he didn't do, because his skin is black... Please do not shoot my son in the back for wanting to vote, because his skin is black... Please do not give my son a reason to hate, so he will still destroy himself while he is still a boy.

During these early ascendant years, the Watts Writers Workshop's generational and political mix led to aesthetic and ideological divides as they became more nationally recognized, and the call for an independent Black Arts movement also gained traction. The writers condemned the Los Angeles' entrenched power structures, as these same powers sought to coddle, fund, and absorb their resistant energies into more palatable expressions. In 1968, thirteen writers in the workshop broke away, accusing Schulberg of "literary sharecropping" and "subtle censorship," recounts James Smethurst. Out of this came the 1968 anthology *Watts Poets* and the short-lived *House of Respect*. Ultimately, even though the Writers Workshop was funded by philanthropic powerhouses, that still didn't protect it from FBI sabotage. In 1973, one of the participants (an undercover FBI informant) set fire to the workshop building, and the program abruptly ended.

Similarly, the Watts Summer Festival, an annual musical concert that emerged in 1966 via a coalition of communists, cultural nationalists, and economic self-empowerment advocates, was amply funded by mainstream businesses to curb the aftermath of the rebellion. Gaye Theresa Johnson writes, "as the Black Panther Party was extinguished by COINTELPRO through the sanctioned murders of its leadership, the city and corporate investors poured energy and money into making celebration more attractive than confrontation." Even though the [1972 Wattstax Concert](#) brought together beloved funk, gospel, jazz, and blues musicians, and even featured a [people's mic speech from Jesse Jackson](#), the rebellion's promise was being corralled into a benign realm of "cultural liberalism." We may now better understand why, after the recent Baltimore uprising, the city arranged for Prince to perform a major "[Rally4Peace](#)" concert).



It's a testament to the long Black freedom struggle that this Watts rebirth emerged at all. Burned-out buildings, trash-strewn lots, ongoing police violence, and scant economic reinvestment enveloped residents for years afterwards in the landscape of a permanent war zone (Charles Burnett's 1977 film *Killer of Sheep* poignantly depicts post-rebellion scenes of Watts children playing in rubble). Donna Murch explains how politicians worsened racial animosities: "Ronald Reagan built his California backlash-based [1967] gubernatorial campaign by railing against 'Beatniks, taxes, riots and crime,' convincing many whites to vote Republican." Even so, tight-knit poor LA communities of colors have kept these memories of riot and resurrection alight for decades afterwards. We see this during the even larger [1992 LA Rebellion](#) against police violence, and in the recent summer 2015 "Los Angeles Aftershocks" series featuring jazz bandleader [Kamasi Washington](#) and Hip Hop radicals [Dead Prez](#) (albeit funded by Sony and the U.S. government's National Endowment for the Arts).

The freedom schools that emerged in the wave and wake of the 1965 Watts Rebellion offered people a militant method of critique, action, and reflection that the "fire this time" of urban uprisings could do well to consciously inherit today. [Rebellious youth rising across the country](#) and the recent [Movement for Black Lives Convergence](#) suggest that this summer is still heating up. Meanwhile, [mainstream media](#) and [police](#) are revisiting Watts' 50-year old legacy to consider how to suppress future riots more effectively. As we navigate potential obstacles ahead – embracing race pride at the expense of multi-ethnic working poor power, plotting urban guerrilla actions with no long-term strategy after molotovs explode and buildings smolder, or getting that funding at the risk of losing our beautiful fangs – let's study and remix these lessons our past generations fought so hard to give us.



Further studies:

[Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A.](#), by Robert Bauman, 2014.

[“Studying in the Streets: The Pedagogy of Throwing Bottles at the Cops,”](#) by Derek R. Ford, 2015.

[Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s](#), by Gerald Horne, 1995.

[The Dark Tree: Jazz and Community Arts in Los Angeles](#), by Steven L. Isoardi, 2006.

[Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles](#), by Gaye Theresa Johnson, 2013.

[“The Many Meanings of Watts: Black Power, Wattstax, and the Carceral State,”](#) by Donna Murch, 2012.

[“Teaching Freedom: SNCC and the Creation of the Mississippi Freedom Schools,”](#) by Daniel Perlstein, 1990.

[Why Watts Exploded: How the Ghetto Fought Back](#), by Della Rossa, 1966.

[From the Ashes: Voices of Watts](#), edited by Budd Schulberg, 1967.

[The Angry Voices of Watts](#), directed by Stuart Schulberg, 1966.

[The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 70s](#), by James Edward Smethurst, 2005.

[Wattstax](#), directed by Mel Stuart, 1973.

[Watts Poets: A Book of New Poets and Essays](#), edited by Quincy Troupe, 1968.

[Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles](#), by Daniel Widener, 2010.