



**COMMEMORATING THE WATTS REVOLT:
RIGHTFUL REMEMBRANCE AND RENEWED RESISTANCE**

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The Watts Revolt of 1965 August 11 still stands as a historical moment and marker of a turning point in the Black Freedom Struggle, signaling the historical exhaustion and end of the Civil Rights phase of this struggle, and announcing the emergence and defiant assertion of its Black Power period. And in the context of our current conversation about the legalized killing of Black people and ongoing concern about police violence and misconduct, it is an instructive irony of history that the spark that caused the prairie fire of this rebellion and others of the decade was a particular incident and general pattern of police abuse.

The victim then, as is most usual, had no position in the academy, no colleagues, friends or homies in high places to whom he could appeal and no power except the stored-up anger of the people who had suffered similar and worse abuse. Marquette Frye, an ordinary person, had no idea of the history about to unfold surrounding his arrest; his mother, Rena's protest, protective intervention and arrest, and the people's spontaneous resistance to this particular instance of perceived unwarranted arrest, police abuse and continuing injustice. For they had witnessed and experienced themselves many similar and more severe acts before.

But that summer, they had reached a breaking point and contrary to the established order's wish to blame it on the weather; their revolt was not in response to atmospheric conditions, but was clearly in resistance to concrete social conditions, indeed, a social climate of brutal and unbearable political oppression and economic exploitation. The police were perceived as the immediate agents of this system, an occupying army in the community, demonstrating dominance, expecting and enforcing deference, and making object lessons of those who

consciously or innocently failed to conform and comply.

It is in this context of immediate police oppression, the lack of community self-determination and long-term merchant exploitation that the people rose up to say "no" to acceptance and "yes" to resistance. The Revolt lasted six days and cost at least the loss of 34 lives, 1100 wounded and further devastation of the landscape, already pock-marked with deep signs of poverty, dilapidation and relentless deterioration. But out of the fire and fierce battles of the Revolt came a new sense of dignity, defiance and determination of the people who demanded and won expanded employment, youth programs, educational reforms, improved health care and housing, funding for community programs and change (though temporary) in police practices.

As a spontaneous Revolt, it could not be sustained, for as Frantz Fanon says, you can hold out for three days or even three months, just on righteous anger, but without clear and collectively-accepted goals, deep education and broad involvement of the masses, such a Revolt cannot maintain itself. Thus, a flurry of efforts toward political education, mobilization and organization ensued directly after the Revolt. But the established order does not really accept serious change, even when it's forced to, and so, ideas and efforts of the most sinister kinds were put in play to negate and reverse gains, reinterpret history and cultivate historical amnesia concerning both the struggle and its lessons.

Thus, each year the more distant the Revolt became, the greater the loss and suppression of memory of it, the more compromises were made in demands and goals, the greater the increase in gaps between the middle class and the masses in terms of wealth and commitment to continued struggle.

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There was new middle class talk about moving from civil rights to silver rights, from Black power to green power and from the Black community to the larger American community in search of acceptance and hoped-for success. In addition, there was preference for hopeful “negotiation” over demonstrations and demands, behind-the-scenes small-group dialogue over open and mass insistence on respect for rights and the social responsibility of the government and businesses.

It is interesting to note that in spite of societal discourse and claims of a new leadership with new ideas and approaches, these practices listed above persist. There is now, as then, talk of negotiation rather than struggle, tendencies to confuse mass interests with class interests, to overestimate one’s personal status and relevance in a racial society, and in the end accept the dominance of Whites as incontestable, and the demand for racial and power deference understandable, regardless of how elevated one’s economic, educational or political status. And always, there is the need by those dominant to cultivate and collect commitments of historical amnesia which allows for denial, distortion and erasure of history. There is, then, the need for us to honor our history thru rightful remembrance and ongoing renewed resistance, remembrance not only of the Revolt, but of our history as a whole, especially our history of struggle and the ethical imperatives that inform and inspire it.

Thus, we have a moral obligation to remember, to fight against the forgetfulness taught and encouraged by the established order concerning the Revolt and other

significant and central moments of our history. We must remember and pay rightful homage to those who fought, died and were wounded in the way of the struggle for a better life; those like Tommy Jacquette-Halifu, executive director of the Watts Summer Festival, who gave so much to maintain the integrity of the commemoration, institutionalize it in the work and activities of the Festival and to leave a worthy model and legacy others can build on and expand. Therefore, the Festival must be supported, preserved and protected from dilution and distortion.

Indeed, we must constantly dialog with the active and observant witnesses still among us; document the Revolt and its meaning in various ways; transmit its lessons, specialness and spirit of resistance to young and older people; and create an ongoing, broad-based educational program and process to achieve this. Furthermore, we must protect and preserve the cultural and political integrity of this historic event in terms of how it is remembered and interpreted as an act of collective resistance rather than a riot.

Finally, rightful honoring of this historic struggle of the people requires also a firm resolution to renew resistance, to continue the fight for a just and good society; and to intensify the struggle to clear space, so we may speak our own special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution to how this country is reconceived and reconstructed and to defining the new role it must play in the world. For in the final analysis, we must, as Fanon urges us, “turn over a new leaf..., work out new concepts and bring into being a new man (and woman)” in the world.

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