

# WATTS

## Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002



HAGGERTY MUSEUM OF ART



MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

**Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002**

Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University

January 23-March 30, 2003

Organized by the Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art,  
Marquette University

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Dale B. Davis, *Sappo—the Brazilian Gambler*, 1995  
Ceramic / acrylic / mixed media, 8 x 30 x 10 in.  
Collection of the artist



## Preface

The Haggerty Museum of Art exhibition **Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002** is offered in conjunction with the sixth annual International Festival for the Arts in Milwaukee celebrating African and African-American heritage. The aim of the exhibition and catalogue are to consider art as a means of social change by examining the role played by African-American artists in the revitalization of the Watts community following the 1965 riots.

The exhibition has been developed with the collaboration of James Woods, Watts Community Housing President and artist John Outterbridge. They assisted in the concept development and planning of the exhibition and provided invaluable information contributing to research for the catalogue including personal recollections and documents of the period. The artists Jayne Cortez, Dale B. Davis, Charles Dickson, John Outterbridge, Elliott Pinkney, Noah Purifoy and writers Jayne Cortez, J. Eric Priestley and Johnie Scott have generously lent their work to the exhibition. Photographs by Melvin Edwards help document the conditions in Watts after the riots.

The exhibition catalogue documents the community arts movement in Watts in the 1960s and 1970s. It brings understanding to the struggles in Watts through scholarly essays, poetry and personal interpretations of the history of Watts. The catalogue consists of new essays by Curtis L. Carter, the exhibition curator, Eric Priestley, Johnie H. Scott, Pan African Studies Department, California State University at Northridge and Jayne Cortez, along with reprints of Budd Schulberg's introduction to *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts* (1967) and poetry by Cortez and Scott.

**Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002** is the latest in a series of exhibitions produced by the Haggerty Museum of Art under the directorship of Dr. Curtis L. Carter. Over the past eighteen years, the Haggerty Museum has presented exhibitions and catalogues that explore the work of multicultural artists and the issues that their art raises. In 1992, the Haggerty exhibition **The Black Family** focused on distinctive features of the black family experience. The exhibition **Songs of My People: African Americans, A Self-Portrait**, 1993, presented the work of African-American photojournalists. Inspired by **Songs of My People**, the Haggerty conceived **The City Within: A Perspective of African American Life in Milwaukee**. This 1994 exhibition offered a look at Milwaukee's urban life through the eyes of young photographers ages 12 to 18. In 1997, the exhibition **Thom Shaw: The Malcolm X Paradox**, focused on the discrepancy between Malcolm X's endorsement of peace and the continued violence in America. In 1999, **Signs of Inspiration: The Art of Prophet William J. Blackmon** explored the art and ministry of Milwaukee's leading self-taught painter.

## Acknowledgments

Lenders to the exhibition include the participating artists and the California African American Museum Foundation. Special thanks are due to all of the artists, lenders and leaders in community development who participated in this exhibition. The committee formed to involve Milwaukee artists and institutions was chaired by James H. Hall, Jr., Hall Charne Burce and Olson, s.c. Members of the committee who assisted with community outreach include Vel Phillips, Cynthia Bryant Pitts, Evelyn P. Terry, Leonard Sykes, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, and Charles Mulcahy of Whyte, Hirschboeck, Dudek S.C. Those who contributed to educational programming include Joyce Ashley of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater Milwaukee; Derrick Harriell; and Steve Vande Zande of the Hartford Avenue University School, among others.

Many divisions of Marquette University joined with the Haggerty in this project: Matt Blessing, Head of Special Collections and University Archives; Dr. Nicholas Creary, History Department; Dr. Tom Jablonsky, Director of the Institute for Urban Life; Dan Johnson, Instructional Media Center; Dr. Mark McCarthy, Dean of Student Development; Vel Phillips, Distinguished Professor of Law; Stephanie Russell, Executive Director and Sr. Kathleen Ries, Administrative Assistant, Office of University Mission and Identity; and Sande Robinson, Director and Sharon Kerry-Harlan Instructional Coordinator of the Educational Opportunity Program.

Members of the Haggerty Museum of Art staff ably contributed to the exhibition. Annemarie Sawkins assisted in curating the exhibition and production of the catalogue; Jerome Fortier designed the exhibition catalogue; Lee Coppennoll assisted by Mary Wagner provided administrative support; James Kieselburg arranged the shipping and insurance; Andrew Nordin assisted by Tim Dykes designed the exhibition; Lynne Shumow arranged programming and community outreach; Jason Pilmaier coordinated communications, and Clayton Montez served as the chief security officer.

Funding for the Exhibition was provided by the Wisconsin Arts Board and the Wisconsin Humanities Council. Also contributing to the exhibition and its programming are Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office; Gonzalez, Saggio & Harlan, L.L.P.; and the Holy Redeemer Institutional Church of God in Christ.

Marquette University support for the exhibition came from the John P. Raynor Program Endowment Fund; Educational Opportunity Program; Excellence in Diversity Grants, Office of Mission and Identity; Institute for Urban Affairs; and the Office of Student Development; and the School of Education.

Curtis L. Carter  
Director



Melvin Edwards, *The Watts Rebellion, Los Angeles, 1965*  
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in., collection of the artist



John Outterbridge  
*In Search of the Missing Mule*, 1993  
Mixed media  
86 x 44 1/2 x 14 in.  
Collection of the Artist  
Image courtesy of California African American Museum  
Photograph © Sammy Davis

# Watts: The Hub of the Universe

## Art and Social Change

Curtis L. Carter

### I. Watts

Watts, a 2.5 square mile section of South-East Los Angeles, was originally part of a Mexican land grant subdivided during the 1880s into a grid of small residential lots. Until World War II, the population was more or less equally divided between African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Caucasians. There were also Japanese-Americans living in the Watts area prior to their incarceration, including the famed Tokyo Rose of World War II propaganda broadcasts from Japan.<sup>1</sup> In circa 1912, Watts' Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan, "Watts: The Hub of the Universe" because of the central location of the district which connected Los Angeles and surrounding cities with four electric rail lines. The section of Watts where African Americans settled was called Mudtown.<sup>2</sup> Post-war migration swelled the African-American population eightfold between 1940 to 1960, ultimately resulting in an increase of 87 percent by 1965.<sup>3</sup>

The widely publicized rebellion of 1965 in Watts occurred exactly one century after the enactment of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which outlawed slavery. Enactment of Civil Rights Acts beginning in 1866 were aimed at giving the rights of full citizenship to blacks, and the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution enacted in 1868 provided due process of law for all persons born or naturalized in the United States. Despite these legal provisions and a century of efforts to ensure their implementation, many issues concerning the exercise of these rights and their violation remain unresolved.

Indeed, incidences of racial violence plague our history. During the 19th century, racial violence occurred in Memphis, Tennessee and in New Orleans, Louisiana, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of blacks and the burning of their churches and schools.<sup>4</sup> Problems intensified as soldiers of color returning from World Wars I and II and subsequent international battles were increasingly unwilling to accept racial discrimination from white segregationists. During the "red summer" of 1919, some 25 American cities including Atlanta, Chicago, Houston, and Tulsa experienced racial clashes resulting in bloody street battles.<sup>5</sup> Beyond the physical fights, problems with equal access for African Americans to education and employment opportunities, police brutality, segregation and other forms of discrimination persisted throughout

the 20th century. These conditions triggered the eruption of violence that reduced a section of Los Angeles to rubble in 1965.<sup>6</sup> From the perspective of the citizens of Watts, their rebellion was in response to a perpetual state of violence against African Americans that threatened their well being. The Los Angeles rebellion was not the first nor the last. Los Angeles has experienced recurring incidences since 1965, and riots have taken place in urban centers across the nation including- Newark, Detroit, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee.<sup>7</sup>

The focus of the Haggerty exhibition, **Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965 to 2002**, is the response of African-American artists and others living in Los Angeles during this period, who offered an alternative to the rioters' militant actions. Their projects represent a particular kind of experiment linking art and social change that has not been duplicated in the other centers of urban crisis.

These efforts also differ from earlier efforts by African-American artists and writers to contribute to African-American cultural life. For example, the need to demonstrate that African Americans were able to make significant contributions in literature, arts, and sciences resulted in the creation of the American Negro Academy in 1887. The Academy's purposes were "to produce scholarly materials, to assist youth in attainments reflecting higher culture, and the vindication of the Negro through raising the level of intellectual pursuits."<sup>8</sup> Individual artists, for example Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937) and Josephine Baker (1906-1975), chose to distance themselves from the problems of living in America through exile in Europe. Tanner made a life in Paris and established a distinguished solo career as a painter in a semi-abstract style of expressionist art. Baker found success in Paris as a performer in the European musical theater and also starred in French films. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s produced another approach toward African-American art and literature celebrating the achievements of African-American writers and artists as a significant aspect of world culture. Centered in the Harlem section of New York City, the movement represented a high point of creativity for writers based in New York, including the poet Langston Hughes.

### II. Philosophy of Community Arts

In contrast to the aims of the American Negro Academy, the African American artists in exile, and the Harlem Renaissance respectively, the arts projects in Watts were primarily directed toward social change and community development through the arts. Two principal objectives underlie these programs: to develop opportunities for the artists and to use art to make a difference in the lives of community residents. As artist John Outterbridge has observed, "The period of the sixties was one

of enhanced vision of how art and culture could effectively participate to help build a community, break existing moulds and create an interest in social change. At the time, it was an unconventional way to use the arts. Artists were challenged to think among themselves in new ways. The artists working in the Watts community were not influenced by social activists whose methods involved violence and social disruption.”<sup>9</sup> In this context artists assumed roles intended to make a difference in the environment.

The artists in Watts, as Outterbridge noted, were not threatened with denied access to galleries and museums or to publishers of literary works. They emerged essentially from a culture with no galleries or museums, let alone publishing outlets. Thus, the question became, “If you have no galleries, or museums or writers’ outlets, how do you create them?” As a result, the artists had to create art in the community. This meant redefining the role of the artist. The redefinition resulted in a concept of the artist as one who works in the community to engage, involve, and activate. The artist in these settings is expected to be a caring person committed to developing a community of thought and collaboration where the art produced functions as a cohesive, healing force.

### **III. Community Arts Projects in Watts**

#### **Studio Watts Workshop**

Even before the Watts rebellion, artists in the community had a vision for a community based approach to the arts. Among the first to respond was Studio Watts Workshop founded by James Woods<sup>10</sup> and Guy Miller in 1964; the Workshop was located at 103rd Street and Grandee in South-East Los Angeles. Initial funding was provided by Woods, who had a degree in business from the University of Southern California and was then working for the Great Western Savings and Loan Association, and by his wife, who was a probation officer.<sup>11</sup> The project provided for some 150 students training in visual arts, music, drama, dance, and writing. The manifesto of Studio Watts Workshop is expressed in these words: “We must facilitate the individual’s regaining an awareness of himself as an instrument of change. Studio Watts Workshop supports a cultural democracy to deal with the broad scope of social, technical, and economic problems.”<sup>12</sup>

Woods, who served as the Workshop’s director and administrator, recalls that Studio Watts Workshop functioned as a place for artists to work free from establishment influences and as a catalyst for artists’ projects. As for Guy Miller, he was in charge of visual arts; Jayne Cortez was director of the acting and writing program that led to the Watts Repertory Theater Company. (see Cortez essay in this catalogue) Others involved with the program included Bob Rogers, who taught

design; Carmencita Romero, who taught dance; William Buller, sculptor; and visual artist, John Whitmore. Choreographer Anna Halprin was also associated with the project for a year. The Workshop attracted participants from Watts and various other sections of Los Angeles, many of whom went on to develop successful careers as artists and writers. Among these were the poet John Eric Priestley, who has written an essay for this catalogue, and sculptor Charles Dickson whose work is represented in the exhibition. The approach of the artists was to develop an openness to experimenting with the various arts media, using available materials. In some instances this meant improvisation and adapting materials trashed by the Watts rioters and fires. The projects at the original workshop site ceased when the building was cleared for housing redevelopment around 1972.

Studio Watts Workshop evolved into the Watts Community Housing Corporation in 1969, with James Woods as its first president.<sup>13</sup> With the assistance of a \$600,000 award from the City of Los Angeles and the Federal Housing and Urban Development program (HUD), Watts Community Housing Corporation generated a project now valued at \$35 million, consisting of 104 family units and 40 units reserved for elderly community residents. The initial application to HUD was submitted to HUD’s Experimental Housing Section and included housing for artists as well as for arts programs. When this program was cancelled, HUD placed the Watts Housing Corporation project under its Section 236 Housing Subsidy grant program which required elimination of the arts provisions of the project.<sup>14</sup> At this point, in 1967, the Board of Studio Watts Workshop had to make a decision as to whether to proceed with the housing project and seek other ways to continue its arts programs. Grants from the Doris Duke and the Ford foundations to investigate artists’ roles in the development of low to moderate income housing, as well as support from individuals including Hollywood stars Bill Cosby and Larry Hagman, provided the initial support for continuation of the arts programs. In making the transition from artists’ workshop to community housing, the Studio Watts Workshop successfully achieved the dual objectives of serving the needs of the artists and making a difference in the community environment through its housing project. Today, the Watts Community Housing Project continues to serve the Watts community with housing and arts programs such as the annual Watts Chalk-In, which began in 1966 as part of a street arts festival,<sup>15</sup> and Cultural Walk. Dr. Samella Lewis describes the Chalk-In “as an exciting example of how children are encouraged to become involved in community activities.” She observes that the Watts Chalk-In enables children and young people to “visually express cultural themes that are of significance to the community.”<sup>16</sup> Lewis believes that street art projects represent “... part of a community action program that serves people of all ages.”





Watts Towers

## Watts Towers Arts Center

During the aftermath of the Watts rebellion in 1965, artist Noah Purifoy became the first director of the Watts Towers Arts Center. Assisting him were musician Judson Powell and teacher Sue Welsh. The Center was built on property Rodia abandoned in 1954 located on 103rd Street in the shadow of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers.<sup>17</sup> The Committee for the Simon Rodia Towers, a not-for-profit organization of concerned citizens of Watts, initially formed the Watts Towers Art Center in the 1950s and acted as caretakers of the site between 1954 and 1975 when the property was presented as a gift to the City of Los Angeles. The Committee's efforts to preserve Rodia's towers drew worldwide attention and ultimately blocked efforts of the City of Los Angeles to demolish the monument. The Watts Towers are now a valued cultural landmark of interest to visitors as well as to architects and scholars.

The Center provided Purifoy, Powell and other professional artists the opportunity to design and construct their works; furthermore, it allowed students the occasion to create work for exhibitions. In addition to the Center's ability to attract area adults, collaboration with local schools brought children and teens to the Center, where all could engage in creative arts including visual arts, dancing and making musical instruments. In 1965-1967, the Center also housed a federally funded teen post with a focus on the arts. One of the unique programs was the Watts Towers Theater Workshop directed by Steve Kent of the University of Southern California. Kent introduced improvisation techniques to Watts street youth empowering them to share their stories of urban life after the uprising.

The ideas guiding the Center were derived in part from Purifoy's interest in artistic and philosophical sources such as Dada, Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl. Their investigation into the relevance of cultural objects as a means to confront one's being in a meaningful sense, amidst the mindless effects of everyday objects and routines may have contributed ideas to the vision underlying the Center's mission. At the center of this mission was the belief, or the hope that, art, by serving as a vehicle for communication, could effect social change. To actualize this vision in the social environment of Watts during the 1960s would prove to be a challenge. In the words of Purifoy,

"The concept of developing another language to address black communities and their needs became the driving force behind the era's artistic expressions. The medium and form an artist employed also had to reflect alternatives to traditional Western concepts of beauty and culture to serve the growing sensibilities of revolutionary thought."<sup>18</sup>

In 1975, the Watts Towers Arts Center was transferred to the City of Los Angeles Municipal Arts Department (now the Cultural Affairs Department), which was then led by Kenneth Ross. John Outterbridge became the first director of the Center under the Municipal Arts Department the same year and served in that position until 1992. During this period, the Center flourished as a base for community arts education and drew international attention for its collaborative community arts projects.<sup>19</sup>

### **Watts Writers' Workshop**

Poetry had been an important art in Watts early in the 20th century. Arna Bontemps, noted African-American poet and author, lived in Watts for a time, and brought Langston Hughes to Watts in 1936 for a story telling at the Carnegie Library.<sup>20</sup> Given this established interest in poetry and writing, it is not surprising to find a strong interest in writing after 1965. The Watts Writers' Workshop was initiated in the aftermath of the Watts rebellion, in September, 1965 by Budd Schulberg, a writer whose works included the screen play for *On the Waterfront*. In the introduction to his book, *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts*, Schulberg tells the story of how the Writers' Workshop began.<sup>21</sup> Quite simply, it grew out of a tour Schulberg took to Watts to view the post-rebellion scene, and his desire to do something to help the people there. Schulberg announced a "Creative Writing Workshop" by posting a note on the bulletin board of the Westminster Neighborhood Association, a social service agency sponsored by the Presbyterian Church. After various attempts to interest people in the neighborhood, the first recruit, Charles Johnson, appeared and the project began. Other recruits followed, including Johnnie Scott, John Eric Priestley, and people from all walks of life. It is noted that Johnson, Scott and Priestley are now successful writers and/or scholars.

The Workshop participants had one thing in common: a desire to write—poetry, essays, and stories based on life experiences. Often their writings laid bare "the angers, fears, frustrations" of the people living in Watts. In less than a year the program outgrew the space at the Westminster building and moved to the Watts Happening Coffee House on 103rd Street, which was an abandoned furniture store converted by area youth into an art center. The success of the program drew the attention of the Los Angeles press, and NBC TV devoted an hour of prime time to present "The Angry Voices of Watts" on August 16, 1966. Subsequently the Writers' Workshop found a home in the Frederick Douglass Writers' House, named in honor of a runaway slave who became an orator and leading spokesman for abolition. The Douglass House attracted support from prominent academic, literary, entertainment and political figures from across the country. Among the supporters were writers James Baldwin and John Steinbeck, actors Richard

Burton and Steve Allen, composer Ira Gershwin, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. In 1966, Schulberg and Workshop members Johnnie Scott and Harry Dolan, were invited to testify before the Ribicoff Committee of the United States Congress, which was investigating urban dislocation and the problems of African Americans living in American cities. Overall the Workshop provided opportunities for Watts writers to develop their skills and present their work, and brought to the attention of the nation a new group of talented American writers.

### **Mafundi Institute**

Located on 103rd Street in Watts, the Mafundi Institute was, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article written in 1992, "one of the most vibrant of the performing arts institutions that sprang from the riots."<sup>22</sup> In Swahili, "mafundi" means artisan. UCLA's Professor J. Alfred Cannon and others banded together to form the Institute as a place where people could develop a sense of self-worth through the arts. Their main purpose was to train community residents to work in the arts. With an emphasis on the history of African-American arts, the program included a communicative arts workshop, a drama workshop, a filmmaking workshop, and dance classes. Dancer Marge Champion gave money for a dance floor and her friends came to teach dance classes at the Mafundi Institute. Funding sources included the Federal Model Cities Program and the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. James Taylor, the Institute's first director, left the program in 1970; it ceased operating in 1975.<sup>23</sup>

### **Community Arts Process**

All of above projects reflected a belief that art in the urban setting could best be channeled through the community. Noah Purifoy "remembers the period as a great artistic awakening throughout the community: dropouts found a voice through street theater; preschoolers accompanied the artist on junk hunts down the railroad track; amateurs and professionals did backyard paintings together; senior citizens learned to tie-dye; people of all kinds learned to dance and make musical instruments."<sup>24</sup> In the early days, Purifoy believed that art could effect social change, but he later realized that art alone may not be sufficient to rescue the ravished community of Watts. Increased gang violence and crime in Watts and the disappearance of community arts programs were indications that the changes in human behavior that Purifoy and others involved in the community arts had expected did not occur unilaterally. Schulberg, too, recognized the limits of a creative writing class in Watts. It was only a small beginning, given all of the problems of the writers, let alone the larger community, whose members might be homeless, without jobs and frequently subject to discrimination and abuse from the police.<sup>25</sup> Testimony to the importance of the program lies in the many writers who emerged from it to develop their own careers as

important voices for African Americans and as notable contributors to American culture.

The efforts of the Studio Watts Workshop, the Watts Towers Arts Center, the Watts Writers' Workshop, and the Mafundi Institute often took place in a hostile environment and with limited funding. All four institutions were positioned, so to speak, on the battle lines along 103rd Street, in the heart of where the riots took place. Frustration, anger, and the threat of violence were never far away.

Particularly distressing was the destruction in 1973 of the public art piece, *Oh Speak, Speak*, (1970), located at the corner of 103rd and Beach streets. The piece had been erected to celebrate the land acquisition for the Watts Community Housing Corporation project, from the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles.<sup>26</sup> Artists John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson, Elliott Pinkney, Dale Davis, Nate Ferance and engineer Tom Little worked on the piece.<sup>27</sup> At the time *Oh Speak, Speak* was destroyed, community residents believed the Studio Watts Workshop and other African-American community network organizations were infiltrated by FBI operatives. Some residents attributed the burning of *Oh Speak, Speak* and the sabotage and burning of the Watts Writers' Workshop theater to a confessed FBI informant known as Darthard Perry, whose aliases included Ed Riggs and Othello.<sup>28</sup>

As part of assessing these projects, it is important to realize the extent of mutual support and collaboration from individuals and institutions essential to the projects' success. Studio Watts Workshop was a catalyst for other community arts developments. For example, a group called The Meeting At Watts Towers was founded in the early 1970s to exchange information and encourage collaboration for the community based arts network in Watts.<sup>29</sup> This group was established after Studio Watts Workshop received a grant from the Ford Foundation to advance community arts. The participants included a broad range of organizations from the Watts Station House Development Foundation to the Mothers of Watts. Individuals such as Cecil Ferguson, curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, also contributed to the cultural life of Watts after 1965. Known as a community curator and historian, Ferguson organized art shows incorporating African American arts in alternative community spaces from churches and malls to prisons. He directed the Watts Summer Festival for 10 years.<sup>30</sup>

Also important in facilitating the Watts arts projects was the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, a union-sponsored not-for-profit organization led by Ted Watkins. Established in 1965, the goal of WLCAC was to apply union skills and organizational experience to improve and revitalize the Watts



John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson,  
Elliott Pinkney, Dale Davis, Nate Ferance  
and Tom Little  
*Oh, Speak, Speak*, 1970  
Mixed media  
Destroyed in 1973

community through the provision of neglected services. The WLCAC Union members' experience was especially useful during the late 1960s and 1970s in guiding the impact of community arts projects on city government.<sup>31</sup> The WLCAC programs incorporated community arts, and subsequently led to the establishment of a museum in Watts to document the Civil Rights Movement.

## V. Artists

The visual artists and writers represented in the Haggerty exhibition -- Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson, Dale Davis, Jayne Cortez, Elliott Pinkney, Eric Priestley, and Johnie Scott – all participated in community-based arts organizations in Watts during the period from 1965 to the present. Their work drew support from a wide range of sponsorship: churches, civic groups, sororities and fraternities, libraries, and city and federally sponsored projects.

### Noah Purifoy

From his days as an art student at Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles (1951–54), Noah Purifoy resisted the traditional approach to art based on drawing and painting. Instead he chose to “find his own way,” inspired in part by the Dada artist Marcel Duchamp, who challenged the boundaries of art and explored the connections between every day objects and art. The Brockman Gallery director Dale Davis remembers Purifoy as an artist who challenged the community with his art. “He was controversial, not well understood but interesting to those who gathered around the Brockman Gallery.”<sup>32</sup>

Purifoy's background as a social worker made him conscious of the needs of at risk members of society, and he determined to use his art to advance social change.

Both the Duchampian influence and his commitment to art as a means of social change influenced his choice of materials and the form of his art. The debris from the riots provided a natural starting point for the materials, and the wasted urban shapes already reduced to abstractions called for abstract forms in the art. “Purifoy was struck by a thought: What if these people could look at junk in another way—as a symbol of their being in the world,....What effect could art have upon the people who are living right inside of it? ‘Junk’ means wasted unusable material. Transferred to human beings it means a life of despair, uselessness, and hopelessness. The resurrection of the discarded material could represent the resurrection of the people who have been discarded by circumstance.”<sup>33</sup>

Most of Purifoy's pieces in the Haggerty exhibition, with the exception of *Watts Riot*, (1966) are from later stages in his



Noah Purifoy

career; much of his early work was lost or discarded when he left the Watts Towers Arts Center. It is nevertheless important to refer to these early pieces. The medium he chose was “assemblage,” a type of three dimensional collage, or work that is predominantly *assembled* as opposed to painted, drawn, molded, or carved.<sup>34</sup> *Watts Riot* was created from charred wood taken from the rubble left from the actual riots. Both literally and metaphorically, the piece symbolizes the tragedy of the Watts rebellions. But it also emerges from the artist's imagination and hand as a formal work of pristine quality. Another work from this period, *66 Signs of Neon*, (1966), was also formed out of junk left by the riots. Purifoy intended that the lesson of artists transforming junk into art would inspire creativity and encourage viewers to shape their lives in meaningful directions.

Two of Purifoy's works in the Haggerty exhibition, *Black, Brown and Beige*, (after Duke Ellington) and *Snowhill* were executed in 1989, shortly after the artist resigned as a founding member of the California Arts Council and resumed full time work as an artist. The piece referencing Duke Ellington is a 68 by 113 inch wall relief constructed of inlaid wooden strips with finger-like shapes at the top. This work signals Purifoy's identification with African-American culture, and reaffirms his standing as a major artist. *Snowhill*, is an abstract assemblage constructed of junk materials. The title of the piece suggests a reference to the artist's birth place in Snow Hill, Alabama. The piece itself perhaps depicts an aerial landscape of this small southern community.<sup>35</sup> The remaining works of Purifoy are recent pieces executed in the desert setting of Joshua Tree, where the artist has lived and worked since 1989 in what he calls an outdoor desert art museum.

### John Outterbridge

After a tour of U.S. military duty in Europe, John Outterbridge studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago from 1956 to 1959 and arrived in California in 1963, just before the Watts rebellion. His stature as an artist of national standing is paralleled by a distinguished career as the director of two important community arts centers in Watts and Compton, California and as an active member of the Los Angeles arts community.<sup>36</sup> Like Purifoy, Outterbridge appropriated his themes and materials from discarded objects, trash, junk, and objects he found. The theme of discarded materials was used to symbolize the plight of persons living in a damaged environment where they felt as if they were treated as discarded human beings. The use of available materials was also a matter of necessity as well as choice for Purifoy and Outterbridge, as the artists could not afford conventional art materials. Both artists would agree that their work as artists was tempered by a need to satisfy the social demands of their work in community arts. Purifoy once remarked to Outterbridge, "This work we do has more to do with creating tools for social change than it has to do with making art."<sup>37</sup>

From the 1960s to the present, Outterbridge's work evolved through different series. First came the Containment Series of the post-rebellion sixties. It features urban debris that attempts to link art to processes; then came the Rag Man Series using scraps of cloth to fashion tightly bound doll-like images that symbolize human struggles in the process of refashioning broken lives. Later, Outterbridge developed the Ethnic Heritage Group, addressing the problems of identity and heritage.<sup>38</sup> In these series, Outterbridge's work quietly addresses the societal injustices perceived through time by African Americans, without succumbing to violent imagery. His images invite dialogue rather than political or physical confrontation on the issues African Americans face. This includes matters of societal inequities and the urban blight

that surrounds the lives of so many.

With the exception of his drawings for *Oh Speak, Speak*<sup>39</sup> (1970s to present) and *Window*, (1991)<sup>40</sup> most of Outterbridge's pieces in the Haggerty exhibition are from the *Ethnic Heritage Series*. These works were mainly executed after the artist left the Watts Towers Arts Center in 1992 to devote full-time to creating new art. *Déjà vu-Do*, was initially created in the early 1970s and entitled *Captive Image*. The piece was renamed in 1992 to link the Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police with the Watts riots of 1965. A small U.S. flag was draped over the captive slave image, as if to say, "Here we go again."

And in *The Hay the Children Won't Play*, (1991) is a visual rendering of a poem that Outterbridge wrote:

And the birds won't sing  
And the bells won't ring  
And the flowers won't grow  
And the rivers won't flow  
And the children won't play.  
The Children.<sup>41</sup>

*In Search of the Missing Mule*, (1993) *Pot of Lie Lye*, (1993) and *Remnants Unclaimed*, (2001) are part of the artist's concern with ethnic heritage and memories relating to ancestors. The 12 foot "Missing Mule" is constructed of fabricated dark steel with extended wooden stick arms. From one arm hangs a metal coupling to attach the missing mule; from the other, a hangman's noose. Both symbolize the double constraints that African Americans have experienced, when enslaved or as victims of social injustice. *Pot of Lye Lie*, a piece created in memory of the artist's grandmother, is one of a series of works Outterbridge produced to consecrate his studio space. *Remnants Unclaimed* is part of a developing series of abstract metal works based on the theme of expansion, with references to the bracelets of slaves.

### Charles Dickson

Charles Dickson studied at Studio Watts Workshop and also taught at the Compton Art Center and the Watts Towers Arts Center with John Outterbridge. Similar to the previous artists, he has been active in the Watts community arts and professionally in galleries throughout Los Angeles and elsewhere. His work includes public sculpture as well as gallery pieces. Dickson's sculpture draws upon African tribal cultures and the African-American experience. His work also reflects an interest in science and technology. Like Purifoy and Outterbridge, Dickson's sculpture includes assemblage and is constructed of carved wood, as well as discarded materials. However, he also works in bronze, as is evident from a recent commis-

sioned bust of the former United Nations Secretary General Ralph Bunche. The titles of his pieces in the Haggerty exhibition: *I Feel the Spirit*, and *Spirit Dance*, (both from 1988), and *Bongo Congo: Mobilization of the Spirit*, (1989) all reflect their connections to African culture. The first two are carved totem-like designs made from pieces of wood specially selected for their natural shapes, with fetishes attached. *Bongo Congo* is a complex three dimensional construction consisting of a chariot-like structure on wheels fronted by a masked figure. Protruding from the front of the structure and holding up the mask is a human arm fronted by a clenched fist carved of wood with inlaid design. Throughout the remaining structure are fetishes and various extensions of rope, chain, and steel pins.

### **Elliott Pinkney**

Elliott Pinkney is a mural painter, sculptor, and poet. He is best known for his murals developed in Los Angeles on the theme of African-American pride and the importance of understanding between different cultures. He too worked in community arts programs at the Compton Communicative Arts Academy. In 1972, Pinkney was commissioned to work on the public art sculpture, *O Speak, Speak* with Outterbridge. One of his recent murals is located on the site of Watts Towers Arts Center. Pinkney's mural *Watts Happened* was created on site in the Haggerty Museum as a part of the exhibition, **Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002**. The 8 by 16 foot mural includes images of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the mayor and police chief of Los Angeles. These are set against a fiery red background, a looming image of death with a gun in one hand and a syringe dripping blood, and symbols of police brutality amidst white doves of peace. In the very center foreground is a hand with a time clock. The work is a commentary on the time-line of events linking the riots of 1965 and 1992 with the present.

### **Dale Davis**

Dale Davis and his brother Alonzo ran the Brockman Gallery located on Degnan Boulevard in South-Central Los Angeles from 1968 to 1991. Brockman Gallery was a major force in the African-American arts movement beginning in the 1960s. Jacob Lawrence, Charles White, Elizabeth Cattlet, Noah Purifoy, and John Outterbridge were among the major artists represented by the gallery. This gallery served middle class members of the public who were interested in collecting art. Frequently the art was purchased on "the lay-away" installment plan. Davis's art works often began in the classroom, where he used his own experience as a working artist to teach art to his students at Dorsey High School in South-East Los Angeles. His ceramic and bamboo works represented in the Haggerty exhibition respond to his environment in South-Central Los Angeles and the places he has traveled. The

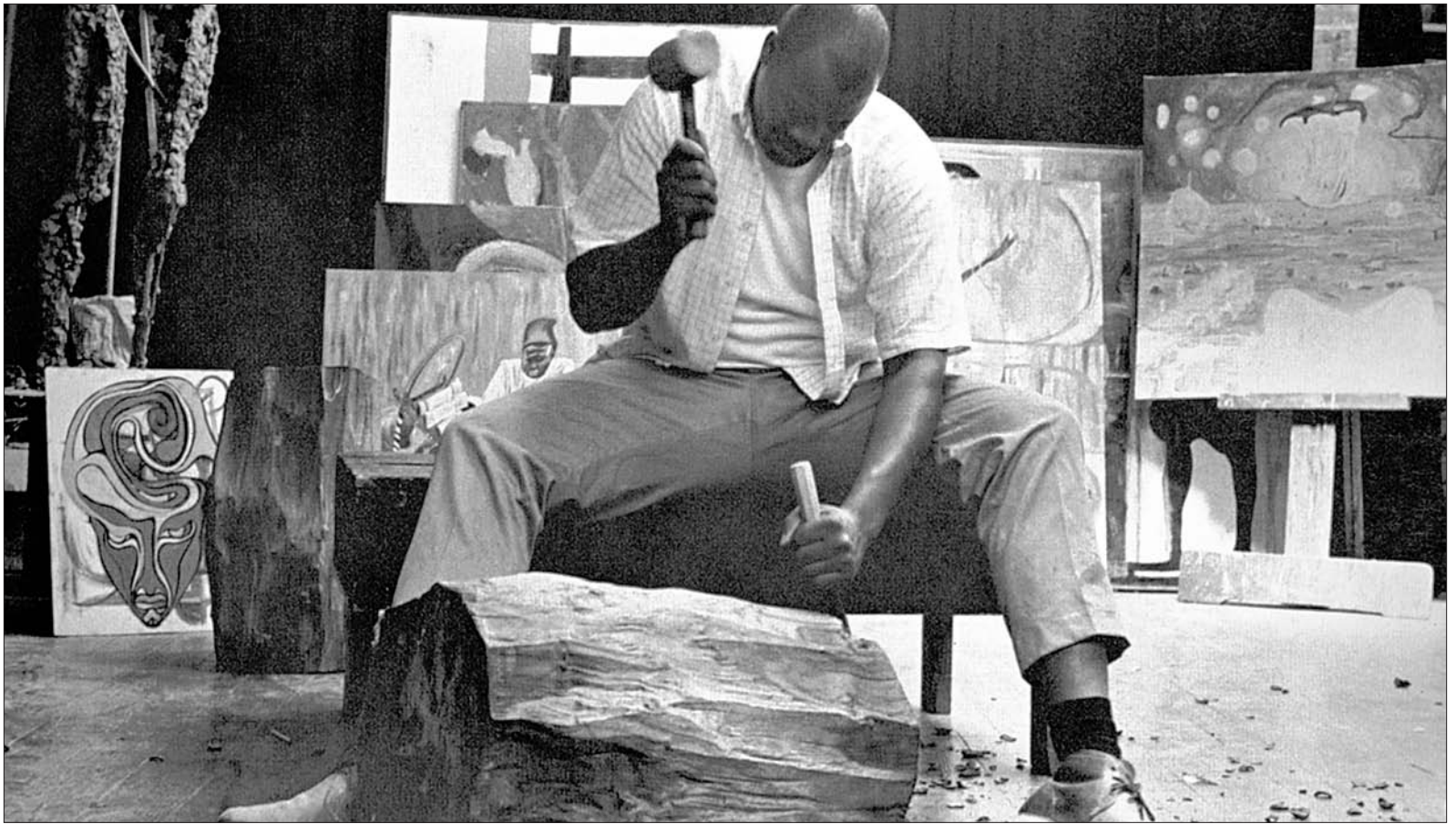
works are often whimsical, but do not shy away from social or political commentary.

## **VI. Outcomes**

On balance, the visionary people who launched and sustained the Watts arts projects deserve high praise. Their work did make a difference. It is easy to imagine the doubts and the persistence required to commit major portions of time to developing the projects instead of devoting full energy to an individual career as an artist. For example, John Outterbridge, whose work extends for the longest period of time among the artists involved in the Watts arts projects, recalls a call from *Time Magazine* in 1970, which would have garnered national attention to his career. Instead of taking the opportunity to speak with the magazine reporter, he referred the call to another artist in the community.<sup>42</sup> As for Noah Purifoy, he left the Watts Towers Arts Center in 1976 to accept an appointment from then Governor Jerry Brown to the California Arts Council, where he continued his efforts to advance community based arts education for the next 11 years. His experience in Watts was an important factor in the arts education projects for community based arts programs, as well as for educational programs at the state's larger arts institutions, which he helped to create and fund in his new position.

The pioneering efforts of James Woods at Studio Watts Workshop; Noah Purifoy, Judson Powell, and John Outterbridge at the Watts Towers Arts Center; Budd Schulberg and Harry Dolan at the Writers' Workshop; J. Alfred Cannon and James Taylor at Mafundi and the many others who contributed to these amazing projects did make a difference in the quality of life for the individuals who participated and for the overall community. They demonstrated that art can be a means of social change and hope in the lives of individuals by contributing to improvements in self-image and community identity.

Not the least important is the role of Watts' experimental arts projects as a model for artists' participation in the community, and for the arts as a central part of education. Literally thousands of youth, younger and older artists, and members of the public in the Watts community received education in and through these arts projects that provided experience and skills in the arts. Many individuals, including the participants in this exhibition, were motivated to become professional artists and writers. For a relatively small community, Watts has produced a significant amount of major talent in the visual arts, music, literary arts, and theater. In addition to the artists included in the exhibition, there are numerous others who exhibited or performed in the Watts Summer Festivals and other venues in Watts who achieved prominence: visual artists David Hammons, David Mosley, Betye Saar, and John



Studio Watts Workshop

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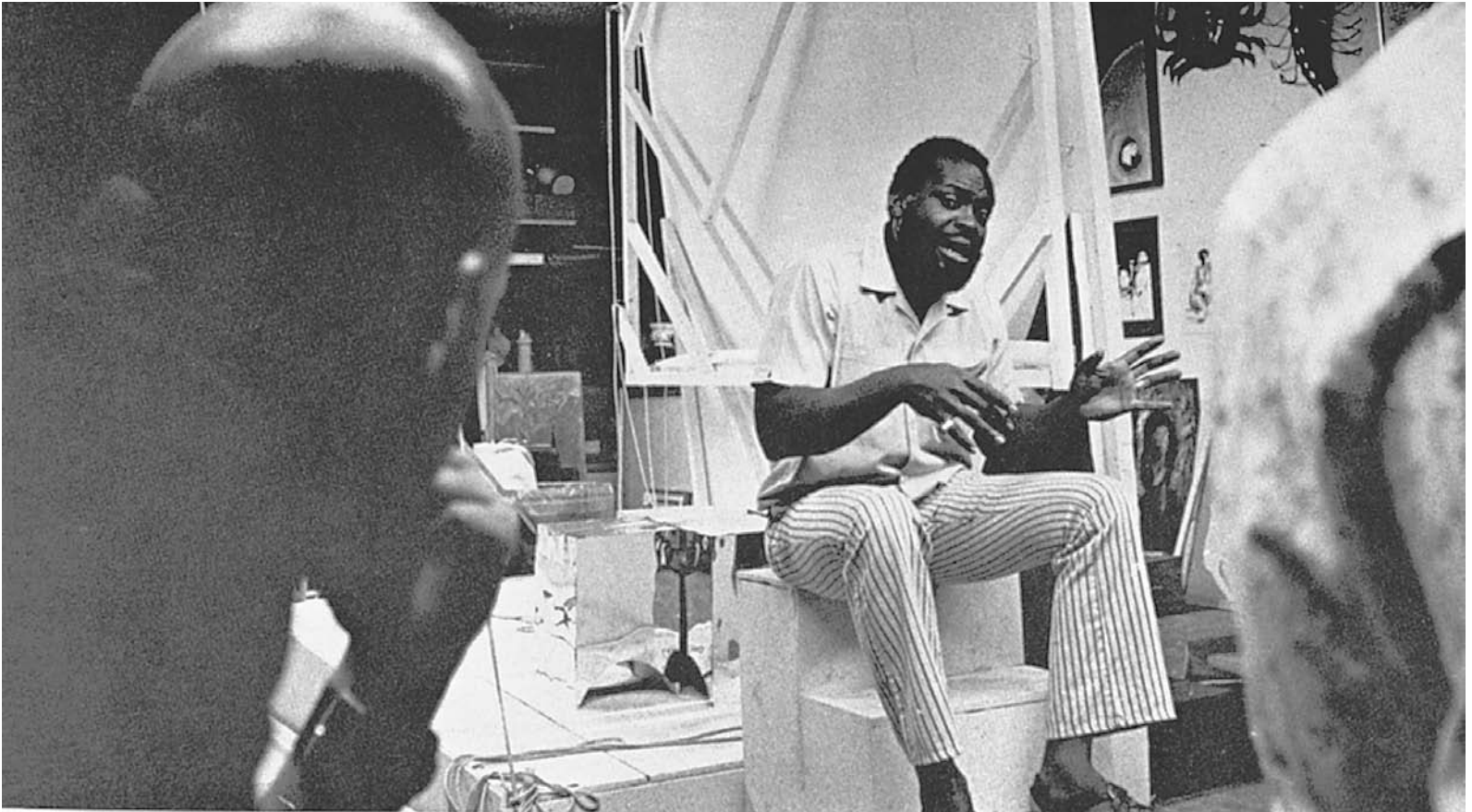
Whitmore; musicians Buddy Collette and Billy Higgins; writers Quincy Throop and Odie Hawkins; actors Roger Mosley and Paula Kelly to name a few.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, the Watts arts projects for social change offered lasting tangible benefits. The Studio Watts Community Housing Corporation developed an immediate contribution to the artistic culture of Watts and an on-going contribution to material well being in the form of affordable housing for residents. This project serves as a model for community based collaboration between the arts and other community institutions in community development. The Watts Towers Arts Center continues to serve as a center for education and display of African-American art and operates under the auspices of the City of Los Angeles as part of the landmark Watts Towers area. It has become a site for tourists to visit, along side Simon Rodia's Towers. In the summer of 2002, the City of Los Angeles began installing plaques to honor community members important in the history of the Watts Towers Arts

Center, including a monument honoring artist John Outterbridge for his work with the Center. The Watts Labor Community Action Committee founded the Watts Civil Rights Museum as a repository for civil rights memorabilia. Its programs include cultural projects involving artists.

Especially important is the role of the Watts community arts projects in focusing the attention of the governing powers of the City of Los Angeles on the need to address its pressing social problems. In the broader scheme these efforts were part of the actions that led to a greater role for African Americans in the governance of the City of Los Angeles at the level of city council and, city commissions. Most notable was the election of a black mayor from 1977 to 1993.<sup>44</sup> These political achievements, in turn, brought greater attention to the problems of Watts, which triggered funding in support of the Watts Community Housing Corporation, the Watts Community Arts Center, and other social services enterprises.

The physical environment in Watts has changed notably and it has become visually and culturally a desirable community warranting civic pride. This change is in part attributable to the achievements of the artists and community arts projects



Studio Watts Workshop

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working in collaboration with the City of Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency and other city agencies. Yet amid the cultural successes and beautification, the social environment in Watts has not changed. The accomplishments of the artists' and writers' projects in Watts from 1965 to the present did not succeed in a radical transformation of the social environment as its leaders had envisioned. Gang warfare continues to plague the Watts neighborhoods where these projects took place, and incidences of racial injustice and recurring police abuses of power against African Americans and others living in Watts have not ceased. The Rodney King affair in 1992 and the incident involving the contested arrest of a young African-American boy in nearby Inglewood in 2001 attest to these on-going problems. Perhaps if there were greater opportunities for participation in alternative arts programs for youth in the community today, as in the "golden years" of Watts after the riots, there would be more creative solutions and greater hope of solving these problems.



1. Reportedly, the famed Tokyo Rose of World War II, who was born Iva Tagori, lived in Watts where her father farmed ranches near Will Rogers Park and had a vegetable store. She attended Compton High School and UCLA, and left for Japan prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, before her family was incarcerated in an American detention facility where Japanese Americans were relocated during World War II. See Mary Ellen Bell Ray, *The City of Watts California, 1907 to 1926* (Los Angeles: Rising Co., 1985), p. 26.
2. Although the Watts schools were integrated, African Americans established their own churches. At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a distinct section of Watts called Mudtown, where African Americans migrating from Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas resettled. This area was known as "the Black section of Watts." Bell Ray, *The City of Watts California*, p. 34.
3. David Wyatt, *Five Fires: Race, Catastrophe, and the Shaping of California* (New York: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), p. 209. See also, Nathan Cohen, *The Los Angeles Race Riots: A Socio-psychological Study*, edited by Nathan Cohen, (New York: Praeger Publishers, in cooperation with the Institute of Government and Public Affairs, University of California Los Angeles, 1970).
4. *The African American Mosaic: A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture*, edited by Deborah Newman Ham (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1993), pp. 96, 102.
5. *Ibid.* Lee Williams II, *Post War Riots in American 1919 and 1946: How the Pressures of War Exacerbated American Urban Tensions to the Breaking Point* (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.)
6. See Nathan Cohen, *The Los Angeles Riot: A Socio-Psychological Study* (New York: Praeger, 1970). A Robert Fogelson, *The Los Angeles Riots* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969).
7. David Boesel and Peter H. Rossi, editors, *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of the Ghetto Riots 1964-1968* (New York: Basic Books, 1971). See also Robert E. Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).
8. *The African American Mosaic*, p. 147. See also, Alfred Moss, *The American Negro Academy: Voice of the Talented Tenth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.)
9. John Outterbridge, Interview in Los Angeles with the author, February 22, 2002.
10. According to James M. Woods, his own initial interest in the arts was a result of a visit to a museum in Houston, Texas where he grew up. During this visit he realized that "the only way for black people to be exposed to culture was through arts institutions." He resolved to find ways to increase these opportunities for African American youth and others through his work in community arts. Author's interview with James M. Woods, December 15, 2002.
11. Author's interview with James M. Woods, December 15, 2002. At the time Woods was with the Great Western Savings and Loan Association and was responsible for a survey of properties in the Watts area. Woods recalls that the Great Western Savings and Loan Association provided support for the Studio Watts Workshop beginning in 1965, and contributed approximately \$4,000 over a period of time.
12. James M. Woods, *Studio Watts*, Promotional Brochure, 1974.
13. Leon Whiteson, "Studio Watts Uses Art as a Tool for Social Change," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 9, 1986, p. E 12.
14. Author interview with James M. Woods, December 15, 2002.
15. James M. Woods, *Studio Watts*, 1974, pp. 13-14.
16. Dr. Samella Lewis, "Street Art By Black Americans," in *An Exhibit of Street Art by Black Americans* (Houston, Texas: Exxon Company U. S. A., 1973), p. 5.
17. George Hill, "Simon's Vision," *New World*, 1976, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 24-27, 96.
18. Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins "Noah Purifoy: Outside and In the Open," *Noah Purifoy: Outside and in the Open*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: California Afro-American Museum Foundation, 1997), p. 11. Much of the information on the Watts Towers Arts Center and the work of Noah Purifoy is indebted to this catalogue, which accompanied an exhibition of Purifoy's work shown at the California African-American Museum, Los Angeles, January 25-July 27, 1997. The exhibition also traveled to the African American Museum in Dallas, Texas; Clark Atlanta University Art Galleries, Atlanta, Georgia, and Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, California.
19. After Outterbridge's departure, Mark Greenfield, a civil service employee from the Los Angeles police department became director and served until 2001. During this period the Center veered from its focus on the neighborhood artists and arts programs and became detached from the Watts community. Rosie Lee Hooks became director in 2001 and is in the process of redirecting the Center to its original purposes.
20. Bell Ray, *The City of Watts California*, p. 31. Arna Bontemps had held a story telling session at the library the previous year.
21. Budd Schulberg, Introduction to *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts*, edited by Budd Schulberg (New York: The New American Library, 1967) pp. 1-26. Originally published in *Playboy Magazine*, 1967, Copyright, Budd Schulberg, 1967. See also John Eric Priestley, *The Spirit of Art: Art and Social Change 1965-2002* in this publication.
22. David Colker and Marc Lacey, "From Watts Riot Ashes: Bright Hopes, Heartaches," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992.
23. Colker and Lacey, *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992.
24. "A Day With the Experts in the Arts," October 26, 1974. Cited in Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins, *Noah Purifoy: Outside and in the Open*, exhibition catalogue, p. 10.
25. See, for example, "The Trial of T," printed in the appendix to Schulberg, *From the Ashes*, pp. 261-75. This story recounts the experience of T, one of the members of the Writers' Workshop, with the Los Angeles police.
26. Thoughts in the Watts community regarding who was responsible for the destruction of *Oh Speak, Speak* differ. Some individuals believe that the piece was destroyed at the instigation of the Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles according to James M. Woods. Woods noted that the sculpture was placed on property of the Redevelopment Agency without proper legal clearance. Author's interview with James M. Woods, December 15, 2002. Others attributed the destruction of the piece to F.B.I. informant Darthard Perry. See footnote 28.
27. Dr. Samella Lewis, "Street Art By Black Americans," pp. 1-6.
28. Roger Rapoport, "The Man the FBI Used to Destroy the Black Movement in Los Angeles," *Mother Jones*, April, 1977, pp. 21-23. Darthard Perry began as a janitor and worked up to the position of technical director for theatrical productions at the Watts Writers' Workshop under Harry Dolan, director of the program. Reportedly, Perry confessed to sabotaging the Workshop's fund raising mailings, mailing lists, and TV equipment. He then cancelled the Workshop's insurance and set fire to the theater, forcing the Workshop to cease operations. See also Tom Thompson, "Snooping: Black Politicos, KPFK Bugged, Testifies FBI Informant," *Los Angeles Free Press*, Oct. 31-Nov. 6, 1975.
29. Participants in The Meeting at the Watts Towers included the following: John Blaine, director of Studio Watts Workshop, who served as secretary; Guy Miller, director of Studio 103; Freita Shaw Johnson, director of the Watts Station House Development Foundation; Maurice McGehee, principal, Watts Skill Center; Ditta Olikier, programs officer of the Center Theater Group; Edna Lewis Manyhand, director, Our Thing Cultural Center (Long Beach); Luis Hernandez, Chicanos Young Adult Club; and Rose Robinson, Mothers of Watts. Among the achievements of The Meeting at Watts Towers was a grant from the Los Angeles area Model Cities Agency to fund cultural programs during 1970-71. See James M. Woods, *Studio Watts*, 1974, p. 20.
30. Edward J. Boyer, "Curator An Icon for Black Artists," *Los Angeles Times*, March 30, 1990
31. The Watts Community Labor Action Council (WCLAC) was founded in 1965 after the Watts Riots, by labor union members living in Watts. The WCLAC was under the leadership of Ted Watkins (1922-1993), a labor leader who lived in Watts. The group had the support and encouragement of seven international unions and staff members from the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations. See the web page at [wlcac.org.history.htm](http://wlcac.org.history.htm). The former Will Rogers Park in Watts has been renamed after Ted Watkins. See "Watkins of Watts," *Reporter*, vol. 38 (Jan. 25, 1968): 36-38 and "Remember Watts," *Newsweek*, vol. 81, (Feb. 19, 1973): 37.
32. Author's interview with Dale Davis, December 9, 2002.
33. Joyce E. Widoff, "In Watts: Out of the Ashes... Art and Understanding," *Tuesday Magazine: Chicago Sun Times*, August 1968, vol. 3 no. 12, p. 5.
34. William C. Seitz, *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961).



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35. LeFalle-Collins, p. 31, states that Snow Hill refers to the small southern town in Alabama where Purifoy was born.

36. Alonzo Davis, "Interview: Outterbridge," *New World: A Quarterly of the Inner City Cultural Center*, 1976, vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 28-30.

37. Author's interview, John Outterbridge, December 7, 2002.

38. Leslie King-Hammond, "John Outterbridge Griot, Teacher, Artist," *John Outterbridge: A Retrospective*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: California African American Museum Foundation, 1994), p. 4.

39. John Outterbridge reports that the City of Los Angeles has plans to reinstall *Oh Speak, Speak* on its original site. Author's interview with John Outterbridge, December 5, 2002.

40. *Window*, 1991 was the first piece created in a new studio-factory space, made avail-

able to Outterbridge through the collaboration of Barry and Janet Baszile, owners of BMS Metals. BMS Metals provided free space for Outterbridge's work from 1990 to 1994, in exchange for an annual gift of sculpture to the Company's art collection.

41. Author's interview, John Outterbridge, December 7, 2002.

42. The artist who answered the call for a story on Black America from *Time Magazine* in 1970 was David Hammons. He left for New York shortly afterward to pursue his art. Hammons and Outterbridge considered moving to New York together, but Outterbridge remained in Los Angeles where he successfully sustained a joint career in community arts and as an artist.

43. The Watts Summer Festival which began in 1966 was founded by community activist Tommy Chaquette, whose shrewd organizational skills helped make this event a success.

44. Raphael Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

# The Spirit of Art

## Art and Social Change: 1965–2002

Eric Priestley

I believe “art” to be the *soul* of any culture. I suggest that if one wants to see just how *fine* a culture is, how *civilized* and *progressive*, then one must look at the way said culture treats their artist. The larger question is, can we use **art** to implement **social change**? If it is possible, then **how**?

**How?**

So you want to know how?  
go up the 3rd & east to the projects then,  
& sudden Downs like splinters rise  
nails, scrap metal factories, stones  
they grow astigmatic ibises  
weird loose young ones  
sixteen going on sixty-six  
these Quo Vadis origami black heads  
erect psychic walls  
they learn to feel no feeling  
the emptiness spreads  
like an unholy water  
& leaks contempt from a wound  
that never heals  
**you may not understand this** <sup>1</sup>

You have no idea what it means to have your career systematically dismantled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. No, you do not understand. You do not understand what it means to have the project space where you sang your poetry, invented your stories, celebrated the spirit, history and survival of your ancestors burned to the ground. I do! As an original Member of the Frederick Douglass Watts Writers’ Workshop, I can say that I do understand it, because it happened to me and to the Members of the Watts Writers’ Workshop. Frankly, I am not sure it is possible to rectify social conditions through art. Let’s first assume that it cannot be done. What was the state of art in Watts in 1965, what is the state of it now in 2002? Can art change society for the better?

### Cloak and Dagger resisting social change: the Riot in Watts

The artist seeks—rather what he should seek—through his art is a universal meaning to the space-time we are given between birth and death: existence. Here is the conundrum, which sets the artist apart from all the other people working and contributing to society: the educators, politicians, scientists and the rest. Our situation—being black, black on black crime—it all really compounds an already disturbing dilemma.

Black people were in a war on three fronts in 1965: (1. United

States in Viet Nam War, (2. at home in Watts with the Civil Rights movement thwarted by the efforts of the (3. FBI (COIN-TELPRO, FBI acronym: “counterintelligence program.” <sup>2</sup>

The role of the artist in Watts in 1965 demanded that we sought, through art, to improve the quality of life in Watts. So we built the Watts Writers’ Workshop Theater.

Yet, in 1973, Darthard Perry, Special Agent for the F.B.I.—code name “Othello”—infiltrated the Frederick Douglass Watts Workshop Theater and burned it to the ground. Today in 2002, the Los Angeles City Department of Cultural Affairs, seeks to act in concert with the FBI: purportedly to build a Junior Arts Center in Watts, and in the same breath, destroy and demolish the building where resides the last remnants of that organization—myself and my place of residence as an artist for the past 20 years. Now that’s progress!

Despite this skullduggery, I write because I have to write, because my life would be unbearable and I could not imagine living life if I could not write. I don’t know whether *this* is “art” and I don’t care. We (Watts Writers) wrote because we enjoyed it. The first and most important lesson in the Douglass House–Watts Writers’ Workshop was and is that we used writing as “catharsis” to vent rage, anger.

The “artist of color”, who happens to be male, has a whole different set of questions presented to him by society. Questions, which must be answered by his/her art – little step by little step toward an overwhelming and compelling giant step of universal clarity. The problem—usually a foible of society: bigotry, discrimination, ignorance propagated from fear—is pointed out by the artist. The artist, analogously, says to the public through his/her art, ‘Look at this! This is what’s wrong. This is what needs to be fixed. Fix it!’

In reality, most Black people in America are so caught up in the day-to-day struggle of simply staying alive, that the very *idea* or mention of “art,” is both alien and absurd to them. Since, being alone, black and invisible is a condition, which both frightens and troubles most people. The discipline of art makes the artist extraordinary.

The overall results of the efforts we made were quite compelling in that, almost none of the venues, which were at our artistic disposal in 1965 still exist today in 2002.

Jazz venues, as were artistic venues in Watts after August of 1965, were plentiful in Los Angeles. I had an opportunity to meet: John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner, Art Blakey, Lee Morgan, Theolonious Monk and a list too numerous to mention. If one wanted to hear Live Jazz there were: the Lighthouse, Shelly’s Manhole, the Parisian Room, Melody Lane and John T. McClain’s “It Club”.

The venues in Watts after the revolt were: Studio Watts, the Coffee House, Douglass House, Mafundi, Watts Towers and the Watts Writers Workshop Theater.

Now (2002), we have Watts Towers Art Center and Mafundi. The later doesn't really welcome community-based artists as a rule. Now (2002), we have the Catilina Club to hear Live Jazz.

In the reality of these changes do we find humanity? Here where power holds sway, resides the place where the artist goes into dark territory of history—one upon which we would rather not gaze. The dust of summer settles, and the artist—if he/she prevails, takes these despicable sights from under the rug and holds them up to the light for us to examine, change and clean for the springtime. Contemporary Modern Art, thus is so very important. It is because Contemporary Modern Art is **social change**.

Let us just forget about Melvin Tolson, his influence on my writing—he was a major influence—and the motif of the *Riot* for a moment. Let us pretend that he never wrote *The Harlem Gallery*, that there was no *Harlem Renaissance*, no American slavery, Civil War, lynching, Jim Crow South, Sit-ins, Marches, murders of Civil Rights workers, or any of the things which ultimately served as the canon fodder which brought about the Watts riots of 1965.

Most will probably not have any idea *who* Melvin Beaunorus Tolson is, or *was*. This is not unusual. Karl Shapiro's words about Tolson's poetry were just as valid in 1965 as now 2002. This is important because whether a work can withstand the test of time, to a great extent determines whether it is "art" or political gamesmanship. Shapiro so poignantly noted in his Introduction to the Harlem Gallery, "Poetry today is an established institution which has many characteristics of a closed corporation. (One of the rules of the poetic establishment is that Negroes are not admitted to the polite company of the anthology.) Poetry, as we know it, remains the most lily-white of the arts." Ironically, the Harlem Gallery was published in 1965, which is the same year the *Riot* came to Watts.

Shapiro went on to say of Tolson, "Instead of purifying the tongue (English language), which is the business of the Academy, he is complicating it, giving it the gift of tongues. Pound, Elliot, and Joyce did this, but with a pernicious nostalgia that all but killed the patient."

We observe from this, that although English is the mother tongue of America, Americans do not, indeed, speak English. We speak American-English, Spanglish, dialects and derivatives of English. Tolson demonstrated the truth of this inventiveness in the different characters, their dialects and rich



Melvin Edwards, *The Watts Rebellion, Los Angeles, 1965*  
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in., collection of the artist

variation in The Harlem Gallery.

Thus, in *the Riot* I give you a glimpse at what Shapiro meant by, " ... the door to poetry that everyone has been looking for,"<sup>3</sup> which is in direct defiance, as Shapiro aptly points out, to the comment by Gertrude Stein, who said of Tolson, that the Negro, "Suffers from Nothingness."

The *point* is an example of historical revisionism. A corollary to the point, is that a culture which does not learn from the mistakes of the past (1965) is doomed to commit those same



bars with their bare hands, smashing plate glass windows (ergo the sound of wind chimes was glass breaking in the street) an agitated swarm of African bees, the full blown riot.

The looters traveled North down Central Avenue from 116th and Avalon Boulevard onto 103rd Street—the main drag in Watts—became known as “**Charcoal Alley**”. I walked from 42nd and Central up Central—into the eye of the riot storm—until I reached 92nd Street, where my aunt lived. I saw a guy get shot, who ran across the street with a TV set—flip in the air like a mechanical man—and fall dead not a stone’s throw from a funeral home. I saw other people die during my trek. I was twelve years old the first time I saw somebody die by violence. I saw people die on Central Avenue that Friday the 13th. The looting, stealing, violence and death—all of it—changed me. It’s a terrible thing to see somebody die in the street, and there is something about the smell of blood and feces mixed together that never leaves you. Terrified, I spent the rest of the day trying to make it back to my family on the eastside.

Although I didn’t take anything during the entire riot, the police stopped me, put their guns on me. **I just hoped I lived to write about this.** *This* is the one thought that saved me. *The Riot* left 34 dead people in *his* wake of wrath.

Marquette Frye being stopped on August 11, 1965 set in motion a series of events, which would cost 34 people their lives and destroy over \$44 million dollars worth of property. Johnie Scott said at the time, “We started when a man called Fear got angry.” By August 13, that same Friday even God was in trouble!<sup>5</sup>

That same Saturday, the 14th of August 1965, the smell of smoke filled the air. By Sunday, there were National Guardsmen, tanks, rifles—locked and loaded—and a curfew, which was enforced. The next morning there were dead dogs and cats all over the street—**where the guardsmen had shot anything that moved.**<sup>6</sup>

Where does Watts stand (1965–2002) amid the dilemma of “Modern Art”—Portraiture versus Abstraction?

As a caveat to the answer, I must say that it was my great misfortune not to have met J. Robert Orton, Jr. until 1996. I say this with respect to understanding Contemporary Modern Art, the development of my taste in it and of my appreciation of it. Had I met him sooner, these faculties would have no doubt been greatly enhanced.

So the point in answering the original question, the dilemma of “Modern Art”—Portraiture versus Abstraction our definition of art, and our assessment of it—what it is or is not—begs another look. I say it is “Portraiture versus Abstraction”.



John Outterbridge  
*Déjà Vu-Do, Ethnic Heritage Group*,  
ca. 1979–92  
Mixed media  
67 x 13 1/2 x 9 in  
Collection of the Artist  
Image courtesy of California African American Museum  
Photograph © Sammy Davis

The role of the artist in Watts was a rocky one in 1965. It demanded that we sought through art to improve the quality of life. So we built the Watts Writers’ Workshop Theater and the FBI burned it down, ‘so what?’ you muse. *So* being black and living in America today leads one to be exposed to a whole myriad of oppressive circumstances unique to us and different from any other ethnic group, let alone artists. Further, if one is male and black, it sets up a whole series of psychological gambits into play, which result in: affectations, damaged self-esteem, unprecedented incompetence and uncertainty of our value as human beings in Watts, California, America and the world at large.

My own experience has shown, that to be black today means in 2002 what it meant in 1965: to be caught up in some sort of absurd joke—a joke, which we are not in on or privy to—one which stereotypes us, categorizes us, puts us in a spin-

box turning around media sound-bites of extreme scrutiny based exclusively on fallacies and false paradigms, which all render us to be neither true nor false, but invisible—regardless of the political position we take concerning our lives in American society. These are the social realities for black people. This makes simple survival especially hard for one who is black and male in America.

### Face to Face

I first saw the face of the *Riot*—face to face—some weeks later. *The Riot* glared down at me from what remained of a burned out building—buildings, charcoal shells of cement. Dark blood splotches dried on the sidewalks. The blood dance covered the black soot of *all that was left of a street that once was*, on walls that were ripped up and raped, beat down and pillaged, crushed in twisted steel, on jagged brick, broken and gnarled and on one wall on Vernon and Central. *His* eyes were made of silver spray-paint and *his* teeth were made of words—words, which identified the *Riot*—burning his image into the core of my being, the sum total of all I ever was, or would ever hope to be. There were these words—ones which read: **GOD IS THE SUN.** The face of the *Riot* sent chills down my spine when first I saw him. I looked again, not at all sure I wasn't having hallucinations. I drove around the corner on 92nd Street and Graham Street and there he was again: **THE BIBLE IS LIBEL—WHITE IS UGLY—BLACK IS UGLIER, THE SUN IS GOD.** This time the *Riot* appeared on the side of a bar-wall—a shell of stucco really—left standing to the East just beyond the railroad tracks at 92nd and Graham Street. I rode through phantasmagoric silence onto 107th Street. Written on the back wall of what was once Simon Rodia's house behind the tallest Tower, the site of Watts Towers of Simon Rodia—the *Riot* showed his silver spray-paint face again with the words: **WHEN JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD HE BECAME A ZOMBIE—THE SUN IS GOD.**

These sketches of the *Riot* were very disturbing for me—a struggling writer, who had been Baptized, received First Communion, Confirmation, served as an Altar Boy and married as a Catholic. There is something so primal, pagan and primitive about these scribbles. They reminded me of the ancient cave paintings of the harbingers of Homo Sapiens in France.

Everywhere there were burned out buildings on Central Avenue, there loomed the gossamer visage of the *Riot*. To see the words written in defiance in this way is a very disturbing experience. The thought of it still unnerves me.

I listened and I looked. I saw and heard the *Riot*, *his* flames—doused now—but still burning in the pagan meaning of the silver-spray painted words: fear in a hand full of ashes—sift—through *the Riot's* fingers.

*His* voice was but a mere whisper now, but it sounded—resounding on the memory of drums being beat over the TV—keen as pain—**and was the first thing I ever heard the *Riot* say aloud. The *Riot* said, "Burn, baby ... burn."**

### Seeing is believing

I obtained the original information that the *Riot* existed from a simple clerk, Señor José, who lives behind a door in a room of the Central Registry—the same "Central Registry of all Births, Marriages and Deaths which had ever existed in the world."<sup>7</sup>

Señor José cautioned me, that the *Riot* was a chameleon and he was known to assume many shapes, ethnic groups, cells, sizes in the animal kingdom.

Then the *Riot* stepped out of the crowd, and said,

"All eye know  
Eye saw *it* go  
From whence eye came  
To where *it* went:  
Sunsets with honey bees."<sup>8</sup>

This is a turning point, since the Douglass House was born in a riot and a war—the Watts riots and the Vietnam war—an unpopular war, but nonetheless—a terrible war. Casualties of 1965 Watts Revolt **34 dead.** Casualties of 1992 Los Angeles Riot **54 dead.** US Military in Vietnam—**58,193 dead.** The *Riot* touted **220,000** South Vietnam Military **dead** and North Vietnam Military/Viet Cong **1,000,000** dead and **2,000,000** Vietnam civilians' **dead.**

Douglass House subsequently became the "Watts Writers' Workshop" and "Watts Writers' Workshop Theater" in Los Angeles. Ultimately, it evolved into the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Academy in New York. The Douglass House, an intellectual organization—meant that we did not bear arms or advocate the violent overthrow of the US government.

Johnie Scott and I first met in 1963 in the lounge at East Los Angeles College. We became friends, and I played the lead role in the first play he ever wrote. It premiered at the Coffee House on 103rd Street. In 1965, Johnie lived on Grape Street, we were hanging out in Watts. We went over to Westminister Neighborhood Association, where Budd Schulberg had put up this sign saying that anybody interested in writing should show up at these meetings. This is the same guy who had won an Oscar for writing "On The Waterfront."

Budd secured the "Frederick Douglass Writers House" (9807 Beach Street)—through the help of Patrons (his Hollywood pals: **the original Patrons to Douglass House were:** Senator Robert F. Kennedy, John Steinbeck, Ira Gershwin, James Baldwin, Richard Rodgers, Stanley Wolpert, Richard Burton,



Melvin Edwards, *The Watts Rebellion, Los Angeles, 1965*  
Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in., collection of the artist

Paddy Chayefsky, Irving Stone, Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor, Hodding Carter, Steve Allen, Ann Petry, Irving Wallace, Elia Kazan, Mort Lewis, Justin Turner, Allan Nevins) and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The organization later became the "Watts Writers' Workshop" and ultimately the "Watts Writers' Workshop Theater". Later in New York, he founded the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Academy.

In 1965, I met the people, who became known as the: Watts Writers "Old Guard" of the Douglass House. They ranged in age from 35-50 years. They included Harry Dolan, who later became the Workshop Director, Birdell Chew, James Thomas

Jackson, Sonora McKeller, Louise Merryweather, Jeanne Taylor, Fannie Carole Brown, Edna Gipson, Guadalupe De Saavedra, Harley Mims, Blossom Powe.

I also met the, "**Avant-guard**" of the **Douglass House-Watts Writers' Workshop**--people my own age, (18-21 years)--they included: Vellejo Ryan Kennedy, Alvin A. Saxon, Jr.(Ojenke), Johnie Scott, Jimmie Sherman, Ernest A. Mayhand, Jr., Emmerly Evans, who became known as the "Love Poet", Leumas Sirrah, Quincy Troupe. Budd Schulberg donated a set of Harvard Classics and an Underwood manual typewriter to the house.

*My meat* became a Harvard Classic a week, my *bread* became the Underwood manual typewriter in the library, which doubled as sleep quarters from time to time. The workshops were the most powerfully critical and challenging in my life. The energy when one walked into the room was electric.



The air crackled with talent. Artists got their work thrown out of the window if it was judged not good enough. But when those same people came back from the drawing board, they made magic happen. The workshop members began doing readings at Unitarian Churches and colleges—my first experience reading in front of audiences—throughout the city. We started having writing workshops on Beach Street—thus the Douglass House was founded.

I also met **Jayne Cortez**, who became my mentor, teacher and friend. She was married to jazz musician Ornette Coleman. I met her at Studio Watts on Grandee Street, which was run by Jim Woods. Jayne directed a play by Jean Genet, *The Blacks*. I tried out for a part and landed the lead role of the character Village. The play was performed at Studio Watts, the Ashgrove in Hollywood and the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium. My high school chum Stanley Crouch, was also in the play. This was in 1966-67.

Today in 2002, there is no evidence that Studio Watts ever existed on Grandee Street. There is housing there, "Sweet Alice Manor", but the "art" that was, is no more. Before Jayne left for New York, she acted on my behalf, as a wizard—much like those in *Harry Potter*—and left me an invisibility cloak.

And just like Mister Tamborine Man, "I'm invisible now, I have no secrets," as Bob Dylan sang. "It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle! They had set them-selves up to describe the world. What did they know of us, except—that we numbered so many, worked on certain jobs, offered so many votes, and provided so many marchers for some protest parade of theirs?"<sup>9</sup> As an artist and being black, I slowly realized that this invisibility Jayne bequeathed to me was one of my only assets. I abandoned the thought, however, that if I used *it* carefully, I would have the unique chance to change obsolete ideas and misnomers of: "race," "class," and "caste" which are the linchpins of bigotry and the oppression in order to journey into the future of a "free society."

I believed it now—not because I thought that it was what you wanted to hear, but because I truly believed it to be right—believed it right up to the point at which the Riot stopped me on the street, shoved me against the wall, put a gun on me, and said:

"Up the roll or I'll smoke you!" When I told *him* I was an invisible starving artist who didn't have any money. "Sir, please excuse me," I said, "but you have me at a disadvantage, but surely you can see that we are more alike than different. We both have forty-six chromosomes, we are..."

"Shut up!" he said. "Eye am the *Riot of God, you Backward country boy,*" he said. "Eye am no rank imitation of the

almighty!"

I asked, "What name do you bare?"

The Riot said:

"eye am *ten*, raised to the power: minus forty-three seconds ago  
 eye am sixteen billion—Big Bang—years of sunsets *since*  
 call me Eastern Stardust Time  
 'fore eye was a cell, a clam, a crayfish  
 'fore eye was a frog, a turtle duck billed Dodo bird a Platypus,  
 a dragon fly, a pollywog  
 'fore eye was a heron shy, a swallow full of sky, a trilobite, a  
 fire spark,  
 a meadowlark, a grain of sand, that grew into a stone,  
 a breath of air, & 'fore eye was a bone, eye was a shadow:  
 a protozoariferacoelenterata,  
 plathyhelmintheaschelmenthemymykindyourdermata mollusan-  
 nelidoidanthropodointegumentarychordata,  
 remember me, my flag it's purple flowers fly:  
*forgetmenots* my color  
 'fore eye was a bone, eye was a shadow,  
 dangling chromosomes of genus: **You Know**  
 oh swarthy Ethiopia, recall my own aunt Lucy  
**quand nous sommes: mille-huit cent-soixante quatorze**  
 dawn *Riot* aegyptopithecus,  
 skull intact two million tears ago  
 sharper than mosquitoes "petahs"  
 32 teeth in Miocene Time  
 one prospector bone jumping Sapien  
*they* never got it right,  
 but called *us* by another name  
 when no tail grew,  
 thirty thousand years of snow would go  
**dubbed 'em dignop-ragmop Rasta-Pongid-Missing Link**  
 Big Foot, Yinee shot dice on a gene splice & Neanders thawed  
 frostbite feet froze off Ice Age  
 stone flecks come the Peking man  
 then dropped like fire sticks  
 grew me & you & all the shades of them no one has seen 'em  
 since  
**'cocked dice don't roll'**  
 still Aunt Lucy says to say **hello**  
**Eyeball** am here to testify: a Sapien,  
 a sole survivor, sweet Aunt Lucy's kin  
 come not she your aunt Lucy too  
 what solar system sky?  
 please tell me who? as *what ? by how?*  
 or *whence?* from *where* do your own ancestors fly?  
 whose jaws with skulls  
 the carbon dated bones back when?  
 you see, my friend  
 we are the spawn of saurs

no count tribes, whose thoughts grew out of grunts old nods,  
hand jive & screams--no word, odd signs,  
engirdling tones the bread defined  
the mantra said: **yo-kee gee-ring-ho yo-mee-nam**  
our silence sings *The Dream Time*  
to Ghaghaju-griot hearing aids  
Sangria gun-gun great uncle juju Bushman kindled fire,  
gathered roots *his horse* who rides me still  
up a mountain-down the Belladonna *shade*  
a million five ago & ashes  
when the no name Mhamha's  
announced us kin to cousin Taung's child  
petrified like magma swirls  
the garnet gleans a snowball stone  
where once eye lay chameleon raw,  
preserved in time, a lump of coal,  
my jelly shook in oyster shells,  
the progeny of apple cores--because:  
'fore eye was a cell, a clam, a crayfish,  
'fore eye was a frog,  
a turtle, duck billed Dodo bird, a Platypus,  
a dragon fly, a pollywog,  
a trilobite, a heron shy, a meadowlark,  
cyanogenic drop of rain, a fire spark,  
'fore eye was a grain of sand that grew into a stone,  
a breath of air 'fore eye was a bone,  
eye was a shadow:  
a protozoariferacoelenterata, plathyhelmintheaschementhey-  
ourkindmydermata, mollusannelidoidanthropodaintegumen-  
tarychordata remember me, my flag, it's purple flowers fly:  
**forgetmenots** my color, 'fore eye was a bone eye was a shad-  
ow." <sup>10</sup>

The events in Watts in August 1965 didn't *just* happen. The revolt was wrought with a history of abuse directed toward peoples of African extraction, who were systematically oppressed and denied Rights under the Constitution and Bill of Rights given to other citizens in order to exploit a free labor force. These historical events preceded what was to come in Watts in August. The *Riot* had been raising havoc for decades. The Watts revolt was just a matter of time. The events, which mattered were: The clothes this *Riot* wore were unsavory and stitched with torn flesh and broken families, forged with tattle bells and yoked with iron bits that fit the mouths of naked African men--forbidden by dint of flogging to speak a common African tongue.

The *Riot's* eyes were made of over **500,000 dead in the Civil War**, also **3,250 black men lynched between 1889-1919**. <sup>11</sup> **All were murdered.** On August 28, 1955--Emmett Till, a 14-year-old black youth is murdered, beaten, mutilated by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam in Mississippi for whistling at Carolyn Bryant's wife after he bought two cents worth of bubble gum at the Bryant's store--Till's body is found in the Tallahatchie



Melvin Edwards, *The Watts Rebellion, Los Angeles, 1965*  
Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 in., collection of the artist

River.

War on home front in 1965 saw Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit civil rights worker, shot while shuttling participants in the Alabama Freedom March between Selma and Montgomery. Gary Thomas Rowe, Jr., paid FBI informer within United Klans of America--Alabama Realm was a passenger in the car driven by Klansmen accused of the sniper shooting of Viola Liuzzo.

The Riot sneered, then looked at all the dead and grunted,

"nobody dies  
tell it to the dead  
but the dead don't speak

wake up, brother & tell us  
when you died  
did your synapses fail to pass acetylcholine  
to the next nerve juncture on that day  
a hangman's knot crimped your sphincter  
& turned your bowels to water in the bigots' clay?  
did the Mississippi drink your blood  
that night the baying hounds were set on your trail  
& you hid from the lapdogs sought you out?"<sup>12</sup>

Other events, which mattered were: Brown v. Board of Education, May 1954—Supreme Court bans segregation in public schools. Rosa Parks, on December 1, 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, a seamstress and former NAACP chapter secretary, refuses to give up her seat on a segregated bus and is jailed. On October 1, 1962, Chief United States Marshal, James P. McShane escorts James Meredith to the University registrar and enrolled him at 8:30 A.M. That evening, 5,000 soldiers and federalized National Guards patrolled Oxford, a Mississippi town of 6,500. In 1963, the War on the Home front on June, 5, all federal troops are withdrawn from Oxford, Mississippi. August 18, James Meredith graduates with a BA in Political Science.

However, in this same August the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham Alabama is bombed. Four black children: Denise McNair, Carol Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and one other child are all killed in the attack. One of these young girls was the childhood friend of the present National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice. This is certainly an example of social change. Or is it?

Since in 1964, War on the Home front took on a whole new meaning when Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, (two Jews) and James Chaney, (an African-American) all civil rights workers, were murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Later, Deputy Sheriff Cecil Ray Price, was defendant in federal conspiracy trials in their murders. Edgar Ray Killen, defendant in federal conspiracy trial involving civil rights workers murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi. James E. Jordan, defendant in federal conspiracy trial in the murders of three civil rights workers (Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney) in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Further, Edgar Ray Killen, defendant in federal conspiracy trial in the murders of three civil rights workers (Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney) in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Alton Wayne Roberts, defendant in the federal conspiracy trials that grew out of the murders of three civil rights workers (Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney) in Philadelphia, Mississippi: also a paid informer who tipped off Meridian police about a Klan-planned bombing that led to the capture of Thomas A. Tarrants, III. It is later found that the same Thomas A. Tarrants, III, member of the White Knights of KKK, captured after a shoot-out with Meridian, Mississippi, police when he attempted to plant a bomb outside

the home of a Jewish civic leader.

Robert Chambliss, former Klansman was convicted in 1977. Chambliss was defended by former mayor of Birmingham, Arthur Hayes and his son, who had served as defense attorney for several Klansman.

However, James York, arrested in 1957 for several racially triggered bombings in Montgomery—indicted in 1976 for forcing a black truck driver to jump into the Alabama River in 1957. **The case was dropped.**

There were three artists whose work reflected the contempt and horror of these factual events, which ultimately brought about social change.

Maya Angelou, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, three writers, who saw through their art early on and with an eye revealing clarity just how important the need for social change and a look at America's unpleasant history is.

James Baldwin correctly pointed out in the 1960's, "This continent now is conquered, but our habits and our fears remain. In the same way that to become a social human being one modifies and suppresses and ultimately, without great courage, lies to oneself about all one's interior, uncharted chaos, so have we, as a nation, modified and suppressed and lied about all the darker forces in our history."

He said, "Societies never know it, but the war of an artist with society is a lover's war, and he does, at his best, what lovers do, which is to reveal the beloved to himself, and with that revelation, make freedom real."<sup>13</sup>

Yet, how is it possible to make social change with art when old hatred and ignorance runs so deep? The essence of some of these feelings is self-hatred—one which set the stage for the civil unrest of 1965: "You're nobody, son. You don't exist—can't you see that?"

Ellison captures feelings of helpless and hopelessness, which had festered in the Jim Crow South for years, yet are still present today, "You're a black educated fool, son. These white folks have newspapers, magazines, radios, and spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth; and if I tell them that you're lying, they'll tell the world even if you prove you're telling the truth. Because it's the kind of lie they want to hear ... "

The testimony of survivor, Maya Angelou, confirmed the danger. "Five years before, my brother had seen the body of a black man pulled from the river. The cause of death had not been



Melvin Edwards, *The Watts Festival, Los Angeles, 1965*  
Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in., collection of the artist

broadcast, but Bailey (Jew was short for junior) had seen that the man's genitals had been cut away."<sup>15</sup>

In November Johnson is elected US President by a landslide over Republican Barry Goldwater, who had pushed for an even tougher approach to Vietnam.

These *deaths* are not abstractions. These deaths are trappings of rationales, the Kerner Report and the McCone Commission and other reports to Congress, the *Riot* gave to rationalize the dead—a written litany of horror. So, that whatever “art” ultimately said of such suffering—whether it is painting, sculpture, writing, made with reference to this history got covered up, revised by *Riot’s* servants. As a result of *this*, the million injustices and events, which led up to the ultimate confronta-

tion of 1965, are downplayed or dubbed “incidental” to the event. However, there are three events, which stand out above all the others, which must be mentioned because they fueled the black rage of the *Riot’s* Eyes.

The *Riot* asked, “What is the source of this passion?”

The *Riot* said, “Nobody Dies!”

“... running from the mob

were you grippin’ for the last feather  
burned to your arse in the boiling tar?

wake up, brother!

tell us how you died!

oh wake!

you die like Emmett Till:

where your own mama  
couldn’t figure a feature of your  
mug in the coffin?”<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, when one asks, “what art, what social change has come out of these events?” We now have a Wall in Washington—a Wall dedicated to those young men and women who lost their lives in Vietnam. One remembers how soldiers were spat upon.

In January of 1965 the Vietnam War *the Riot* raged through the jungles of *that* country. Johnson sent Congress a budget containing the biggest expansion of domestic welfare programs since the New Deal, reflecting his goal of providing funds for both the war and what was called the, “Great Society.”

In February, U.S. bombers attacked targets in the North for the first time, in a reprisal for attacks on U.S. bases. By March the first U.S. combat troops landed in Da Nang, South Vietnam. Then in April, Johnson formally authorized combat troops to be used for offensive operations.

Meanwhile in the war on the home front, antiwar movements become more active. By the end of the year in December, American troop strength reached 184,300; 636 deaths to date.

By this time **Art and Social Change (1965-2002)** had changed into two distinct and precise forms of clarity with one universal voice.

*my love ascends amnesiac stairs/sube mi amor escaleras amnesicas  
where my sanity starves my lunacy begins/donde mi cordura pasa hambre  
comienza mi locura/to swindle itself out of itself/para estafarse uno a si  
miso /while these feelings bail/mientras achico estos sentimientos/this  
innundated sinking skiff in a storm/este esquife inundado se hunde en la  
tormenta/lashed to its prow my arms unfurl/azotado en la proa mis brazos  
se abren /gather sky in giant hungry gulps/mi amor, reune el cielo a  
grandes tragos voraces/ four sheets in the sails/las velas hechas de cuatro  
sabanas/ like a pauper sups from his beggars bowl/como 'un pobresu  
tazon de mendigo/tiny bits of gruel/trocitos de aguachirle/ eye confide in  
its' wisdom: the fool/ojo confio en su sabiduria tonta-que' necio/the blood  
knows all secrets/la sangre sabe todos los secretos/the heart never  
tells/el corazon nunca los cuenta*

By October antiwar sentiment continues to build. Protest were held in 40 US. Cities.<sup>19</sup> In July Apollo 11 astronauts landed on the moon. In August Woodstock festival, a social and musical milestone, draws an estimated 500,000 people to upstate New York. In May 1970, four students killed by National Guardsmen during antiwar protest at Kent State University in Ohio. Their deaths become a rallying point for the antiwar movement. Also, it put the idea of “art for social change” on the back burner, since most of the people of that ilk—who were doing art as protest for social problems—were too busy trying to stay alive.

In 1970 am sent to Africa—back through the “Door of No

Return.” Because of the history of slavery, this for me is a turning point—here, I’m suppose to re-write history. I am the first student from my University in history to go—for 3 months on an International Study Forum. I meet up with Jayne Cortez. But instead of remaining invisible, I repeat history: study voodoo, slavery, go to the Installment of Nana Apokuware II, got laid, contracted malaria and celebrated the blood knot in fiefdom.

Ojenke and I do a protest reading at the Malcolm X Center and South Park to huge crowds. Later we do a reading at Soledad prison. We are not permitted to read the second half of the program. A prison lock down occurs the next day.

In March of 1971, Vietnam War front fall out reared its ugly head when Lt. William L. Calley Jr. is convicted of premeditated murder in Mai Lai massacre.

George Jackson is murdered at San Quentin Prison.

In March of 1991 everybody in Watts and the nation watched, as Rodney King is beaten and the beating is videotaped and televised millions of times. Social change seemed to be traveling in retrograde. The deep-seated feelings of Emmitt Till, the beatings, lynchings and mutilations all reared their ugly heads again.

**The Riot said, “Nobody Dies!**

did they whip your head till it flayed in the maw?  
was it the wrong place wrong time?  
did they smoke your hood?  
were they yoking you to the bone raw?  
did you take your sappin' good?  
wake up, brother!  
tell us how you died!"<sup>20</sup>

The question then becomes one, which I put after the 1992 Los Angeles riots in a “... not just for people of color but for all Americans—how do we want to be remembered in history? In light of the death of more than 50 people and the destruction of nearly \$1 billion dollars in property, we see the videotaped beating of Rodney King. We see the videotaped killing of Latasha Harlins and the two Samoan brothers being shot 19 times in the back by Compton Police—all happening in 1991 leaving in its wake in Watts: hopelessness, alienation, disenfranchisement and systematic oppression. How do we (Americans) want to be remembered in history?”<sup>21</sup>

On April 31, 1992 the verdict against the four LAPD officers involved in the Rodney King beating came down. “Not guilty” is announced.

First the *Riot* whispered, “No Justice ... no peace,” barely

audible in the street. Then the *Riot's* voice grew until he shouted and chanted and screamed, until the mob in the streets numbering in the thousands finally roared, **"NO JUSTICE. NO PEACE!"**

The *Riot* stepped out of a burning building and said,  
"... here in LA.. what godforsaken clay do your lost remains lie?  
wake up brother!  
tell us how you died!  
oh wake! "

Rebuild LA. Came to Watts again in 1992, as it did in 1965. The needs of Watts community based artists were finally met in the form of the Arts Recovery Grants. When Al Nodal, former Manager of the Department of Cultural Affairs raised \$1 million dollars. As an artist living in Watts for the past 20 years, I became the first in history to receive such a grant. Also, I am the first and only recipient of a Lannon Foundation Grant in the history of the city. We have the housing and the market and the Martin Luther King, Jr. shopping center and a statue of a hand releasing a bird (Charles Dickson's sculpture of *The Kingfisher*).

The 1992 riots brought with it a further metamorphosis: Spanglish, a street invention, which captured the diversity and flavor and change of the city.

The *Riot* said,

"the last time I saw LA./she was singing *los corridos/muy pulcra mas penachos rojos enfermo*/many fingers *mezcalrando*/all mixed up in *el pelo* /crooked justice angel hair/she was *mal es suerte con nublado*/growing big black clouds for titties/master twister raising *plumos negros*/she was *mucho salsa chile*/ smoking *fumas* by the minute/giving birth to little ashes /*pimienta*-pepper, *sangre*-blood/& dripping *jalapenos* /full of *que bonitas* fingers /she was chewing up the fat/& spitting out *carnitas* /*huevos* broken in *espurma*/she was shaking shakes /& breaking breaks /falling tiny windows/singing *passale alarma* up/*arriba primavera*/she was buying pain & selling anger /*vende malo pedos* squeezing musicbox: /"no peace" & *todos chingadera*/mango by the bushel slip banana peel/on the downtown *pasajeros*/with a milk crate through a window in the weekend *mucha gente* /she *comprando* plenty *drogas*/*vende mucho ropas* /taking *las pistolas* giving *dos piezas para nada--otra vez* /& searching for *quien sabe*/on the dirty paper sidewalk she was jobless/unamused about the verdict unexcused & chasing deportee/quite *desparando* looking lost *trabajos*/no prospects *manana* incognito new guitar/singing *cu-cu-rru-cu-cu con grande central ojos* /*colerico* many feet *ruido*, running through *Mercado*/she was teeth & animal/*no darles muchos* blessings little *pueblo calle Olvera*/holy water benediction *Vibiana* skins/a brown contralto her cantata /she was *todos companeros los pachuchos & negritos* /waiting on *el brujo verde*/in the big *bastidablanca*/all dressed up in curfew/going to the Ball /*peligro no pasar* /*muy borrachos los gavachos* /*cucarachas* sucking pain *paletas enamorado* disappearing *sueno* /lost one dream Americana & she was singing *los corridos*"<sup>23</sup>

The *Riot* gazed back at me—the burning embers still glowing red hot in burned out buildings and broken promises to heal a thing that had learned to feel no feelings, as I looked into **the mirror of this history (1965-2003)**. I saw in the *Riot's* eyes myself, *yourself*, of *all of ourselves* reflected there, as he asked, "How do you want to be remembered in terms of this history?" and I realized now that I was not invisible anymore, that the **"self"** I once was gone--dissolved into the art of a thousand **"selves", "voices" and "languages"** and that **this** is the **ultimate - social change is art.**

I looked around and realized that I had come to Tolson's Ars. I had now reached the land of **Pisgah**. Where all around me—the metamorphosis—had dissolved us all into creatures of art, neither black nor white nor brown nor yellow. Our languages—all different, consisted of every tongue spoken on earth, but understood by everyone. Our voices sang the universal "OM" of art. Our fingers painted rainbow bridges, whose steps ascended into the rarefied air of art and the social change we made real and brought into the light!

The *Riot* stepped from shadows, sneered and asked in a clairvoyant voice, "You backward country-boy, did you do your duty?"

I said, "my silence sings/*mon silence chante*, my love sprout wings/*mon amour bourgeonné d'ailes*, became the sun/*devint le soleil* & flew into a fuse/*s'envola et se fondit*/ because my blood is fire/*parce que mon sang est feu*/ the guff is empty/*le trompie est vide*, my tears became the rain/*mes larmes se transformèrent en pluie*, my thoughts the air/*mes pensées en air*, dissolved in earth/*dissoutes-dans la terre*, still rooted there/*encore enracinées là* , my simple fears/*mes simples peurs*, turned into the thorns/*devinrent des épines brodées* , the bougainvillea climbs/*la bougainville monte* , a trellis to this solitude/*un treillis vers cette solitude*, my legacy a drafty garet/*mon héritage: un grenier à courants d'air*, my laughter all became the clouds/*tout mon rire devint les nuages* , my need changed from stars/*mon besoin changea les étoiles* , into some angry cup of ashes/*dans une tasse de cendres fâchées* , & my smile became a coffin shroud/*mon sourire se convertit en un drap de cerceuil* , my questions all the answers/*mes questions: toutes les réponse* "<sup>24</sup>

How? the *Riot* Asked. "I told you," I said. "Little step by little step."

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2. Formally launched 1956 against the US Communist Party and against the Black Nationalist in 1967—focused on the Black Panther Party which was founded in 1966.
3. Melvin B. Tolson, *Harlem Gallery*, with Introduction by Karl Shapiro, Twane Publishers, Inc. NY, 1965.
4. "Recreation" from *We Speak As Liberators*, edited by Orde Coombs, Dodd, Mead and Company New York, 1970.
5. Eric Priestley, *Flame & Smoke—authentic account of Watts revolt*, Watts Foundation 1974.
6. Priestley, *Flame & Smoke*.
7. José Saramago, *All The Names*, 1997, Harcourt, Inc. Translation: Margaret Jull Costa., 1999.
8. Eric Priestley, *Gypsy Poems*, Inevitable Press, 1996.
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10. 21 Feb. 1992, 1st Edition, *Five Finger Review* 14, *Metamorphosis*, 1995, Edited by Mark Novac, Fanny Howe, 2nd Edition, Eric Priestley, *Gypsy Poems*, Inevitable Press, 1996.
11. Priestley, *Flame & Smoke*.
12. Eric Priestley, *Abracadabra*, Heat Press 1994; *Grand Passion-poets of Los Angeles & beyond*. Red Wind Books 1995.
13. *Complete Essays of James Baldwin*, p. 672, "The Creative Process" from "Creative America 1962."
14. Ellison, p. 143.
15. *Gather Together In My Name*, Random House, 1974.
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17. Eric Priestley, *Douglass House—a story of the Watts Writers' Workshop (1959-75)*, unpublished.
18. Priestley, *Gypsy Poems*.
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20. Priestley, *Abracadabra*.
21. Eric Priestley, "The American Dream: Hope at Odds With Reality," *Los Angeles Times*, (Sunday, April 18, 1993), p. 23.
22. Priestley, *Abracadabra*.
23. Eric Priestley, *Abracadabra; Grand Passion—poets of Los Angeles & beyond*.
24. Eric Priestley, *Abracadabra; Gypsy Poems; El Europeo* magazine no. 52 May-June, (Madrid, Spain 1995).



John Outterbridge  
*Window*, 1991  
 Mixed media  
 46 x 24 1/4 x 5 1/2 in.  
 Collection of the artist  
 Image courtesy of California African American Museum  
 Photograph © Sammy Davis



Noah Purifoy  
*Black Brown and Beige*, 1989  
Assemblage  
68 x 113 x 6 in.  
Collection at Tara's Hall, Los Angeles



## Jayne Cortez, In Her Own Words

My father was a career military person. My mother was a housewife and secretary. I was born in Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. We migrated to California in 1943, lived in West Los Angeles then moved in 1946 to South Los Angeles where I grew up with my sister and brother in the community of Watts. At that time, this African American community included Latinos, Japanese, Gypsies and a few working class White people. Simon Rodia's Watts Towers was a neighborhood landmark, which I was very familiar with. I began writing poetry as a pastime in elementary school. I studied music and art in junior high and high school. As a teenager I went to museums, libraries, concerts and in Watts I attended dances that featured rhythm and blues bands like the Roy Milton Band and the Johnny Otis band with singers Little Ester Phillips, the Robins, Big Mama Thornton and tenor saxophonist Big Jay McNeely. The dynamics of Central Avenue had traveled all the way to South Los Angeles and in the late 1940 and early 50s I heard many established and emerging jazz musicians from Dexter Gordon to Don Cherry. They played at jam sessions, in garages, clubs, halls and parks. I bought the latest bebop recordings at Pete Canard's record shop on 103rd Street, put my age up, went to clubs and became a jazz fanatic. I got married in 1954, moved from South Los Angeles to West Los Angeles in 1955 and had a son in 1956.

Politics was not something that I paid a lot of attention to in high school, but politics in life: integration, black and white relations, and police confrontations were experienced. In the late 50s and early 60s I protested in support of the Civil Rights Movement. I attended political rallies and programs where I heard the dynamic speeches of Malcolm X, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Forman and others. In 1963 I went to Greenwood, Mississippi as an activist with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). I returned to Los Angeles and co-founded with Bob Rogers a Friends of SNCC group. From 1960 to 1966 I participated in theatre workshops throughout Los Angeles. In 1964 I performed a one-woman show of black literature and jazz. In that show were significant resources from the world of black literature, culture, and politics. I first performed this work with Curtis Amy's band, which included Horace Tapscott on piano. Clearly among the musicians on this program Tapscott was the one with the most awareness and dedication to the black freedom struggle. In 1964, 1965, and 1966 I did a few performances with Tapscott and his ensemble, which included trombonist Lester Robinson, drummer Everett Brown, and saxophonist Arthur Blyth. I also performed with John Carter and his trio,



Jayne Cortez

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bassist Herbie Lewis and one performance with tenor saxophonist Teddy Edwards. Those experiences of literature, music, art, and politics are expressed in my work. My concepts developed during this period.

In 1964 Jim Woods called a meeting of friends to propose the setting up of an art center in the black community. I agreed that there was a need for such a facility and suggested getting a building in Watts. Jim found a place on Grandee and 104th street. This was the winter of 1964/65 before the Watts rebellion and the Anti-Poverty Program. I was director of the acting/writing workshop. Bob Rogers taught design, Carmencita Romero was the dance instructor, Guy Miller was in charge of visual arts and Jim Woods was the director/administrator. The acting/writing workshop participants came from various areas of Los Angeles and Watts.

In 1965 Watts exploded. This was an upheaval, a rebellion spreading throughout Los Angeles. There were a lot of inci-

dents leading up to this uprising of black discontent. Black people were tired of the contradictions, the inequalities, the mounting violations, police brutality, unemployment, lack of opportunity, lack of respect, and the amount of sacrifices made as a consequence of white domination. In the late 50s and early 60s we saw televised images of the Cuban revolution, the Algerian war for independence, the Vietnamese struggle between oppressed and oppressors, we saw students shouting "we want our freedom now" as the struggle to desegregate the U.S south heated up. A number of African American families had migrated from a segregated south to southern California, a place that had the habit and customs of racial discrimination and Ku Klux Klan activities on its report card. Many came to Los Angeles after having the military experience of World War II, the Korean and Vietnam wars and were well aware of the white law and order maintained by the dominant landlords whose ancestors had tricked, killed and stole land from Native Americans and had pushed Japanese Americans into the internment camps during World War II. We also understood that our own situation could no longer be tolerated. The rebellions pointed out the need for social, economic, and political change. So it was time to recognize the need for change, a time to protest conditions, a time to reflect and cancel all conservative ideas, a time to drop the ball and chain, a time to go back to the root and use the black freedom struggle as a foundation for art, a time to find another way of life. Many artists drew energy from the rebellion and produced works exploring the aftermath, the confrontations, the wounds, and the revolutionary ideas.

Progressive musicians, literary and visual artists existed in Los Angeles. They did not have to come as a result of the rebellion they were already there. Other artists coming from other states and cities ended up in Watts after the fact of the explosion and were welcomed by those artists already there. Musicians, literary and visual artists in Los Angeles were doing their version of what became known as the black arts movement. They were talking about black consciousness, black power, black images, and how to free themselves and their people from white oppression. They were starting publishing and recording companies, opening alternative spaces, organizing art exhibitions, poetry readings, music concerts, and creating organizations such as the "Union of God's Musicians and Artists Ascension" (UGMAA). There were levels of artistic quality. There were figurative thinking critics and abstract artists. There was Sunday painters, writers and musicians and the professional and accomplished artists. There were students, community organizers and missionaries, The rebellion also attracted the opportunists, the schemers and those with reactionary tendencies.

In the Studio Watts acting/writing workshop we used improvisation as a way of breaking down inhibitions and going to the source of the actors' energy. We did a lot of experimenting and analyzing. The intention was to prepare to spontaneously respond using experiences, issues and material coming from the black world. We did character studies, worked on plays, scenes, wrote poetry and performance pieces. We also used Jean Genet's *The Blacks* as an excuse to break limitations and traditional play formulas. I left Studio Watts in the spring of 1967 after disagreements with Jim Woods.

The Watts Repertory Theatre Company, which had been formed inside the Studio Watts premises separated and moved on. We continued our exercises and explorations of internal and external contradictions at other locations. The group met and rehearsed at sculptor Guy Miller's Teen Post on 103rd Street and Grandee, at Will Rogers Park and other spaces. We performed at the Watts Happening Coffee House and did presentations at universities, folk clubs such as the Ash Grove and at political and cultural events throughout Los Angeles. Our audiences were always confronted with an array of art possibilities, a variety of forms, different images, political ideas, an exposition of dreams, a juxtaposition of attitudes, familiar and unfamiliar behavior patterns and references. Both women and men took the lead in performances. Some of these live presentations were probably only preserved in minds of eyewitnesses and participants. The intent of the action was temporary, but the discovery of self and the struggle to be more human was permanent. In the summer of 1967 I traveled to Africa, Asia, and Europe before landing in New York City. My trip had been planned before the break with Studio Watts. I returned to Los Angeles for a few weeks in the summer of 1968 and in the fall of 1969 to collaborate and direct the group in performances.

The significance of Studio Watts: It was a living example of African American culture in Los Angeles.

The Watts Repertory Theatre Company produced viable black theatre dealing with social political realities.

In New York City I remarried. I wrote more poetry, published ten books of poems, my latest book is *Jazz Fan Looks Back* and performed my poetry with my band The Firespitters on nine recordings including the CD *Taking The Blues Back Home*. In visual art I produced several groups of monoprints, which I combined image and text as graphic art. In 1990 I co-founded with Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, Inc. and became its president. In the 1970s and 80s I helped organize "Forums on Southern Africa" at the Countee Cullen Library in Harlem, New York. From

1976-1983 I taught Black Literature/Black Music, Black Modern Writers, and Creative Writing at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I have lectured, read and performed my work in places as diverse as UNESCO in Paris, The Women's Conference in Beijing, China and in venues in Nigeria, England, Cuba, South Africa, Brazil, and Angola. In 1997 I proposed and helped coordinate the international conference "Yari Yari: Black Women Writers and the Future"; the international symposium "Slave Routes The Long Memory 2000" and "The Black Aesthetic 2001" at New York University. I directed my first film *Yari Yari* in 1999.

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John Outterbridge  
*And In The Hay the Children Won't Play*, 1991  
Mixed media  
42 x 76 x 2 1/2 in.  
Collection of the artist  
Image courtesy of California African American Museum  
Photograph © Sammy Davis

# Jayne Cortez Poetry

## You Know

*(for the people who speak the you know language)*

1975

You know

i sure would like to write a blues

you know

a nice long blues

you know

a good feeling piece to my writing hand

you know

my hand that can bring two pieces of life  
together in your ear

you know

one drop of blues turning a paper clip  
into three wings and a bone into a revolt

you know

a blues passing up the stereotype symbols

you know

go into the dark meat of a crocodile  
and pinpoint the process

you know

into a solo a hundred times  
like the first line of Aretha Franklin

you know

like Big Mama Thornton

you know

i sure would like to write a blues

you know

if i could write me a blues

you know

a blues that you could feel at the same time  
on the same level like a Joe Louis punch

you know

a punch that could break a computer  
into an event like Guinea Bissau like Namibia

you know

if i could write me a blues

you know

a nice long blues

you know

an up to the minute blues

you know

a smack dab in the middle of depression blues

you know

a blues without incidental music

you know

without spending time being incidental

you know

if i could write a blues

you know

a blues without the popular use of the word love

you know

without running love love love in the ground

you know

a serious blues

you know

a significant blues

you know

an unsubmitive blues

you know

a just because we exist blues

you know

a blues

you know

a terrible blues about the terrible terrible need

i have to write the blues

you know

if i could write a nice long blues

you know

a nice long blues

you know

it sure would feel good to my writing hand

you know

you know

you know



## Global Inequalities

1990

Chairperson of the board  
is not digging for roots  
    in the shadows  
There's no dying-of-hunger stare  
    in eyes of  
Chief executive officer of petroleum  
Somebody else is sinking into  
    spring freeze of the soil  
Somebody else is evaporating  
    in dry wind of the famine  
there's no severe drought  
    in mouth of  
Senior vice president of funding services  
No military contractor is sitting  
    in heat of a disappearing lake  
No river is drying up  
    in kidneys of  
    a minister of defense  
Under-secretary of interior  
    is not writing distress signals  
    on shithouse walls  
Do you see refugee camp cooped up  
    in head of  
Vice president of municipal bonds  
There's no food shortage  
    in belly of  
    a minister of agriculture  
Chief economic advisors are  
    addicted to diet pills  
Banking committee members are  
    suffering from obesity  
Somebody else is sucking on dehydrated nipples  
Somebody else is filling up on fly specks  
The Bishops are not  
    forcing themselves to eat bark  
The security exchange commission members  
    are sick from  
    too many chocolate chip cookies  
The treasury secretary  
    is not going around in circles  
    looking for grain  
There's no desert growing in nose of  
    Supreme commander of justice  
It's somebody else without weight  
without blood without land  
without a cloud cover of water on the face  
It's somebody else  
Always somebody else  
Yesterday took off its shoes  
and became an unpopular song

## The Mambo Lesson

2000

today will end like a stunned fish in  
tomorrows unequal distribution of  
emptiness  
as the sun makes its entrance  
without public support into  
the clairvoyance of your  
unsweetened panti hose  
& I am already  
smoking an image  
that will bite me  
before I change my tongue  
so don't forget your skull  
your fossil fuel  
your utopian teeth

## There It Is

1979

My friend  
they don't care  
if you're an individualist  
a leftist a rightist  
a shithead or a snake

They will try to exploit you  
absorb you confine you  
disconnect you isolate you  
or kill you

And you will disappear into your own rage  
into your own insanity  
into your own poverty  
into a word a phrase a slogan a cartoon  
and the ashes

The ruling class will tell you that  
there is no ruling class  
as they organize their liberal supporters into  
white supremacist lynch mobs  
organize their children into  
ku klux klan gangs  
organize their police into  
killer cops  
organize their propaganda into  
a device to ossify us with angel dust  
pre-occupy us with western symbols in  
african hair styles  
innoculate us with hate  
institutionalize us with ignorance  
hypnotize us with a monotonous sound designed  
to make us evade reality and stomp out lives away

And we are programmed to self destruct  
to fragment  
to get buried under covert intelligence operations of  
unintelligent committees impulsed toward death  
And there it is

The enemies polishing their penises between  
oil wells at the pentagon  
the bulldozers leaping into demolition dances  
the old folks dying of starvation  
the informers wearing out shoes looking for crumbs  
the lifeblood of the earth almost dead in  
the greedy mouth of imperialism  
And my friend  
they don't care

if you're an individualist  
a leftist a rightist  
a shithead or a snake

They will spray you with  
a virus of legionnaire's disease  
fill your nostrils with  
the swine flu of their arrogance  
stuff your body into a tampon of  
toxic shock syndrome  
try to pump all the resources of the world  
into their own veins  
and fly off into the wild blue yonder to  
pollute another planet

And if we don't fight  
if we don't resist  
if we don't organize and unify and  
get the power to control our own lives  
Then we will wear  
the exaggerated look of captivity  
the stylized look of submission  
the bizarre look of suicide  
the dehumanized look of fear  
and the decomposed look of repression  
forever and ever and ever  
and there it is

# Stockpiling

1982

The stockpiling of frozen trees  
    in the deep freeze of the earth  
The stockpiling of dead animals  
    in the exhaust pipes of supersonic rockets  
The stockpiling of desiccated plants  
    on the death root of an abscessed tooth  
The stockpiling of defoliants  
    in the pine forest of the skull  
The stockpiling of aerosols  
    in the pink smoke of a human corpse  
Stockpiles  
    of agent orange agent blue agent white acids  
    burning like the hot hoof of a race horse on  
        the tongue  
Look at it  
    through the anti-bodies in the body  
    through the multiple vaccines belching in the  
        veins  
through the cross-infection of viruses  
    stockpiled  
    in the mouth  
through the benzene vapors shooting  
    into the muscles of the  
        stars  
through the gaseous bowels of military  
    fantasies  
through the white radiation of delirious  
    dreams  
Look  
    this stockpile marries that stockpile  
    to mix and release a double stockpile of  
        fissions  
exploding  
    into the shadows of disappearing space  
Global incapacitations  
Zero  
    and boom  
This is the nuclear bleach of reality  
the inflated thigh of edema  
the filthy dampness in the scientific pants  
    of a peace prize  
the final stockpile of flesh dancing in  
the terrible whooping cough of the wind  
And even if you think you have a shelter  
that can survive this stockpiling  
    of communal graves  
    tell me  
Where are you going  
with the sucked liver of mustard flint  
the split breath of hydrogen fumes

the navel pit of invisible clams  
the biological lung of human fleas  
the carcinogenic bladder of sponges  
lips made of keloid scars  
poems in the numb section of the chromosomes  
Just where do you think you're going  
with that stockpile of contaminated stink  
  
Listen  
When I think of the tactical missiles plunging  
    into the rancid goiters of the sun  
The artillery shells of wiretapping snakes hissing and  
    vomiting  
    into the depths of a colorless sky  
The accumulation of fried phosphoric pus  
graffitied  
    on the fragile fierceness of the moon  
The pestering warheads of death-wings stockpiling  
    feathers upon feathers  
    in the brain  
And the mass media's larval of lies stockpiled  
in the plasma of the ears  
And the stockpiling of foreign sap in the fluxes  
    of the blood  
And the stockpiling of shattered spines  
    in chromium suits  
    under  
    polyurethane  
    sheets  
  
I look at the stockpiling  
at this rotting vegetation  
and I make myself understand the target  
That's why I say I'm into life  
    preservation of life now  
    revolutionary change now  
before the choking  
    before the panic  
    before the penetration  
        of apathy  
        rises up  
        and spits fire  
into the toxic tears  
    of this stockpile



## Sacred Trees

1994

Every time I think about us women  
I think about the trees     the trees  
escaping from an epidemic of lightning  
the sacred trees exploding from the  
compressed matter of cuckoo spit     trees  
the raped trees flashing signals through the  
toxic acid of sucking insects  
the trees used as decoy installations     trees

I have the afternoon leaves throbbing  
  in my nostrils  
I have the struggling limbs sprouting from  
these ear lobes  
I have a power stump shooting from  
out of this forehead  
I have clusters of twigs popping from  
  my tattooed moles  
& sometimes I feel  
like the tree trunk  
growing numb & dead  
from the ritual behavior  
sometimes I feel like the tree ripping  
from the core of ancient grievances

Trees

I feel like  
the family tree  
relocating under pressure  
  Trees

I feel like the frantic tree  
trying to radiate through  
  scorched surfaces  
sometimes I feel like  
the obscure tree  
babbling through the silver-plated mouth  
  of a shrinking moon  
& sometimes I feel like a tree  
hiccuping through  
the heated flint of gunpowder crevices  
sometimes I feel like a tree

& every time I think about us women  
I think about the trees  
I think about  
the subversive trees laden in blood  
  but not bleeding  
the rebellious trees encrusted  
  but not cracking  
the abused trees wounded  
  but still standing  
I think about the proud trees  
the trees with beehive tits buzzing

the transparent trees  
the trees with quinine breath hovering  
the trees swaying & rubbing their  
stretched marked bellies  
  in the rain  
the crossroad trees coming from  
  the tree womb  
  of tree seeds  
  Trees

I think about the trees  
& sometimes I feel like  
a superstitious tree  
smelling negative & fragile  
  & full of dislocated sap  
sometimes I feel like  
the tree stampeding from  
  a cadre of earth tremors  
I feel like the forgotten tree  
  that can't live here no more  
sometimes I feel  
  like the tree that's growing wild  
through the wild life left  
in the petroleum pipeline

I feel like a tree

A tree caught  
in the catacomb of bones  
  enslaved in  
the red light districts of oppression  
I feel like a barricade of trees  
  I feel like a tree  
& sometimes  
I feel like the tree  
that's lucky to be a tree  
  in the time of  
missing trees  
I feel like a tree  
that's happy to be a tree not disappearing  
among disappearing trees

Trees

I feel beautiful  
  like an undestroyed  
  rain forest of trees  
I feel like a tree  
  laughing in the rawness  
  of the wind

I feel like a tree  
& every time I think about us women  
I think about the trees  
I think about the trees



Noah Purifoy  
*Snowhill*, 1989  
Assemblage  
62 x 40 1/2 x 7 in.  
Collection at Tara's Hall, Los Angeles

# The Ceremony of the Land

Johnie Scott

Beach Street. In Los Angeles, California, on the Southside, mention this street amongst most blacks who have lived there longer than ten years and they can tell you about a red-light district. They could tell you about gambling joints and hookers, police raids and an occasional shooting. That was the connotation of Beach Street until 1964, when the first signs of a growing consciousness began to seep into that tiny sector of Los Angeles.

Beach Street is located in the middle of Watts. It runs parallel to the railroad tracks while up and down the street are homes. Of course, the neighborhood, just like the community, is almost entirely black. Small kids play on the street, dodging cars. Dogs run loose in the street. On 96th and Beach Street is a liquor store—it has occupied the same location for the last 15 years.

Like everything else in this community, the liquor store reflects the residents. The parking lot outside is strewn with broken bottles and crushed glass—the latter resulting from too many cars pulling up in the lot and running over the same multi-colored glass. There is graffiti on the walls, even on the Church right across the street from the liquor store. It more or less tells one just where the community consciousness is at when one reads, for instance, "The Bible Is Libel ... God Is The Sun."

It would be easy to romanticize this place. To call it a colorful albeit miniscule capsulization of what the rest of ghetto dwellers in South Los Angeles and elsewhere live with daily. Indeed, Beach Street is immediately adjacent to 103rd Street, internationally known as "Charcoal Alley"—the main drag for the eight-day and seven-night long Watts Riots of 1965.

Those Riots, one remembers, touched off a string of violent protest in America's inner cities that was not to stop until three years and 265 cities later with hundreds of lives lost and hundreds of millions of dollars in property and goods destroyed. More important than the property losses, however, was the visible polarization of the races in America. One could watch color television and see where the looting struck at white-owned stores. "Soul Brothers" was painted on every window owned by black storekeepers. For some, this meant the difference between being looted and being burned-out.

But that was only the tip of the iceberg. It became easy for writers and investigative agencies to declare that "Watts had

become a disaster area, a smaller Dresden. Although the damage could not be equated with that wrought on Dresden by the bombing of World War II, nevertheless within the confines of that ghetto called Watts the damage was just as concentrated, and just as real." Indeed, this sort of observation became the order of the day.

One had to wonder at what was going through the minds of those who lived there. Watts, with its five housing projects housing 47,000 people approximating half of its total population, had become the American metaphor for despair. Moreover, it had become as well the metaphor for frustration, apathy, benign neglect, disillusionment with the human condition, and, finally, the cleavage in the human soul between love for one's home and rage at one's living in a world of so few options.

It was at that point, then, that certain individuals began to enter the community. These were not social workers. These were not plain-clothed policemen. Nor were they welfare representatives or agents of the War On Poverty Program doling out long, hot summer cool-it jobs to the youth of that community. No, these individuals came out of a feeling that in Watts there had to exist amidst all the despair and feeling of powerlessness some people whose lives were centered about the creativity of the human spirit.

These were artists in search of fellow artists, kindred spirits in search of their brothers. Color was no matter, although for whites it posed, then as now, a certain testing ground for personalized fears and hangups. Nonetheless, that search was focused on Watts and one of the major individuals involved in it was a Black man who had attended the University of Southern California's School of Commerce, had worked at a Savings and Loan company, then turned his back on a promising career in the social mainstream to come back home and there, hopefully, develop some alternatives for those trapped in the ghetto cycle of frustration, poverty, crime, prison, parole, frustration, aggravated poverty, drugs, crime, prison again.

I know. I was one of the ghettodwellers. I grew up in one of Watts' housing projects—one of six kids in a broken family that for 16 years made it on welfare checks and whatever odd jobs we might assemble to supplement the family's meager income. I had been there to witness the Riots, and as well had seen the outside power-brokers enter with their blue ribbon committees and declare, after going through the rubble and still-smoking ash from burned-out buildings that, for sure, "Racism exists in America and Watts is its witness."

I saw Jim Woods enter Watts and begin a small studio for artists that was housed in a storefront on Grandee Avenue, where from the front one could walk perhaps 25 yards and stand on the railroad tracks running down the middle of that

community. Then I left, for seven years, and upon returning still found Woods there. The change in the man, however, reflected the change in the community. His was a change in attitude, in outlook, in vision.

Jim Woods had initially begun with a group called Studio Watts Workshop. The premise of the group was that—and it remains—“Art is a tool for social change.” When one hears that expression the soul necessarily thrills—it brings back memories of what had to inspire the great artists of other lands and other times. As well, art had to be a tool for social change in Watts otherwise it stood no chance for survival.

The difference was critical. It was easy in the academic world of Cambridge, Eton, the Sorbonne, Harvard, the University of Chicago, and Stanford to talk about art as independent and isolated from both time and space. This thinking pervades not only the universities and academies, it is a fundamental tenet of Western civilization.

Talk of art as being functional, as having some direct link to one's own personal condition, to that academic way of thinking, connoted a sub-culture, a primitive art still chained to man's earliest beginnings. But what Woods discovered in Watts, and what artists the world over have been noting more and more of late, is that art in a very real sense not only belongs to the people, it also reflects the culture out of which it came in as real and palpable a sense as an African spoon-carved out of wood, it is both an objet d'art and a tool.

In Watts, there is a new sense for what is happening in art. And this is a sensibility born, appropriately enough, out of not only what Watts, but members of the Afro-American community have experienced while trying to create and then, more importantly, show their creations. Time and again black artists have been rebuffed or putdown by the Arts Establishment—have had to suffer the indignity of being invited to exhibit, for instance, at one of the chic art salons on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles.

There, as happened with one prominent black sculptor, the invitation was proffered to exhibit but upon arriving to inspect the premises—very tasteful and very expensive—the artist found that his work was to be exhibited in a small back room and not in the main art gallery. An old story, which the artist did not care to go through again, so he politely declined the invitation.

The problem is that black artists, in seeking to develop alternative means of exposing their work, have suffered at the hands of the media. It is a fact of 20th Century life that what *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *The Manchester Guardian*, say about one's work either positive or negative titillates the public curiosity and builds the artistic reputation. In having to do their “own thing,” black artists

found themselves building black art galleries and then being snubbed by the artistic establishment.

This could have created a cultural dead end for the artist who did not seek confinement to a certain socially-defined area of exposure. Artists who felt that their vision carried the timelessness of human struggle as evinced through the protests of a Watts, or Harlem, or Southside Chicago, found themselves confronted with the problem of what to do not only as an artist, but as a neighbor to the unemployed and unemployable—social rejects not only because of education, or income, but a forced human condition of degradation.

It meant to men like Woods first redefining the role of the artist. It meant clarification of the term artist, especially in the 20th century anachronism of the “ghetto”—recently pronounced by President Nixon as “having rounded the curve and on its way to improvement.” It had become clear to Woods that Studio Watts was only a small part in a total struggle to establish the contribution of the black artist to his society. In effect, Watts out-dated the studio concept. Its very desperation demanded an alternative to traditional forms and means of communication as well as living.

Which brings us back to Beach Street—that collage of small, wooden homes some occupied and some boarded-up, “condemned” as uninhabitable by the City of Los Angeles' Housing Authority. Beach Street, once the center of the sporting life for blacks in Watts, was just another street of failure here. No one, Woods included, would claim that Beach Street has been changed by the Riots—not on the surface. You do notice when you turn off 103rd Street onto Beach the vacant lots where department stores and small businesses once stood.

And symbolically enough, at 102nd and Beach Street, where ten years ago one found at one corner the South Los Angeles Funeral Home, at another corner a local Baptist Church, at the third a soul food restaurant, and at the fourth corner the hangout for the local hookers, the change as been that everything from that time period is gone—except the Baptist Church which now is boarded up, and the corner once occupied by the hookers is the location for a building housing the largest private poverty agency in the city, Westminster Neighborhood Association.

If one travels down 102nd Street, past the Westminster Neighborhood Association, the first thing noticed will be a large parking lot—strewn with glass. On one side is what appears at first to be an apartment complex. It is not. In reality, that apartment complex—grey and faded white—is the headquarters for the Watts Community Housing Corporation, formed one year ago by Woods in concert with Westminster, Solid Rock Baptist Church, and the Watts Area Redevelopment Agency.

The WCHC, as it is more commonly known, possesses the landrights to ten and one half acres of land—from 103rd Street to Century Boulevard, from the railroad tracks to Wilmington Avenue. More important, this land is to be the site for one hundred and fifty housing units of low and moderate income apartment dwellers.....

Its difference relates to the vision of the artists brought into the WCHC by Woods himself—black sculptors, painters, writers, filmmakers. For, as Woods explained in the headquarters for WCHC on March 14th, 1973, at a gathering of Los Angeles art critics and media representatives, the new identity of the artist in Watts now is “to inform the art community and others of the new direction of Studio Watts Workshop—to infuse the arts and our own art programs into a housing project and thereby begin reducing elitism in the arts.”

The gathering called that day was to listen to six artists—four black and two white—discuss their involvement in “The Ceremony of the Land.” Woods had gathered together John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson, Joann Gilmore, Nate Fearonce, Elliott Pinkney, Tim Rudnik and John White. The occasion had its own drama....

Woods continued “Hopefully, this will serve as the setting as we inform the art community of the importance of the arts as a mechanism for the planning of a constructive alternative lifestyle. What we are doing is building a ‘Community of Seekers,’ a community of people who have given up their own personal trips and have concentrated instead on the forging of a community identity and purpose.”....

Woods then became specific: “The housing program is designed to be the mechanism by which the arts are to be introduced into the community.”

John Outterbridge, 38, then led off. He said “A studio situation can take place anywhere.” The artist becomes the energy force within the community.

Nate Fearonce, 38, a painter-sculptor, then spoke: “I think that more than being artists, we are stimulators, implementers. It's quite possible that even if a museum existed here in Watts people would not go. But if you make it part of the environment, part of your environment, if you give the people something to do, something they can relate to, then your role necessarily changes.”

John White, one of the two white artists involved, then spoke up. “I'm involved in the process from the standpoint of a white cat coming from an isolated community with his fears and how I can express these finally through the conventional forms of drawing, painting.” He noted that before the conference began, he had observed a small black, boy walking

down the tracks.

He attempted to say hello to the boy. But, White observed, the youth merely glared at him and continued walking down the track. Though no words had been spoken, this had left a powerful impression on him.

Dickson, 25, who works in wood carvings, pointed out that “why not stimulate people to do things in front of their own houses. We're concerned with this, with stimulating, people to put the museum anywhere.” Said Rudnik, 30, the second white artist, “It's not a question of leaving the museum or gallery. It's like putting them in perspective. ....

Woods then added: “The Ceremony of the Land is dedicated to the dead of the riots.” When this was defined, everyone buzzed, including the artists. I've been trying to find out who they were—the dead—from the police to the people. All the symbols of the past have been lost, so we've had to go into the land and from these recreate new symbols. The most important thing is that each of these brings to the Ceremony their own dedication.”

.... The Ceremony of the Land took place April 7th and 8th. It happened on 103rd Street—Charcoal Alley—and involved dancers, actors, artists, and a streetful of people drawing designs with colored chalk on the streets. It was a dedication commemorating the beginning of the new arts-oriented housing project of the Watts Community Housing Corporation—where each artist instructs his neighbors in the arts, not just from a craftsman's point of view but from the point of view which sees art as an integral expression of the community, the culture, the country, the times.

.... Now above all of the talk remains the question—will it work? One can look to the past for examples, but none spring readily to mind where an artist might live next door to a welfare mother and a civil service worker, instructing both in the fine arts. One can only hope that “art can be a tool for social change.” Whether it will now shall be seen. For sure, Watts will be the testing-ground, perhaps even rougher than the stormy and frustrating waters of the Museum.

# Johnie Scott Poetry

## Watts, 1966

Yes, the call was  
for violence  
and it filled the  
air, it seemed,  
everywhere

No, nothing was gained  
that felt no fire  
before the first trace  
of sun broke over  
the morning dawn.

It was a ship only fools  
chose to ride, and the  
hopes of those angry black  
braves crowded the skies  
and the seas and the land.

For Watts, amid all the  
shouting and cursing  
and foot stamping and  
screaming, the sight  
of routed white colonialists

was heady wine. Perhaps, when  
I sat to watch the images  
weaving against the walls, I  
saw myself reflected in the  
wildness of their oaths and stares.

Oaths, that laid torch to a cross  
on this, the yard of my brain.  
My mind burned with the ache  
to get away . . . escape the  
bestriken, howling rabble.

I wanted a place to sit and  
there ponder . . . a spot away  
from them and the black women  
who shouted "Rape" and the  
old men slobbering their words

and said stories with their  
magnificently wine-twisted mouths.  
I had thought to sink into  
a daydream, singing a quiet  
song to and with myself.

. . . to look across the streets  
torn by the rioting and now  
mocked by an apathetic white merchantry  
and wonder if the hate within  
my soul would ever leave.

Oh . . . bright, young guns poured,  
spilled out into the streets  
to raise a din of noise that echoed  
from Central Avenue to Alameda  
to Imperial Highway to Manchester Avenue.

A din of sound that called people,  
who rose, it seemed, from the  
very manholes that gutted the streets  
. . . streets, a patchwork quilt  
of incensed cesspools civilized

Man has named "ghettoes."  
But still, the fervor of revolution  
inflamed the air. Air,  
draped as though a pregnant cloud  
above the tiny heads of black children

playing in the streets with their lives.  
A fire hydrant, overturned and now  
spewing water as if it were a whale in  
the midst of miscarriage 50 feet high  
while buses honked impatiently

and the hustler's hawklike stare commanded  
a visitor's noting.  
Pity, Sorrow, Love, each fought  
silent savage battles throughout  
the night for the lost souls

that wandered drunkenly in the alleys  
or sat, composed, on milk crates  
in front of the liquor stores —  
speaking of filth and Mighty Whitey  
and the bloodlust that has impregnated

even the little bastard child sitting  
on a porch, confused by the chaos.  
BROFOYEDUR: the white man has indeed  
created a nightmare, and that Hell  
will not have Watts surprises none

but the mayor. On, on come the all-seeing  
eyes of the television cameras  
controlled by the probing, insensitive  
hand of the detached reporter who  
purports to relate the news to millions

while there, in the eye of madness,  
he quakes in his boots and wonders  
when his turn to be beaten shall come.  
(Left bleeding like a brutalized ragdoll  
that has outlived its usefulness and

a child's curiosity.) Relating the news  
while the reality perpetuates itself.  
Strutting down the streets  
come the Young Ones,  
with jazz playing from FM radios  
and marijuana tucked away  
in a jacket,

talking 'bout the Man and  
the trial of Deadwyler  
and the coming of the end  
of the fire that burned  
too short too long ago

and yet something new,  
a man named Fear,  
to the world as it looked  
in palsied horror at  
this, the child of the  
Hydrogen Bomb.

Watts, a womb from whence  
has been spawned molotov  
cocktails and shotguns, but most  
of all, a lack of care:  
for care has been exposed

as fraudulent and so deserving  
of no due other than that  
accorded burnt newspaper wafting  
away in blackened wisps while  
mothers hang out their clothes

and talk on telephones of the  
danger and their children  
and the nightmare that has descended  
. . . and how hopelessness,  
helplessnessness, is their

young one's due.  
The man named Fear has inherited half an acre,  
and is angry.

*excerpts from*  
**Revelations**  
*in No Justice No Peace: A Memoir, 1999*

Johnie Scott

Side 1  
**Looking Back**

It's like it was only yesterday  
when me, Jimmy, Eric, Quincy,  
Ojenke, Vallejo, Emmery,  
Cleveland, Herbert, Ernest,  
Paris Earl and Leumas,  
all of us  
the Watts Writers Workshop  
on 103rd and Wilmington  
at Watts Happening  
reading dictionaries in the middle of the night  
searching for the words  
we thought would set us free,  
would allow us to  
give spirit to the word,  
breathe life into the dream,  
free the fabulous Phoenix  
from the ashes  
give new toast  
in our own way  
pouring libations to the Orishas.  
These were the times the public knew about,  
that the media made sure of  
and it was necessary  
to be political;  
the times when Budd  
came to Watts,  
when Talmadge and Gerry  
and Harry and Claire  
were doing all they could to keep the dream alive  
while we shouted out  
about Police Chief William Parker  
and Mayor Sam Yorty  
and Uncle Roy Wilkins.  
Nobody escaped  
our self-righteousness  
which sighted in on anybody,  
everybody we felt  
set it off  
in the first place.

Bourgeois Negroes  
were just as responsible for  
the Riots  
as  
those whites who bled Watts  
not only for our money  
but whatever little hope  
we had  
of ever rising to become somebody;  
we sat in back houses  
with Rimbaud's Un Saison en Enfer  
brooded in alleyways  
where lost souls sucked their dreams  
out of No. 4 brown paper bags  
eyes purple dilated sniffing airplane glue  
past all sense of reason,  
past caring,  
stumbling blindly into wooden fences  
mumbling about  
how the Burning should have happened  
long before it did.  
Who were we to complain  
when some  
got paid for being indignant,  
had a home for once,  
the Douglass House  
on 97th and Beach Streets  
to lay our heads at night  
crafting righteous poems  
telling the tale  
from the heights of Kilimanjaro  
how black people had been brutalized;  
then,  
spotlights gone,  
the media glare died down  
the streetlights where we lived flickering in the darkness  
still needing repair  
we'd pass libation again;  
Italian Swiss Colony Dark Port  
might have been some Ripple  
whatever we could afford  
there in the silence,  
young poets  
revolutionaries  
liberators  
with songs to sing  
stories to tell  
we would  
remember  
like the time Eric went head-up  
against six young dudes

on 103rd who didn't care  
whether he lived or died  
opened fire  
did their best to blow him away  
Eric sprinting for his life  
down Beach Street  
dodging bullets  
all the way  
to Douglass House  
diving through a window  
the shattered glass  
landing on Emmery's face and shoulders  
lanky dark Emmery laying there  
stretched out middle of the day  
circling slowly back down from a night  
spent hallucinating off LSD  
while reading Pablo Neruda.

Eric wiping away the blood  
still breathing hard  
afraid to look up and out  
not taking any chances  
not of being killed  
by people who didn't appreciate  
poetry  
or wanted any part  
in our revolution  
just wanted to kill the brother  
they felt believed understood  
was somehow different from  
the miasma  
the futility  
whose command of language itself  
said he didn't belong here  
that he was a poet,  
yeah.  
who didn't know he could dodge bullets  
would dive through windows  
anything else  
if it would give him  
one more minute  
to remember the story,  
like the rest of us,  
and in remembering,  
promise  
never to forget.

I look back 30 years removed:  
it seems so much clearer  
what was happening  
could not truly see it then



which makes now  
even more important.  
A poet, more than anything else,  
is a storehouse of memories,  
the living history  
of a people  
given in images and sound.  
So for my people,  
for the Black Brown Red and Yellow People  
who made up that little town  
nobody really cared or wondered or thought about,  
for Watts,  
so very much alive then  
so down and out today,  
I dedicate this song-poem-Ourstory  
that you never be forgotten,  
that what we dreamed of  
and dared put to word  
not be undone.

This, then, for the memories.  
This, then, for the children and grandchildren  
who will only know what they read,  
that is, if they have learned to think for themselves  
and know they come from a  
generation of griots.

## Side 6 **Bessie's Song**

If I see you somewhere in a crowd,  
I promise not to call out your name  
or let my eyes meet yours.  
If, somehow while traveling,  
our paths cross one another,  
I promise to go another way  
even while I curse the day.  
These are my thoughts as  
I finally realize  
what it's like  
when love goes bad.

Those streets of Watts  
where Riot ran rampant,  
Where Murder ruled the day  
and Mayhem owned the night,

the hard sounds of Army troops  
taking back the city  
block by bleeding burning panic-stricken block  
the Patton tanks the .50-caliber machine guns  
the Marines in waiting  
all of this witness  
to what happens when love goes bad  
when people too long forgotten  
misused and abused  
finally speak.

When I ran the streets  
what I missed out on  
wasn't 'cause I didn't try.  
The lesson I forgot to practice  
the most important thing  
of all  
comes back to haunt me now:  
*love is as love does.*

Where there's no justice,  
there can be no peace.



Charles Dickson  
*Spirit Dance*, 1988  
Mixed media (Telephone wire, wood and shells)  
60 in. high  
Collection of the artist  
Photograph © D.J. Robinson, 2002



Charles Dickson  
*I Feel the Spirit*  
Mixed media (found objects, hardwoods, glass,  
sand, oil, copper and bullet casings)  
79 in. high  
Collection of the artist  
Photograph © D.J. Robinson, 2002



Noah Purifoy  
*Watts Riot*, 1966  
Mixed media (Acrylic on burnt wood and other debris from the Watts Riots of 1965)  
50 x 36 in.  
Bequest of Alfred C. Darby  
California African American Museum Foundation



Dale Davis  
*World Hand*, 1993  
Clay and acrylic  
3 x 18 x 8 in.  
Collection of the artist



Watts Writers' Workshop

*Reprinted from*  
**From the Ashes**  
**Voices of Watts**

Budd Schulberg

It was Black Friday, the 13th of August 1965. Like millions of other dazed or complacent Los Angelinos, I was watching an unscheduled "spectacular," the damndest 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 Nathaniel 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 Nathaniel West's nightmare vision as if it had leaped from the canvas and was coming live from Watts.

Not only Watts but all of southeast and central Los Angeles was being put to the torch. Television cameras hanging from helicopters brought the action into our living rooms. Flames from the supermarkets were licking into 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, "B3" - 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 nothing less than the on-the-scene telecast 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 genuine, full-scale Revolt, a rebellion 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, transportation, recreation, and hurting with the humiliation of it all, to the south and east.

Abruptly, the "dramatic" pablum spoonfed 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-guns 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 their 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 Reaganland, and 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 here. 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 crazyquilt sprawl that was and is Los Angeles. In the Sixties, Watts was no longer six thousand but sixty thousand; the black ghettoland of South Los Angeles had leaped to 600,000 in an exploding county population of six million. 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. If I were to understand this urban tragedy, it would require not merely a look but a lot of looks, and not merely superficial looks but finally, somehow, from the inside looking out.

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 twenty-first-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 flowerbeds and their well-kept lawns. Yes, there are such houses, block after block, and the first impression might be of a comfortable lowermiddle-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. Moving on beyond Success Street, we came to 103rd Street, the mainstream of Watts, which had won notoriety as Charcoal Alley No. 1. I had not seen such devastation since, as a member of an OSS team in World War II, 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 Watts that terrible silence that descends on battlegrounds the day after battle.

Just off embittered 103rd Street we saw 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 backed 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, teen-age and adult. There was a dancing class, lacking instruments or a record player, and some basic English and Negro-history classes. 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 efforts to assist severely depressed families in the nearby housing project, and that was about it - a sad, 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 social worker from Harlem and from CCNY guided this first tour of Miseryland, the dark side of the shimmering Angeles moon. In the poolroom I tried to shake hands with young men whose eyes would roam the floor and the walls when mine sought to meet theirs. No, they would not put out their hands in that 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 teen-agers, 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 goddam 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. Shi-it, man, I had it with whitey." He glared at me and turned back to his game of pool.

"I didn't mean to get you insulted," said our guide. "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 kicked around. We don't want to turn off their hostility and turn them into Uncle Toms. We want to guide them so they can turn those energies into constructive channels. It's discouraging. Every day there's 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 teen-agers who were staring dully at daytime television on a set from the



middle Fifties. I squirmed when the commercials came on. Like most litterateurs I am conditioned against commercials. The cigarette sells and the instant relief from body odors -it's all too much and we laugh at it, put reverseAmerican on it, and accept it as part of the game. It's camp to comment on how much more you enjoy the commercials than the so-called entertainment sandwiched in between, and to have your easy chuckle at the expense of Marlboro and Rear Guard and Mr. Clean. But I said squirmed. My first afternoon in Watts I knew I had never looked at TV that way before. It was eerie to watch these man-children watching the promised land held up to them through the magic of the television tube: look but don't touch. They were dropouts and they were jobless and some of them slept in doorways and in the backs of cars, prey to police harassment and the vices that seem to offer momentary escape. And what was the commercial offering them? - an opportunity to get in on the ground floor of a new real-estate developer's dream, each individual split-level home facing the golf course, and of course each with its own swimming pool, "no longer a millionaire's prerogative but within reach of even the budget-minded homemaker."

"Shi-iiit, man! I think I'll buy me two of 'em, one f' my white maid." They broke themselves up. They were laughing, but it wasn't good-natured, easy laughter. It was their own, stylish way of reacting to a challenge, a brutal challenge of a society that was selling swimming pools and golf courses and at the same time warning them to keep off the grass.

I remember feeling, after watching them watch that absurd American Dream of a commercial, that the burning of a supermarket (offering substandard meats and vegetables at higher prices than in Beverly Hills) was, if not forgivable, at least understandable.

From the pool hall we walked over to the Jordan Downs Housing Project. The units are adequate for young married couples who can afford eighty-five dollars per month. But God or Allah help you if you have four, five, or six children - or more frequently eight, nine, and ten. Walking back to the beat-up Westminster building, the crude beginnings of what may one day become a thriving settlement house, I heard myself asking the inevitable question of the concerned white visitor: "Is there anything I can do? Is there anything one person - not an organization, but just a single person - can do?"

"Just because our kids are mostly high school dropouts doesn't mean they're dumb. I can show you dropouts with IQ's of a hundred and forty. These kids are so frustrated they're going out of their minds. Some of them literally. They need motivation - stimulation. You said you were a writer - maybe you

could start a writers' class."

These days I receive letters from ghetto neighborhood groups in Cincinnati and San Francisco and Philadelphia asking how I began, as if there were some special magic we bottled to launch our Watts Writers' Workshop. I simply posted a notice on the Westminster bulletin board - "Creative Writing Class - All interested sign below." Simple as that. It would be pleasant to add that a dozen aspiring young writers signed immediately and we were off and writing. The truth was, nobody signed up. Nobody came. Week after week I sat there like an idiot shepherd without a flock, shuffling my notes and idly reading the community papers in the small, cluttered room that was actually a kind of pantry for the Westminster kitchen. Sometimes I wandered down Beach Street to 103rd. People glared at me. I felt unwanted. I could catch the tone of angry muttering. "Dig the gray beast! What the fug you think he's up to?" Sometimes I'd be confronted directly. "The white man's heaven is the black man's hell!" a lean, ragged youngster who looked and sounded like a teen-age Malcolm would challenge me as I passed.

What to do? Give up? Admit that a white man, no matter how altruistic he believes his motives to be, has no place in a black ghetto? I decided to tough it out. At least to try it not for three weeks but for three months if necessary - or longer. But I thought I would try new tactics. Nobody knew me on Beach Street. Nobody could figure out what I was up to. It was still only a month or so after the curfew had been lifted and the National Guard withdrawn. One Hundred and Third Street was still suffering from a sense of psychological siege. White was fuzz. White was power structure. White was "Travelin' Sam Yorty" the Mayor and his Police Chief Parker, against whom the people of Watts seemed to feel a hatred similar to the feeling of the Jews for Hitler and Himmler. White was the color of the Enemy that held you in and blocked you off and put you down and kept you there at the business end of the billyclub and the bayonet point.

I thought I would try, as a calling card, the film *On the Waterfront* that I had written. Since the street kids who were my prospective students had no money to go to the movies, I suggested to some staff members at Westminster that I might talk to the manager of a local theater - get him to run the picture for us at some off-theatrical hour that would not compete with commercial showings. My suggestion trailed off. I could see the Westminster workers looking at each other.

"Don't you know there's no such thing as a movie theater in Watts?" one staff member said.

"You've got to go all the way up to, midtown, a good ten or twelve miles, about two dollars round trip," said the other.

So I borrowed a sound projector and a 16 millimeter print of *Waterfront* and we ran the picture in the makeshift Westminster assembly hall. It was mid-September, 1965. It was like a midsummer night, suffocatingly hot. There was no air conditioning. Not even fans. Our audience consisted of thirty restless teen-agers, some of them from Westminster's Youth Training and Employment Program, some of them hardcore trouble kids, troubled and trouble-making, some of them on glue and dropping red-devils, thrill-seeking some escape from the demoralizing atmosphere of a neglected community.

All of a sudden there was a commotion across the street. A crowd was forming in front of the prosperous two-story building cater-cornered to our center. "This place is in a worse depression than the country as a whole was in the early thirties," said an angry staff worker. "But that shop over there does the best business in town." He was referring to the mortuary.

I looked around and realized that I had lost my audience. I followed them to the street and learned the nature of the competition. A six-month-old baby had died. The mother's grief was intensified by the bitter knowledge that the prompt arrival of an ambulance and a hospital closer than the County General Hospital a dozen miles away might have saved her child.

So, outside the mortuary on Beach Street while my movie was running in an empty room, I was learning another important lesson about Watts. Nearly all the things that we take for granted uptown as part of the comforts of city living are brutally missing in Watts. In an area of large families and inadequate housing, prone to accident and the illnesses of undernourishment, there are fewer doctors and substandard medical care. The laying-out of that infant during the "premiere" of *On the Waterfront* in Watts still burns in my mind as image and symbol of the true meaning of medical deprivation.

You may read in the \$300,000 McCone Report that "the Commission believes that immediate and favorable consideration should be given to a new, comprehensively-equipped hospital in the area." The authors of this report go on to describe an urgently critical situation in the comfortable language of bureaucratic polysyllables. They fail to look into the face of the bitter young mother who sees her infant sacrificed to "statistics indicating that health conditions of the residents of South Central Los Angeles are relatively poor and facilities to provide medical care are insufficient." "Relatively poor,

hell!" cries Watts. "What health conditions? Insufficient medical care - those are just a lot of big words for the murder of our children!" Yes, and then they add, dangerously, "If they were your babies dying, you'd have an ambulance there in five minutes and a good hospital close enough to save them." Invariably, someone in the crowd would call out, "Brother, tell it like it is!"

In Watts I have heard it said over and over again, "You know what the real trouble is - nobody cares. You white people uptown don't give a damn about us. Hell, even our middle-class Negroes who move out to Compton or west of the Freeway don't care about us. That's why we don't have a hospital and we don't have hot meals and we don't have a movie house and we don't have a bus system that'll take us to the job interviews, and we don't have - "

One tries to say that there are thousands in the comfortable white neighborhoods who are not complacent about segregation and poverty-stricken ghettos. But one of the tragedies is that there has been no real channel of communication between Watts and the prosperous communities, between Watts and what you might call "The outside world." Watts has been made to feel cut-off, neglected, ignored, rejected: an explosive social condition.

In those early months - despite the pontifications of Field Marshall McLuhan - I refused to lose faith in the word. I continued to hope that we would find some communication through the word, through words put together meaningfully to communicate frustrations, feelings, thoughts, ideas.

At last my first recruit arrived. Although he is not represented in this anthology, I shall always be grateful to him. Some of his spirit, some of his determination to rise from the ashes, breathes in this book. Charles Johnson. Nineteen years old but looking a dozen years older. Roundfaced, pudgy, but, you felt, not a man you'd like to mess with. A veteran of the County Jail during the Revolt. A veteran of a lot of things. I had met him on that first visit to the pool hall. He had told me how the police had busted him while he was standing on a corner watching the fires. "I don't have to tell you what they did to me - I can show you the marks," he had said quietly.

On that first visit Charles Johnson talked with me for almost three hours. Just the two of us. Starting very slowly. Feeling each other out. Groping. Searching. After the first hour it got easier. I think both of us were a little surprised that we could talk to each other as honestly as we did. He asked me what my purpose was in setting up this class. "Nothing up my sleeve," I said. "It's just that I'm sick of people talking about

the problem - The Negro Problem, as the whites call it, The White Problem as Ebony calls it - and not doing something personal about it. I'm not the anti-poverty program. I'm not the N Double-A CP. I'm just me, a writer, here to see if I can find other writers."

"Now I'll tell you the truth," Charles said. "Some of the brothers didn't like the sight of you. In fact some of them wanted to stomp you. But I told 'em, Lemme see what the cat is up to first!"

Thus Charles Johnson became the charter member of the Watts Writers' Workshop. "I got things to write about," he said, "only I don't know if they're stories." He told me a few. I said, "Stories aren't fancy things. They're the things you've been doing, what you did in the uprising last month, what you're thinking about now."

Our first textbook was *Manchild in the Promised Land* by Claude Brown. Charles Johnson and I read some of it out loud together. By the time he was nine years old Claude Brown was a manchild, a respected thief and full-fledged member of the Forty Thieves. At thirteen, when the white kids of suburbanland are playing Little League baseball and going on cookouts with their dads, Claude was lying on the dirty floor of a fish-and-chips house in Harlem with a bullet in his gut.

Putting the book down after a particularly vivid excerpt, Charles Johnson said, "Wow! That's a real tough book. I didn't know you could put words like that in a book. Sounds just like we talk on a Hundred and Third Street. Everything he puts in that book, that's just like what's going on here in Watts. I could tell a hundred stories just like it."

Sometimes Charles would bring a friend with him, a gangly, homeless teen-ager who is considered retarded. Call him Luke. I had been warned that Luke could become violent and that unaccountably he had attacked a Westminster staff worker. Sometimes Luke would wander into the empty little classroom and sit down beside me and, with his dark, sad, sensitive face only a few inches from mine, stare at me while Charles and I were discussing a possible story. It was unnerving, but somehow Luke and I got used to each other. He did not write, although Charles said he had interesting ideas. He sketched surprisingly well.

And this derelict, whom some considered a village idiot, was strangely dependable. Later, when our original cubbyhole was preempted and we were shunted to some other makeshift classroom, a sign would have to be posted telling prospective members where to find us. Luke would take off on

his long, cranelike legs and the notice was posted impeccably and punctually. Luke was not writing, but he seemed proud of the writing class. He seemed pleased to have these little jobs to do. In order to understand Watts and the creative element so alive in Watts, it may be necessary to understand Luke. When the police pulled him out of the back of a parked car-his bedroom of expediency-and locked him into the hated 77th Street Precinct on the usual charge of suspected armed robbery, a crowd of many hundreds marched on the jailhouse. They were trying to tell the police something about Luke. They were trying to say that Luke needs more than an overcharge of robbery and a hard time in jail. The police did not get the message. They spoke to the protestors with shotgun butts.

By this time the writing class was growing. There was a mysterious eighteen-year-old who had dropped out of Jordan High School in his junior year, the same year he had left the home of his stepmother and ten half-brothers and sisters, living thereafter from hand to mouth with many meals not passing from hand to mouth for many days. He looked like a shy, unathletic, unkempt, underdeveloped Cassius (What's-My-Name?) Ali. He handed me a poem, on a small scrap of paper, in longhand. It was titled, "Infinite." By Leumas Sirrah. I paused after the first line: "Never know a begin of me." "Begin?" I thought, You can't use begin as a noun. But something whispered to me, "Wait a minute, before you jump to grammatical improvement, say the line again. Never know a begin of me."

It may be one of those original lines that goes on beating in your head long after the impeccably Victorian lines have died like cut flowers. Every week after that Leumas Sirrah would hand me three or four new poems, "Godandman," "You and I," "Who's Life," "One, Two, Three" - and say: "Criticism." But like "Infinite," these poems were both complex and original and deserved more than instant criticism. I would have to take them home and ponder. With Leumas came another teen-age high-school dropout, Ernest Archie Mayband, Jr., who shared with Leumas the chancy, marginal life of the child in search of his manhood, his identity in the dark ghetto. He listened, and indulged in long, philosophical discussions with Sirrah regarding the latter's abstract, metaphysical poetry questing for God, unity, and identity.

Our young poet's corner on Beach Street was joined by older prose writers who found their way to us by word of mouth: roly-poly, half-defeated Harry Dolan, in his middle thirties, in the process of being retrained as a glass-blower to support his four children, arrived with a battered briefcase full of unfinished manuscripts. He had been everything from a porter

at Filene's in Boston to a city-hall janitor to a weekly Negro-newspaper reporter. Time was running out for Harry Dolan. But he still wanted to prove that he should be a writer and not a glass-blower or a janitor. Since this was a workshop, my job wasn't to teach Harry Dolan how to write or even what to write - the real stuff of ghetto life beat strongly in all the scraps and false starts and incomplete rewrites he had to show. The job was simply for Harry Dolan to organize himself, his material, his talent. He seemed to have everything but self-confidence. Pick the piece you like best, concentrate on it, don't stop until you know it is the best you can do with it, get a clean, finished copy, and move to the next: that was about all the teaching I had to offer Harry Dolan, and from this gentle nudge flowed essays like "Will There Be Another Riot in Watts?," short stories like "I Remember Papa," plays like *Losers Weepers*.

There was also Birdell Chew, a lady in her fifties, like so many Watts residents a migrant from the rural South, a philosophical veteran of the hard life, active in the struggle of the community to pull itself up from the depths of despair and neglect and apathy and a tragic sense of alienation from the white overlords.

Like Harry Dolan, Birdell Chew had been wanting to write all her life. My first reaction to the first chapter of her novel in progress - years in progress - was similar to my impulsive response to Leumas Sirrah's first line of "Infinite": "Looks hopeless - can't spell or punctuate - trips over her own syntax - semi-literate." But I took it home and made only the most necessary, simple, grammatical adjustments. Our secretary - by now we needed a special secretary for the workshop writing alone - typed a clean copy. When I read the first chapter of Birdell's book again, it was like looking through a window that had been cleaned after gathering dust and crust for years.

.... And then there was Sonora McKeller, born and raised in Watts, known all over the area as "Aunt Fanny," a militant community action worker recognized for her cleanly written and strongly delivered speeches to anti-poverty groups. Sonora is also a human melting pot, part Afro-American, part German, part Apache Indian, part Mexican. She has been everything from a chorus girl to a South Los Angeles Joan of Arc.

There was twenty-year-old Johnie Scott, who drank wine and dropped red-devils with the most abandoned of the desperate black children of 103rd Street, but who survived, miraculously, to become one of the handful of his generation in Watts to graduate from Jordan High School and to find his own elo-

quent voice as a kind of poet laureate of ghetto Watts.

And Jimmie Sherman, high school dropout, who had also gone through a period of personal rebellion, turning to wine, marijuana, and gang-fighting, but who was now a reformed ex-GI teaching boxing at a Teen Post, who filled out his application for the Workshop with the significant phrase: "I had made up verses since I was a little boy, but it was taking part in the Revolt of Watts and thinking about what it had meant to me for days afterwards that made me realize that what I really wanted to be was a writer, not just for myself but for all of us who want justice in America."

By the spring of '66 we had outgrown the small offices and classrooms we had been using at Westminster. Westminster itself was bursting at the seams as its various anti-poverty, self-development programs multiplied. So we moved up to 103rd Street, on good old Charcoal Alley No. 1, into the Watts Happening Coffee House, an abandoned furniture store that the young people of the area have transformed - industriously and ingeniously - into an art center. There are home-made paintings on the wall, a few of them fascinating, a lot of them promising, some of them god awful. There is a stage where poetry readings and self-propelled plays like Jimmie 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.

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 forty-year-old from Indianola, Mississippi, who had been the first Negro to graduate from Brigham Young University, Harley Mims. Our first Mexican contributor, warm, enthusiastic Guadalupe de Saavedra. Young, black militant, and talented Vallejo Ryan Kennedy. A twenty-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 thirties, Jeanne Taylor and Blossom Powe, of the Ebony-reading middle-class, who seemed to find fresh inspiration in brushing shoulders with the troubled or angry kids of the Watts ghetto.

By summer '66 our Writers' Workshop was becoming a kind of group celebrity. Los Angeles Magazine published the poetry of Johnie Scott, Jimmie Sherman, and Leumas Sirrah, and they found themselves attracting national attention. *Time Magazine* reprinted some of the poems with an article in the Education section on new approaches to school dropouts in the ghetto.

NBC-TV devoted an hour on 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 Stuart Schulberg, whose camera roamed the main streets and back alleys of Watts as the writers became their own narrators.

.... I do not mean to suggest that everything was hunky and 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 turn up the hi-fi until it sounded as loud as the siren 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 five hundred-word explanation. Harry Dolan said, "A Chance." Birdell Chew said, "Justice." Ernest Mayhand said, "Respect." Leumas Sirrah said, "Identity." Jimmie Sherman said, "Dignity, or pride."

A young painter 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. Without freedom we aren't alive. We're walking dead men. We can't wait for your President's Great Society. . . ."

He was interrupted by a teen-ager 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. . . . We're ready to take our stand here and to die for our freedom in the streets of Watts."

Many evenings I walked out of the Coffee House, into the oppressive darkness shaken and frightened by the depth and intensity of the accumulative anger.

A full year had passed since the Fires of '65. Despite the faint claims of the Honorable John McCone, there had 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 daycare 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 prominent 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 '65 when he said, "Resentment has been defined as an autointoxication - 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."

But a big question remained. Having shucked apathy for militancy and subservience for a new pride in Negritude, would the post-Revolt 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 selffulfillment?

The answer came in late summer '66, when a new spirit of unity and a fascinating ambivalence toward the white man produced "The Watts Summer Festival." The angry young blacks, some of whom found their poetic voices in our Workshop 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 white 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 or 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 proven ability like 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. 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 double-edged. If it resisted the temptation to invade the white man's terrain, it was also a joyous celebration of a victory, a victory for lawlessness and disorder in search of identity and freedom.

Watts – August '66 – was neither snarling nor trying to play "good dog" and sit up and do tricks for the happy and relieved white man. It was celebrating a new-found sense of power. There was dancing in the streets, dancing such as Los Angeles has not seen since its true Mexican fiesta days. And instead of fires along Charcoal Alley No. 1 there were great tents displaying jazz groups, exhibitions of sculpture, and paintings. There were street plays and street entertainers that revived the flavor of commedia dell'arte. In the Coffee House, Jimmie Sherman presented his *Ballad from Watts*. Studio Watts performed its own interpretation of Genet's *The Blacks*. And our Writers' Workshop, now grown to some twenty members, gave a nightly program of readings – a historic literary moment for Watts – the first time its writers were being heard on a stage, reading from their own works.

For three days this unique Arts Festival went on, and lo, the miracle—in all that time, even with the bars of 103rd Street going full blast (and that's a blast, baby!), there was not a single incident. With white tourists all over Watts, not a single ugly or dangerous moment. Here at last was law and order. But whose law?

In a rare mood of forbearance, the provocative Los Angeles Police Department had agreed to withdraw completely from "The curfew area," the city hall euphemism for the ghetto. Instead the policing was left to the Watts Summer Festival Committee, which drew on the young black nationalists to maintain that magic balance called "law and order." What does an indigenous police force have to do with an introduction that is supposed to devote itself to a literary

awakening in Watts? Since there is no border guard who stands on the boundary between life and art, the indigenous self-protection and supervision of the Watts Summer Festival may be as creative as the contents of the festival itself.

But it was merely an uneasy truce. Once more the mailed fist of the L.A.P.D. came down on Watts. Watts was marked as the hard pit of the bitter ghetto fruit and there was constant harassment. Young men were picked up for loitering, for being on the streets after midnight, for having no definite address, and on suspicion for all sorts of crimes. When the troopers struck, our young writers felt the blows along with the others. The Watts Happening Coffee House was a particular target. To the unemployed, the dropouts, the angry, talented young people of 103rd Street, the Coffee House had special meaning because it wasn't a Teen Post, a government hand-out, but theirs, their very own – from the paintings covering the walls to the furniture they had made with their own hands. Three or four of our homeless young poets were sleeping there on the sofas. When they and their friends emerged, they were intercepted by nervous officers of the law and forced humilatingly to spread-eagle against the wall while they were searched for arms and dope. Some of our teenagers, at times wearing yellow Malcolm X sweatshirts, would see the feared police cars and run. The white helmets would assume that flight was a confession of guilt. "I don't think they were arresting us as individuals," said Leumas Sirrah, "I think they were arresting our sweaters."

Captain Tom King of the 77th (who later did an energetic if futile job of trying to prevent Harry Dolan's teleplay *Losers Weepers* from being produced in its natural locale in Watts) may not realize what a center for the arts he is conducting in his celebrated gaol.

.... A creative writing class in Watts was fine, as far as it went, but it didn't go very far for writers who were homeless, who had to pawn typewriters, who fainted from hunger in class. Most of these writers would fall apart because they had no address, no base, no center, no anchor. That discovery was the genesis of Douglass House, named in honor of Frederick Douglass, the runaway slave who taught himself first to read and then to write, memorably, who became one of the most powerful speakers in the cause of abolition and who founded and edited the influential newspaper *North Star*. Frederick Douglass had fought his way up from the cruel beatings and heavy chains of professional slave-breaker, to discover the power of the word. A slave of illiteracy, of the cold-blooded system of illiteracy, he had become his own master and a master of the language of his land.

The beginnings of Douglass House could not have been more unprepossessing. We drove up and down the streets of Watts looking for vacant houses until we found a nine-room house, literally in ruins, but with possibilities. All the windows were shattered. Glass and unspeakable debris littered every room. It could be rented for ninety-five dollars per month. I thought I could swing that personally while I worked on some primitive plan to renovate and support the house by other means. The writers themselves cleared away the litter. How, I wondered, were we to raise the money to rebuild the house, furnish it, equip it with typewriters, a reference library and the other tools of our trade, pay the salaries of a resident manager, a secretary and editorial assistant...?

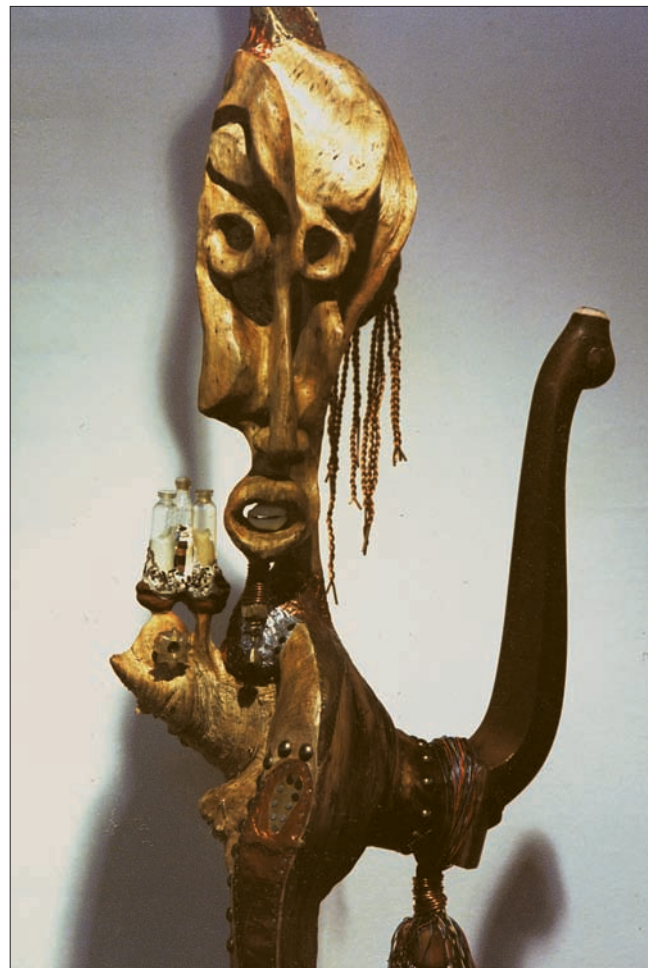
When I first put up that notice, "Creative Writing Workshop," in Watts I had no idea what I might discover. But I do now. I have no illusions that our Workshop has cornered all the writing talent in Watts. New writers wander into Douglass House with their stories and poems in hand almost every day. And what of the musical talent, the painting and sculpture like Noah Purifoy's imaginative "junk" put together and recreated literally from the rubble of the Revolt? Or the natural acting talent that may be symbolized by Sonora McKeller, an amateur who more than held her own with tremendous effect in the midst of powerful professional Negro actors in Mr. Dolan's *Losers Weepers?* Deep into my second year with the Douglass House writers of Watts, I am convinced that there are Leumas Sirrahs and Harry Dolans and Johnie Scotts and James T. Jacksons and Harley Mimses and Alvin Saxons all over America, wasting away as janitors or menials, or unemployed.

The writers of Douglass House — and the Douglass Houses waiting to be founded all over America — may or may not be Miltons. But for too long they have been mute and inglorious. My experience convinces me that the young, angry social worker who first greeted me in Watts was telling me the stone truth. There in the poolroom lurks the nuclear physicist, lost to drug addiction through criminal neglect and want of motivation. There on the street corner drifts the young poet who flunked English in the tenth grade. And finally, who is flunking, he or we? The society, the school, is flunking. The substandard ghetto school, the raceridden society, is the biggest Dropout of them all.

The ambivalence and ferocious complexity that I have found in my two years in Watts is expressed profoundly in the wide range of attitudes and feelings within our Workshop now grown to thirty members with thirty-five new applicants as we go to press. There is a young element with deep distrust of the white man and with strong leanings toward black nationalism and separatism. There are older members, no less

militant but oriented toward American justice in the form of integration. Some are swayed in both directions. There may even be a few of what old and loving but also firm and fierce Birdell Chew calls "crawling, creeping Uncle Toms." Somehow they have learned to co-exist in the Writers' Workshop, containing their differences and even their opposite poles.

Budd Schulberg, Douglass House, Watts 1967.



Charles Dickson  
*I Feel the Spirit* (detail)  
Mixed media (found objects, hardwoods, glass, sand, oil, copper and bullet casings)  
79 in. high  
Collection of the Artist  
Photograph © D.J. Robinson, 2002



Charles Dickson  
*Bongo Congo: Mobilization of the Spirit*, 1989  
Mixed media  
84 x 120 x 60 in.  
Collection of the artist  
Photography ©DJ Robinson 2002. All Rights Reserved.



## Artist Biographies

**John Outterbridge** (b. 1933) A native of Greenville, North Carolina, Outterbridge studied at the American Academy of Art in Chicago (1956–59). He is a painter and sculptor known for his pioneering work turning found and discarded objects into sculpted assemblage. His Containment Series, created in response to the Watts riots of the late 1960s, provides a particularly poignant commentary on the social and political environment. In 1970, he incorporated the work of Elliott Pinkney, Charles Dickson and Dale Davis into a piece for the Watts community, commissioned by James Woods, Director of the Studio Watts. This work *Oh Speak Speak*, 1970–2001 addresses issues of survival, ethnicity, freedom and mobility. In addition to his work as an artist, Outterbridge has directed urban community art centers in Compton and Watts, California. In 1994 he received a J. Paul Getty Institute Fellowship and represented the United States at the San Paulo Bienal, Brazil.

**Noah Purifoy** (b. 1917) co-founded and directed the Watts Towers Art Center in the 1960s. He has a Bachelor of Science, a Masters degree in social service administration, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Chouinard Art Institute. In 1976, then Governor Jerry Brown appointed Purifoy as a founding member to the California Arts Council. As a leader in the genre of assemblage art since the 1950s, he collects and assembles others' "junk" to create his sculptures. Over 100 of his pieces are on display at his Joshua Tree, California outdoor studio and sculpture garden where he moved in 1989. His textural explorations of forms and materials plumb the meanings and the essence – material political and spiritual – of his found objects.

**Charles Dickson** (b. 1947) is a sculptor of large scale mixed media work including *Spirit Dance* (1988) and *Bongo Congo: Mobilization of the Spirit* (1989). His work ranges from bronze heads and realistic nudes to wooden drums and intricately carved heads. Dickson's unique, multi-colored plastic and styrene masks have helped to place him at the forefront of African American artists working of Los Angeles. He is an annual participant in the Craft and Folk Art Museum's Mask Festival Parade and also provides free demonstrations in mask making to Los Angeles children, including at the Watts Towers Art Center. The artist has received numerous awards in recognition of his contribution to his community.

**Elliott Pinkney** (b. 1943) will be on-site to paint a mural for the exhibition depicting notable events in the Watts Community from 1965 to the present. Pinkney moved to southern California from his native Georgia after serving in the U.S. Air Force. The museum will hold an "open studio" with the artist during the painting of the mural, prior to the opening. Visitors and school groups can meet the artist and watch the work in progress. He has painted numerous murals in the Los Angeles area, including a 1977–78 grant project for the California Arts Council in Compton. Pinkney is also a poet and sculptor.

**Dale B. Davis** (b. 1945) is a Los-Angeles based sculptor. He is a mixed media artist whose work often situates ceramics into new contexts. His Expressive Hands series utilizes the form of the human hand. The form of hand could not be more familiar to the viewer, yet in this series Davis creates dynamic expressions through this most essential of body parts. He uses a variety of techniques in his artistic process--from pit firing to inlays of abalone shell, molds are never used. Davis has been motivated by the many expressive metaphors that come from the notion and physical fact of "hand", from fingerprint and personal iden-

tity. He was formerly director of an art gallery in Los Angeles featuring African American art.

**Melvin Edwards** (b. 1937) is a sculptor and printmaker who was in Watts during the rebellion and captured the events in a series of black and white photographs. A year later, he photographed the Watts Festival. In 1976 Edwards was making prints at the Ben Wigfall Workshop in Kingston, New York and collaborating with the artist and poet Jayne Cortez.

## Authors

**Johnie H. Scott**, is Associate Professor and Director of the Pan African Studies' Writing Program at California Sate University at Northridge. The program probes African American culture from multiple references including history, religion, psychology and creative production. Scott was one of the original members of Budd Schulberg's Watts Writers' Workshop. He credits writing with having saved his life and his poem *Watts 1966* was a response to the 1965 riots. He edited *The New Voices of Opportunity: Literary Essays on African American Literature* and authored *Black Film: A Critical Perspective*.

**John Eric Priestley** is an author, poet and screenplay writer. He has been a member of the Writer's Guild of America since 1994. He is the author of *In the Eagle's Beak* (1998). Collections of his poetry include *Gypsy poems* (2000) and *Abracadabra* (1994). His *Flame & Smoke* (1974) provided an account of the 1965 Watts Riots. He has taught courses on Literature at CSUN, UCLA, UCSD and Antioch. His screenplays include *Amazing Grace*, a screenplay about the Neville brothers, *Monster* and *Colors United*.

**Jayne Cortez** was born in Arizona, grew up in the Watts community of Los Angeles, California, and is currently a New York-based poet and performance artist. Collections of her poetry include *Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere* (1997), *Coagulations: New and Selected Poems* (1982), *Poetic Magnetic* (1991). Her poems have been translated into many languages and widely published in anthologies, journals, and magazines. She has released a number of recordings, often accompanied by her band The Firespitters, including *Taking the Blues Back Home* (1997) and *Cheerful & Optimistic* (1994). In 1964 she founded the Watts Repertory Company and started her own publishing company, Bola Press, in 1972. Cortez has been the recipient of the American Book Award, the International African Festival Award, and a Guggenheim Award, as well as fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Foundation of the Arts.

## Community Development

**James Woods** is the founding president of the Watts Community Housing project. He was the founder of the Studio Watts Workshop. He has been actively involved with the artists in the exhibition. In 1970 he commissioned John Outterbridge to produce a sculpture for the Watts community which became a focal point for community development. He is currently involved in community arts programs for senior citizens, and coordinates the annual Watts Artists Chalk In project.

## Theatre Performance

Watts Prophet **Dr. Amde Hamilton**, Ethiopian Orthodox Priest and Professor, UCLA.

## Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles, 1965-2002

### Works in the Exhibition

#### Jayne Cortez

(b. 1936)

*Tell Me # 1*, 1991

Monoprint

41 x 29 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Tell Me # 2*, 1991

Monoprint

41 x 29 in.

Collection of the Artist

*There It Is # 1*, 1994

Monoprint

41 x 29 in.

Collection of the Artist

*There It Is # 4*, 1994

Monoprint

30 x 22 in.

Collection of the Artist

*They Want The Oil But They Don't Want The People*, 1994

Monoprint

30 x 22 in.

Collection of the Artist

#### Dale Davis

(b. 1945)

*Arabian Nights*, 1972

Mixed media

18 x 12 x 12 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Bamboo Flutes*, 1982

Mixed media

60 x 15 x 6 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Meditative Hands*, 1989

Mixed media

10 x 20 x 20 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Rasta Hand*, 1989

Clay, Rasta braid and Kentic cloth

15 x 12 x 11 in.

Collection of the Artist

*World Hand*, 1993

Clay and acrylic

3 x 18 x 8 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Rainbow Fire Hand*, 1993

Clay and acrylic

16 x 16 x 12 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Rainbow Hand / Power Fist*, 1993

Mixed media

10 x 11 x 9 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Sappo the Brazilian Gambler*, 1995

Mixed media

8 x 30 x 10 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Orisha I*, 1995

Mixed media

36 x 36 x 4 in.

Collection of the Artist

*Orisha II*, 1995

Mixed media

48 x 30 x 10 in.

Collection of the Artist

#### Charles Dickson

(b. 1947)

*I Feel the Spirit*

Mixed media (found objects, hardwoods, glass, sand, oil, copper and bullet casings)

79 in. high

Collection of the Artist

*Spirit Dance*, 1988

Mixed media (Telephone wire, wood and shells)

60 in. high

Collection of the Artist

*Bongo Congo: Mobilization of the Spirit*, 1989

Mixed media

84 x 120 x 60 in.

Collection of the Artist

## **John Outterbridge**

(b. 1933)

*Oh Speak, Speak* (work in progress), 1970–2001  
Mixed media panels (3)  
40 x 30 in. each  
Collection of the Artist

*Déjà Vu-Do, Ethnic Heritage Group*,  
ca. 1979–92  
Mixed media  
67 x 13 1/2 x 9 in  
Collection of the Artist

*And In The Hay the Children Won't Play*, 1991  
Mixed media  
42 x 76 x 2 1/2 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*Window*, 1991  
Mixed media  
46 x 24 1/4 x 5 1/2 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*In Search of the Missing Mule*, 1993  
Mixed media  
86 x 44 1/2 x 14 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*Pot of Lie Lye*, 1993  
Mixed media  
48 x 19 x 19 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*Window with Wall*, 1994  
Mixed media  
8 ft. x 4 ft. x 10 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*Remnants Unclaimed* (work in progress), 1996–2002  
Mixed media  
27 x 12 x 8 in.  
16 1/2 x 15 x 6 1/2 in.  
Collection of the Artist

## **Elliott Pinkney**

(b. 1934)

*WattsHappeneding*, 2003  
Acrylic on panel  
8 x 16 ft.  
Installation at the Haggerty Museum of Art

## **Noah Purifoy**

(b. 1917)

*Watts Riot*, 1966  
Mixed media (Acrylic on burnt wood and other debris from the  
Watts Riots of 1965)  
50 x 36 in.  
Bequest of Alfred C. Darby  
California African American Museum Foundation

*Black Brown and Beige*, 1989  
Assemblage  
68 x 113 x 6 in.  
Collection at Tara's Hall, Los Angeles

*Snowhill*, 1989  
Assemblage  
62 x 40 1/2 x 7 in.  
Collection at Tara's Hall, Los Angeles

*Untitled* (Triptych), 2001  
Assemblage  
77 x 115 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.  
Collection of the Artist, Joshua Tree

*Untitled*, 2001  
Assemblage  
68 x 42 x 5 in.  
Collection of the Artist, Joshua Tree

*Condominium*, 2001  
Assemblage  
30 x 68 x 3 1/2 in.  
Collection of the Artist, Joshua Tree

*Untitled*, 2001  
Sculpture  
93 x 24 x 14 in.  
Collection of the Artist, Joshua Tree

## **Documentation**

### **Melvin Edwards**

(b. 1937)

*The Watts Rebellion*, 1965  
Gelatin silver print  
10 x 8 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Rebellion*, 1965  
Gelatin silver print  
10 x 8 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Rebellion*, 1965  
Gelatin silver print  
10 x 8 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Rebellion*, 1965  
Gelatin silver print  
10 x 8 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Festival*, 1966  
Gelatin silver print  
8 x 10 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Festival*, 1966  
Gelatin silver print  
8 x 10 in.  
Collection of the Artist

*The Watts Festival*, 1966  
Gelatin silver print  
8 x 10 in.  
Collection of the Artist