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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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.


**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 Coppernoll 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
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.1 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.2 Post-war migration swelled the African-American population eightfold between 1940 to 1960, ultimately resulting in an increase of 87 percent by 1965.3

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.4 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.5 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 1965.6 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.7

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.”8 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.” 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 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. 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.”

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. 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. 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, 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.” Lewis believes that street art projects represent “... part of a community action program that serves people of all ages.”
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. 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.”
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.19

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.20 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.21 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 Johnie 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 Johnie 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.”22 In Swahili, “mafundi” means artisan. UCLA’s Professor J. Alfred Cannon and others banned 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 1975.23

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.”24 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.25 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. Artists John Outterbridge, Charles Dickson, Elliott Pinkney, Dale Davis, Nate Ferance and engineer Tom Little worked on the piece. 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 Darhard Perry, whose aliases included Ed Riggs and Othello.

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. 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.

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
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.\textsuperscript{31} The WLCAC programs incorporated community arts, and subsequently led to the establishment of a museum in Watts to document the Civil Rights Movement.

\section*{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.

\textbf{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.”\textsuperscript{32}

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.”\textsuperscript{33}

Most of Purifoy’s pieces in the Haggerty exhibition, with the exception of \textit{Watts Riot}, (1966) are from later stages in his 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 \textit{assembled} as opposed to painted, drawn, molded, or carved.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{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, \textit{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 renews 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. 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. 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.”

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. 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 (1970s to present) and Window, (1991) 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.41

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 Lie Lye, 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-
missioned 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 Happeneding* 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. 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
Whitmore; musicians Buddy Collette and Billy Higgins; writers Quincy Throop and Odie Hawkins; actors Roger Mosley and Paula Kelly to name a few.43

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 1993.44 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.
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 Togari, 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.


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 18, 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.


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 Outerbridge’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.


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.


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 confided 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, KPK 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 Oliker, program 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.


32. Author’s interview with Dale Davis, December 9, 2002.


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


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


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 available to Outterbridge through the collaboration of Barry and Janet Bazzile, 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.

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

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 (COINTELPRO, FBI acronym: “counterintelligence program.”)

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, Darhard 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, Thelonious 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 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,” 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
mistakes in the future (2002). This is *How*.

Simon Rodia—the Italian immigrant, who, alone, in 33 years built the Watts Towers—was 44 years old when he started in 1931. He finished in 1964, and then gave the property to the people who lived across the street. When he started, I doubt he had in mind that the structure would one day have a social impact as a California State and a United States Historical Monument. No, Sam probably had no idea that out of his work would come a symbol of social prominence and representation of social change with such far reaching impact—in the year 2002, over 25,000 visitors from all over the world visited the Watts Towers.

Myself a neighborhood resident, who remembers as a child bringing Rodia old broken plates from home, most people in the neighborhood simply tolerated the man—the usual the plight of the artist—as being "crazy Sam" or just plain "crazy". Most artists are hated and despised when they are alive and they are celebrated after they are dead.

Sim Rodia’s work is extremely unusual. In 1959 the City of Los Angeles in all its wisdom wanted to tear the Watts Towers down. The politicians said that the structures were unsafe and were going to fall. Fortunately, Bud Goldstone, an engineer working for NASA at the time, had come out and taken sample sections of the foundation rungs. He believed in the strength of the structure of the Towers. Goldstone connected a ten thousand-pound load to the tallest Tower for a stress test. The only thing to fall from the Watts Towers was a single seashell. As a result of this test and further lobby by concerned residents of the Watts, the Towers became a State and National treasure.

The amazing fact is that the Towers were ever finished. For one thing, Rodia could not afford to hire a man to help him. It should be noted here about the structure. First, there are no welds in the entire structure of the Watts Towers. The steel girders which support the three towers, were bent under the Pacific Electric Railroad tracks which once ran juxtaposed the Watts Towers. This is very significant, since the tallest of the three towers stands 101 feet high. The seashells, broken plates, bottles, tiles, etc., which before Sam used these discs that would have otherwise gone to the trash dump—supported in place by mortar—to be transformed into “ART”. Imagine, for a moment, standing on a Tower rung one hundred feet in the air, a bucket full of mortar and a trowel—hanging there—attempting to trowel a seashell into place. That is one hell of a balancing act, when one considers doing said act for a period of 33 years. The prospect becomes quite compelling and brings a whole new meaning to the idea of "Art."

My sister married in 1948 and moved to 115th street in Watts. But my aunt, my mother’s sister had been living in Watts since 1942. In 1942 my father got out of Shreveport, Louisiana, with the help of two Jews for whom he worked at the Columbia Restaurant. This occurred after his encounter with the Riot’s hooded Klansmen, who nearly beat him to death. He arrived in Los Angeles and got a job working for the Pacific Electric as a machinist.

**What happened in Watts in 1965?**

"On Wednesday August 11, 1965 a Caucasian LAPD motorcycle patrolman by the name of Lee W. Minicus, stopped Marquette Frye on 116th and Avalon Blvd. at 19:00(7 PM). Marquette was celebrating with his brother Ronald, who had recently returned from Vietnam. An altercation occurred when Ronald failed a sobriety test. Marquette’s wife—then nine months pregnant—became involved in the scuffle and was purportedly kicked in the stomach by the officer.”

On August 12th, a young black man appeared on television. There were others in the backdrop of the frame beating conga—drums. The speaker, plenty ticked off from his tone, told the TV News Announcer, “Whitey’z goin’ down tonight! We gonna’ caravan, Watts, Southgate. Burn, Baby! Whitey’z goin’ down tonight!” The guy in the background beat the drums in a way, which sounded frightening, exhilarating and incomprehensible. But the one message in the drumming was SERIOUS TROUBLE!

On Friday, August 13, 1965, I came out of the pool hall on 41st and Central Avenue, where I was living at the time—to see what sounded like the far-off tinkle of wind chimes ... ... (Written in a pool hall on 41st Central) Jazz. Muffled voices pushed behind the squeaking doors of a place.

Costello racking balls with tales ’bout being in King Kong. Pulsating on the pleasant sounds of Coltrane on soprano. Crowded with hungry faces in the monkey jungle where hustlers are hunters who carry guns.

Watching the flashing fumble of jagged shadows & figures that jig and jumble, skip and bounce off the walls like flies on a binge between a screen & a pane.

... muttering, “Play you one for a quarter.”

I followed the far-off tinkle of wind chimes sound, as I walked South down Central Avenue. The sound grew louder, as the black-dot of an iris dilated into, angry Black men and women—a hurricane of them—ripping loose iron store front
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!

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.

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”.

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 scribblings. 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—sifting 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.”

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.”

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.

Johnnie 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, Johnnie lived on Grape Street, we were hanging out in Watts. We went over to Westminster 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,
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 Merrywheather, Jeanne Taylor, Fannie Carole Brown, Edna Gipson, Guadalupe De Saavedra, Harley Mims, Blossom Powe.


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?” 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 protozoarferacoelenterata,
plathyhelmintheschelmenthemychordata mollusan-neilidiodanthropodointegumentarychordata,
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 years 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,
slow 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?
I 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 jujju 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, plathyhelminthesaschementhey—ourkindmydermata, mollusannelididanthropodaintegumen
tarychordata remember me, my flag, it’s purple flowers fly: **forgetmenots** my color, 'fore eye was a bone eye was a shad
ow." 10

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.** 11 **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 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?” 12

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 mur- dered 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 lead 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.” 13

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
broadcast, but Bailey (Jew was short for junior) had seen that the man’s genitals had been cut away.”

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?”

Melvin Edwards, The Watts Festival, Los Angeles, 1965
Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in., collection of the artist
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 mismo /while these feelings bail/mientras achico estos sentimentos/this inundated 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 agua chiarte/ eye confide in its’ wisdom: the fool/ojo confio en su sabiduría tonta-que nece/the blood knows all secrets/la sangre sabe todos los secretos/the heart never tells/el corazón nunca los cuenta

By October antiwar sentiment continues to build. Protest were held in 40 US. Cities.19 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?
woke up, brother!
tell us how you died!” 20

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?” 21

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 mezcalando/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/pimiento—pepper, sangre—blood/& dripping jalapenos/full of que bonitas fingers/she was chewing up the fat/& spitting out carnitas/huevos broken in espumita/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 daires 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 bruto verde/in the big bastidablanco/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” 23

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 bourgeois 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 broudées, the bougainvillea climbs/la bougainvillea monte, a trellis to this solitude/un treillis vers cette solitude, my legacy a drafty garret/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/mes besoins changées 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 cercueil, my questions all the answers/mes questions: toutes les réponse “ 24


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.


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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
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, 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-
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 domination. 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

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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
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
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 unsubmissive 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
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
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They want the oil
But they don’t want the people
They want the oil
But they don’t want the people

I crisscrossed with Monk
Wailed with Bud
Counted every star with Stitt
Sang “Don’t Blame Me” with Sarah
Wore a flower like Billie
Screamed in the range of Dinah
& scattered “How High the Moon” with Ella Fitzgerald
I crisscrossed with Monk
Wailed with Bud
Counted every star with Stitt
Sang “Don’t Blame Me” with Sarah
Wore a flower like Billie
Screamed in the range of Dinah
& scattered “How High the Moon” with Ella Fitzgerald
as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium
Jazz at the Philharmonic
I cut my hair into a permanent tam
Made my feet rebellious metronomes
embedded record needles in paint on paper
Talked bopology talk
Laughed in high-pitched saxophone phrases
Became keeper of ever Bird riff
every Lester lick
and Hawk melodicized my ear of infatuated tongues
& Blakely drummed militant messages in
soul of my applauding teeth
& Ray hit bass notes to the last love seat in my bones
I moved in triple time with Max
Grooved high with Diz
Perdidoed with Pettiford
Flew home with Hamp
Shuffled in Dexter’s Deck
Squatty-rooed with Peterson
Dreamed a “52nd Street Theme” with Fats
& scattered “Lady Be Good” with Ella Fitzgerald
as she blew roof off the Shrine Auditorium
Jazz at the Philharmonic
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

today will end like a stunned fish in
tomorrows unequal distribution of
eptiness
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
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
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
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

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 capsule 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 doing 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, aggraved 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 do you 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.
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
bestricken, 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 iin 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, helplessness, 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
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 spooned 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-gunsmoke 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-
tons 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 lower-middle-class city in the Midwest. We found sunshine in Watts, and a deceptive suburbia, with small palm trees. But when we took a harder look we could see that the palm trees were growing like the people, as if they really did not have their hearts in it. 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-speaking 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 reverse American 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–iit, 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 imme-
diately 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 young-ster 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 com-
pete 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-monthold 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 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 povertystricken 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 laying 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
scrap-ends 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 gen-
tle nudge flowed essays like “Will There Be Another Riot in
Los Angeles?” 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 philo-
osophical 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 syn-
tax — semi-literate.” But I took it home and made only the
most necessary, simple, grammatical adjustments. Our secre-
tary — by now we needed a special secretary for the work-
shop 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 appli-
cation 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 discus-
sions 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 Indiana, 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-read-
ing 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 Mc Cone 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
... 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 Outerbridge** (b. 1933) A native of Greenville, North Carolina, Outerbridge 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, Outerbridge 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 identity. 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 State 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 Outerbridge 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 Kentie 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,*  
cia. 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 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