



**REPARATIONS, RESISTANCE AND RE-READING HISTORY:  
LESSONS IN POLITICS AND STRUGGLE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 08-07-08, p. A-7*

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The insightful assertion of our forefather, Frederick Douglass, that “if there is no struggle there is no progress” and that “power concedes nothing without demand. It never did and never will.” resonates and rings true with anyone still on the battle and building grounds for a new and ‘nother world. And although I am ever attentive to the life-practice and lessons of struggle, the month of August always invokes in me a renewed spirit of resistance and recommitment and an expanded eagerness to study and understand in deeper and more detailed ways this transformative power and process.

Certainly, the Watts Revolt (1965 August 11) profoundly informs the way I understand and approach this month. For the Revolt marks a critical juncture in the Black Freedom Movement, i.e., the transition and transformation of the Movement from its Civil Rights phase to its Black Power phase. And it is in this Black Power phase that our organization Us and I come into political being, into the midst of a struggle that preceded us and made us possible, but also was reshaped and expanded by our and others’ entering into the transforming fire of it.

In this age of transition and transformation, struggle was the central practice, spirit and speech of the time, struggle of every kind and form. It was the clear path, an unavoidable practice, a pervasive spirit and an essential element in daily speech. We of Us actually took seriously Toure, Fanon, Robert Williams, Malcolm, Douglass and later Cabral, especially their stress on relentless struggle, on culture as an instrument of struggle, liberation as an act of culture, and the need to overturn ourselves, struggle against our weaknesses and as Cabral taught us, “turn our weaknesses into strengths”.

In these times, struggle was a sacred rite of passage, a self-conscious and self-

formative coming-into-being as Black men and women, void of the “negroness” that leads to the self-doubt, self-denial, self-condemnation and self-mutilation Fanon defined as central aspects of an oppressed personality. Indeed, we understood ourselves as unfree *Africans-in-residence-and-resistance* in America, whose psychic and social health, well-being and wholeness depended on and deepened in the process of our struggle to free ourselves and, as Fanon urged, start a new history of humankind. We were not confused about our identity then, nor did we show unawareness, alarm, or joy over the visible evidence of various shades and mixtures among us. For we were and are all Black, “heirs and custodians of a great legacy” and awesome historical responsibility as Mary McLeod Bethune reminded us.

Indeed, our identity was an historical and cultural collective self-conception forged in the fierce and uncompromising struggle for our very existence as a people; against the savage social death designed for us in the Holocaust of enslavement and subsequent oppression; and for our reaffirmed and reasserted humanity, rooted in our own particularity as a people and in our commonality of origin, inherent dignity, aspiration and interests with other peoples of the world.

In this time of fundamental turning, we talked of and worked for a new world and a new way of being African and human in that world. The Revolt was rightly understood as part and parcel of an ongoing history of resistance, from the revolts during the Holocaust of enslavement to and thru those which would light up the cities and night skies of the 60’s. The immediate causes were police brutality, merchant exploitation and systemic suppression in other forms, finally reaching a tipping and turning point.

But the will to resist oppression was always present and thus the continuing possibility of revolt in the pursuit of freedom, justice and a dignity-affirming life.

Out of the fires and struggle of the Revolt, new organizations and institutions rose including: Ujima Village, the Brotherhood Crusade, the Black Congress, the Watts Health Foundation, Mafundi Institute, Watts Happening Coffee House, Kedren Community Mental Health Center, King-Drew Hospital and Medical School, the Watts Summer Festival, and of course, our organization Us which played a significant role in the conception, advocacy and building of many of these and other institutions.

Hearing of Congress' passing a non-binding voice-vote resolution to apologize for "slavery and segregation", I think of the long struggle of our people for reparations and of the beginning discourse after enslavement. And I think of and pay rightful homage to leaders like Sis. Callie House and Rev. Isaiah H. Dickerson and the National Ex-Slave Mutual Relief, Bounty and Pension Association; the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam who brought the reparations discourse to a whole 'nother level; the towering and unfaltering figure of Queen Mother Moore, James Foreman's reparations challenge to the churches, Rep. John Conyers' longstanding efforts with H.R. 40 and the hard work and essential role of N'COBRA and Dr. Imari Obadele in the reparations struggle. I thought of how without a re-reading of history and knowing ourselves in our fullness, we would miss the meaning of our own historical and ongoing struggle and praise others for efforts we've made ourselves and

which make their projects and proposals possible.

So regardless of the praise we might give the sponsor of the bill and those who supported it out of good will and moral conscience, the passing of the bill is problematic for several reasons. First, the resolution omits the history and struggle in which it is rooted, i.e., the struggle for reparations. Second, it is externally generated, not just co-sponsored, and thus undermines the self-determined definition by the injured of the injury to be apologized for and repaired. It is also premature and limited in that reparations, the repair of the gross and grievous injury of the Holocaust of enslavement and subsequent oppression requires more than a public announcement of contrition. At a minimum, it requires: public dialogue; public acknowledgement of *Holocaust* as the root injury, rather than simply slavery or trade; public apology after these; public recognition in institutions, education and media; compensation of various kinds; and corrective and preventive measures, i.e., radical social transformation.

Thus, to apologize for something not agreed on by the injured and to detach it from its overarching history and focus is also to divert and diminish commitment to the larger project. In fact, it is to substitute a safe, symbolic gesture for the comprehensive program and justice-driven practice of repair that is required. And here, as always, the remedy is relentless resistance, our ongoing overall struggle that pushes history forward, constantly opens up the horizons of hope and possibility for the future, and transforms us, society and the world in the process.