



**COMMEMORATING THE WATTS REVOLT:  
A HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF RESISTANCE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 08-09-12, p.A-7

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Each August brings with it a commemoration of the 1965 Watts Revolt and thus rightful reflection on how it fits within our history as a people, how it spoke and speaks to vital issues of life and struggle, especially to the right and responsibility of resistance. Even the Watts Summer Festival finds its fundamental and ultimate meaning in its contribution to our cultural reaffirmation, historical memory and political consciousness and practice. For the Watts Revolt fits firmly within our history and tradition of righteous resistance to oppression, evil and injustice. Indeed, ours is a history and heritage of resistance expressed in struggles against our enslavement on the Continent, on the ships of horror and upon landing here in the racially savage wilderness of White dominated America.

But the commemoration of the Watts Revolt also brings to mind an even longer and larger history of resistance in African and human history. For the right and responsibility to resist oppression, evil and injustice are as ancient as humankind and are rooted in the ancient African ethical understanding of what it means to be a self-determining moral agent in the world. This fundamental understanding of human beings is found in the sacred texts and ethical teachings of our ancestors in the *Husiu* which obligates us “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, (especially) among those who have no voice.”

Moreover, the history of African resistance in this country is written in vibrant *red*, signifying relentless and resilient struggle; in bold *Black*, reflective of an audacious and undefeatable people; and in a hopeful *green*, pointing towards a future framed and

forged in uncompromising and ongoing struggle. Thus, commemoration of any revolt and resistance must always pay homage to all the martyrs and all the other men and women who sacrificed and gave themselves in countless ways to expand the realm of freedom, justice and other goods in this country and the world. Here, Harriet Tubman and Nat Turner immediately come to mind, as do other openers of the way thru revolt and resistance in the Holocaust of enslavement, such as Gabriel and Nana Prosser, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and all the others too numerous to name, leading in a direct line of resistance to Watts and today.

From the Holocaust of enslavement and after emancipation with the rise of the anti-Black savage violence of segregation, we encounter vital models of resistance, calling us to continue the struggle and reaffirm our right and responsibility to resist. David Walker, in his *Appeal* to our people during the Holocaust of enslavement, reminds us, we “have a natural (God-given) right to freedom” that the enslaver has no right to enslave and oppress us, even as we make no claim and have no right to enslave and oppress him. And thus, he tells the enslaving tyrants of America, we will and must resist in every way possible, for “we must and shall be free.”

And he challenges us to take rightful responsibility for our liberation and not entrust it to enemies or allies, nor attempt to substitute *deliverance prayer* for *liberating practice*, but rather add work and struggle to professions of faith. For he says, we cannot “wait until God shall take us by the hair of our heads and drag us out of abject wretchedness.” Moreover, he says, our oppressors

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and some unthinking allies, praise America as it is and “say that we are ungrateful—but I ask for them, for heaven’s sake, what should we be grateful to them for—for murdering our fathers and mothers” or for our enslavement, our oppression, or “keeping us in miseries and taking our lives by the inches?”

Harriet Tubman tells us that she decided at the outset it was a question of “liberty or death” in the struggle for liberation and the God-given right to a free and fulfilling life. And thus, she told us, “we must go free or die. And freedom is not bought with dust,” i.e., with minimum sacrifice. Indeed, the only currency that counts is relentless, uncompromising and continuing struggle.

Likewise, in his *Address* to the enslaved Africans of the U.S., Henry Highland Garnet observes that the USA, in its beginning, had an opportunity to live up to principles of the Declaration of Independence and free us also, but instead, “they rather added new links to our chains.” He reminds us that our condition cannot be a cause for submission or unbecoming conduct of righteous men and women, but rather obligates us to free ourselves, be ourselves and realize ourselves in the most positive and productive ways.

Thus, he says, “Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. The diabolic injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, *neither God nor angels or just men (and women) command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore, it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual and physical that promise success*” i.e., liberation. Indeed, he says to the enslaved and op-

pressed, “Let your motto be resistance! resistance! resistance!” For “no oppressed people have ever secured liberty without resistance.”

And Ida B. Wells-Barnett reminds us in the midst of her struggle against the racist blood ritual of the lynching of Black men, women and children, that, as we repeated in the 60s, “freedom ain’t free,” and that it requires sacrifice, struggle and endurance. Indeed, she reaffirms that there is, for the sickness of a savagely segregated society, no remedy but resistance. For she states, “the more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he/she has to do so; the more he/she is insulted, outraged and lynched.” But when the oppressor knows he runs the great risk of receiving a reciprocal blow, “every time his victim does, he will have greater respect for Afro-American life.”

Thus, we must come each year to commemorate the Watts Revolt, not in isolation, but linking it in a life-affirming, struggle-committing way to all our peoples’ righteous acts of revolt and resistance to oppression, evil and injustice in the world. And may we always raise our voice and stand in solidarity with the oppressed and struggling people of the world under the banner and battle cry of our ancestors: *resistance, resistance, resistance*. For there is in this a timeless and terrifying message to those who have mangled, mauled and mismanaged the world, which says: the world is not yours and never was and it will be eventually taken back, bit by bit, and returned to its rightful owners—the oppressed and struggling masses of the world.

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