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Watts Still Rising: Visualizing Watts's Past, Present and Future
Through Public Art and Spatial Imaginaries

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master in Art in Chicana and Chicano Studies

by

Kaelyn Danielle Rodriguez

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Watts Still Rising: Visualizing Watts's Past, Present and Future
Through Public Art and Spatial Imaginaries

by

Kaelyn Danielle Rodriguez

Master of Art in Chicana and Chicano Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Judith F. Baca, Chair

Using spatial theory, social theory, geography and visual analysis, this thesis demonstrates the history of Watts as well as the ongoing community activism that empowers residents. The results of gathering this data and being closely involved with the Watts community have informed the mural, *Watts Still Rising* and the public monuments we at the Social and Public Art Resource Center have collaborated to design. By visualizing this history through a mural and public markers, we hope to inspired local memories from the past and social consciousness as we advocate for social justice, radical self-love and creativity as forms of liberation. Finally, while the arts movement in Watts from 1965 is overshadowed by the legacy of destruction from the Watts Rebellion, we must remember the tremendous role of the arts in Watts and continue to create artwork that will usher in the future residents' desire to see.

The thesis of Kaelyn Danielle Rodriguez is approved.

Gaye Theresa Johnson

Charlene Villaseñor Black

Judith F. Baca, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the youth who grew up in Watts that summer of 1965, to the youth growing up in Watts in 2016, and to the future generations from Watts. May the powerful and beautiful memories from the past inspire your dreams for the future.

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Introduction:

Today, Watts is a majority Latinx community.¹ Income levels, life expectancy and literacy rates are low. Some housing projects are significantly over populated, while violence and gangs continue to exist on in the community.² However, two new healthy food restaurants have opened in 2016, community gardens are becoming popular for families and organizations and community groups are operating at high capacity. While these changes are signs of improvement, the community of Watts is still largely impacted by the destruction from the 1965 Watts uprising that depressed home values and deterred business owners.³ While these are some of the social conditions in Watts today, we believe that residents in Watts have many visions of their identity and future. This thesis project reflects this belief and evidence for this claim.

This thesis comes out of a creative arts project in Watts that the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) and I began working on in the summer of 2015. While the thesis is an important component to the work I have committed myself to, it is not the pinnacle of this public art project. There are many moments within my experiences in Watts that I could never retell or recreate; yet I offer this thesis as a fragmented representation of some of those moments. Furthermore, this thesis is a scholarly endeavor of the history, geography and historical geography in Watts that required research, reading and interviews. This academic work often times meets the community work, as they each inform the other. It is a reflection on and analysis of the final mural design and the accompanying monuments. Furthermore, the work I did to

¹ Social Explorer <http://www.socialexplorer.com/2fe5b5d718/edit> accessed May 13, 2016

² Ibid.

³ Robin D. G. Kelley, "Watts: Remember what they built, not what they burned" *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA) Aug 11, 2015.

support the mural was still within a team context. Working in a team allowed us to use our skills in different areas for the mural. Members of the team include Judy Baca, lead artist, Farhad Akhmetov, Carlos Rogel, Pilar Castillo, Alice Patrick, Myisha Arellano, Frank O'Brien and myself. While we sometimes worked on tasks alone, I believe working as a team was one of the successes of this whole project.

One example of the methodologies used in this paper and even developed for this work specifically is emoji mapping. Working together in community engagement, SPARC archivist Pilar Castillo and I necessarily developed this decolonial cartographic place/space making activity for connecting with community members. This method allows Black folks and Latinxs to “site...expressive culture where aggregated and displaced peoples have waged a struggle to resist and survive policies of racial segregation and conceive a different future.”⁴ In applying the history of Watts to new methods along with spatial and racial theory, we created a mural, *Watts Still Rising* , and seven accompanying monuments that are community based art works.

In the summer of 2015, several members at SPARC, including myself, a Graduate Summer Research Mentee, organized an application to the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) for a mural commission in Watts. The DCA created an open call for applications: Watts Riots/Rebellion 50th Anniversary Commemorative Mural Project. The concept for the commission was to represent the history of the 1965 rebellion in Watts while at the same time, to depict a present and a future that Watts envisions of and for itself. After a very competitive process, we learned that our application was accepted by the DCA and that we won the commission, we moved forward quickly. Our project proposal was more than a single mural, it

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley on George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) back cover.

was a mural and a series of monuments in Watts that would link and celebrate existing artworks with our emerging mural. Said monuments also include *Memories on Charcoal Alley*, a walking path at 103rd Street and Compton Avenue of sandblasted quotes from five local community members. Each community member reflected back on the uprising or life in Watts today and we cut and selected them together to present a meditation on Watts over the past 51 years. As we moved forward with our plans, everyone on the team took on a role or responsibility in the project, and I, along with Pilar Castillo, worked on community engagement. We knew that this mural would be a failure and a disservice to residents in Watts if it were not made in collaboration with community members. We were aware of the stakes of this project, and for that reason, Pilar and I invested time and effort working with community members in Watts for nearly a year. We joined the community movement called I Heart Watts, as members and supported the group's initial goals.

We attended meetings and volunteered our time on local efforts like community picnics and clean-up days. We listened to residents of Watts and became friends with them. In order to represent a history of the 1965 uprising in Watts, we had to learn more about Watts before, during and after the revolt. Drawing primarily from Gerald Horne's *Fire This Time*, along with other primary documents like the McCone Report and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) report, I became familiar with the midcentury history of Watts and Los Angeles. I also learned about these histories from elders in Watts who shared their experiences with me. After situating this historical foundation in the thesis, I move forward to discuss and analyze the spatial and racial make up of Watts and South LA from the 1930s to the 1960s. Drawing from census data and the mapping software Social Explorer, I offer visuals that demonstrate the spatial demography of Los Angeles. This data becomes an important part of this

case because it offers visuals and analysis to the redlining in Watts and the plight of housing segregation.

From there, I build by demonstrating the community engagement that this project required and to offer a better sense of the extent of the labor and methods that were used within the community. Not only does this section allow us to see what's important to the community, and offer us details to allow us to see how residents live, it helps us connect theory and practice for decolonial praxis of Watts. Finally, I offer a visual analysis of *Watts Still Rising* design and the respective monuments. By offering a robust (spatial) history of Watts, coupled with the community engagement, I contextualize the visuals and aesthetic in the design. I also describe the function of the monuments such that the viewer/participant will locate themselves in the history of Watts, but also, use the present to dream of a future.

I. Memory, Spatial Imagination and the Watts Rebellion

What we call riots are rarely spontaneous in the ultimate sense...
-Gerald Horne⁵

To find the origins of the Negro problem, we must turn to the white man's problem.
-Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.⁶

There was a heat wave in Watts the night of August 11, 1965. Amenities such as air conditioners were scarce and public pools were even more limited to residents of color due to local civic segregation. With few methods to stay cool in the enduring summer heat, residents in South LA regularly sat outside their homes to cool down and socialize with neighbors. Some 200

⁵ Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995) 41.

⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 2010) 71.

residents were present that August evening in 1965 and witnessed first-hand Lee Minikus, a white California Highway Patrol officer, arrest Marquette Frye, his brother Roland Frye and their mother Rena Frye on Avalon and 116th Street.⁷ Roland, a recently discharged member of the US Air Force and Marquette were driving home at 6:00 PM when they were stopped, possibly on suspicion of driving under the influence. In his widely recognized book, *Fire This Time*, Gerald Horne offers two accounts of what happened that night, as told by the CHP officer and Marquette Frye. Marquette said the exchange with the officer was routine and the officer was about to let them go when another officer with a “nastier attitude”⁸ arrived. The Frye residence was not far from Avalon and 116th, and Mrs. Frye walked over soon after her sons were pulled over. She witnessed her sons in an exchange with CHP officers as a crowd of hot residents continued to gather. Mrs. Frye took issue with the way her children were being treated and objected to the authorities themselves when she was abruptly handcuffed by one of the CHP officers. Accounting for Marquette’s version, Horne writes that “the first officer then twisted her arm behind her back and seemed to lift her off the ground and put handcuffs on her, causing her to cry and scream due to the pain.”⁹ An officer hit Marquette Frye on the head multiple times, kicked him and slammed his leg in the door of the patrol car. The contusions on his head were evidence of his story. Mrs. Frye was slapped in the face and hit on the knee. After witnessing this excessive force, the crowd became boisterous, while still others in the crowd were also struck.

Beginning on August 11, the rebellion turned into six consecutive days of unrest in Watts and other parts of South Los Angeles. The loss of lives and damage to homes and businesses were devastating. Horne writes, “At least 34 people died...1000 more were injured, and 4,000

⁷ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 53-54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

arrested.”¹⁰ Some 200 million dollars of property damages was estimated within a broad perimeter of South LA, which exacerbated poverty in the area for decades thereafter. Over-policing was not new in Watts yet this instance of hyper-policing and omnipresent law enforcement affected the whole community; Horne accounts that “16,000 National Guard, Los Angeles officers, highway patrol and other law enforcements officers; fewer personnel were used by the United States that same year to subdue Santo Domingo.”¹¹ Furthermore, marshal law went into effect and officers enforced a curfew for residents that required all individuals seen outside of their homes after 10 PM to be shot on sight.¹² During the six days of rebellion and fires, grocery and drug stores were closed, burned down or looted, making it very difficult for families to access food and drugs.

The fight between the Frye family and the CHP officers would become known as the beginning of the uprising in Watts that summer of 1965. While over policing and police violence within communities of color are much older than the mid-century uprising in Watts, the encounter with the Frye family and the CHP officers was widely seen as the last straw for residents in South LA. It was not the impetus for the rebellion; only the last public expression of Black oppression and neglect residents could stand. In his book, *Black Arts West*, Daniel Widener reminds us that flames were stoked by decades of marginalization and injustice as the rebellion was “years in the making.”¹³ Furthermore, Horn asserts, “There were many causes and reasons for the tumultuous event...[and] it should have come as a strange surprise only to those

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Alice Patrick, (artist and former resident of Watts) in discussion with the author, August 25, 2016.

¹³ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 92.

who were not paying attention.”¹⁴ While residential segregation exacerbated poverty by localizing it, poor transportation options and few social resources might have signaled to local government their responsibility to intervene and develop more support. Yet Watts was bastardized by Los Angeles from its inception, as it was only formally included in Los Angeles city *or* county based on a financial incentive. Although this incentive benefited the City of Los Angeles, Watts was still marginalized within its new zone, a topic that I will offer in more detail later in this paper.

Although the causes for uprising were plenty, mainstream media and white Americans largely misinterpreted what occurred in Watts and why. Media outlets largely described Watts as “the Negro section of Los Angeles”¹⁵ and use behavioral politics as a trope of ethnics to frame their arguments that Black Americans in Los Angeles do not respect authority.¹⁶ This logic sometimes evolves into “people blaming Blacks for the persistence of unequal racial outcomes in U.S. society...”¹⁷ Time magazine famously called two children being arrested during the uprising “prisoners” and in so doing, characterized these kids as criminals at the same time. This hyper-criminalization of children is only conceivable because the police initially arrested them. While this occurred in the 20th century, experts have written widely on the ways that Black and Latinx children, especially boys, are judged and punished by law enforcement, schools and social institutions in general.¹⁸ In this way, criminalizing children makes villainizing adults more

¹⁴ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 36.

¹⁵ *Troops Patrol L. A.: Damage Heavy in Coast Riots*, black and white film, narrated by Ed Herlihy (1965; Los Angeles, Universal Newsreel.), Film.

¹⁶ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 36-38.

¹⁷ George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) 5.

¹⁸ Victor Rios, *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (New York: New York University Press, 2011) 40.

acceptable. Since the majority group at the time agreed with and benefitted from housing segregation, many white Americans were quite distant from the lives and concerns that Black Americans faced.

In 1965, on his television talk show, Merv Griffin, who, at that time, had never visited Watts, presented a point to Dick Gregory that, “There is a rumbling right now. Even among people who want things to happen for civil rights, who want the Negro to have all his rights...to protect the Negro with laws. There is a feeling, if many disobey the law, disobey the constitution, that it’s going to be a terrible chaos in America.”¹⁹ These examples of news media, both print and broadcast, offers us an important insight to the framing of race and racism in the US. By raising this point, especially within a mainstream media platform, Griffin’s singular view and participation in behavioral politics demonstrates acceptance of white innocence and belief in the neutrality of law. It ignores the many years of systemic violence and marginalization that Black Americans and others have endured. His question obscures dominant culture’s active participation in both legal and social marginalization of Black communities and other communities of color. Furthermore, the message of his question reveals the reality that “white vanity is valued more highly than Black humanity.”²⁰ In this way, Griffin effortlessly forgets that white privilege and public policy directly contribute to Black poverty. He minimizes the context in which Black people (and other marginal groups) have been confined to live in the small ghetto of Watts and face fewer opportunities to work post World War II. The framing of the question “attributed urban decay and poverty to the behavior of Black people, not to discrimination and

¹⁹ Merv Griffin, *Watts Riots Interview*, Television show, featuring Merv Griffin interviewing Dick Gregory (1965; New York; 1965), Black and white film.

²⁰ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 20.

ill-conceived public policy.”²¹ In this way, the comment focuses only on Black Americans and their logic in rebelling. Finally, by discussing Black disobedience as the main problem, Griffin reminds us “Today’s segregated schools, neighborhoods and workplaces produce white people who know very little about Blacks and even less about themselves.”²² In other words, segregation and the white spatial imaginary reinforce and recreate racism and racial ignorance.

In early 2016, I had an impromptu discussion with an elderly white couple from the San Fernando Valley who remember the Watts Rebellion. They described seeing smoke from fires in Watts while they were at Chavez Ravine taking in a Dodger game. The couple reminisced about Black protesters interrupting a family member’s graduation ceremony at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) the following year. While their description seemed to be consistent with other accounts I’ve read, it was clear that this couple *still* did not understand the causes of the rebellion, the conditions residents in South LA lived with, nor did they understand the lasting impact the rebellion would have in Watts. For them, the rebellion was part mystery, part national shame. The social realities that residents in Watts had experienced since the creation of the sequestered city fit exactly within what George Lipsitz calls, the white spatial imaginary. Lipsitz uses the term white spatial imaginary to reveal the processes, mechanisms, social contracts and laws that, combined, uphold the divisions that allow all-white spaces to exist and appear to be natural and neutral rather than actively racist. In other words, the “hostile privatism”²³ that sustains white supremacy and racial segregation were the same rationales that justify how some white people could misunderstand the rebellion as anything but “an expression

²¹ Ibid., 28.

²² Ibid., 15.

²³ Ibid., 13.

of disappointment and outrage.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the couple I spoke with maintained that residents of South Central LA, a racially/spatially coded description of Black people, were responsible for the destruction of Watts and for inconveniencing their graduation ceremony at CSUN. Their analysis was rooted and invested in white spatial imaginary, which allowed them to observe cities and environments as inherently neutral, yet at the same time, more available and accommodating to whites. Of course, it would be problematic to suggest that this couple was inherently racist; rather, my goal by offering this example is to point to the conditions that informed their understanding of land use, spatial entitlement, the construction of race and the meaning of the rebellion in Watts.

Throughout this paper, I will continue to draw on and discuss the white spatial imaginary, Black spatial imaginary and spatial entitlement to offer frameworks for racial formation in space. Building on the works of Katherine McKittrick, George Lipsitz, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Natalia Molina, Laura Pulido, Darnell Hunt, Edward Said, David Harvey and Bobby M. Wilson, I join this important tradition of scholars who apply spatial studies to racial studies and racial formation to make interventions to what Henri Lefebvre calls *abstract space*. Because spatial exclusion, redlining and racial segregation were major contributors to the Watts Uprising of 1965, it is imperative to begin this work in the spatial history of the city of Watts. Finally, this paper will continually draw from the rebellion as the historical backdrop for the community-centered mural project. My goal in this is to discuss *Watts Still Rising* and subsequent monuments in relationship to the history of Watts in order to center the history, to celebrate the community approach to the project and to demonstrate the design process of the mural as parts of a decolonial public arts practice and interdisciplinary art history.

²⁴ Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

Scholars note that similar unrest almost broke out the summer of 1966 since social conditions and police relations in Watts had not much changed. In fact, living conditions worsened for many because "...declining home values, the hemorrhaging of jobs and the flight of middle-class African Americans *deepened poverty*."²⁵ These factors and others contributed to the poverty and rise in gang culture from the 1960s. Nevertheless, in the 60's, Los Angeles was largely considered to be a safe haven for Black migrants from the Jim Crow South. Yet the reality for Black people in LA was not consistent with the myth of a Black oasis. According to Paul Von Blum, a Los Angeles art historian, "...the riots profoundly accelerated the development of the Black arts movement in the city. The uprising and its aftermath put pressure on government agencies to provide funding for social, artistic, and cultural programming in Black communities."²⁶ As Black people in LA, especially South LA, were fighting for civil rights, grassroots movements began to shape the culture and the arts that were being produced at the time. While art historians and others sometimes obscure art from its social and political context by centering the single artist as genius²⁷, I cannot separate the political content from the artistic practice, as many artists were intentionally engaging in socially conscious work.²⁸ While a significant art emergence came out of the influx of funds after much unrest, scholars like Robin

²⁵ Kelley, "Watts: Remember what they built"

²⁶ Paul Von Blum "Before and After Watts" in *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*, ed. Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón (New York: New York University, 2010) 249.

²⁷ See Judy Baca, "Whose Monument Where: Public Art in a Many Cultured Society" *Mapping The Terrain* ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995)

²⁸ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 118.

D. G. Kelley and others remind us that the arts were already a strong component in life in South Los Angeles *before* the rebellion.²⁹

Daniel Widener, Steven L. Isoardi, Robin D. G. Kelley and others offer us a history of artists in South LA before the uprising, demonstrating how a local cultural expression grew even stronger in the wake of the destruction. In an essay published by the *Los Angeles Times*, Kelley recounts the founding of the Underground Musicians Association in 1961 by Horace Tapscott, and the progressive agenda of Studio Watts, a collective of writers, dancers and visual artists who advocated for affordable housing in 1964, as well as other community based art practices. These grass roots institutions were ever more important to community members who experienced the rebellion first hand because they recall that upon returning to school that autumn in 1965, teachers went on with the same lessons they had before; the violence and destruction were absent from classroom curriculum. Watts native, author and active member of I Heart Watts Dr. Chris Hickey accounts, “It wasn’t a topic at school as a part of our lessons. We were still getting math and the history we were getting was the history of white folks. That was all I had ever seen, and it didn’t change.”³⁰ Later on in our interview, Dr. Hickey underscored the significant impact art teachers and elders had impressed upon him as a youth, “There was a lot of talk from some of the elders, a lot of consciousness talk in the context of being artistic and creative. A lot of that creativity and that artistry was around these feelings of neglect for our community... And through that artistic expression we were also being awakened consciously about what our conditions were.”³¹ This inter-generational creative platform went on to make huge contributions in Watts as it empowered individual artists and collectives, as well as

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

³¹ Ibid.

mainstream culture through Hollywood television and music. In this way, the local art institutions that were established both before and after the uprising was critical for providing space and opportunity to youth and others to process the rebellion they experienced.

While the arts were burgeoning in the early 1960s in Watts, it is critical to make two points; the first is that the police violence that occurred the night of August 11, 1965 is not the source or the origins for the arts movements in South LA. As discussed earlier, the arts were an important part of life in Watts years before the rebellion broke out. The second point is that while Black, Latinx and other residents in Los Angeles experienced violence from police much earlier than 1965, the eruption of the Watts rebellion would crystallize art from the 60s in a very particular way. As expressed by Dr. Hickey, there was a new imperative and context to create artwork that would elevate a community's social consciousness. While these two points may seem to be in opposition to each other, I submit that they are not dialects, but rather, congruent and connected to the temporality of the period. In fact, they affirm each other; they point to the arts movements in Watts before and after the uprising and distinguish different creative imperatives and institutions. For this reason, and the fact that our mural and monuments commemorate the 1965 uprising, I am choosing to start and situate this historical review in the 1960s. Building especially from Kelley and Widener, from Darnell Hunt and Josh Sides, I begin thinking about the present and future of Watts by looking back to the 1960s.

As previously mentioned, some Angelenos were not paying attention to the conditions in Watts and South LA before or even after the rebellion. The reasons may vary, but some might have been because of geographical distance between West LA and South LA, or possibly because of racial segregation and racial tension. George Lipsitz, however, reminds us that white spatial imaginary is not neutral or natural. He asserts that, "whites viewed inner-city residents not

as fellow citizens denied the subsidies freely offered to whites, but as people whose alleged failures...forced the government to intervene on their behalf, to build housing projects that were then ruined by alleged Black neglect.”³² In his quote, Lipsitz reminds us that the white spatial imaginary actively penalizes and inherently incriminates Black peoples, and other people of color. Pushing this concept even further, white spatial imaginary coupled with Henri Lefebvre’s concept of abstract space can frame the issue of social uprising with roots in racial and spatial hegemony. To put it another way, if we pair the concepts of abstract space and white spatial imaginary, we can use these lenses to see exactly how race and space reinforce each other in ways that uphold white supremacy, white fragility, colorblindness and white privilege in society.

II. The Space and Geography of Watts

A geographical imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice
-Ruth Wilson Gilmore³³

I contend that the analytic of the white and Black spatial imaginaries and the production of abstract space will reveal the great differences between both the haves and the have-nots in South Los Angeles. This lens illuminates the distance and disparaging realities between those paying attention to social context and geographical realities, and those unaware of the reasons and causes of the riots. While in many ways, my research deals with public and social arts, I believe that applying a spatial lens will help to contextualize the legacy of Watts from the 1950s, 1960s and on. Since social art is produced in context to the social conditions of an artist, and public art is art that is outdoors or otherwise freely available to people to view and experience, I

³² Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 27.

³³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography,” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no.1 (2002): 16.

believe this analytic is not only fitting for this project, it is forward thinking and powerful in its potential. In this paper, this analytic is used to deconstruct Watts as a heterogeneous community, but when applied to the arts that were produced around the time of the Uprising, these lenses can help illuminate the ways that Black artists used space and race to gain social consciousness, pride and power.³⁴ They will also be helpful in analyzing the ways that public arts such as murals can be read and understood in Watts.

While this historic moment of the 1960s is the backdrop of this thesis, the earlier histories of what is now South Los Angeles are increasingly important and set the stage for the mid century uprising that will become the pinnacle moment for this paper. In order to uncover the reasons and causes that fueled this tension and eventually led up to the rebellion, I will begin investigating the creation and planning of the city of Watts, the isolation of the city, and the history of divestment of communities of color in the 1930s through the 1960s. In the aftermath of the Uprising, many called for investigations of police brutality and the poor economic infrastructure in South LA, yet within this paper, I propose and offer an analysis of the geographical design of South LA and Watts specifically. In providing a local and areal analysis of Watts and neighboring cities in South Los Angeles, my goal is to illuminate the impact and lasting legacy of racist and racially motivated city planning, city ordinances and housing covenants. Motivated by the work and writing of geographers and historians, I take my cue from the likes of Laura Barraclough who asserts that “Seemingly mundane land-use practices such as zoning, community planning, infrastructure developments, and heritage designations actively construct racial categories by producing unequal places and systems of places in which

³⁴ Dr. Chris Hickey (resident of Watts), in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

phenotypically distinct bodies are sorted.”³⁵ Therefore, by deconstructing some of the history of segregation in South LA, I aim to provide a historical narrative and analysis that lends itself to the multiethnic and multi-racial demographic of Watts in the 20th century.

In addition to George Lipsitz and Henri Lefebvre, I build on the work of scholars including Gerald Horne and Katherine McKittrick. In his book, Horne indicates that conditions of the 1965 Uprising, which was the greatest expression of unrest in the Civil Rights era, requires “consideration of factors beyond the usual Black-white binary and broader factors beyond the immediate issues of police brutality and unemployment.”³⁶ McKittrick’s book, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, provides a theoretical framework that centers (Black women) geographies as sites of emancipation and liberation. In this way, her theoretical framework offers us alternatives to the otherwise harsh realities that Black people, Asians and Latinxs lived in Watts. By centering Black geographies, McKittrick creates a liberatory space for Black place-making. Furthermore, in her book, time and again, she remind us that space, like place, is never neutral, and is created within a cultural context, power dynamic, social condition and historical moment. These methods, concepts and authors are all critical to this paper, as they play into each other and help me expand on my own methods and concepts.

The scale of my geographical scope for this paper is relatively small. This paper deals with specific areas of geography in Watts and South LA. This section of the paper discusses the city planning and events in Watts, while also referencing South Los Angeles in order to put small neighboring communities in context to each other. As is discussed later on, the neighboring

³⁵ Laura R. Barraclough *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscape, Urban Development and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011) 15.

³⁶Horne, *Fire This Time*, 23.

communities in South LA help to reveal a very concerning expression of segregation and wealth inequality.

With respect to the planning of the city of Watts, it is important to note that Watts is a particularly small area in South Los Angeles, as outlined in the map below. The figure indicated that it is about 2.12 square miles between Central Avenue, the 105 Freeway, roughly Alameda Street and 92nd Street. Compared to neighboring communities like South Gate (7.35 square miles) and Inglewood (9.09 square miles), Watts is undersized.

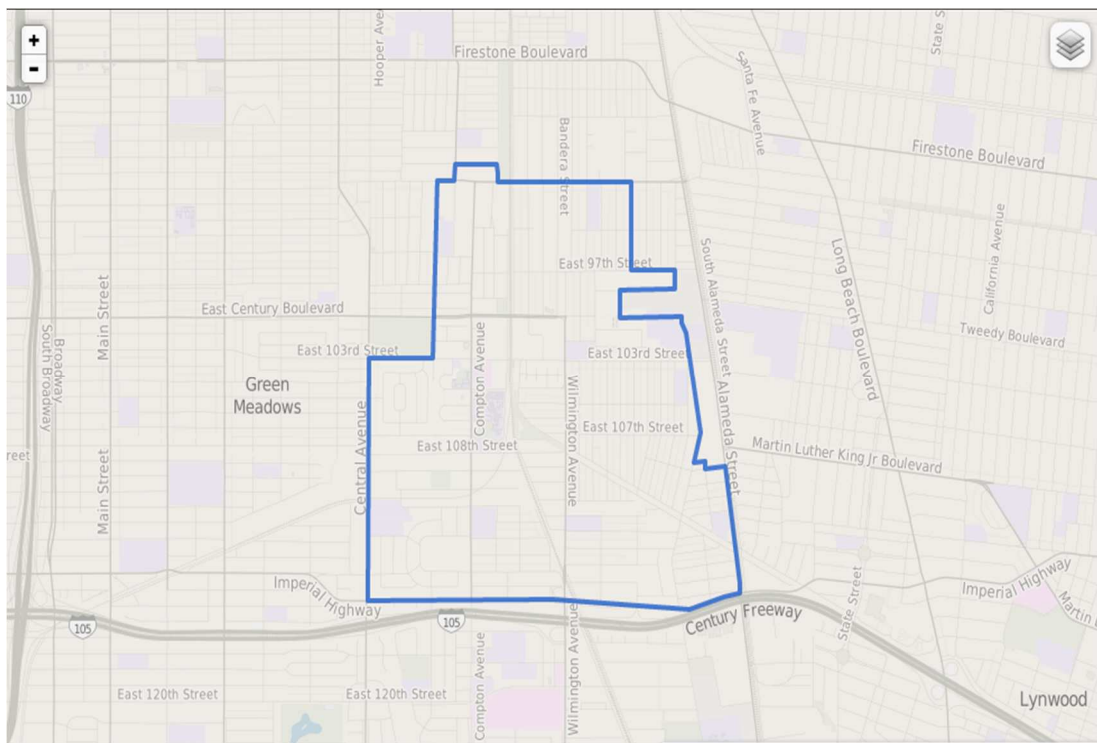


Figure 1. Map of Watts

While small towns or cities are common in Los Angeles, Watts is roughly half the size of the next smallest community in South LA. This significant factor helps to make the social and spatial context and stakes more visible as they are often unknown or go unmarked. And so, by analyzing and comparing the scales of these small towns, we can begin to surmise that the stunted size of Watts exemplifies segregation and isolating city planning practices that would contain Blacks, Latinxs and Asians who have lived there throughout the 20th century. While this analysis alone

is not enough to prove that city planning was or is racist, it does help us begin to see the way that size of a given city was a critical factor for city demographics in South LA.

Since about the 1940s Watts has been a majority Black community—sometimes described as “...a tiny section of the deep south...”³⁷—yet research and interviews have substantiated that it was never a homogeneous community. In his book, Horne discusses the Japanese produce gardens and Chinese lottery dens, pointing to these two Asian communities and their respective involvement in Watts in the 1930’s.³⁸ In 1939, the Home Owners Loan Corporation sent employees to survey living conditions and communities in Watts, along with dozens of other areas in Los Angeles. In their once-confidential report, they recorded that 25 per cent of households were “foreign families” with nationalities of “Mexican and Japanese.”³⁹

Furthermore, according to census data that was mined via Social Explorer, a digital mapping software, between two and fifteen per cent of residents indicated that they belong to the category “Puerto Rican or Spanish Surname” in 1960.⁴⁰ While this qualifying category is ambiguous, overly simplifying and otherwise problematic for a Los Angeles Latinx demographic, it does indicate that Latinxs lived in Watts at that time. That data is visualized in the map below, which indicates the number of Latinx families living in Watts in 1960 via color saturation. Further this narrative is corroborated by Latinx residents who have lived in South LA for generations like Celia Martinez*, a third generation Chicana, her parents and grandparents.⁴¹ During a personal correspondence, Martinez shared with me that while she was growing up in

³⁷ Ibid., 27.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ T-Races, <http://salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/data/la/ad/ad0425.pdf> accessed July 11, 2016.

⁴⁰ Social Explorer <http://www.socialexplorer.com/2fe5b5d718/edit> accessed May 13, 2016.

⁴¹ *Celia Martinez, name changed in this paper; Personal conversation May 2, 2016.

South LA in the early 1990s, violent events, including the Rodney King riots, led her parents, neighbors and herself to support and protect Latinx, Black and Asian neighbors, businesses and homes. Martinez shared with me an intimate story of caring for a Black youth who was shot and bloodied near her home. Her tragic experience provides insight into the ways that multiethnic and multi-racial families and communities supported each other during dangerous and uncertain events. Furthermore, her story underscores collective trauma shared despite racial difference and a hard reality that life in South LA was sometimes dangerous.

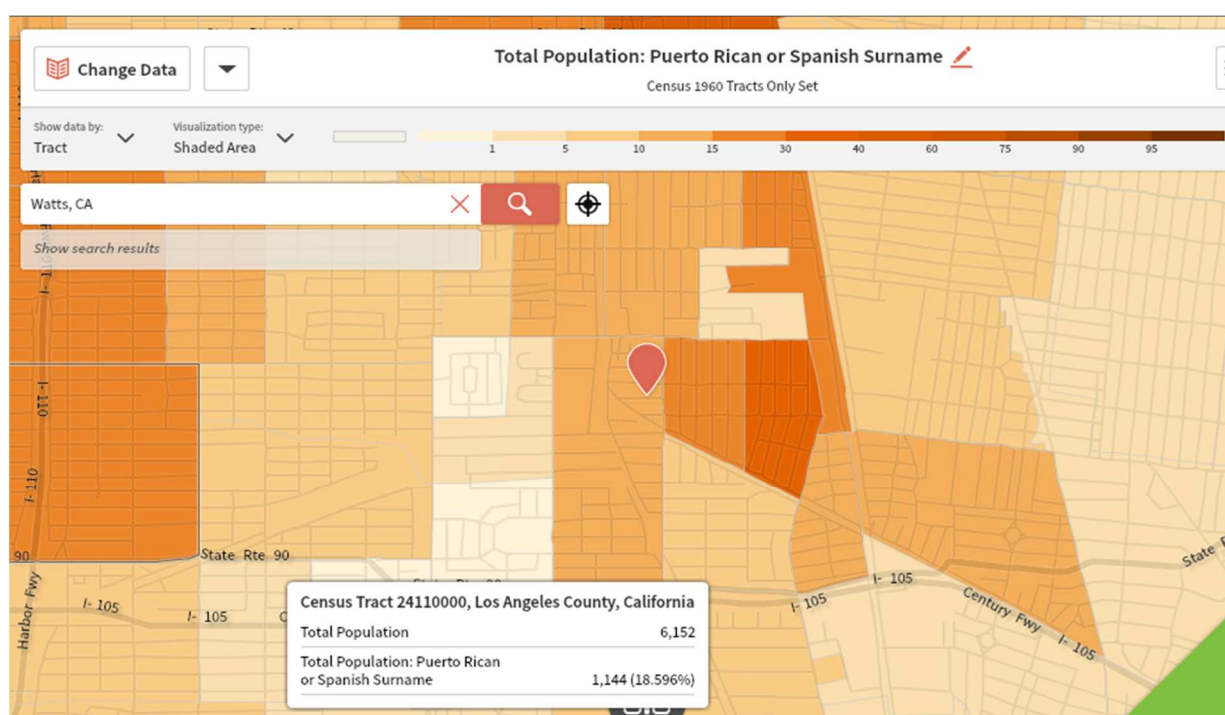


Figure 2. Map noting “Puerto Rican or Spanish Surname” population in Watts, 1960

Referring back to the Home Owners Loan Corporation information, the report describes Watts as a “swampy land” and emphasizes that the community is racially mixed, stating, “Population and improvements are largely heterogeneous...”⁴² All of these accounts—personal and primary, secondary and scholarly, indicate and underscore the history of racially mixed communities in Watts, all of which were considered to be undesirable in a Postwar, hegemonic

⁴² Ibid.

Los Angeles. The conditions of this heterogeneous community did not seem, internally, to be a conflict for community members until much later in the 20th century. Nevertheless, this racially heterogeneous community was, and often times, still seen as all-Black, as undesirable and “thoroughly blighted.”⁴³ With these associations connected to Watts, it can be no wonder that the white spatial imaginary has been sustained in Watts. Additionally, it is no wonder that the nice elderly white couple I spoke with was still at a loss as to the meaning or origins of the rebellion.

The white spatial imaginary works amongst individuals, corporations and government agencies alike. For example, observe the city planning oddity that Watts continues to experience—its unique and mixed standing within both the city and county of Los Angeles since some areas of Watts are part of Los Angeles City while others are part Los Angeles County.⁴⁴ For such a small area to be organized in this way is not only divisive, it puts Watts at odds with government support and access to resources. Not only does this city have two autonomous systems of government running it, Horne reminds us that Watts was only “incorporated into LA in part to broaden the tax base in order to pay for water brought by the Owens Valley Aqueduct.”⁴⁵ In other words, it was advantageous for the city of Los Angeles to include Watts within its boundaries in order to gain a valuable resource. Had the prospect of gaining a valuable resource not been available to LA, Watts might still be outside of Los Angeles entirely, leaving a poor, Black, Latinx and Asian community in zoning isolation. Returning to a sentiment expressed by Laura Barraclough, this odd status that Watts occupies as both LA City and LA County demonstrates the great impact of an otherwise mundane city planning detail. It also exposes some of the rationale for including or excluding cities and areas into municipal

⁴³ T-Races data <http://salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/data/la/ad/ad0425.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 27.

boundaries, which, in this case, benefit the city of Los Angeles and tokenizes Watts.

Furthermore, this analysis helps to expose, once again, the significant impact that race and space together have on communities and their futures; and finally, it allows us to analyze the conditions of Watts as separate from LA, part of LA and also at odds within itself.

This story of racial segregation in South LA becomes crystallized even more when we move outside of the 2.12 square miles of Watts and into a larger geographical scope that includes the neighboring cities and towns, a geographical scope that includes about 80 square miles of South LA. With this larger scope, we note the incredible isolation that residents of color experienced in Watts. Somehow, a public narrative has conceptualized communities like Compton and Lynwood as historically accommodating communities of color, yet that assumption is quite inconsistent with the historical reality. Until the 1960's, Watts was an island surrounded by white communities (see Figure 3 below).

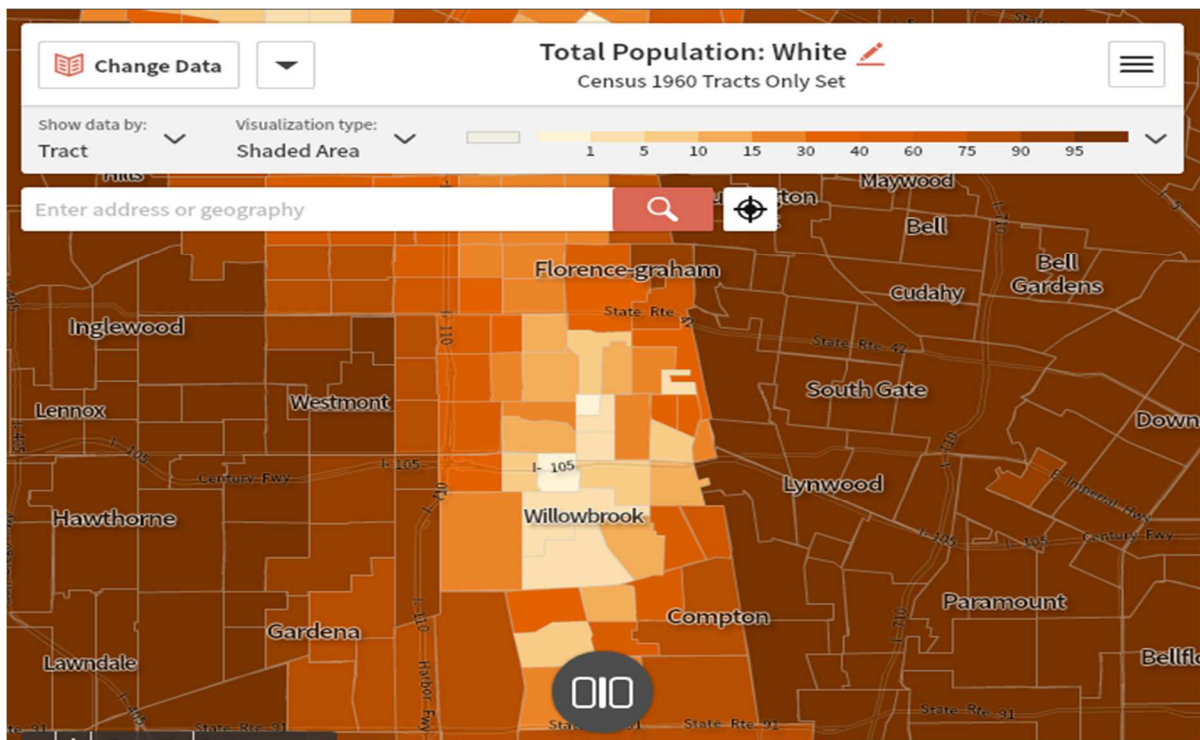


Figure 3. Map of white households in South Los Angeles, 1960

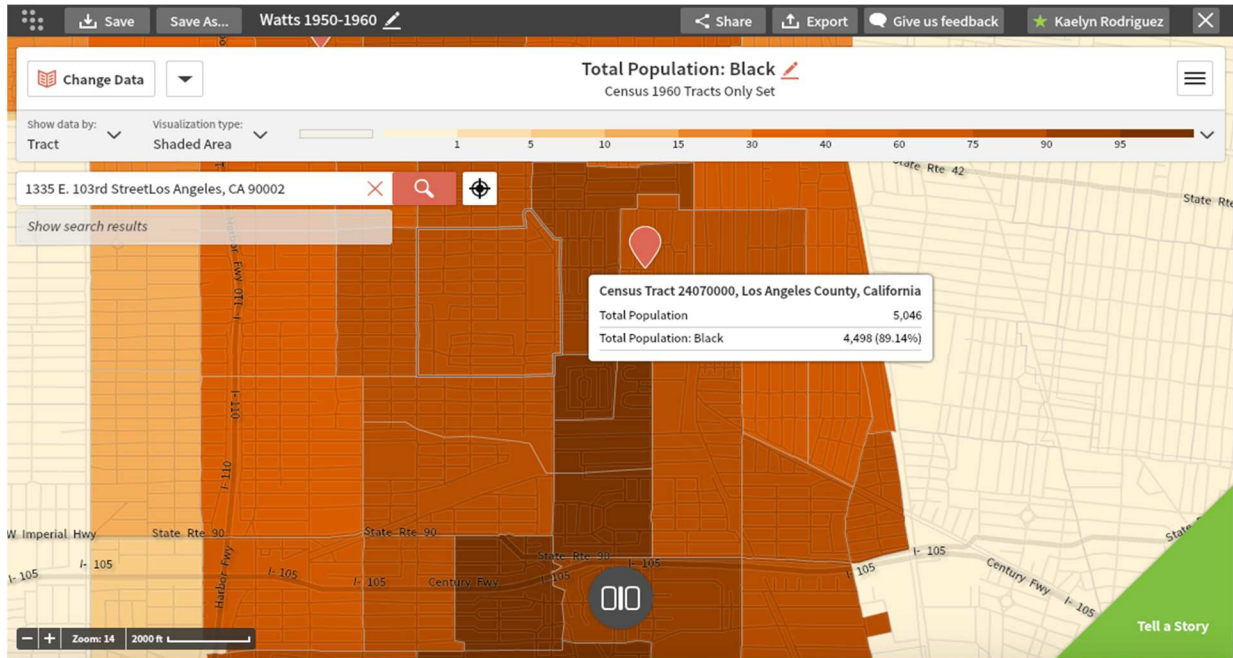


Figure 4. Map of Black population in Watts, 1960

The maps above use color saturation to indicate the population of white and Black households, respectively, in South Los Angeles in 1960. Horne describes Watts from 1965 as “hemmed in on the east by a string of nearly lily-white cities and towns—notably South Gate, Lynwood and Bell—and on the south by Compton.”⁴⁶ Looking at figure 3, we can see that Watts was truly an island for people of color, while figure 4 shows the inverse image; it visualizes the Black population in Watts during the same year. These dialectical images work together to visually corroborate the history that Horne lays out in his book. More than a simple confirmation, the two maps produce a sense of what the communities looked and felt like in 1960. These maps and Horne’s words invoke a history of South LA that is often forgotten or separated from our contemporary experiences of Los Angeles; one that pictures South LA as white, even a “friendly Caucasian city,”⁴⁷ such as Lynwood used to be called. Furthermore, Horne shares that, “Attacks on Blacks seeking to enter spaces reserved for whites constituted actual...criminal behavior.”⁴⁸ In

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 26.

this way, segregation was not only a social practice—it had legal claims and implementation. Housing covenants and local propositions⁴⁹ were used within the bounds of the law in order to separate many demographics over time, yet Black people were especially singled out in this process.⁵⁰ While Asian and Latinx residents’ ethnicities were also identified and recorded, they were not specifically required in each Home Owner Loan Corporation document. Black residents, however, were specifically singled out, as the aforementioned documents required the percentage of the “Negro” presence in every community. Building from historian Josh Sides, I submit that this practice of specifically identifying and locating Black residents was used as criteria for assigning housing grades. As described by Josh Sides,

Whites believe then, and I think now, that the arrival of Black people in their neighborhood will lower property values. And the really troubling reality is, that that is true. The arrival of Black people does usually lower property values, but not, of course, because of any material difference, but simply because real estate is all about perception. In fact, if you looked at the FHA--Federal Housing Administration--studies during World War II, they actually found that Blacks defaulted at a lower rate on their mortgage than whites did. But it doesn't really matter...real estate is not about true value, its about perceptual value. In this case, the perception that Blacks would lower value meant that in reality values did decline.⁵¹

To this effect, the historical erasure of a highly segregated Los Angeles pacifies the legacy of racism, especially anti-Black racism. Furthermore, such historical amnesia enacts what Lefebvre calls abstract space, the neutralizing and naturalizing of social control through space and spatial construction.⁵² Gaye Theresa Johnson says it this way, “The contradiction between

⁴⁹ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

⁵⁰ T-Races, accessed May 15, 2016, <http://salt.umd.edu/T-RACES/data/la/ad/ad0425.pdf>.

⁵¹ Josh Sides, interviewed by Zach Behrens, *KCET Social Focus* “Before the 1950’s Whiteness of Compton was Defended Vehemently”, January 11, 2011, accessed June 1, 2016.

⁵² Henry Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Maiden: Blackwell Publishing, 1984) 21.

the myth of equality and the reality of state repression create both obvious and embedded incongruities, in politics and everyday life.”⁵³ Her words effortlessly describe Watts and the mythic silence around its intense segregation. For much of its history, white communities surrounded Watts and I submit that the incubation of peoples of color, especially Black people, in Watts, is very important to understanding the many causes and origins of the uprising in 1965.

Within this paper, I build on George Lipsitz’s notion of the Black spatial imaginary to discuss both Black and Latinxs in Los Angeles. Although his analytic centers Black experiences of space, “a focus on Black space reveals particular dynamics that have been central to the general construction of racialized space for everyone.”⁵⁴ Lipsitz crystallizes his point by saying, “Because racial projects are flexible, fluid and relational, the contour of anti-Black spaces are relevant to all communities of color.”⁵⁵ In this way, when we look at the geography and demography in Watts, we see patterns that imply that peoples of different racial and ethnic backgrounds lived among each other and lived in very similar social conditions to each other. While this framework is not without limitations, I believe it is a powerful tool for this relational racial project. Furthermore, by making a Black spatial imaginary a central analytic, I believe it creates opportunities to analyze and address anti-Black racism within other communities of color, which is one area that I hope to make a contribution to in the field of Chicana Studies. Finally, when applied relationally, this analytic helps us to see relationships beyond a singular experience and allows for relational analysis in cases like the 1965 Uprising or the 1992 Rodney King revolt when certain businesses were left undamaged because of dynamic relationships

⁵³ Gaye Theresa Johnson. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2013) 97.

⁵⁴ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 12.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

between residents. These relationships were not reserved for persons of the same heritage, but for neighbors and friends who shared space and experienced similar loss in either revolt.

In her book *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left*, Laura Pulido chronicles some of the histories between and across racial and ethnic difference to tell the collaborative histories of radical activism in Los Angeles. In the introduction, she writes, "...I learned the importance of organizing beyond the Chicana/o community and the need for explicit class analysis. I came to appreciate how class consciousness could potentially bring various racial/ethnic groups together and contribute to a larger movement for social and economic justice."⁵⁶ In this way, by applying a geographical analysis to Watts over time, the maps I gathered identify racial and classed data that demonstrate the heterogeneous population in Watts. Furthermore, the maps demonstrate the social conditions of the built environment in a way that visualizes spatial restrictions like redlining and segregations. Building off of this approach and Natalia Molina's relational racial concept, this section's main goals are to demonstrate the impact of space and place in the production and reproduction of race *and* racism in Los Angeles. It is even more important, then, to apply a relational racial approach in order to avoid erasing histories of Watts that are too often forgotten and therefore neutralized. These multiethnic histories are very important and urge us to continue to push back against the dominant narratives of communities of color.

Finally, in *Black Geographies*, which was edited by Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, the authors offer us very important ideas that push back against white spatial imaginary. They make the case for using space and geography as analytics that help to deconstruct socially produced and conceptualized ideas of race, making race—especially Blackness.⁵⁷ Furthermore,

⁵⁶ Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 1.

⁵⁷ Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge: Massachusetts, 2007) 7.

they apply and center Black geographies as conceptual sites for (Black) emancipation and spatial liberation. They propose the possibility of life without reenacting hierarchy and oppression onto ourselves or onto others, an important question that lends itself to relational racial theoretical frameworks. Furthermore, this powerful concept will, no doubt, prove very important as my research continues to develop. I believe it will help when conceptualizing the power of public and social art in Watts in the 1960s and considering the intervention that Black and other peoples of color made and continue to make. When we couple Black spatial imaginary with this concept of Black geography, the opportunities for analyzing Watts' (art) histories are limitless.

In sum, there is still much work to do in order to draw on and couple black spatial imaginary and Black geography, but I hope to have laid out my intentions and met my goals within this paper--that the heterogeneous community of Watts was designed to be segregated and isolated in an otherwise white South LA. By using white spatial imaginary, I laid out the ways that city planning, racist ideology and political practices were the causes for segregation and poverty in Watts, factors that eventually directly contributed to an environment and a community that would eventually rise up in the summer of 1965.

III Community Engagement

If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

-Lilla Watson⁵⁸

This section of the paper builds from the geographic and spatial analysis of Watts to the human and personal experiences I had with residents there. It details my community involvement

⁵⁸ Collective, Northland Poster. *If you have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.* Political Posters, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

in Watts while also offering some description of life for residents. As I prioritize my commitment to the community along with my academic research, I take on a challenge that many scholars before me have faced. The challenge is to respectfully and accurately represent a historically marginalized community, while also caring about them and respecting their humanity and their privacy. As an insider-outsider to Watts, a woman, a Black Chicana, a native Angeleno, a poor person with class privilege, a young scholar at UCLA, an artist and a summer research fellow, I hold conflicting positions that point to tensions in my positionality. Yet I, like many scholars before, take seriously these risks and do my best to uphold the community and their interests.

The participant-observer methodology of data collection is not always simple and requires flexibility, as I often move between roles; nevertheless, it is an important method for scholars and others who seek to serve the communities we love. It requires that sometimes I listen and observe, while other times I join in on discussions and activities. Because of the sometimes violent and exploitative relationships that develop between scholars from research universities and historically vulnerable communities, I have worked to create relationships with community members and local leaders. Trying to avoid the pitfalls that cultural anthropologists and others have committed years before my undertakings, I take my friendships and relationships with community members seriously. In this way, I've come to fulfill a dual role as scholar and an activist. While part of my responsibility is to listen to residents and learn about them personally to represent their lives in my work, I am also a part of a local alliance and assert that sometimes, "Our stories are not for sale."⁵⁹ By keeping certain information private and maintaining relationships with friends, my goal is to stay connected with community and advocate where and

⁵⁹ Gaye Theresa Johnson, guest presentation in Robin D.G. Kelley's Historiography of African American History seminar, March 14, 2016.

how I can. I hope to demonstrate throughout the remainder of this paper the ways that I have navigated this condition. Our collaboration and engagement with the community have become very meaningful and important to us personally, but also as young scholars and representatives of SPARC.

One important contribution I seek to offer is to recount Black and Latinx histories together and to describe the beauty, the nuance and power of two communities that have sometimes been in conflict, but have often been in solidarity.⁶⁰ In this paper, I discuss the struggles that Black and Latinx communities have experienced and detail the opposition these communities expressed to over-policing, inaccessibility to resources and everyday racism. I seek to layout the very high stakes in the construction of space and the “role that space plays in every day life, as well as the cumulative role that everyday life plays into the development of mass movements.”⁶¹ For all of these reasons—and many others—documenting these recent histories next to this contemporary project requires grace, flexibility and strength.⁶² Chela Sandoval says,

Enough strength to confidently commit to well-defined structure of identity for one hour, day, week, month, year; enough flexibility to self-consciously transform that identity according to the requirements of another oppositional ideological tactic if reasons of power’s formation require it; enough grace to recognize alliance with others committees to egalitarian social relationships and race, gender, sex, class and social justice, when these other readings of power call for alternative oppositional stands.⁶³

Sandoval precisely describes the different modes that community engagement and local activism requires. Adding to her description, I submit that for this project, it requires real relationships and

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict*, x.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶² Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 60.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

friendships with residents of Watts and local leaders. It requires accountability and transparency on my part as I work to build with community in Watts.

My community work began in January of 2016 when I joined the group I Heart Watts. In fact, I joined as the group was in its sixth month of meeting regularly, and so I have had the opportunity to see the community participation grow over time. Right away, I shared with them my reason for participating with the group and spent most of the first meetings just listening. After that, I spent several months volunteering my time and supporting the group's goals before I asked for an interview or for feedback on our mural design. Since then, my colleague Pilar Castillo and I have been working closely with I Heart Watts. In addition to attending bi-weekly meetings, Pilar and I participated with the "Ride for Love"/ Grand Opening of the Hamwich Shack, where we volunteered to make crafts, play with children and paint nails for residents. This cross-promoting event was designed to celebrate the opening of a much-needed healthy restaurant and designed to invite locals and others to join for a community bike ride. This was my first large-scale glimpse of the beauty of residents of Watts. Feeling shy and a little bit like an imposter, I was met with hundreds of friendly neighbors and bike riders. Hundreds of excited residents ordered turkey burgers and salads from the fresh menu while hundreds of others mounted their bikes for the ride. Within all of the excitement, children and parents were glad to see our table of games, crafts and nail decals, and in a way, we were offering an important service to folks: play.

Several weeks later, we helped to organize the first annual I Heart Watts Community Picnic. This picnic would inspire us to develop a mapping methodology that was specifically designed for residents of Watts. Motivated by our desire to engage community, to have some fun together and to learn more about their lives, Pilar and I created emoji mapping. Emoji mapping,

cutting out paper emojis and gluing/taping them onto a map of Watts, was a way for community members to share as much as they like and omit whatever they want. It is also an interactive method that asks the interlocutor to think about the sites in Watts where life occurs. Emoji mapping encouraged residents in this multilinguistic community to share memories beyond and across written or spoken language and to express their personal histories in emojis. It was also a way for those without writing or reading skills to participate without marginalization or humiliation.⁶⁴ Folks could place sites and landmarks onto their maps *and*, at the same time



Figure 5. Detail of some emojis for emoji mapping. Photo courtesy Kaelyn Rodriguez

locate personal histories and map out memories in space. Residents choose from hundreds of emojis to share their stories with us. Some of these emojis include stacks of books, police cars, single and multi family housing, churches, guns, paint pallets, soccer balls and the Watts Towers. This method would prove to be an instant success: not only were folks sharing stories with us,

⁶⁴ Illiteracy is a serious issue in Los Angeles. See Jean Merl, “Study finds Rampant Illiteracy in L.A. County” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, California) September 9, 2004.

they were reliving memories and connecting meaning to place. Multiple picnickers would remark on their emotional response and the significance of identifying spatial patterns on the map. Furthermore, several others invited us to their community groups to share emoji mapping with their members.

The data we gathered from the emoji maps primarily offered us demographics and indicated significant areas to residents —where and how life took place in South LA, like family histories, personal losses, and love stories. However, what proved to be very significant to Pilar and me was more than the data we gathered, it was also, the way that children and adults found this activity personally meaningful and affirming. It became a method for telling stories about life, for locating intersections and blocks where lots of living took place. It became a way of doing a human geography and a personal narrative at the same time, and our interlocutors relished that.

This activity was born out of other failed attempts to discuss life and lived experiences in Watts with residents. For Pilar and me, asking community members questions about their families, their work, or their relationship status was not a simple thing. These questions were loaded with tensions and misunderstandings about race, poverty and death. Keeping in line with our creative goals and our desire to do better than social anthropologists before us, we decided to move into a visual, rather than verbal, historical narrative with the mapping activity. We choose to use emojis because of their symbolic capacity and their capability to work beyond any one language and allow for a visual narrative to unfold in space.

About two-dozen individuals participated with us at the I Heart Watts Picnic, and many shared with us the power of visually locating life experiences. While this activity is visual, residents naturally began speaking to their kids and partners to reflect on the histories they

wanted to share. They asked questions of each other to verify locations or dates, and collectively, shared their knowledge with us and also exposed that there are great archives in Watts. This was an unexpected element of the activity, yet it was very significant. This reflecting component of the map was important for many participants as they noted patterns between site and major life events. In the image below a couple in their 60's made a map together and noted when they first met as junior high school students at Markham Middle School.

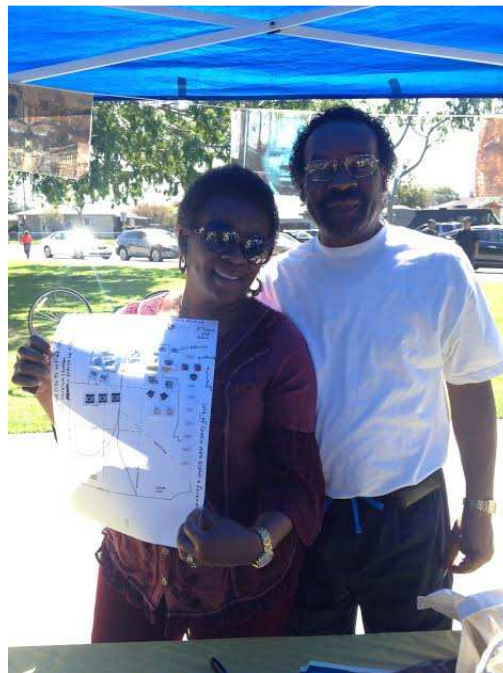


Figure 6. Residents of Watts show their emoji map at the I Heart Watts Picnic. Photo courtesy Kaelyn Rodriguez

This couple also marked their places of employment, favorite restaurants and losses of loved ones. They mapped their everyday life *and* major life moments on this map, allowing us as researchers and outsiders to analyze their stories from their narrative, not an imposed one. In this way, emoji mapping became a decolonial cartographic place/space making activity and methodology that we continued to use at events. By centering residents' lived experiences, we necessarily recreate meanings of space, oppose white spatial imaginary and resist historic systemic and symbolic spatial violence residents have endured. We do this by creating

alternative spatial narratives that celebrate and honor the lives of residents and empower community to define its history based on their own memories. I believe that in doing this, we achieved part of our goal in practicing innovative, interdisciplinary methods that allow us to gather data, engage community with decolonial pedagogy and epistemologies. What might be even greater, still, are the implications for emoji mapping in the future for doing oppositional geographies in historically looted communities, and for employing cartography to visualize environmental and spatial racism take place.⁶⁵

After The First Annual Community Picnic, I Heart Watts was invited to participate with 96th Elementary School for their annual Sharefest, a day of cleaning bathrooms, landscaping gardens, picking up trash and painting murals. Over the following two weekends we participated in two other events: Arts War LA, Watts and CicLAvia. Both events were held in Watts and both were ways for members of the community to enjoy safe, healthy, and free activities. Arts War LA was curated and organized by a member of I Heart Watts. There, local artists organized an art making contest for on-site painting, a contest for completed paintings, as well as prizes for spoken word poetry and other performative arts. While we did not present any artwork, we participated by giving free face painting to children and adults. This event was another huge success for Watts, as over one hundred residents and community members attended. CicLAvia was an even bigger event that beckoned thousands of Angelenos to visit Watts and South LA. It was an important achievement that was in the works for several years. During this event, I Heart Watts held a fundraiser, but more importantly, we lent out bikes for children and adults for free so that families could enjoy a bike ride together. This service was important to visitors without

⁶⁵ Oppositional geography is a term I borrow from Katherine McKittrick. For more, see *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006) xi.

bikes as it allowed them to participate with the day. This event allowed us to have time to meet with more residents and invite them to participate with us.

In addition to these events, Pilar and I met often to discuss our work and plans. I also met with I Heart Watts leader, Adrian Acosta, several times to discuss funding opportunities, grant writing and plans for the future. All of these events and meetings were and are important for our work with this project. Each one offered opportunities to build with residents, to be with friends, expand our network, and work toward our goals. Building relationships and building community with residents in Watts has allowed us to foster important friendships, connect with police officers like officer Paul Rodriguez, who patrols the Jordan Downs housing project, but also to advance our goals of the mural project. Officer Rodriguez would become someone that I would interview for the *Memories on Charcoal Alley* piece. In this ways, spending time on these smaller projects has allowed us to get closer to Watts and to begin to understand how its history has informed the city and residents up to today. It gives us a stronger position as scholars doing this community work, and allows for our work to be centered in life experiences rather than solely focused on theoretical discourse or secondary sources. In other words, this community work grounds our projects within the heart of the community and overlaps in interest with other projects and events. While Pilar and I have not been able to attend every meeting or event, we do our best to be consistent with the goal of this mural project and to engage in work that supports and uplifts people and history that has all too often been erased and forgotten from mainstream memory and mainstream arts.

August 11, 2016 marked the 51st anniversary of the Watts Rebellion and in those fifty-one years, much has changed in the community, but not enough. It has since been well documented that the rebellion broke out after a Black motorist, Marquette Frey and his brother

Ronald Frye, were pulled over by the California Highway Patrol Officer and a brawl broke out. Residue from years of hyper policing most certainly contributed to the community's chronic disappointment and frustration.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the end of the Second World War depressed job opportunities for people of color in Los Angeles, especially Black Angelenos.⁶⁷ Declining conditions in the housing projects signaled divestment from Watts, while deficient and expensive transportation made it even more difficult for commuters to travel outside of South LA.

An uprising broke out again in 1992 when footage of Rodney King, a Black motorist, was brutally beaten by police officers. The videotape captured several officers accosting King with excessive force, yet video evidence was not enough to ensure justice for King. Three of the police officers were tried on assault with a deadly weapon and excessive force charges, yet all three were acquitted of the counts against them. Before that, many residents in Watts believed another uprising would have been impossible.⁶⁸ Many residents in South LA were shocked and angry that video footage was not persuasive enough as evidence to uphold the charge for assault and excessive force, and once again, Black LA revolted. Although this second uprising was under different conditions, the wound from excessive law enforcement in the Los Angeles Police Department was exposed anew. The media's portrayal of South LA, especially its representation of these two rebellions and the subsequent war on drugs, has since cast an enduring shadow. It has created discourses around morality politics and questionable family values to justify the hyper-punishment and shame that Black communities experienced in the wake of community

⁶⁶ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Dr. Chris Hickey (Resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

devastations.⁶⁹ In this way, Black Angelenos were, and sometimes still are, painted with a single brush—as inherently violent, fatherless thugs—a narrative and mythology that was peddled by media outlets for years. This paper vehemently opposes that narrative and recognizes it as racism cloaked as morality and behavioral politics.

In addition to tough-on-crime politics and policy and the hyper-representation of Black criminality in the media, George Lipsitz identifies historic and contemporary examples of the white spatial imaginary⁷⁰ as largely ignored in history or public discourse, yet having monumental impacts on creating mythologies around Black people that inform Black displacement and neglect. Lipsitz's white spatial imaginary offers us a race/space analytic that highlights systemic divestment from Black communities in the interest of structural investment for white families as homeowners. His discussion of redlining and official discriminatory practices by the Federal Housing Administration from 1934-1968 are particularly relevant to this paper, as we examine, in part, how space is made racial and how race is spatialized. Furthermore, and in addition to a sort of federal or public discourse around Black divestment, Lipsitz uses examples from real estate manuals for professional brokers to further demonstrate how Black people and homeownership in white neighborhoods was largely considered criminal.⁷¹ This assertion of criminality was accepted in national discourse from the top down, but it was also reproduced and practiced by white-collar professionals at local levels that *still* impact the make up and monetary values of neighborhoods and communities. The proliferation of thought that Blacks homeowners, Black families, middle-class Blacks and working-poor Blacks were

⁶⁹ Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television news, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Regan Legacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 186-188.

⁷⁰ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

criminal only reinforced media portrayal of Black criminality. In this way, painting Black folks in Watts with a single brush became multiple brushes painting a single line.

While the destruction in Watts was severe and still affects the community in different ways today, I believe that the chance to create a mural in Watts and to build relationships with community is an important opportunity for us as a team of artists and scholars to work to shift this narrative. Furthermore, our project supports the depicting of a difficult history while also celebrating the treasures in and of Watts. It celebrates the work and legacy of Watts leaders like Ted Watkins, the Watkins family and the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, which was tremendously important since its inaugural year of 1965. This project allows us to center the community's lives and experiences today, to showcase some of the incredible artistic contributions in Watts and to dream together of a future that residents in Watts desire and work toward every day. Furthermore, this project situates itself in a genealogy of people of color whose activism and artwork precede us. The likes of the Watts Prophets, the WLCAC, Ted Watkins and the Watkins family, Horace Tapscott, and others who come before us in a long tradition of arts and community activism have forged an important tradition that we, along with others, work within.

One of our earliest goals in this project was to work with community and to support their local groups and organizations in Watts, and also, to center the voices of the community in the mural and in our methods. We wanted to keep our focus in Watts, to maintain constancy in both the telling of this history and in the collaboration we do with current residents, and to highlight their situated knowledge of Watts. In this way, we offer examples of oppositional geography by selecting Markham Middle School as the site for the mural. We decided that its long-standing

presence from before the 1965 uprising and its contemporary prominence as community hub along with its proximity to Charcoal Alley⁷² made it an important location.

In addition to Markham Middle School’s longstanding presence in Watts and its survival of both the 1965 and 1992 uprisings, we assert that in selecting Markham Middle School as our mural site, we “bring into view material referents, external, three-dimensional space, and the actions taking place in space as they overlap with subjectivities, imaginations and stories.”⁷³ Furthermore, in selecting Markham Middle School, we point to this school as a historic site that embodies oppositional geography—a site where social justice and equality are part of the local memory and ongoing civic engagement. By this, we highlight and celebrate the community organizing that still takes place at Markham Middle School in addition to locating the history of Watts in the walls and halls of the school’s buildings. Additionally, Markham Middle School boasts at least a dozen murals on its campus, ranging from large graffiti writing murals to small renderings of the school’s mascot. By installing *Watts Still Rising* on the façade of the street-facing auditorium, we situate the mural in conversation with a collection of others and celebrate a legacy of arts, especially murals, on this campus. Finally, in selecting Markham Middle School, we make a call for educators and administrators to create curriculum that includes the history of Watts, a history that was largely ignored in 1965 up to the present day.⁷⁴ We hope *Watts Still Rising* will spur on conversations in classes and meetings alike that center the tremendously important local history and the legacies of the arts that surround it.

⁷² The nickname *Charcoal Alley* was developed after the entire block on 103rd and Compton was burned to ash in the wake of the fiery destruction from the 1965 uprising. See *Fire This Time* for more details 26-27.

⁷³ Katherine McKittrick *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) xiii.

⁷⁴ Dr. Chris Hickey (Resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016. Ms. Blanks, teacher at Markham Middle School corroborated that the history was not and is still not taught in Watts.

In addition to building relationships, conducting interviews and supporting community events, we decided that connecting with the youth at Markham Middle School was paramount to us. Markham is an important site because it is one of a handful of local institutions that survived the 1965 (and 1992) uprising. We also take into account its proximity to serious destruction just two blocks over in the wake of mass fires that August of 1965. In this way, this site is important to the genealogy on which we build, yet the memories held at Markham Middle School informs this project's theoretical approach to construct space, place, memories and futures with this mural. Although the mural is for the whole community of Watts, we acknowledge that staff, administration, parents and students will view it most often. In appreciating this reality and taking seriously its implications, we are moved to conduct our project in a way that is connected to the youth who will encounter it daily. I submit that our goals to affirm the youth's sense of self through their local history and by supporting their dreams are, therefore, even more important for us during this country's current social and political climate. As such, creating a workshop series that would discuss the history of the Watts Uprising and the significance of the arts in South LA before *and* after the rebellion helps us to uplift the youth in the arts.

Moving forward, we specifically designed this workshop series for students at Markham Middle School. They were created with the goal of supporting and encouraging students in the arts. Our aim is to share our creative project with them, and to encourage their creativity and sense of self-identity. The three workshops built on each other to create a sense of continuity and creativity. Each workshop included a lesson, discussion and activity. In the first workshop, I presented on the history of Watts and then had the students create an identity map. Our hope with this is to ask the students to think about whom they are and to identify some of the roles they play in their lives. The next session introduced ideas of space and place. We discussed three

artists of color, Mark Bradford, Betye Saar and Fred Wilson, who use maps/globes in their work to think about space, place and power structures. Students made an emoji map where they used emojis to map out their lives and experiences in Watts. They used the symbols to describe where they go to school, where they play, worship, live, etc. The final workshop introduced *The Great Wall of LA*, a famous mural that lives in the base of the LA River. We used the mural as a metaphor in this project, and describe it as a tattoo on a scar where the river once ran free. We then asked the students to create a design for the Watts Towers. Our goal was to use an example of reclaimed space for community empowerment and have them create images that do the same thing in Watts. Building off of Judy Baca's approach to community cultural development, as well as the writings of Katherine McKittrick and George Lipsitz, I situate this project as an epistemological tool for marking space, making meaning and drafting spaces in terms of community members' situated knowledge.

By beginning the series with a historical lens, we centered our pedagogical and epistemological foundation in a philosophy that comes from the personal, the local and the self. Putting our work in conversation with the likes of Emma Perez, Natalia Molina and Edward Said, this project expands on an interdisciplinary body of scholarship that deal with space, race, knowledge production, situated knowledge and memory studies through reclamation. In *Decolonial Imaginary*, Emma Perez urges us to examine "the process of, not the origins"⁷⁵ and take seriously violence we face when a fictive past becomes the knowledge used to negotiate the 'other' culture's difference. Therefore, by centering our workshops in decolonial and local knowledge, building from the work of the scholars previously mentioned, as well as elders from the community, we place our work within the struggle for liberation and libratory pedagogy.

⁷⁵ Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999) XVI.

While we certainly had areas that deserve improvement, I believe our approach worked because we spoke to histories that were unknown to the children, yet we discussed conditions of those histories that were personal and familiar.

In the first workshop, we asked the students if they were familiar with the histories of the Watts rebellion and many were not. They did not recognize images of Marquette Frye or his family, nor were they aware of the magnitude of the destruction in their community only two generations before them. While trying to discuss the impact of the uprising is difficult for any of us who were not present during that tumultuous moment, my words were insufficient in describing the rebellion to the students. There was a disconnection between the students and the narrative I was sharing. I struggled to articulate the magnitude of the pain and devastation in a way the students could understand or relate to. I was also concerned that the historic black and white photographic images of destruction and unrest I showed may have further distanced the rebellion by aging it.

While the discussion began slowly, the workshop became more relevant and dynamic when we moved into the personal. In an interview we watched together, a Black elder described what his experiences were like during the uprising as he encountered violent law enforcement, fearful neighbors and devastated buildings. By watching this interview, the students could see and hear the expression in the man's body and face; they could relate to the history a little more through his humanity. The students identified that the man in the interview was not treated fairly during the riots. They observed the militancy of the police 51 years ago, and time and again, they indicated that they are still hyper-policed in Watts. They understood that people were in pain during the rebellion and later on in the workshop, they spoke about the shooting they heard in their neighborhood just the night before, a shooting that kept them from sleeping. We went on to

talk about the food desert in 1960's and how it contributed to social neglect in Watts. We talked about the very new and *few* healthy food options in Watts today and asked why that was. We were making connections between the conditions for the rebellion and the lived experiences of the students. Although connections were made slowly and over time, the students were gathering an awareness of the rebellion and the history of Watts. The connections gathered were not made through spiritual vibrations; they were clear articulations of the lives that the children know and experience. In other words, "links between race and place created in the past continue to shape social relations in the present."⁷⁶

After the initial discussions, we talked about the mid-century art movement in Watts and South LA. I showed images of local artists and art collectives, like the Mafundi Institute, the Pan Afrikan Arkestra, and Watts Writer's Workshop as pictured below to help them contextualize this art history. To my pleasant surprise, they recognized some of the images. They identified the Mafundi mural on the façade of the Watts Coffee House, one of the very few sit-down restaurants in Watts. We talked about huge impacts these artists made in South LA and the legacy of the art community in Watts. We also reflected on being an artist, and what it means to make art. Building from a quote that I opened with, we looked back at the words of Kara Walker, a fierce Black artist, who said, "There's no diploma in the world that declares you as an artist—it's not like becoming a doctor. You can declare yourself an artists and then figure out how to be an artist." Without much explanation, the students understood her message and seemed to relate with its sentiment. Many went on to own their artistry and identify strongly as artists.

⁷⁶ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 124.



Figure 7. Watts Writers Workshop gathering c. 1966. Photo credit *Los Angeles Times*

After the discussions, we moved on to creating an identity map. In this activity, I asked students to think about their identity and the roles they play in their every day lives as students, children, siblings, athletes, artists and so on. As seen in the image below, I demonstrated and described how to make an identity map by using myself as an example, yet several of the students struggled to with the concept of this activity. They were confused or unsure of what to do exactly, since the directions required them to reflect and determine their own identity. While this type of introspection sometimes takes practice, beginning with this workshop was an important first step, one that we continued to build on for the emoji maps when we would meet the following Monday.

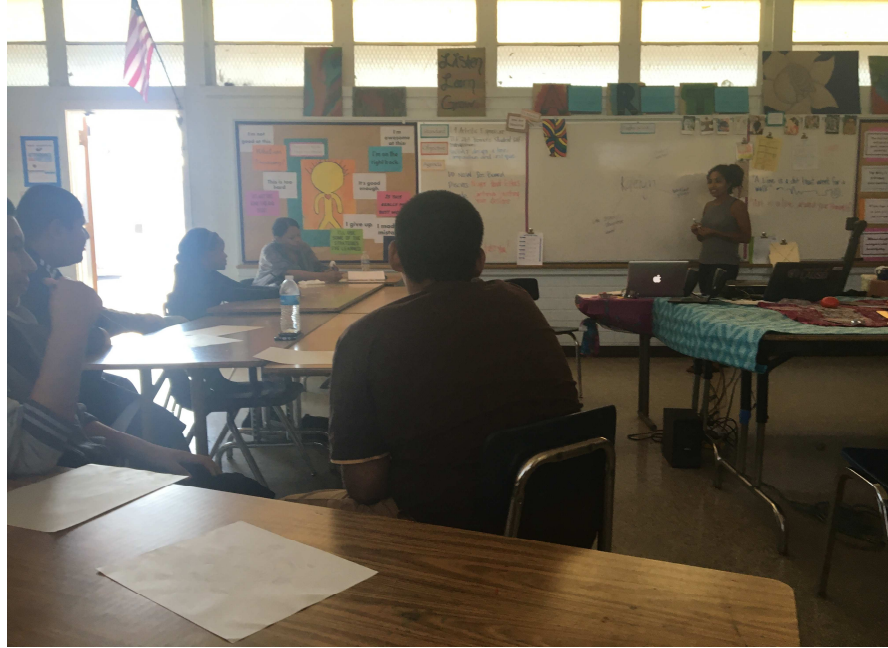


Figure 8. Kaelyn Rodriguez leading workshop at Markham Middle School. Photo courtesy Pilar Castillo

In our next meeting, we combined two workshops into one session. We began with a quick review of our previous workshop and then moved into the emoji mapping activity. We asked the students to cut out the paper emojis and place them on the map in a way that would represent their every day lives and activities in Watts. We showed them examples of what their map might look like and they got started right away. While listening to music in the background, Pilar and I helped the students locate their favorite places to eat, their homes and The Alma Reaves Woods Library on Compton and 103rd. They also located personal histories that, unlike monuments or businesses, would typically not be placed on a map. They mapped sites where they saw or heard gunshots, where they met their friends or where they saw the police. By doing this, they were marking memories in space, adding depth to their community by sharing their experiences and complicating the built environment in which they live.

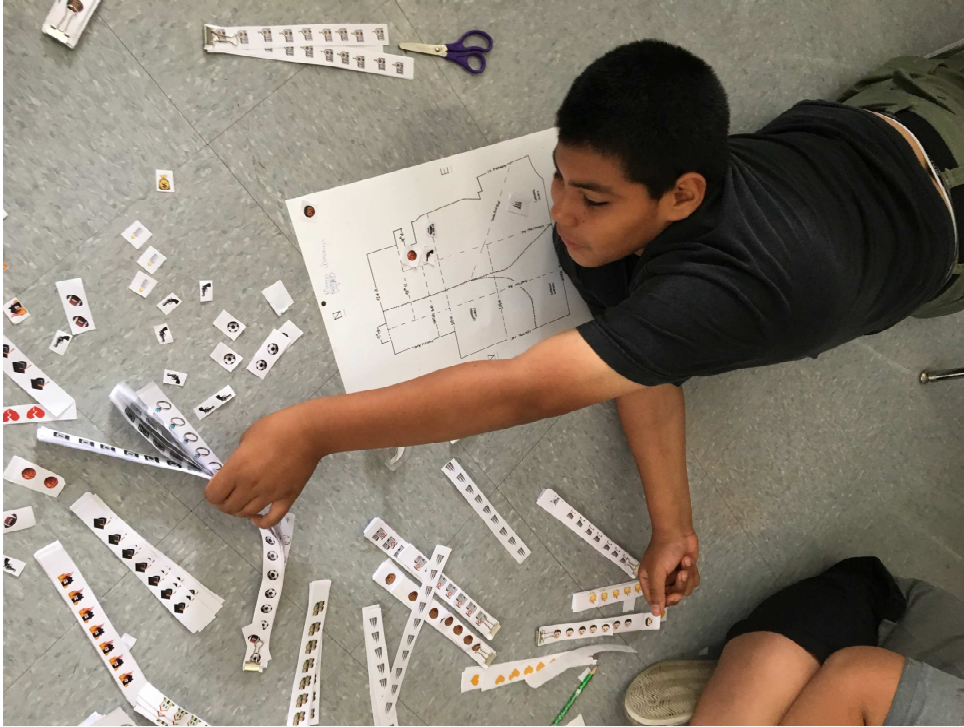


Figure 9. Students at Markham Middle School making emoji maps. Photo courtesy Pilar Castillo

I assert here that this activity was a material expression of decolonial pedagogy that directly opposed the tradition of Geography that asserts the concreteness and neutrality of geography.⁷⁷ McKittrick says it best here:

If prevailing geographies distributions and interactions are racially, sexually and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing ‘difference.’ That is, ‘plac[ing] the world order within an ideological order,’ unevenly. Practices of domination, sustained by a unitary vantage point naturalize both identity and place, repetitively spatializing were nondominant groups ‘naturally’ belong. This is, for the most part, accomplished through economic, ideological, social and political processes that see the positions that racial-sexualizes body within what seems like predetermined or appropriate, places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical... If *who* we see is tied with *where* we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn, suggesting that some bodies belong, some bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xiii.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, xv.

Moving away from McKittrick’s critique of commonsensical geography and asking the students to assert their own views of space—varying and nonhierarchical vantage points of their community—the students sited places and events on the map that were significant to their lives. This intervention is an important discursive move for opposing dominant epistemologies of space, in addition to employing Lipsitz’s Black spatial imaginary. In applying the Black spatial imaginary to this workshop, two points must be discussed. The first is that the majority of the students working with us are Latinx. While the Black spatial imaginary describes space and power relations about Black peoples and communities, it is also “flexible, fluid and relational, the contours of anti-Black spaces are relevant to all communities of color.”⁷⁹ In this way, by applying the Black spatial imaginary as a theoretical concept that is capable of application to other communities of color (especially in Watts, a historically Black community with a Latinx majority population), we can do relational and fluid work. The second point is that the Black spatial imaginary offers us theory for this very instance of “turn[ing] sites of containment and confinement into spaces of creativity and community making.”⁸⁰ I submit that the students did just that with this activity. They saw their 2-square-mile community with eyes for marking home and making art.

One of the most interesting observations I noted in this activity was how some of the students took to it with ease, noting local sites and sharing personal histories, while others seemed stifled by it. Those who struggled seemed unsure how to fill in the map, and used only four or five emojis noting locations like their homes and school, rather than sites of memory. Other students, however, included many details from their lives, including the homes of their

⁷⁹ Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*, 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

friends and relatives, stores they patronize with their parents and local monuments like the Watts towers. Those who created more comprehensive maps tended to work in conversation with their classmates, asking them where they had their first love and their first break up, sharing stories, secrets and laughter. As we finished the activity and began the discussion, I asked the students to reflect on how it felt to make their maps and I was moved to hear multiple students say that they felt proud and happy while creating their maps. They elaborated that reflecting on their lives and community gave many a stronger sense of self and they were happy to see their lives in this way. As the workshop leader and advocate for these youth, I was so grateful to see the power of spatial dynamics and mapping uplifting the students and I cherished their feedback. Their comments underscored the importance of community engagement in this project and the powerful connections we, even as children, have to the environment in which we live. In the future, I hope to use these maps as both primary sources and raw data to help describe Watts and her proud residents.

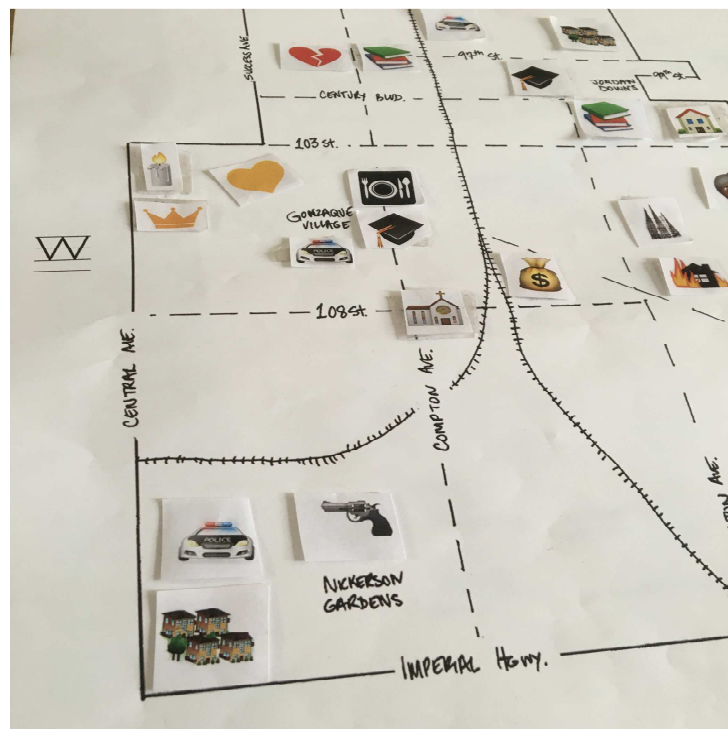


Figure 10. Detail of emoji map. Photo courtesy Kaelyn Rodriguez

After the emoji mapping activity, we discussed the lesson for the day: maps, space and power. We talked about the colonial history of maps and noted how charting space would become a source of social control for colonists. We discussed a cartographic practice of misrepresenting Africa and Asia by diminishing their scale and pondered the implications of reducing the size of certain geographies. We transitioned into looking at the work of Fred Wilson, Mark Bradford and Betye Saar, all of whom use maps or globes in their work at times. The students were clever and intuitive when discussing the possible interpretations of Betye Saar's installations. Several of the students expressed their emotional response to Saar, Wilson and Bradford's works while others accessed what the artists' intentions might have been. I was, once again, moved and deeply excited to see the youth connect emotionally and conceptually with such important artists and such relevant messages. These connections demonstrated the students' natural curiosity and their strong and clever minds. They also impressed upon me how important it is for the students to have more art and art history in and outside of school. Throughout the conversation, the students created a critical art historical discussion that challenged an artist's aesthetics, considered the respective materials used, and located race, power and space in the artworks. The students were very awake.

Although many students were highly engaged, I was concerned that a few of them were bored of the topic of maps and space. Yet as the class was closing, one of those restless students shared a rap with us. He had been writing or taking notes in a lyrical form and he read his flow to us; in it, he reflected on the power of maps and the history of cartography, my purple blouse, the pleasure of making art, and his practice of rapping. His performance coupled with his powerful rhymes were not only creative and strong, they were inspiring and full of knowledge! We all

celebrated his performance and I was humbled that he proved beyond my expectation that he was engaged, listening and even producing knowledge.

As we moved into the last segment of the workshop, I shared with the students a brief history of Judy Baca's mural, *The Great Wall of LA*, the largest mural in the world. We talked about the mural as a tattoo on a scar where a river once ran free, a metaphor that allows us to think about space more broadly and gives us permission to reimagine the meaning of older narratives. I asked the students if they had any scars on their bodies and if they could share the stories behind them. We talked about transforming the meaning of those scars from something painful into something beautiful, positive or powerful. Since *The Great Wall of LA* is in the San Fernando Valley, we decided to have the students create a symbol for the Watts Towers. In doing this, the students could create a meaningful symbol of a local landmark that held more personal significance. We asked them to abstract the meaning of the Towers so that they would reflect on their relationship to it and its personal meaning to them. While some students simply drew the towers others drew geographical shapes and intersecting webs of lines. I was excited to see students turning their papers upside-down, using multiple planes and alternative viewpoints to describe the Watts Towers. Other students used text and image to describe how the Towers make

them feel, and shared their sense of love and pride for the monument. The image below was

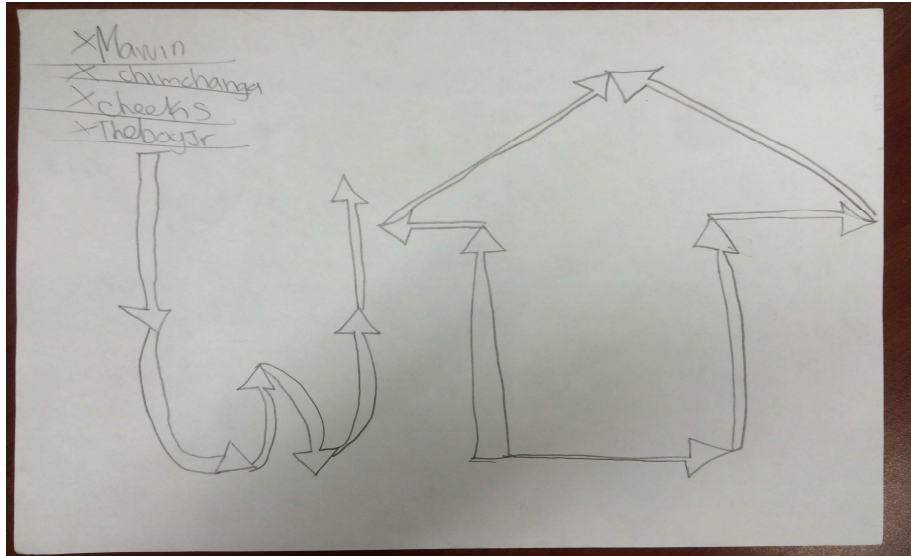


Figure 11. Watts Up drawing from Markham Middle School student. Photo courtesy Kaelyn Rodriguez made by a student from the workshop. He used arrows as lines to recreate the texture and structure of the Watts Towers while drawing a “W” for Watts and a larger, upward-facing arrow for up, or, “Watts up.”

In concluding the workshop, I showed the students images of artworks in Watts today and reminded them of the incredible legacy of art in their community, a legacy they are part of. We looked at images of *Mother of Humanity* and *Resurrection of Watts*, two beautiful and important artworks that exist at the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC). The students seemed excited and even surprised to see the image of *Resurrection of Watts*, pictured below, because they did not recognize it. I encouraged them to visit these incredible works of art that exist only a few blocks away from their school. I also shared a walking field trip that I put together for another event so that they might take an arts tour of their community another time.

In working with these students, I was surprised more than once, and in those instances, I recall feeling most moved when students expressed their emotional response to the activities and discussions. Hearing them say that they felt proud during the emoji mapping activity was one of

those moments for me. Their responses were powerful in that they seemed to gain new eyes for themselves, for their community and for their relationship to it. In emoji mapping, they made place, they sited/cited memories and celebrated themselves, not as consumers or cultural producers, but as children and residents of Watts. They saw their lives play out in space and recognized the power and pride in knowing oneself and one's community.



Figure 12. *The Resurrection of Watts*, by Ras Ammar Nsoroma. Photo courtesy Kaelyn Rodriguez

As we were concluding, I also showed them the plans we at SPARC have for their mural and other monuments. I asked for their opinions of our designs and reminded them that this mural, while historical, was for and about them and their futures. I shared with them our desire to represent them well and we discussed what they saw in the mural. Many of them expressed that they liked the work, and asked questions about different elements in the mural. We discussed the map in the image and reflected on why and how that was significant. In the interest of refining the design, I was hoping the students might express a few critiques of the design. Although they did not, they gave lots of feedback that was positive, helpful and much appreciated.



Figure 13. Earlier Draft of *Watts Still Rising* Image courtesy SPARC

When it was time to leave the students, I was surprised that so many of them asked for more. They were not ready for the workshop to end nor did they want to say goodbye. They asked us to come back with more lessons and activities and Pilar and I promised that we would soon. While it was difficult for us to leave them, their desire for more art and more history supports my belief that the workshop was a huge success.

Reflecting back, it is clear that the students drew from their own identities and their unique lives to make the identity map. They built upon that foundation while making the emoji maps. Our discussions of space and power moved between the topics of self-identity and practices for making artwork. In that way, each lesson and activity built on the former to reinforce the confidence of the students, to remember the histories of Watts together, to encourage the students in their own creativity, to implore them to challenge their conceptions of space and to empower them with the resources we possess as artists and students.

While we all benefitted from the workshop, I was so grateful to collaborate with Ms. Blanks. She was kind in allowing us the opportunity to build with her students and to

accommodate our every request. She trusted us with her students, and that allowed us to do our best with them. Her participation and generosity was crucial for our success and we are very pleased to continue to collaborate with her. Ms. Blanks is an incredible artist and educator, and as a teaching assistant and scholar-in-training, it was a true privilege to work along side her and observe her pedagogy and her relationships with the students. My collaborator in the workshop and colleague at SPARC, Pilar Castillo, was also an incredible support for this workshop series. She offered valuable feedback, helped to facilitate the lessons, engaged students with questions and helped in all of the planning. She also documented the workshops by taking photos and making notes of my presentations to the students. Her warmth and generosity of spirit helped to forge instant connections with the students and served us all. Working with such incredible women was a joy.

This workshop was an excellent opportunity for us to outreach to the youth and solicit feedback on our designs, but it was also important for our larger goals. It allowed us to engage youth in a dynamic and expressive way, to build relationships with them and to encourage them in their creative endeavors. It also helped us to build relationships with teachers, administration and parents.

While the workshops were not perfect, I/we believe there is room for improvement, I am very pleased and proud of the response the students had to us. The deep connections to artwork they had and their engagement with the activities leads me to believe that they are hungry for more, and I am enthusiastic to continue to work with them as well. In moving forward, we are learning from our mistakes by preparing presentations and activities in more specialized way, avoiding a lecture style method of learning and engaging discussion more and more. I am very eager to craft our next workshop to serve the students of Markham Middle School and relish the

opportunity to connect the socially engaging praxis of my community work to the research and writing I do as a scholar in training.

IV. Watts Spatial Imaginary, Past, Present and Future

Public art could be inseparable from the daily life of the people for which it is created. Developed to live harmoniously in public space, it could have a function within the community and even provide a venue for their voices.

--Judith F. Baca,⁸¹

Because this is a digital mural, our process for production is different from most traditional mural painting. We printed an under painting of 36 feet wide by 16 feet high and 576 square feet on an outdoor rated synthetic canvas, which will become the final mural. The under painting is currently installed at SPARC's Digital Mural Lab for painting until it is installed on the façade of Markham Middle School's auditorium in early 2017. One benefit of working with a digital mural is the simplified maintenance procedure in case of weather damage, structural damage or graffiti. In case of any damage we are able to remove the canvas, clean or paint the mural and reinstall it. Nevertheless, some are critical of digital murals because they require expensive, some times premier technology and access to large-scale printing, and sometimes demonstrate the critiques of the digital divide. This critique is sometimes expanded when reflecting on the history of Chicano murals as they embraced a rasquache aesthetic and method. I submit that this mural is rasquache in neither aesthetic nor method, yet it was made very closely with community members, and in that way, maintains a certain cultural capital that rasquachismo might otherwise embody.

⁸¹ Judy Baca, "Whose Monument Where?: Public Art in a Many-Cultured Society" *Mapping The Terrain* ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995) 135.

Designing this mural would take over a year; from its initial design for the DCA application to the changes made on canvas itself, the mural would evolve time and again. While many of the elements remained the same or quite similar to the original design, the major shifts that occurred are in the interior ellipse of the mural. Some of the changes made in the mural were informed by the work I conducted in the community. That work and the relationships built over time helped us to gather feedback for the design, which required that we made changes to reflect the interests and visions of the community. While this process requires flexible artists, cooperation, and more time than other mural design practices, it was very successful in its ability to adapt visuals over time, and in so, to center the voices of residents and community members over our own.

Before I offer a close visual analysis, I would like to highlight the purpose of this particular analysis in such an interdisciplinary project. Like most art historians, I use visual analysis to discuss the visual elements and principles of the artwork as well as the interpretations and functions of the piece. As both artist and art historian in this project, I move between multiple roles, which requires flexibility and creativity. In this way, my formal analysis sometimes functions as descriptive, historical in context, or even somewhat didactic. Furthermore, I sometimes depart from traditional models of visual analysis, yet I submit that the didactic descriptions support the analysis and add depth to the visual elements. Moreover, by including visual analysis in this paper, I position this paper within the tradition of art historical writing and methodologies. In many ways, this thesis and my own analysis of the mural break away from traditional art historical writings such that I am one of the designers and artists on this project and offer an analysis of my own work. It is also atypical that an art historical paper might

offer geographical histories and methods; nevertheless, this type of interdisciplinarity is crucial to this project and to the goals of the mural.

Returning to the visual, the canvas of the mural is rectangular in shape and has a large diagonal ellipse inside of the rectangle. These two shapes function as windows to two different temporal realities. Within the rectangle but outside of the ellipse is a blue sky with the sun rising along a majestic skyline. In the top left portion of the mural, the sun shines against the cerulean sky and offers a note of hope and strength. However, this hopeful note of sunshine is subdued under the looming presence of the National Guard standing with his bayonets. As the blue sky wraps clockwise around the ellipse, the color gradually darkens, and the warmth from the morning fades into the shadows of night. The dark and muted blues of the night challenge the hopeful blues from sunrise, creating a distinct dialectic between hope and despair, a tension between nature and humanity. Even more importantly, in either blue area, silhouettes of national guards stand looming over and through areas of Watts inside the ellipse. In the days and weeks after the uprising, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time Magazine* and other presses widely published images of national guards with bayonets in shadows and silhouettes; these images would become widely recognizable symbols of the violence and militarization of police in Watts 1965. That week of August 11, 1965, some 16,000 trained soldiers and police officers occupied Watts,⁸² stood on residents' lawns and surveyed the community all night.⁸³ Building from this historical event, we envisioned the silhouettes of law enforcement as oversized and larger than life as a way to represent the horrifying police presence in Watts. That week, many residents were in a

⁸² Horn, *Fire This Time*, 4.

⁸³ Dr. Chris Hickey (Resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.

very real state of fear of police and National Guards.⁸⁴ As we look closer still, we observe in the lower right corner of the mural, the national guards stand uniformly in procession on 103rd Street, what would become commonly known as Charcoal Alley. They are balanced in composition and read from left to right, and top to bottom.



Figure 14. Final digital design of *Watts Still Rising* image courtesy SPARC

While our concepts for representing the National Guard are clearly defined and symbolic of a historic moment, this particular rendering was not without some critiques from community members. While asking residents for their feedback, some local artists and residents expressed a visual conflict that made the ellipse and everything inside of it appear entrapped between and underneath the soldiers. This illusion created the feeling of permanently being hemmed in a historical moment of unrest and fear. Others shared a similar sentiment that, in general, the ellipse felt physically or geographically containing since it exists inside a larger rectangle. While these critiques are strong and valuable to us, this sentiment may be partially contextualized by

⁸⁴ Ibid.

the historical reality that Watts has both, materially and symbolically, been marked by the 1965 and 1992 uprisings. The social reputation as well as the economic, housing, transportation and educational realities in South LA, especially Watts, create a particular narrative about a poor neighborhood of people of color. While the team of artists on this mural is very aware of this popular narrative, the design was made with a different set of intentions and a different visual lexicon and interpretation.

The critiques offered by community members are clear, pointed and important to the way we conceptualize this work, it is worth mentioning that the lead artist's vision for the shapes in the mural were strategic and in the tradition of David Alfaro Siqueiros. In this way, this work is consistent within Judy Baca's oeuvre of Chicana murals. Putting this mural next to some of her earlier works, for example, *La Memoria de Nuestra Tierra*, helps to confirm this. Some of Baca's most important themes are land and memory, and she works toward visualizing them together by playing with balance and movement. By making the ellipse diagonal inside of the rectangle, the viewer tends to lean her head to the left and right, scanning the image back and forth. In this way, the piece becomes dynamic and incites movement physically, historically and symbolically. This sense of dynamism begs the viewer to orient and reorient herself while obscuring thresholds between viewing an artwork and participating with it. In this way, the viewer becomes an active player in remembering the past, living the present and dreaming of the future, which, I submit, is an important and beautiful form of community engagement in public arts. The ellipse is set on Siqueiros's *punto de oro system* in a dynamic line through the mural which creates in the viewer a need to balance their body and head to view it. While there are many ways to see this piece and a multiplicity of perspectives and artists contexts, this piece was designed for close looking and community engagement. These goals are underscored by the large

scale of the mural, and its particular location on an elevated façade at Markham Middle School. The ellipse will be more translucent in the final rendition when it is painted and the blue National Guard figures smoky and like illusions of a past reality

While the silhouettes of the National Guard are the only visual reference to the rebellion and the militarization of Watts, other elements within the mural underscore historical moments in Watts's past. The growing plants in the foreground of the mural are examples of a historical moment in the 1920s and 1930s in Watts when residents lived off of the land and gardened. These small planted foliage bare their roots while, at the same time, remind us of the agrarian histories in Watts before 1926, when Watts was not a part of Los Angeles, but rather, an island in segregated Southern California. Gerald Horne outlines the rustic histories of Watts as a marsh area in Southern California, where family gardens flourished and people fished for catfish and crawfish in the muddied swamps.⁸⁵ He reminds us about the wetlands where rice patches and other vegetables gardens used to thrive.⁸⁶ In this way, farming and gardening was a significant component in residents' autonomy and resilience.

While the young plants in the foreground are a nod to a swampy Watts in the early 20th century, the images of plants also reference another historical moment--a moment of local strength and self-determination in the early late 60's and early 70's when the WLCAC created Watts Feeds Itself (WFI). WFI was an important plan of action that would train youth to farm oats, hay, pumpkins, onions, corn, mustard greens, alfalfa and other produce.⁸⁷ Residents also

⁸⁵ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 27.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Dapo Odebiyi, *Watts Feeds Itself* (Los Angeles: WLCAC, 1970) 12.

harvested the produce, raised livestock, chickens, and pigs and sold eggs.⁸⁸ Although Watts is a small area, spatial barriers did not restrict residents from farming land and thriving. While this history is largely forgotten in the more popular narrative of Watts, it is well remembered and cherished by older members of the community.⁸⁹

Finally, in reference to the small plants in the foreground of the mural, I submit that they refer to third temporal moment—the future. Members at the WLCAC, I Heart Watts and other organizations are currently working toward creating local produce gardens that will help sustain healthy food options and support wellness for families and children. As these projects begin to unfold, they take several different forms and represent different stages in the process, yet they each underscore a need and a historical precedent for farming and gardening. For example, the WLCAC is in the second stage of their gardening initiative, MudTown Farms, which includes a cannery, a general store and a roadside fruit stand.⁹⁰ On their website, they say, “MudTown Farms will not be simply an urban park or simply an urban farm. It will be a self-sustaining community center with education, job training, community gardening, farming, and entrepreneurship for stakeholders of all ages and backgrounds.”⁹¹ Their holistic approach to thriving reflects their vision of wellness, which requires more than material wealth or health, but community, collaboration and creativity.

Moving forward from the small plants in the foreground of the mural, we see a cornfield, lush gardens and an urban farming greenhouse. While the cornfield and garden are nods to the

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Michael Franklin, personal conversation with Kaelyn Rodriguez, July 7, 2016.

⁹⁰ “Our Future” Watts Labor Community Action Committee, accessed November 14, 2016. <http://www.wlcac.org/our-future.htm>.

⁹¹ Ibid.

past, the greenhouse is a clear move toward future technological advancements in gardening and self-sustainability in Watts. A fellow member of the I Heart Watts community group, Pinkus Crowther, shared the greenhouse idea with me in the spring of 2016. Crowther is working in collaboration with others to fund and create greenhouses in different housing project so multi-family living areas have close access to local gardens.⁹² While the greenhouses are still a dream, they represent an important trajectory of urban life and sustainable, renewable options for wellness.

A small detail, but another important reference to the present and future of Watts are the people riding bikes. These bicyclists represent the future of Watts: healthy, mobile and active. They are symbolic of alternative modes of transportation in Watts. The bicyclists also affirm and reflect the prominence of bikes by way of bicycle events in Watts in 2016, like the Ride for Love and CicLAvia. Furthermore, bikes are a mode of transportation sometimes used by those without a car or a driver's license. While freeways and freeway off ramps have sometimes divided poor families in color making them vulnerable to pollution and isolation,⁹³ metro stations usher in waves of gentrification bikes offer an alternative, more democratic forms of mobility and space. In this way, they also disrupt transportation systems that foster environmental racism, encourage exercise and wellness.

In different areas within the ellipse, we reimagined and designed single family and multi family homes. Residents raised concerns around housing because some housing conditions in Watts have not much improved since the rebellion in 1965. Overcrowding in several of the housing projects has been an ongoing issue for many. Contemporary crowding has been ongoing and is exacerbated by the poor conditions of the homes, since they were built for World War II

⁹² Pinkus Crowther, email message to Kaelyn Rodriguez, June 26, 2016.

⁹³ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 37.

soldiers but were suddenly neglected as the demographics shifted. Furthermore, Jordan Down, an outdated housing project in Watts is currently being rebuilt for residents in the 21st century. In our rendering of housing, we designed larger homes with green spaces and pools for families and communities to enjoy. In this way, according to the consultation of community members and our own imaginations, we created spaces where families can live and thrive.

Within the rest of the ellipse, we rendered important sites, artworks or monuments in Watts to celebrate the cherished artworks in the community. For example, we represent *Mother of Humanity*, *Mafundi Institute*, and the Watts Towers. Each of these public artworks has an important history in Watts and represents some of the world-class artwork and art history in South LA. In addition to these artworks, we also represent the Ted Watkins Memorial Park with the flagpole and pool. This park is an important community hub where local groups gather to meet, where children and families play or take classes. It also hosts the weekly farmers market and annual picnics. Ted Watkins Memorial Park is a place where elders gather to play cards, where children go to swim, where runners go to exercise. It is an important place in the community and was named after Ted Watkins, founder of the WLCAC and a champion of Watts. We were sure to render the park with a pool, the way it is today, for accuracy but also to contextualize the history of Watts. The pool represents advancement in the community that was not available in 1965 when the rebellion broke out. While there were many complicated factors that contributed to the uprising, barriers like segregated pools kept residents in South LA hot and humiliated. In this case, the pool represents recreation and play, but also symbolizes peace and the humanity of residents.

Circling back to the left side of the image, we see six children in the foreground. The self-portraits of the children claim the majority of the mural and dominate the left side of the

image. The kids appear to be stacked in multiple planes in a similar, yet less dramatic style to Jacopo Pontormo mannerist altarpiece, *The Deposition from the Cross*, as seen below. They move up, rather than back in space to maintain attention on the surface of the wall and to keep the eye moving from left to right. The six kids, three boys and three girls, collectively represent the future of Watts. They represent a Watts that is both Black and Latinx, a Watts that is strong, united, smart, creative and passionate. The children stand confidently with their ambitions in hand; the boy in the red shirt is a business owner and fashion designer, and the girl in the back row is a detective with a clue, while the others are librarians, travelers, beauticians and architects. Five of the kids smile



Figure 15. Jacopo Pontormo *The Deposition from the Cross* photo courtesy from the Getty and look back at the viewer while the boy holding the world lifts his eyes and looks up at the world ahead of him. While each child poses differently displaying the accoutrement of their

professions, they stand with pride and a clear determination. Each of these kids expressed their dreams of their futures with an undergraduate or graduate student at UCLA in workshops hosted at Markham Middle School and The Judy Baca Arts Academy. The UCLA students helped the kids to visually express what their future looks like and we formatted those portraits into this mural. Additionally, four of the six portraits are self-portraits that took months for the kids to conceptualize and then digitally paint. While the kids are the largest element in the mural, they are in direct contestation with the looming guard above them. The autoimmunity of the guard next to the very specific portraits of the kids creates a visual dialectical and a social narrative of the omnipresent and timelessness of policing of youth of color.

This group portrait is one element that many residents in Watts resonated with and expressed pleasure in. Several individuals expressed to me the importance of rendering a strong message about the future for the youth so they could see themselves achieving their goals.⁹⁴ By representing the kids as children who look ahead and dream big, we affirm their



⁹⁴ Dr. Chris Hickey (Resident of Watts) in discussion with author, March 1, 2016.la

Figure 16. Detail of final mural design

dreams and support their goals for the future. We also celebrate the range of interests and goals and appreciate the creativity and passion in these youths. We also wanted to represent Black and Latinx kids in equal numbers, as they are the future of the community.

An ensemble of SPARC artists, myself included, will produce this mural and subsequent memorial marker in collaboration with past and current partners in the Watts area. In addition to the mural, we will create seven sites of public memory including important cultural assets culminating in a mural at the Markham Middle School. The intention is to make clear and more visible the events that precipitated the largest revolt in United States history in 1965.⁹⁵ Today, nothing remains of those events but a profound *absence* as the sites are without markers or memory. These sites will be marked via etched concrete sandblasted into existing sidewalks and connected via a walking, biking or car tour created for the public with didactic materials. We have designed memorial plaques for each site so passersby can read along and activate the space with their own social engagement. Each site contributes to the unfolding story of the development and escalation of the uprising in the Watts area.

The artistic approach we take is both traditional and unconventional, as the work proposed is more than a single mural. It required fieldwork and historical research, conducting interviews, watching historical interviews, making maps and mastering digital software like Photoshop. As a way to build on and draw attention to the important cultural productions in Watts, we will also celebrate local artworks and centers, including the Cecil Ferguson Center, Richard Wyatt's Neighborhood Pride mural at Watts Towers Art Center along with Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. All of these artworks and art histories are an important part of Watts and

⁹⁵ Horne, *Fire This Time*, 54.

we are proud to build with the community to make this mural and to celebrate the great works of the past.

While there are many forms and methods for producing public art, we chose to create a landscape or spatial representation of Watts because of the deep connection between land and memory. Since the goals of the mural are to connect the past to the present and future, to commemorate the history of the 1965 rebellion with visions for what comes next, we wanted to be as intentional as possible in selecting the mural's physical location at Markham Middle School and also in rendering temporal visions of Watts. By centering different temporal moments in the image itself, we necessarily imagine Watts as a spatially specific and geographic area in South LA. Furthermore, building on the discussions from earlier sections of geography, we use this spatial theme to counter the history of geography and the "built environment [that] privileges and therefore mirrors white, heterosexual, capitalist and patriarchal geopolitical needs."⁹⁶ Therefore, this rendering of Black and Latinx people thriving in the built environment, riding bikes and growing their own produce is a celebration of people of color, but also a rendering of a political struggle that envisions a community for women, for people of color, for LGBTQ folks, for children, families and immigrants.

Conclusion

The innovations this project offers are in the methodologies, the creative process and the permanent artworks. The particular methodology that I believe has the most potential to grow in the future is emoji mapping. While community-based art projects have a significant history, especially in Los Angeles, emoji mapping is a completely new innovation that was designed within this project. As I look forward to the future, I am eager to develop this emoji mapping further and offer more specialized emojis that are specific to Watts's residents. While emoji

⁹⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 6.

mapping has proven to be successful thus far, I am interested in digitizing the process and creating augmented emoji mapping that can locate memories and monuments from a central database and include images and primary sources about the site. I am also interested in expanding the theoretical applications to emoji mapping even further with Lipsitz's Black and white spatial imaginaries, Lefebvre's abstract space and McKittrick's oppositional geography. I believe the theoretical interpretations can be very powerful and useful beyond the scope of this project. Furthermore, the interdisciplinarity of this project also allows for important innovative unions between geography, history, race and art. Because of this, this project was able to build creatively and originally.

While the methodological and theoretical innovations are exciting, the outcomes of my work are equally important. One outcome I am proud of is the relationships I have built with community members over the course of this year. Doing the research was critical to the project, but spending time in the community where these histories took place was different from any reading I could have done. Being personally invested in this work has added depth and life to this project, which in turn, fosters creative and innovative opportunities. Additionally, the outcomes of this work are this thesis paper and the artworks and monuments that we will install in 2017. The artworks and monuments will live on beyond this research project and will mark memories for generations to come. They will usher in new interpretations and meanings of spaces in Watts that otherwise appear to be banal sidewalks or neutral intersections. Furthermore, these artworks and monuments will be accessible to members of the community in ways that this thesis paper is not. While the process for making the mural and monuments is incredibly important to the work and the interdisciplinary approach that I take, the material elements that will live on in Watts are

a huge success to this project. They represent the past, present and future and hopefully, they will continually inspire new visions of Watts.

In addition to the innovations and outcomes of this thesis are the risks I took by doing this work. Taking on a participatory-observer project that includes art making, as a trained art historian is somewhat bold in that this project moves beyond the scope of most art historical research. However, by pushing the envelop in this way, I hope to extend the scope of possibilities for what art history work can be. In addition to the way I did this project, including the methods and theories I developed and built on, the social justice component of this project required a commitment to activism. This type of commitment to local community is different from many art historians or scholars in general. While many scholars use writing and research as tools for their activist work, they sometimes lack in the areas that require personal engagement or experiential knowledge. Where human interaction is necessary, “Desk-Bound Radical” scholarship, where scholars perform activism via writings and reading, often leaves students and community members wanting.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it leaves the scholar as an outsider to their work in a way that does not encourage objectivity in the research but distance in the field. In this project, I have multiple outlets for my activism, some academic, personal, ephemeral; others are permanent. In this way, upsetting traditional ways of doing (or making) art histories will have material benefits to residents in Watts, and helps to create a more creative and innovative art history that may impact students, scholars and community members as well.

Finally, this thesis paper and the project as a whole offer many contributions to the field of Chicax Studies. It uses space as an analytic to think about the ways demography took place in Watts in the 1960s. It notes that Latinxs and Chicaxs were present in Watts before the 1980s and 1990s, and proves that there were important relational racial connections in Watts’s history.

⁹⁷ Don Mitchell, “Confessions of a Desk-Bound Radical” *Antipode* no. 3 (2008): 448.

They offer an interdisciplinary approach to the study of murals and community engagement.

They produced an original form of mapping space and memories via emoji mapping, a methodology that has important implications in the future in many fields of study. This work is also more than a theoretical approach to history or a visual analysis of a painting; it is a practice-based community orientated project that will produce permanent artwork and public monuments in and for the Watts community. The mural and the monuments will have a life outside of this paper and hopefully, will have an impact on current residents and generations to come.

Sometimes, when community based work is conducted, its results are typed up as an essay, article, dissertation or book project and prove to be very important for scholars, but are much less useful for the residents they worked with. In addition to scholarship, this project, however, offers material objects that invoke a historical part, but that also invite the viewer/resident to participate in imagining the future.

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