

The Rise and Decline of the Watts Summer Festival, 1965 to 1986

Bruce M. Tyler

An important effect of the black civil-rights movements was the revival of ethnic awareness and pride among American-Indians, Asian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, American Jews, Irish-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Armenian-Americans and others. New institutions and rites arose in its wake. In Los Angeles the Watts Summer Festival typified the ethnic pride and celebrations that arose from the civil-rights movements, and while it outlasted the movements, the Festival too eventually fragmented and faded away. Yet at inception it was part of a revitalization movement that promised a better future.

Ethnic pride and revitalization movements are not new in American culture. Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux eloquently described the 1890s "Ghost Dance" as a ceremony "to bring my people back into the sacred hoop, that they might walk the road in a sacred manner pleasing to the Powers of the Universe that are One Power." The evocation of a rich, vibrant black folk culture around the turn of the century and its reappearance in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and in the civil-rights movement of the 1960s revitalized black pride and self-respect. The 1960s ethnic revival coincided with political advances that together produced a new leadership determined to renew ethnic cultures through festivals, ceremony and a new political agenda. At the same time, ethnic-pride movements appeared in the American prison system.¹

The Watts Summer Festival exemplified many of the issues faced by ethnic pride movements. It was an invented tradition designed to fill a void some black nationalists believed existed in Afro-American society and culture. The Watts

Summer Festival seemed to follow Eric Hobsbawm's definition of invented tradition as "essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition."²

The Watts Summer Festival embodied the hopes for rebuilding Watts amid fears of renewed rioting. Many people, both black and white, feared that the new movement foreshadowed renewed violence or ethnic tension. Some festival leaders were militants who often used threatening language that appeared anti-white, and militants' demands for recognition and redistribution of power and resources made many people uncomfortable.

The Watts Summer Festival grew out of the Watts Riot of August 1965. The Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations helped organize an anti-riot coalition that proposed the festival as a remedy against lingering hostility and pro-riot activism. The pro-riot faction advocated riots as a legitimate form of black protest. They viewed the Watts Riot as "a call to revolution," believing that riots were a means of destroying white domination and power. Thus, the anti- and pro-riot factions disagreed on the meaning of the annual celebration that began as the Watts Riot of August 11, 1965.

The idea of a festival dominated at first, but violence, drugs, gangs, radicals and the police finally destroyed the hopes many had for an annual festive holiday. The annual celebrations also provided an outlet for black petty capitalists, vendors and local entertainers, and showcased Ron Karenga's African cultural performers. The festival was successful from 1966 through 1973, but drastically declined in 1974. From 1975 through 1979 it was suspended until community support could be renewed and its structure reorganized. In the 1980s it never again achieved the support or success it had before.

The idea of a carnival emphasizing a dance and celebration instead of violence, looting and battles with police originated during the Watts Riot. Indeed, the distinction between riot and festival could be confusing. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial on August 13, 1965, called the riot "A Summer Carnival of Riot" and denied that the violence was a race riot.³ The *Times* described the disturbance as a wild and violent youthful exuberance, not a race riot stemming from deep grievances. It stressed that black youth threw bottles at and attacked black and white motorists alike. The Reverend Casper Glenn and Timothy O'Seyere (a pseudonym) walked along Avalon between Imperial and 120th Street and told those milling on the streets: "The police are pulling back. Check it out, there's going to be a dance." Anti-riot activists wanted to divert the incipient riot into a carnival. Rev. Glenn told a black youth breaking out street lights: "Look, you don't have to bust those lights! We're having a dance!" The youth asked, "Is that right?" Then he bitterly added, "You're a damn liar!" Police, "20 abreast," marched down the street with shotguns combat ready, and began dispersing the crowd.⁴ The Watts Summer Festival as a street dance and anti-riot measure had to wait another year to be born.

Ralph Reese, an anti-riot activist in the area, told the people: "Come on, man, don't throw rocks. Wait a while and check things—we're going to have a party."⁵

He suggested the dance and obtained a restriction on police activity until 11 p.m. Rev. Glenn, Rev. H. H. Brookins of the AME Church, and John Buggs of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, had taken the dance proposal to Deputy Chief of Police Roger Murdock at the 77th Street Police Station.⁶ At the station Rev. Glenn told Police Lt. Frank Beeson and Inspector James Fisk: “Things are blowing up all over. The only chance—if we could get them to hold a dance on Avalon.”⁷ Fisk replied, “Yes, it’s OK to go ahead. Go ahead and have the dance, the police will not be out in force.” He warned that higher authority could “overrule” his decision. Before the record player could arrive, the Los Angeles Police Department had cleared the area, dispersing the crowd by force.⁸ This proposed dance was the beginning of The Watts Summer Festival.

The next year a group of black community leaders started planning in February for the 1966 commemoration of the Watts Riot and the festival. They had the active support of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations and Westminster Neighborhood Association, a Presbyterian self-help organization located in Watts.⁹ Stan Sanders, a black Rhodes Scholar who graduated from Jordan High School in Watts, Booker Griffin, a local radio station commentator and columnist for a black newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Tommy Jacquette, founder of SLANT (Self-Leadership for All Nationalities Today) and Maulana Ron Karenga, founder of the black cultural nationalist organization called “US Black Nationalist Cultural Organization” and Swahili instructor for the Fremont Adult School, founded the “Watts Summer Festival.” They did so under the auspices of the Jordan High School Alumni Association to give it the appearance of a local project.¹⁰ The organizers sought to use the festival to carry out “rituals of status elevation” of the poor and depressed Watts community and at the same time carry out “rituals of status reversal” that would defy white authority and culture with black cultural nationalism.¹¹

Maulana Ron Karenga expressed a rationale for the festival and its status elevation rituals and reversals: “The revolution being fought now is a revolution to win the minds of our people.” “If we fail to win this,” he added, “we cannot wage the violent one.” Moreover, “You must have a cultural revolution before the violent revolution. The cultural revolution gives identity, purpose and direction.” Karenga sought to return black persons radicalized by the riot to acceptable modes of behavior by getting them involved in a long preparatory stage—cultural nationalism—before the violent revolutionary stage. The festival would provide the vehicle, and Karenga would offer the philosophical rationale, with a veneer of black radicalism in the guise of black cultural nationalism. He defended riot behavior in order to win the confidence of ghetto toughs and the under-class: “A culture is what legitimizes a people’s action and in turn, gives self respect.” He founded “Uhuru Day,” August 11, to celebrate the Watts revolt.¹² Karenga’s rhetoric of violence apparently was merely designed to placate angry blacks; it became clear that he abhorred riots and ghetto crime.

Uhuru Day was part of the cultural nationalism program that Karenga sought to apply in black ghettos across the nation. “Nationalism is a belief that black

people in this country make up a cultural nation," he argued. He established a series of holidays and ceremonies—"Kuzaliwa," May 19, the birth of Malcolm X; "Kwanza," December 26 to January 1, the holiday of the First Fruits as a counterpart to Christmas; "Kuanzisha Founder's Day," commemorating the founding of "US Organization" by Karenga; "Arusi," an Afro-American wedding ceremony; "Akika", a nationalization ceremony for children; and "Maziko," an Afro-American funeral ceremony. These attracted followers across the country.¹³

The 1966 and 1967 Watts Summer Festivals were surprisingly successful. The planners organized them to appeal to local residents as well as outsiders. Scholars of festival theory and practice have recently noted that in order for festivals to be successful, they must depend either on local appeals or outside-the-community patronage appeals, or a combination of the two, to attract festival goers.¹⁴ Class and status factors must be considered in order to appeal to a cross section of people to insure the festival's success; otherwise it must be pitched to a specialized audience. The Watts Summer Festival attracted large numbers of local residents from Greater Los Angeles and San Diego.¹⁵ Welfare recipients, working-class and professional people, and their children attended the first few festivals. Large numbers of white families (enticed by big name entertainers and traditional festival attractions) came in a mood of sympathy, support, fun and racial reconciliation.

In 1966, about 35,000 people attended the first festival. Los Angeles police estimated that 130,000 people attended the 1967 Watts Summer Festival, of whom about 30 percent were white. The incidence of crime was the lowest in the area since 1947.¹⁶ Hugh Masakela, a South African black trumpeter, performed with his group before a sellout crowd at the Jordan High School outdoor field. He sang from his album the Swahili song "The Ooga Booga," then riding high on the national music charts, and thrilled the black people in the audience who were basking in black pride resulting from the festival. Masakela's appearance attracted many festival goers because he appealed to the newly emerging black-pride movement. Maulana Ron Karenga, a powerful local black nationalist, sponsored his "US boot dancers," the "Zulu" dancers, and the "Malaika" dancers and singers. African male dances at Will Rogers Park proved very popular. The dancers also performed in the community and in the Los Angeles City school system.¹⁷

Vendors were everywhere selling candy, ice cream cones, African jewelry, clothes, books, black arts and crafts, barbecue meats and dinners, hot dogs, juices, African clothing and handicrafts. There were carnival rides, Ferris wheels, pony rides, slide shows, policemen, firemen, ambulances and even recruiters for the armed forces. Various City and County agencies had displays, leaflets, pamphlets and first-aid stations. The Los Angeles County and City Fire and Police Departments had recruitment booths and encouraged black persons to consider a career with their agencies. The City and County ambulance services, the Bureau of Social Welfare and other government agencies were well represented. In fact,

government agencies and displays probably had the largest share of booths. A central goal of the festival was to bring government to the people through these booths. The people were in a carnival spirit. Families came and picnicked on the green at Will Rogers Park, and black and white people mixed together¹⁸ Radicals with leaflets, however, denounced the festival.

But the Watts Summer Festival had encountered opposition from the very beginning. The Los Angeles Police Department (L.A.P.D.) had never approved of the festival because it commemorated the riot. Policing the festival became a quite dangerous undertaking. Los Angeles Police Chief Ed Davis, testifying in 1970 before the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, which was considering bills on the U.S. internal security, charged:

In the Watts riot aftermath two years ago, in 1968 or 1967, we had a very disastrous celebration of the rebirth of Watts after the riots. Through Black Panther instigation, there were virtual volley lines of shooting at policemen and policemen returning the fire of people shooting at them. This was stimulated by Black Panther activity. A few days before that, in stopping four young men in the car, our men were shot at, two policemen, by four Black Panthers. There was a shootout, two Panthers killed, one got away, and we captured one. That was that festival celebrating the rebirth of Watts, a good form, this was turned into a virtual battlefield where three people were killed.¹⁹

Although far from the festival site, these police and Panther shootouts, as well as the gang violence and public drug abuse, resulted in a dramatic decline in festival attendance, especially by families and white people.

The War on Poverty and the private programs that flourished in the aftermath of the 1965 riot seemed not to have slowed the high unemployment, poverty and desperation in Watts. At the same time, some government and private programs in Watts and the Watts Riot of 1965 built self-esteem. Some black persons moved vigorously by organizing self-help programs.²⁰ The names of many self-help groups, whether under private or government sponsorship, indicated new directions in the community: Self-Leadership for All Nationalities Today; Action Committee on the Urban Crisis; Police Malpractice Complaint Center; Afro-American Cultural Association; Black Man's Self-Image Development Institute; Community Pride, Inc.; Sons of Watts; Watts-Compton Improvement Association; Young Men for Total Democracy; Image Development; Opportunity Workshop; and Men of Tomorrow.²¹ The Watts Festival rode atop this wave of positive renewal in the black community.

Some black youths, proud of the Watts riot as a protest against police authoritarianism and white power, took to the streets of Los Angeles and Watts, calling the approaching summer of 1966 "The Watts Burners Annual Festival."²²

These youths, radicalized adults, various student militants from the Black Student Unions, and radicals were preaching a pro-riot ideology as black protest. Some advocated riots as the first stage of revolution.

The festival organizers and many government agencies, including the police and sheriff's departments and the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations, knew they had to counter this concept and suppress it or face more riots and violence. The festival organizers advanced the view that the authorities should support the festival "because they realize that this festival is the catalyst for keeping the lid on this community."²³

The festival sponsors opposed violence and encouraged the view that the festival was an effective anti-riot measure; it would channel black anger and discontent into meaningful black cultural pride as well as provide jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities and experience for many blacks. The festival was uniquely designed to promote both black pride and petty black capitalism among vendors of food, clothes, jewelry and arts and crafts. It was reasonably successful for a few years.

In August of 1968, the Watts Summer Festival ended in violence. Three people were killed and forty-one were injured, including three policemen.²⁴ Black community members and their allies mobilized a group called "The Crisis Coalition" to protest police brutality and repression of blacks and Mexican-Americans. The Crisis Coalition took its protest to the Los Angeles City Council, where charges and counter-charges were heatedly exchanged.²⁵ Black leaders threatened that race war would escalate between the police and blacks and Mexicans if the police did not stop brutalizing people. They called for a halt to unfair, hostile and aggressive policing designed to provoke violence and arrests.²⁶ Violence continued to escalate between police and the people, and among the gangs at the festivals.

The Watts Summer Festival, however, became a battleground not only for gangs and police but for radicals and anti-radicals who respectively opposed and supported the festival as either the "Darky Carnival" or a display of black cultural nationalism and pride.²⁷ Michael Lasky, a white Communist who organized and led a small doctrinaire group called the "Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist" in Watts, had been advocating revolution in Watts to a few black and white followers prior to the riot. He denounced the Watts Summer Festival in a broadside that became the rallying cry of the anti-festival black political nationalists. The broadside, entitled "We Must Build the August 11 Movement," boldly denounced the Watts Summer Festival as "The Darky Carnival." This position was taken up by Robaire "Nyjuky" (Swahili for "one born out of anger"), a radical local black Communist who shared Lasky's ideological leanings and sought to radicalize black youth against police and merchant oppression and exploitation. Robaire organized and led the "Black United Front, Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Maoist," and allied his group with Lasky. They developed the Marxist and political black nationalist opposition to the festival.²⁸

The Black United Front insisted that they were the true followers of Malcolm X's brand of black nationalism and Marxism. They took up this position against the cultural nationalists such as Tommy Jacquette and Maulana Ron Karenga, who supported the festival and who also claimed they embraced Malcolm X's views. The Black Marxists and political nationalists charged that Jacquette and Karenga had distorted and compromised the values and politics of Malcolm X. Even more disturbing to the black radicals, the cultural nationalists collaborated with the War on Poverty programs and local authorities in policing the festival by threatening and attacking disrupters and pacifying blacks by denouncing revolution and violence.²⁹

In 1968, Hakim Jamal, as head of the "Malcolm X Foundation," attempted to rename Will Rogers Park "Malcolm X El Shabazz Park" and put up a paper sign to that effect. It was torn down by festival security workers. A shootout almost occurred at Markham Junior High School in Watts between Jamal and his followers and festival personnel and Sons of Watts, a local self-help group organized by social worker Billy J. Tidwell, who received Government funding. The issue involved a dispute over redirecting the festival into black protest and pro-riot directions.³⁰ Jamal's Malcolm X Foundation failed to gain any influence over the festival's direction or leaders. The anti-festival radicals remained largely limited to the role of minor irritants rather than dangerous disrupters despite the fear and possibility of violent altercations.

Only the Black Panthers presented a formidable threat to the festival, but even that opposition lasted only a few years. The Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party attacked the Watts Summer Festival head-on in the summer of 1969. Elaine Brown, minister of information of the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party, held a press conference at Panther headquarters at 41st Street and Central Avenue in which she denounced the "Will Rogers Massacre" after a few blacks had been shot and killed and many beaten, as black rioters and police repression broke up the festival. The Panthers, civil-rights leaders and Black Student Union leaders thought the police provoked violence by aggressive policing. Brown charged that the festival was a "joke" and "insult" to black people; she denounced the festival as a "Darky Carnival" and "Darky Parade," terms coined by Michael Lasky. In fact, many Panthers had been influenced by Robaire of the Black United Front; he supported the Lasky political line and easily brought the Panthers to this position.³¹

Elaine Brown attacked Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty and the festival, declaring, "The dancing and the singing in the slave quarters must cease forever." She called Tommy Jacquette a "bootlicker." She denounced festival supporters as "lackeys" of the Government War on Poverty programs and for trying to pacify blacks to keep them nonviolent and happy and content in their poverty and misery. Finally she threatened: "We, The Black Panther Party, say, and want to let the people know, that we support their efforts to have the community control the police and itself. And to all those in the power structure and their lackeys, know

that we don't need their jive programs and we will see to it that the game is stopped forever."³²

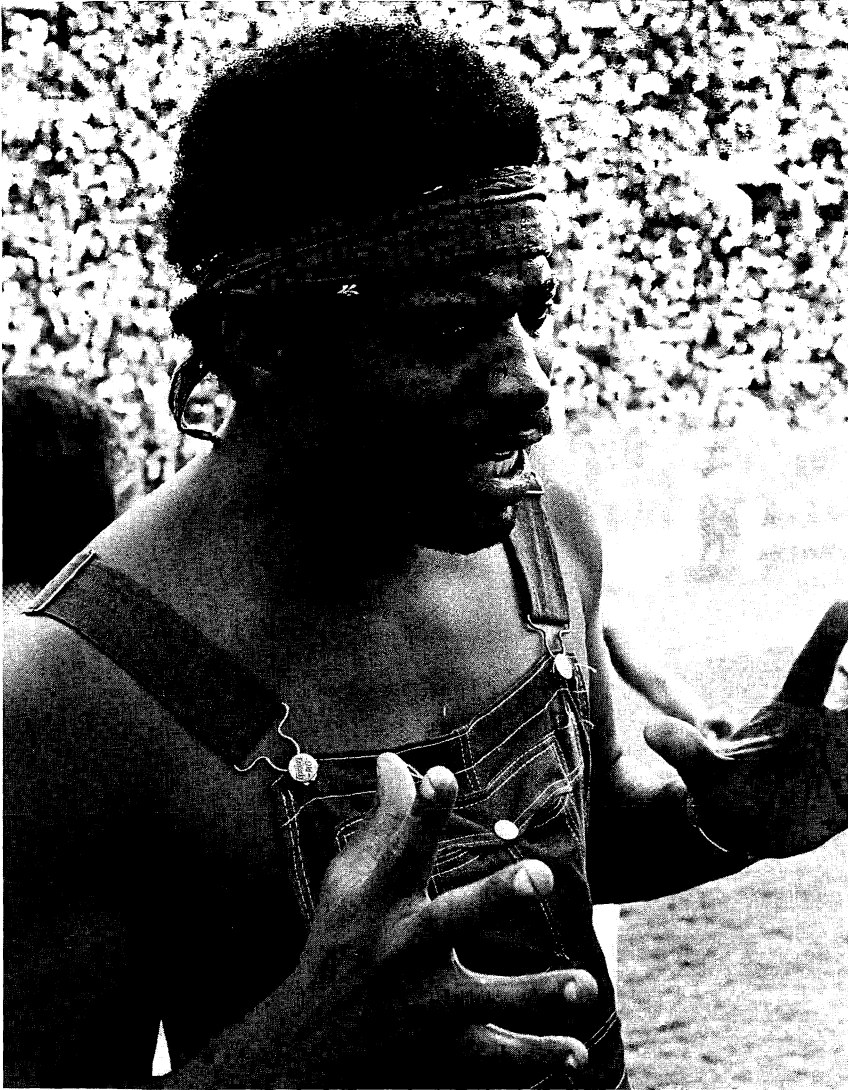
The Panthers did not have decisive influence in halting the festival, but moved into the leadership in opposing it because they thought it was a counter-revolutionary strategy to pacify blacks and to suppress the protest impulses throbbing in the black community, especially among ghetto and college youths.

The split in 1971 between Huey P. Newton and Eldridge Cleaver tore the Panther Party apart and effectively ended their opposition to the festival. With unity dead, organized opposition to the festival ceased, since the Panthers had emerged as the main black radical group in Los Angeles. The Black United Front had collapsed the same year. The splintered radicals now stood on the sidelines and boycotted the festival.

Meanwhile, Tommy Jacquette and Ron Karenga led the Watts Summer Festival to a few years of spectacular successes and enjoyed a high profile and influence as a result. Noel Dyck's study of the recent Indian "Political Powwow" movement on the West Coast from Canada to New Mexico helps to shed light on the Watts festival and its leaders' influence. Dyck described how urban Indians took over the traditional Indian culture and "powwow" and eclipsed the power and authority of traditional leaders still on the reservations, thereby gaining social and cultural authority over Indian affairs in the national governments of Canada and the United States.³³ Similarly, Tommy Jacquette, Maulana Ron Karenga and numerous other actors and leaders in Watts and Greater Los Angeles reflected this pattern, gaining new authority through their leadership of the festival and related activities. They acted as master of ceremonies at the festival events and supplied African cultural performances. The press, black and white, clearly acknowledged their roles.

The Watts Summer Festival reached its peak in 1972 and 1973 and Will Rogers Park remained the focus for vendors and carnival activities. In 1972, 1973 and 1974, the festival climaxed with well-attended musical concerts at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. The concerts became profitable and so well-attended that the Jordan High School track and football stadium could no longer accommodate the huge crowds and the concerts had to be moved to the Coliseum. The first concert in 1972 at the Coliseum was the most successful, drawing 100,000 people. In 1973, some 75,000 came to hear singers Isaac Hayes, Dione Warwick and Ike and Tina Turner.³⁴ Stax Records, a festival sponsor, recorded and released a two-record album called "Wattstax" in celebration of the festival and its success. Paramount Pictures released a film of the event. The 1974 concert, however, proved to be a dismal failure and the Festival never recovered.

The 1972 Festival warrants extended commentary because it was the first and most successful concert. The official theme of the concert was "Wattstax: The Living Word." Hosts Tommy Jacquette and Ron Karenga were in the center of the festivities, and introduced the entertainers and speakers. The message intended was that blacks were "black and proud." The \$1 admission encouraged large numbers to attend. Kim Weston started off the seven hour concert on August



Tommy Jacquete, executive director of the Watts Summer festival, at the 1972 Wattstax concert. *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1972. All photos in this article courtesy of *Los Angeles Times* Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of California at Los Angeles Library.

20 at 3 p.m. with a “rocking national anthem.” The crowd, however, out of protest and militant black pride, did not stand when the national anthem was sung. When Weston sang “Life Every Voice and Sing,” James Weldon Johnson’s “Black National Anthem,” “people shot out of their seats, raised clenched fists, and fervently screamed along with her.” The music ranged from blues to rock and roll, jazz and gospel, and the speakers from preachers to activists, integrationists and black nationalists. The black gospel group, the Staple Singers, sang “Respect



Ron Karenga (right), a major leader of the Watts Festival, and black activist H. Rap Brown at the 1967 Festival. *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1967. The original *Times* caption identified Brown and Karenga as black power advocates addressing a rally in South Central Los Angeles.

Yourself," Eddie Floyd sang "Knock on Wood," Carla Thomas sang "O Have a God Who Loves," The Bar-Kays sang "Son of Shaft/Feel It," Albert King sang "Killing Floor," "I'll Play the Blues For You" and "Angel of Mercy," The Soul Children sang "I don't Know What This World Is Coming To" and "Hearsay," and Rufus Thomas sang "The Breakdown" and "Do the Funky Penguin." The

crowd spilled out of the stands into the forbidden green to dance. Thomas persuaded them to return to their seats. Isaac Hayes sang "Ain't No Sunshine."³⁵ All of these singers had national reputations in music and in the black community.

The Reverend Jesse Jackson was present as a spokesman for the "National Black Litany" and shouted through the microphones: "I AM SOMEBODY! I AM SOMEBODY!" He wore a colorful African "dashiki." The crowd was fashionably dressed and the intermissions were a fashion show as members of the crowd paraded around while others gawked. Isaac Hayes made a dramatic entry escorted by two L.A.P.D. motorcycle policemen on Harley Davidsons, sirens blasting and lights flashing as they rode through the main tunnel entrance into the stadium. People stood up, screaming "The Black Moses!" He strutted on stage wearing "a gold chain vest, shiny bald head, metallic orange pants with black and white fringed cuffs. . . ." As he stood observing the crowd's adulation, he coolly remarked, "Right on, right on," and played his popular musical score from the movie "Shaft." He left the scene with even greater fanfare, with "more motorcycles, minibuses and police escorts" roaring motors and sirens as they paraded out the exit. The crowd shouted its approval and went wild with delight and pride seeing the police behaving in an unaccustomed fashion toward one of their own—treating the "Black Moses" as a celebrity. The Rev. Jesse Jackson, who now had emerged as a major leader of the black community and civil-rights movement, ended the concert with: "Let us join our hand in prayer, let us thank the Lord for this day." It was a powerful statement of "black pride and power" and unity as the concert closed.³⁶

Ronald L. Wilkins (popularly called "Brother Crook"), a Los Angeles officer of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was an original planner of the festival. He had sought a more radical black nationalist orientation of the festival as a "call to revolution." In a pamphlet he published and distributed in 1972, he bitterly charged: "Some of those sat among them that somber Sunday afternoon in February of '66, who would steal the concept, claim it as their own, distort its real value and purpose and create the most corrupt, self-serving, counter-revolutionary political instrument to ever rise and threaten the Los Angeles Black community in recent history—the Watts Summer Festival."³⁷

Brother Crook reopened the ideological struggle against the Watts Summer Festival because he believed it was a tactic to pacify blacks and justify arrests. He favored a festival as a means to radicalize blacks into political action against government manipulation and police oppression. He objected to Ron Karenga's and Tommy Jacquette's black cultural nationalism as too passive and accommodating. He protested in vain.

The massive concert planned for 1974 at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, located several miles northwest of Watts, ended in failure. Fewer than 8,000 people—nearly all black—attended because of the threats of "Isaac Rasim," leader of "Aliens of America." This mysterious character planted in the Los Angeles International Airport a bomb that killed three innocent persons and injured thirty-five others. He claimed in taped conversations and threats that he



Muhammed Ali was the 1967 Festival's Grand Marshal. *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 1967. The *Times* caption identified Ali as Cassius Clay, but noted his car carried his Black Muslim name.



Balloon Vendor at the 1972 Festival. *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1972.



Preparations for 1973 Festival observed by 18-year-old Festival Queen Andrea Phillips of Inglewood. *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1973.



Children dancing the Chicken on the Coliseum grass at the 1972 Festival's Wattstax concert. *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1972.

was violently protesting the treatment of illegal Latin American and Mexican immigrants in the United States, especially by the police. He planted bombs, but most were found before they exploded. A rash of bomb threats by crank callers to police and radio stations resulted. Rasim had managed to terrorize the whole city. The Watts Summer Festival also received threats by telephone callers. People were afraid to congregate in large public places. Police advised against holding the festival because of bomb threats. A bus strike and the increase of tickets from \$1 to \$3 also helped keep many concert goers away. The concert failed and ended up with a debt of \$150,000.³⁸ The festival could not pay its bills. Its failure did not bode well for again attracting big name entertainers. As a result of the 1974 disaster the festival organizers called a moratorium for several years and it was not held again until 1979.

Later concerts and festival activity held at Will Rogers Park continued to be plagued by public drunkenness, drug abuse and gang violence. Attendance fell off as a result. Black drug pushers openly plied their trade. Gangs of blacks smoked marijuana openly and scared families away. There were many arrests by police and fights broke out over drugged blacks resisting arrest. Increasingly, youths and children roamed the festival grounds where there were fewer booths and attractions to engage their attention and energy.³⁹ The festival that had attracted a crowd, at first in Watts itself, and later on “neutral” territory at the Coliseum with big-time entertainers, had become distinctly unsafe to both white as well as black families. In 1980, even the police started to leave the rowdies and marijuana smoking parties alone to avoid incidents at Will Rogers Park—the center of much of the violence.

The Watts Summer Festival revealed characteristics of traditional carnivals like the Carnival in Rio in Brazil where blacks and mulattos dominated. Groups called “blocos with their own songs and sambas, often subversive of the regime and not at all respecters of its persons” dominate. “In addition, countless people dressed in their ‘private fantasies’ stroll, flirt, get drunk, and make love in streets and squares. . . .” The submerged underclass blacks use the Carnival in Rio to elevate their status and reverse the status of the wealthy and powerful political and bureaucratic leaders.⁴⁰ But the Watts Summer Festival’s reputation had declined drastically. Harold Garfinkel’s thesis of “conditions of successful degradation ceremonies” helps to explain the ultimate failure of the festival and the insidious danger it faced and failed to overcome. “Any communicative work between persons, whereby the public identity of an actor is transformed into something looked on as lower in the local scheme of social types, will be called a ‘status degradation ceremony.’” Crime and chaos turned the Watts Summer Festival into a status degradation ceremony. In this theory, “total” identity is explained by “motivational” and not “behavioral” types.⁴¹ Motivational types are crucial because they indicate an intent to do evil rather than let it happen by chance. A violator of taboos must be denounced so as to arouse the moral indignation of the community and cast shame, guilt, demoralization and punishment on the person or community denounced. Thus, in delivering the curse: “I call upon all men to

bear witness that he is not as he appears but is otherwise and in essence of a lower species."⁴² Moreover, this was his "basic reality." "What he is now is what, after all, he was all along."⁴³ In other words, Watts and its black residents already had been identified historically as a lower caste that had been denounced repeatedly for crime, violence, the Watts Riot and drug abuse. As a result, white people's moral indignation had been aroused repeatedly to support a racially restrictive social order enforced by the police in Watts.

Trudier Harris's theory of "exorcising blackness" is an appropriate corollary to the degradation ceremony and sheds light on the Watts Summer Festival. The exorcism of blackness was widely practiced from 1882 to 1927, a period during which 4,951 persons were lynched in the United States (of these, 3,513 were black, including 76 black women). Murder, rape, and "minor offenses" were used as justification for lynchings and burnings.⁴⁴ The lynching pattern became highly stylized and predictable. A racial taboo was broken, the violator was captured. A white mob bordering on hysteria quickly gathered to punish the offender. White men, women and children would hang, castrate or shoot the black violator, then remove trophies from the body which had been cut, chopped or burned off the live person or the corpse. In fact, this ritual became a family affair (a holiday), with food and drink appearing on the scene of the violent exorcism. Frequently, both time and place of the events were announced in the newspapers.⁴⁵ The pattern of exorcising blackness became predictable.

Traditional violent exorcism by white lynch mobs declined long before the success of the civil-rights movement in the late 1960s. The criminal-justice system and the police, however, continued to exorcise blackness. Police and prosecutors felt fully justified in doing so because they had a mandate to enforce the law, and the white community's (and increasingly the black community's as well) moral indignation had been aroused against black riots, crime and chaos in the ghetto and from civil-rights protests. In Los Angeles and throughout the nation, prosecutors and judges publicly denounced black prisoners in courts for violating taboos—law and order. Police or National Guardsmen were mobilized throughout the 1960s to suppress black criminals and rioters and exorcise blackness.

The Watts Summer Festival, Brother Crook and other radicals charged, became an occasion for the police not only to exorcise blackness by ensnaring blacks in the criminal-justice system, but also to provoke the events that justified their doing so. The rowdy black lower-class gang elements and some revolutionary radicals accommodated their tormentors by their public behavior, thereby justifying their exorcism. The pattern at the festival became increasingly predictable as it declined and crime and chaos increased.

Of the 1980 Watts Summer Festival, *Los Angeles Sentinel* columnist and community activist James H. Cleaver lamented, "There is something strange about a Gospel music concert, where the observers stand behind a wire fence, smoking marijuana, drinking wine and generally desecrating the concept of Gospel music." Moreover, "contrary to many of the previous years, there were

no deputies walking through the park in groups of threes and fours, and there was no large number of LAPD vehicles patrolling the area. But there was dope in abundance.” Barely 1,000 people came to the festival.⁴⁶ Equally alarming was the deficit of \$150,000. In years past, the festival had “raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for local benefit projects.”⁴⁷ Now it was a pale shadow of past festivals. It lacked vendors, big name entertainment, and basic decency and safety for visitors.⁴⁸ To some, the festival had become an embarrassment and a degradation ceremony.

The Watts Summer Festival limped along. It never again would achieve the patronage of its first seven years. In 1979, the County of Los Angeles almost locked the festival out of Will Rogers Park in Watts because it owed the county \$10,000 for fees and costs. In 1982, sheriff’s deputies closed down the festival a day early because they feared that gang fights there were endangering visitors. The festival also was plagued by stolen sound equipment. Jacquette cornered a suspect and held him in a trailer, and he, in turn, was arrested for “false imprisonment” of a detained youth. The black youth was given immunity by the Los Angeles prosecutor’s office in order to press the charge of false imprisonment against Jacquette. The charges against Jacquette were finally dismissed after having been dropped and reinstated twice as a result of political maneuvering between the prosecutor’s office and Jacquette’s numerous supporters. The sound equipment was never recovered.⁴⁹

Many were disturbed by the constant turmoil the festival generated. Residents circulated a petition against the violence and gangs that the festival attracted to their community. They asked the County to deny a permit for the festival. A festival agent, Emma Brown, said, “We feel we have their [community’s] support now” after a door-to-door and petition drive to garner support for the festival. Jacquette rebutted his and the festival’s critics. “There are some segments of the community that oppose the festival . . . who feel that this is something that is not productive and worthwhile for the community. But gang activity is not just a festival kind of thing, it’s a community problem that goes on all year ‘round.”⁵⁰ He argued that the festival did not cause the gang problem. Nevertheless, the community and police argued that the festival gave gangs an opportunity to come together publicly with a high possibility for drug abuse and violence.

In 1983, Morri Lubarsky, deputy director of Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation, again charged that Jacquette had not paid the County its \$10,000 in back debts. Jacquette, in turn, denied that the festival owed the County the money. Since the County refused to allow the festival back into Will Rogers Park, Jacquette held the festival in a fenced-in vacant lot on Imperial Highway near Alameda Boulevard. He planned to have ethnic foods, art exhibits, musical concerts and a “break dance” contest. The County refused to issue the festival a permit for the lot, then relented and allowed a “drastically reduced, one-day festival” to take place.⁵¹

The festival was funded entirely by private donations since it had no other resources. Jacquette said it cost about \$25,000 to stage the festival. He had rented

the lot from the California Department of Transportation for \$100 and used security guards in an attempt to forestall aggressive policing by the Los Angeles police and Sheriff's deputies, who in the past had often triggered violent incidents and arrests. He boasted, "The festival is alive, well and healthy." Nevertheless, the sheriff's office set up a command post near the festival and assigned extra crews and mounted officers to patrol the festival. Jacqueline bitterly charged that the festival had "been imprisoned with a lot of negativity, a lot of innuendo, a lot of misunderstanding. Until that's broken down, it will have its continued annual struggle, but it will survive. After all, it's about a people who have survived."⁵²

In the summer of 1985, the County of Los Angeles again refused to allow the festival into Will Rogers Park. Morri Lubarsky charged that Watts residents had continued to complain of gangs, violence and drugs at the festival spilling over into their neighborhoods. Moreover, the festival still owed the County \$10,000, and until the debt was paid, it could not use the park. The police complained about the difficulties of policing the festival. Lubarsky said the County would remain adamant on not granting a license for the festival "until the debt is paid and they can assure us and the community that the festival is desirable."⁵³

Tommy Jacqueline said the festival had plenty of community support and denied that it owed the County any money. He charged that the County, the L.A.P.D., and the sheriff had "for years attempted to wipe out the festival because it serves as a reminder of the 1965 Watts revolt."⁵⁴ Undaunted by the County's refusal to issue a permit, Jacqueline declared it was "our goal to get back to Will Rogers Park in 1986." Moreover, he planned to hold a memorial service on August 23 at Westminster Community Center on 103rd Street and Wilmington for those killed in the 1965 riot.⁵⁵ Westminster, a private Christian action group in Watts, was the largest employer of blacks in Watts and an original founder of the festival.

The Watts Summer Festival was held again at the vacant lot on Imperial Highway. It started one day late because of rain and was plagued by a lack of money, booths, sound equipment and even patrons. "Festival organizers outnumbered visitors at the opening ceremony, which was to feature a concert and break dance exhibition that did not materialize." The County refused to issue a permit to construct a makeshift stage. Emma Brown said that "we are a little behind schedule, and we have a lot to overcome. But we've had to fight every year, and we've pulled it off every year. We expect to do the same this year."⁵⁶

The Watts Summer Festival was evicted and again became homeless. It wandered about without home or hearth. It went from the ghetto outdoor stadium at Jordan High School and Will Rogers Park to the prestigious Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, and then back to Watts. Even more disturbing, it was evicted from what many, including Jacqueline, thought was their home—Watts and its public places. The message was clear for all to witness: blacks did not even control or own the ghetto that they called home.

The significance of the rise and fall of the Watts Summer Festival can best be explained by revealing the social and cultural crisis faced by the festival and

its leaders. The Watts Riot presented authorities, voluntary groups and concerned citizens with “conflict management.”⁵⁷ The Watts Summer Festival was, according to its planners, an instrument to prevent a recurrence of riots. The festival had to be successful in order to prevent riots. The festival at first appealed to local and even state-wide patrons. Festival attractions provided local and national offerings, especially nationally respected black entertainers. In short, the festival met the conditions for a successful festival—attractions for locals and for outsiders—as defined by theorists such as Carole Farber and Robert H. Lavenda.⁵⁸ These achievements, however, were undermined by more negative factors, such as the persistence of crime, drugs and a major terroristic threat which led to a fatal economic collapse in 1974.

Watts rioters in 1965 had intended to break the racially restrictive social order—the old way of conducting affairs in the black community was no longer acceptable—and start a new order of racial reconciliation based on the equality of black and white people. (Jacquette called for “Self-Leadership for All Nationalities Today.”) The festival and its organizers were mainly concerned with investing black people with pride and morale, and an economic infrastructure, and were only secondarily, if at all, concerned with white participants. Some white leaders wished to allow the new black leaders to work their own magic in their own way within the black community without outside white interference.

The L.A.P.D. and the sheriff felt challenged and threatened by the festival because they had been greatly embarrassed by the rioters who had gotten completely out of control and were subdued only with the mobilization and intervention of the California National Guard in August 1965. The emergence of the festival to celebrate the new Watts brought back painful memories to authorities who feared the Watts Summer Festival might be the occasion for another large-scale riot. They were well aware that some black radicals favored riots and sought to turn the festival into a political tool to radicalize blacks.

The festival—as a showcase of black pride, dignity, peace, love, brotherhood and sisterhood, and nonviolence among blacks—first would have indicated to the larger white community that not only were blacks ready to enter the mainstream of American society, but also whites would be able to enter the mainstream of black society. Each would do so as equal partners. Whites had attended the first few festivals in large numbers although no special call went out to invite them. They were welcome. After two years of attendance, whites and middle-class blacks stopped attending when some lower-class blacks could not fully invest themselves with middle-class values and codes of conduct—or more appropriately, simple nonviolence—which would have made it safe for middle-class blacks and whites to patronize the festival to demonstrate their partnership in black self-help and pride. The huge concerts at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 1972 and 1973 attracted large numbers of blacks because of the popular national entertainers and speakers, and it was held far from Watts.

The festival organizers tried to break the cycle of poverty, crime, violence and unemployment that identified the ghetto and blacks as a lower caste. They

failed to develop a viable and enduring vehicle. They also failed to invest the black underclass with an enduring black pride, dignity, morale and stability. They tried strenuously but could not control the volatile underclass blacks. The police could barely control them. The annual Watts Summer Festival, tragically, with its crime, gangs, violence, drugs and chaos, magnified by police repression, became an annual degradation ceremony that resulted in the exorcism of blackness by the police and criminal-justice system, the complete opposite of what the planners had intended.

The Watts Summer Festival collapsed because of the many antagonistic groups and individuals who sought to use the festival for their own ends. The law-enforcement agencies opposed the festival and became locked into running battles with criminals, radicals and the festival planners. Criminals, gangs and a terrorist threat disrupted the festival for their own ends. Gangs fought among themselves, sold and bought drugs, attacked people, and sought to build their reputations for rowdiness. Radicals saw the festival as a pacification program sponsored by black turncoats, cultural nationalists, police collaborators and various governmental agencies. They denounced the festival. A terrorist threat by "Isaac Rasim" in 1974 decisively destroyed the festival as an annual event. No wonder the festival collapsed; it simply did not develop a workable consensus among whites and blacks, the public and government agencies. It divided rather than united people. Nevertheless, the Watts Summer Festival established an invented tradition that lasted a full generation. And it might be re-invented again.

Notes

1. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1979), 238; Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery To Freedom* (New York, 1978); David L. Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York, 1982), Frank E. Manning, ed., *The Celebrations of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983); Ethan Hoffman and John McCoy, *Concrete Mama: Prison Profiles from Walla Walla* (Columbia, Missouri, 1981).
2. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), 4.
3. Editorial, "A Summer Carnival of Riot," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1965, Sec. II, 4.
4. Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (New York, 1967), 178-179, see 472, on Timothy O'Seyre as a pseudonym.
5. *Ibid.*, 175.
6. *Ibid.*, 117-118.
7. *Ibid.*, 178.
8. Rev. Casper I. Glenn of Bel-Vue Community United Presbyterian Church, *Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots*, Vol. XV, no. 49, November 5 1965, 7.
9. Ronald LeRoy Wilkins (Brother Crook), *The Truth About The Watts Summer Festival, July, 1972* (Los Angeles, 1972), i.
10. Tut Hayes, former head of the Los Angeles Community Alert Patrol, telephone interview, May 8, 1982; Joe Johnson, telephone interview, Los Angeles, July 13, 1977; Ronald LeRoy Wilkins, *The Truth About The Watts Summer Festival*; "Swahili Class Again Set for Fremont Adult," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 11, 1965, Sec. A, 8.
11. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, 1969), 167.
12. Clyde Halisi, ed., *The Quotable Karenga*, (Los Angeles, 1967), 16, 19.
13. *Ibid.*, 13, 38; Maulana Ron Karenga, *Kwanza: Origin, Concepts, Practice* (Inglewood, California, 1977); Maulana Ron Karenga, *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis* (San Diego, 1978); Maulana Ron Karenga, *Kawaida Theory: An Introductory Outline* (Inglewood, California, 1980).

14. Carole Farber, "High, Healthy and Happy: Ontario Mythology on Parade," in Frank E. Manning, ed., *The Celebration of Society*, 41; Robert H. Lavenda, "Family and Corporation: Two Styles of Celebration in Central Minnesota," in Manning, ed., *Ibid.*, 52-53, 58.
15. Bruce M. Tyler, Participant/Observer; Roger Smith, "Watts Summer Festival Draws Few to Concerts," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1980, Sec. II, 1, 10; Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival Off to a Wobbly, Late Start," *Los Angeles Times*, August 17, 1986, Sec. II, 1, 4.
16. Douglas G. Glasgow, *The Black Underclass: Poverty, Unemployment and Entrapment of Ghetto Youth* (New York, 1981), 127; Tut Hayes, telephone interview, May 8, 1982; Wilkins, *The Truth About The Watts Summer Festival, July, 1972*; Smith, "Watts Summer Festival."
17. Clyde Haliisi, ed., *The Quotable Karenga*, 5.
18. Bruce M. Tyler, Participant/Observer; Joe Johnson, telephone interview; Tut Hayes, telephone interview.
19. Edward M. Davis, Chief, L.A.P.D., testimony in U.S. Senate, 91st Congress, 2nd Sess., *Hearings Before The Subcommittee To Investigate The Administration of The Internal Security Act And Other Internal Security Laws of The Committee On The Judiciary*, October 9, 1970, (Washington, D.C., 1970), 335; Jack Jones, "Jumping Joe' Plays for Kids," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1970, Sec. II, 1.
20. James O'Toole, *Watts and Woodstock: Identity and Culture in The United States and South Africa* (New York, 1973).
21. *Ibid.*, 139.
22. Bruce M. Tyler, Participant/Observer; Tut Hayes, telephone interview; Joe Johnson, telephone interviews, July 13, 1977 & June 22, 1977, and May 8, 1982.
23. Roger Smith, "Watts' Summer Festival."
24. "Violence Ends Watts Festival," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 15, 1968, Sec. A, 1 and Sec. D, 4.
25. Bill Robertson, "Police-Race War Threat: Stormy Council Hearing," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 22, 1968, Sec. A, 1, 5.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Joe Johnson, telephone interviews; Bruce M. Tyler, Participant/Observer; Tut Hayes, telephone interview.
28. Joe Johnson, telephone interviews; Tyler, Participant/Observer.
29. Bruce M. Tyler, Joe Johnson, telephone interviews.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*; "Panthers Assail Watts Festival: Call Committee Officials Lackeys," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 14, 1969, Sec. A, 1, 10.
32. *Ibid.*; Bruce M. Tyler, Participant/Observer, Tut Hayes telephone interview; Joe Johnson, telephone interviews.
33. Noel Dyck, "Political Powwow: The Rise and Fall of an Urban Native Festival," in Manning, ed., *The Celebration of Society*.
34. *Wattstax: The Living Word; Live Concert Music From The Original Movie Sound Track* (Los Angeles: Stax Records, Inc., 1972). (Two-record album.) STS-2-3010. The Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, August 20, 1972. Record album notes.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Ronald LeRoy Wilkins, *The Truth About Watts*, ii.
38. Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival Off to a Wobbly, Late Start;" Celeste Durant, "Threats, Bus Strike Keep Crowd Down at Southland Event," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1974, Sec. I, 3, 22; Al Martinez and Bill Hazlett, "Threat of Bombing Called Off But Police Aren't Taking Any Chances," *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 1974, Sec. I, 28; Dick Main, "Police Discount Telephoned Claim of Blast Responsibility," *Los Angeles Times*, August 19, 1974, Sec. I, 3, 22.
39. James H. Cleaver, "Watts Festival: A 'Smoking' Success," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 21, 1980, Sec. A, 1, 11.
40. Victor W. Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York, 1986) 130-131.
41. Harold Garfinkel, "Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies," (68-77), in Lawrence Hazelrigg, ed., *Prison Within Society: A Reader in Penology* (Garden City, New York, 1969), 68.
42. *Ibid.*, 69-70.
43. *Ibid.*, 50.
44. Trudier Harris, *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1984), 7.
45. *Ibid.*, 6.
46. James H. Cleaver, "Watts Festival;" Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival;" Roger Smith, "Watts Festival."
47. *Ibid.*; Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival;" James H. Cleaver, "Watts Festival."
48. *Ibid.*
49. Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival."

50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. Marita Hernandez, "Watts Festival Plug Pulled Over Site, Debt," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1985, Sec. II, 1, 2.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*
56. Sandy Banks, "Watts Festival."
57. Clinton F. Fink, "Conflict Management Strategies Implied by Utility Models of Behavior," *American Behavioral Scientist* 15, (July/August 1972), 837-858.
58. Robert H. Lavenda, "Family and Corporation in Central Minnesota," Manning, ed., *The Celebration of Society*, 51-64; Carole Farber, "High Health and Happy: Ontario Mythology on Parade," 33-50.