

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Oral History

Dr. Maulana Karenga #1

Dr. Maulana Karenga was a social activist in 1965. Now a professor of Black Studies at The University of California, Long Beach, he is also the founder of the Organization US.

Interviewer: So could you tell us about the—tell us Europeans about the Watts Revolt.

First of all—and this is for the recording—explain to me why you call it the Watts Revolt and not the Watts riots.

... Yes. The Watts Revolt—yes, _____, it was in, um, uh—the Watts Revolts happened, as you know, in August '65. And we call it a revolt because we—one of the things that US organization teaches and [*inaudible*] philosophy teaches is that we must always speak of ourselves in dignity-affirming ways. And one of the great powers of the European is the capacity to define reality and make others accept it even when it's to their disadvantage. ... Not even weaponry, not even, like, weaponry is more important to this. ... What is important is that the people decide that the struggle is necessary and they will develop both the method and the means. And so what happens here is that when we talk about the Watts Revolt we're talking about a legitimate historical struggle that is a continuation of struggles before it, that go all the way back to the holocaust of enslavement... By "holocaust" I mean a morally monstrous act of genocide that is not only against the people themselves, but also against humanity. And more and more Afrocentric scholars and Native American scholars are being to talk about their genocide as holocaust. Because it's the most morally meaningful term to discuss this morally monstrous act of genocide that expresses itself in three basic ways—the morally monstrous destruction of human life; human culture; and human possibility. Now, when we talk about the, uh, Revolt we have to define the Revolt. ... The Revolt—they say the



difference between a revolt and a riot—which other people might call the Watts Revolt—is that the riot is a spontaneous outburst. That is, um, without any self-conscious political goals. Whereas a revolt is a collective act of a people to achieve three basic things—self-determination; self-respect; and self-defense. Self-determination in that they make a statement with this Revolt: We will defend and develop to find our own interests; we will control the space we occupy; we will not ask permission to struggle, we will not ask permission for us to confront the established order. ... Second, it’s an act of self-respect that in order to defend our dignity as human beings we must draw boundaries around what people can do to us without us responding. If somebody—whether you or any kind of victims, whether you’re a third-world person or a person of color, or a woman—if you let people just trample on you not only do they lose respect for you, you begin to question your own humanity, your own dignity. ... And if you notice, the conversation during this time when people interviewed they were saying, “We’re tired of these things that are being done. We must respond.” And then finally, of course, is self-defense. All the revolts in modern times that have happened, have happened in response to the police who act as occupying armies. We saw the police as an occupying army and that’s how we developed this whole concept of internal colonialism—where you have a colony of—that’s internal to the country itself, and the police become the occupying power that suppresses the rightful aspirations of the people. So that’s why we called it Revolt...

Interviewer: And so what happened at the Watts Revolt? Can you explain the series of events?

Yes. Well, first, of course, as you know it started with Marquette Frye and his mother, umm, they were in the unincorporated Watts _____ unincorporated area. They were outside of Watts that they had. And, um, the sheriff there had jurisdiction, so the sheriff had stopped, um, um, Marcus, um, Marquette, I’m sorry. Marquette. And was, according to his mother, mishandling him. And she intervened. And, uh, things got out of hand. People said, “Stop that.” And then they began to pelt the, uh, police. And then they began to go up and down the street and organize people—bands to attack businesses that were



seen as sources of oppression. ... So oppression has many faces. It has the face of the police, which is clear. And becomes the, um, immediate cause, um, for the Revolt. But it also has the face of the merchant that is, um, overcharging black people. That gives them inferior, um, products and does not give them in their mind, the respect that they deserve. And so a lot of times people say, “Why would you burn down your own shop?” Well, they didn’t burn down their own shop. They burned down the shops of what they saw as the petty bourgeoisie oppressors that came from outside the community—whites came from outside the community, took the money back, didn’t reinvest and really contributed nothing to the ... positive, um, sustaining and development of the community itself. So that was another target of the Revolt. And of course, you know, the Revolt lasted a long time, umm, many people were killed or even more wounded. And, um, finally of course, you know, the National Guard was brought in, uh, and supplemented the police forces. And finally, of course, the, uh, Revolt was, um, stopped.

