4 Fortifying Community: African American History and Culture in Leimert Park

I've known rivers:
I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
—Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921)

“The Concepts We Hold in Our Minds”

The poet Kamau Daáood has referred to Leimert Park, the small retail enclave in South Central Los Angeles, as a river. Centered at the intersection of 43rd Street and Degnan Boulevard, the roughly six blocks of shops, art galleries, restaurants, and bars has, in the last several years of the twentieth century, become a pivotal site in the production of Afro-centric, community-based art in Los Angeles. The small, seemingly insignificant storefronts that line Degnan Boulevard carry with them meaning far surpassing their daily operation—they are, in effect, capsules of memory and history for a community of African American artists and activists. They contribute in the construction of an African American community in Los Angeles—one that is built on both cultural and geographic connections.

What makes the area unique is its self-conscious reconstruction of the city’s black history. Many of the storefronts have a direct lineage to previous African American areas in Los Angeles—Babe’s and Ricki’s Inn is a transplant from Central Avenue; the World Stage, a performance and jamming space, is intimately linked with the art and philosophy of the Watts Writers’ Workshop. Like a river, the fluid history of black Los Angeles, a history that has occupied several spaces of the city, now streams through the geography of Leimert Park. This self-conscious effort is contingent on several factors. Although existing as a contemporary manifestation of social and cultural circumstances, the area is dependent on a particular historical mythology that is mobilized through various acts of performance and commerce.
History is woven into the spaces of Leimert Park through an active, self-conscious process. And it is in the work of historical appropriation that urban community is built. Each space is dependent on its historical referent, and each historical referent is dependent on the space that makes its memory accessible. Without becoming a museum or a collection of urban monuments, Leimert Park uses the history of African Americans in Los Angeles to produce a community that is both grounded and generative.

Constructing community in Los Angeles is like building a sandcastle at high tide—the sheer amount of images and space that make up the raw material of the city is never stable enough to secure any reasonable foundation. Once something appears stable, it is immediately washed away by a new flood of cultural signifiers. For this reason, community, in the contemporary cultural climate, must be a careful process of assembling, deconstructing, and reworking—with a mind to geographic space, social history, and the media images that produce them both. In this essay, I will discuss how this process works in Leimert Park.

The one-and-a-half-acre green space of Leimert Park, dedicated on November 17, 1928, was the focal point for a community project planned and developed by Walter H. Leimert. The project was intended to accommodate moderately affluent white urbanites desiring to relocate into the suburbs—only “17 minutes by auto” from Exposition Park Stadium, the University of Southern California, and downtown, boasted the project’s promotional flyer. The area surrounding the park, as explained in Greg Hise’s detailed history of its planning documents, was an early prototype of a planned community—the type now ubiquitous in Los Angeles. It was to embody the kind of “natural” urban setting for which Los Angeles was building a reputation, and it was to accommodate a greater amount of people and expand the possibilities of home ownership to a larger (white) population. Developers appropriated wider and shallower lots to enhance privacy and permit more varied housing designs. This creative division of lots also allowed for more affordable prices, thus opening the door to a new class of homeowner. Because of unofficial housing covenants, this area was completely off limits to non-whites, thus creating the new American suburb, one increasingly open to the lower-middle class but situated within a very specific ideological framework of racial exclusion.

This brief history of the area offers a kind of ironic standpoint from which to see the contemporary shifts and planning currently taking place in Leimert Park. Once representative of the democratization of white suburban growth in Los Angeles, considered urban by most standards, the area now embodies a very different but equally self-conscious view of community building. Situated within the largely black and economically impoverished Crenshaw District and just to the East of the middle-class African American suburb of Baldwin Hills, the community of Leimert Park is now engaged in a reconfiguration of the American dream once wishfully indicated in its landscape. Far from the utopia of the white garden city, the dream is now focused on the idealism of community art and the possibilities of multiculturalism existing within a black foundation.

As one walks down Degnan Boulevard on a Saturday afternoon, it is difficult not to notice the ways in which people are using public space. In a highly uncharacteristic fash-
Illustration 4.1. Sidewalk artist: An artist on Degnan Boulevard working on a large-scale mosaic. Photograph by Eric Gordon.

ion, especially for Los Angeles, there are people hanging out on the sidewalk, talking about art, politics, and nothing in particular (Illustration 4.1). Unlike most public spaces in the city, the position of the pedestrian is not solely dictated by commerce. The public spaces of the sidewalk are more apt to be used in this way because of the relative political awareness of the shop owners; no one seems to mind a little loitering; in fact, it is likely encouraged. This setting is partially symptomatic of the kinds of storefronts that occupy the main drag of Leimert Park. Along Degnan Boulevard one can visit the Museum in Black, a store devoted to Afro-centric artwork and clothing, and The World Stage, a performance and rehearsal space owned by the poet Kamau Daood (once co-owned by the late drummer Billy Higgins). Around the corner is 5th Street Dicks, a coffee house offering outdoor chess until 4 A.M. every night; The KAOS Network, an educational and performance space run by filmmaker, teacher, and photographer Ben Caldwell; and Babe’s and Ricki’s Inn, a blues club recently relocated from Central Avenue (Illustration 4.2).

All the places mentioned above are recent additions to Leimert Park. Long considered an African American arts colony, the space was not widely known or frequently visited by people living outside the area until relatively recently. It was not until after the 1992 L.A. uprisings that there existed the social, political, and cultural motivation for the dramatic renewal currently taking place. A political urgency coupled with the nation’s watchful eye on the African American “urban condition” led to the kind of self-conscious community building currently manifest in the area. Brian Breyer, the owner of
Museum in Black, told Black Enterprise magazine that "this part of the city is one of the only areas in the U.S. with such a high concentration of educated blacks and black businesses. It's on the move and rising, and there's a lot of pride in the community."

This pride, in what the Washington Post calls a "full body immersion in black culture and aspirations," has played a pivotal role in defining the area from both inside and outside. Leimert Park has garnered a certain amount of recognition as a positive community space in the otherwise perceived war-torn area of South Central Los Angeles. It has taken on the burden of attempting to represent a different side of South Central. For this reason, the people living and working in the community must simultaneously concern themselves with everyday commerce and with media marketing. Ruth Nuckolls, a 62-year-old optician who has owned and operated Leimert Park Eyewear for twelve years, told the Washington Post, "We're constantly having to disprove these old myths. Any little thing that goes wrong, people say, 'That's why I don't do business with black people.' They can forgive Macy's, the Broadway and the May Company, but they can't forgive any mistake that we might make."

The anxiety about doing business with black people that Ruth Nuckolls points to is indicative of the need for a kind of exhibitionism in developing community within an area like Leimert Park. A "positive" space like Leimert Park operating within a "negative" space like South Central, necessarily draws attention to itself and carries with it, whether intentionally or not, a burden of representation. To form community (generally an internal process), in the case of certain minority populations, organizers must
be concerned with how they are perceived from the outside. Leimert Park was, in the first place, partially necessitated by the negative media portrayals of South Central Los Angeles, and it was likewise concerned with turning that media image around.

The media seems all too hungry for human-interest stories about the area because it provides entertaining news for a voyeuristic population desperate to peer into a world unknown to them. In a Los Angeles Times article about a San Fernando Valley physician who regularly attends Project Blowed (a rap workshop held at the KAOS Network on Thursday nights), this becomes abundantly clear. The story explains that Dr. Sherman A. Hershfield uses rap as therapy for a seizure condition he recently developed and how the regular attendees, although once suspicious of the elderly white doctor, now consider him a pleasant novelty and are very supportive of his efforts. The article is not at all reproachful of the area, but it exemplifies the ways in which Leimert Park is constantly subject to the scrutinizing gaze of the mainstream media, forcing the area to exist as both local community and public service announcement for black life in Los Angeles.

In its everyday functioning, the material history of the area collides with the way it is generally perceived. Kamau Daâood, poet and co-owner of The World Stage, described this process to me in an interview:

One of the things that happened here in Leimert Park is that when we began to take over all these spaces down the block—artists came in without the help of community redevelopment, cultural affairs, or corporate sponsoring. It was just people scraping together some money and liberating these old storefronts, slapping paint on the walls, and turning them into dance studios or art galleries or performance spaces. When we began to do that, what you saw happening was a coffee house that is open until 4 o'clock in the morning, chess tables out front of the coffee house in "South Central" with people outside sipping on coffee and playing chess at 3 o'clock in the morning. You have after-hours jazz playing upstairs and jazz playing around the corner. Then brave souls from other communities begin to filter into these places. After awhile you look around and you see that you've got people from all over the city down in Leimert Park at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning blowing away all those myths about how unlivable our communities are.

Business and perception, art and the marketplace, all come together in Leimert Park. As the area struggles for an identity, it fights or embraces popular perception in order to boost its chances for success. "Not only had the media colored how the outer world looked at the community," Daâood continued, "we were looking at the same TV's, and we began to believe the hype ourselves. The concepts that we hold within our minds—they're worth more than anything, just the concepts we hold in our minds." These problems are common to the project of community building in Los Angeles. Because of the atomized and dispersed geography of the city, people don't only identify with the neighborhoods in which they live. The act of spatial identification is potentially much broader reaching because of the ways in which neighborhoods like Leimert Park are scrutinized from the outside. In some ways, while potentially destabilizing of the community (as Daâood points out), the multiform representations of Leimert Park construct the neighborhood as an exportable concept.
The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, in his book *The Production of Space*, suggests that the meaning of urban space is not solely determined by its materiality. Instead, meaning is produced through the representation of urban history, through variegated modes of social practice and through the interpenetration of lived experience and conceived environments. Lefebvre proclaims that “no space disappears in the course of growth and development.” Likewise, when a community is consistently shuffled around the city because of racially and economically determined circumstances, some self-motivated and others imposed, the history of the social space left behind is always exacted upon the current space. In Leimert Park, this is quite apparent. With only a six-block configuration of retail establishments, the social space of Leimert Park is made meaningful through a complex interpenetration of various African American urban and artistic histories.

Accordingly, I will look to Central Avenue as a precedent to the cultural construction of Leimert Park, with a special emphasis on the recently deceased Horace Tapscott, who began his career on Central Avenue and finished it in Leimert Park. Then I will look to the Watts Writers’ Workshop and the historical significance of the 1965 Watts uprisings to situate the kind of poetry and spoken word performance currently happening in Leimert Park. Kamau Daâood, the owner of The World Stage, got his start in the Watts Writers’ Workshop in the late 1960s and has continued teaching and writing poetry as part of the community. Finally, I will conclude by briefly discussing the role of Hollywood and new media technologies in the continuing struggle for community identity in the area. These kinds of historical investigations are necessary in writing any history of the present. Especially with the turbulent past (and present) of African American communities in Los Angeles, the story of Leimert Park needs to be told as one both burdened and liberated by its history.

**Remembering the Avenue: “There was gold coming out of Central Avenue”**

*Nothing may be forgotten and nothing remembered may remain unchanged.*

—Siegfried Kracauer, letter to Ernst Bloch on June 29, 1926

When I asked Kamau Daâood if he saw a connection between Leimert Park and Central Avenue, he said, “We just don’t build out of a vacuum. We build on the shoulders of the things that have come before us, in one way or another. Even if we’re reacting to it and trying to get away from it—we build on those shoulders.” Accordingly, the historical and social significance of Leimert Park, as a location of culture as well as residence and commerce, must be traced back to Central Avenue.

In the early part of the century, L.A.’s black population was confined to a small area in South Los Angeles concentrated along Central Avenue. Because of racist housing covenants that began prior to 1900, the widely expanding black population of Los Ang
les was forced into a small area along Central Avenue just south of downtown. In 1919 the California Supreme Court ruled the covenants illegal, but the institutionalized racial segregation and housing discrimination just got worse. Homeowner associations joined together on the principal of not selling their properties to blacks. During the inter-war period, these associations grew in numbers to create one large ghetto stretching approximately thirty blocks down Central Avenue and several blocks east to the railroad tracks. Other pockets of black concentration grew in a few other areas along Jefferson, Temple Street, and in the southern suburb of Watts. Neighboring all these areas were pockets of white resistance that, in the name of property values, fought hard to maintain the clear delineation between white and black L.A.

Early on, Central Avenue was recognized as the heart of black culture in Los Angeles. Many of the businesses and buildings along the Avenue, as it was called, remained white-owned, but in relation to every other neighborhood in Los Angeles, black-owned businesses thrived there. The symbolic marker of this boom in black-owned business was the opening of the Sommerville Hotel in 1928. This Central Avenue landmark, later renamed the Dunbar Hotel, carried great significance for the meaning of Central Avenue and black Los Angeles in general. Owned by the prominent black dentist John Sommerville (the first black to graduate from USC), the relatively elegant four-story structure signified the possibility of luxury for African Americans. “The Sommerville was among the finest hotels for blacks in the country and helped fuel the notion that in Los Angeles a black person could find a better living situation than anywhere else in the United States.”

The Sommerville greatly assisted the survival of the music scene on Central Avenue because up until its opening, visiting black musicians had nowhere to stay. Restricted from renting rooms in downtown hotels, musicians traveling to Central Avenue to play in one of the many clubs were left with few options for temporary boarding—mostly people stayed with friends or fans willing to open up their homes. Throughout the 1930s, as the Avenue gained recognition for its vibrant jazz scene, the hotel built a reputation as the symbol for L.A.’s black nightlife. Jazz luminaries such as Nat King Cole and Duke Ellington would pass through town and stay there; regular jamming sessions and meetings in the hotel lobby elevated the structure to a practically mythical status. After the stock market crash in 1929, John Sommerville was forced to sell his hotel to an investment group who kept the structure in place but renamed it the Dunbar Hotel. Although no longer black-owned, the hotel continued to be an integral part of the neighborhood. The Dunbar Hotel remained the spiritual center of the Avenue for decades and is one of the only buildings from the original strip still standing today.

Central Avenue continued to thrive throughout the 1940s. By this time, blacks constituted 4.3 percent of the population of Los Angeles, with the majority of the community centered around the Dunbar Hotel on Central and Forty-second. The Avenue had garnered enough of a reputation that every big touring musician jumped at the chance to play there. Musicians from all over the country came to play for a few nights, a few weeks, or maybe even to stay for good. Many people were intrigued by the relative freedom and creativity on the Avenue, as opposed to other areas in the country.
As Buddy Collette, a multi-instrumentalist and lifelong resident of Los Angeles declared: “Central Avenue was a place where you could bring your own ideas to the stage, to the audience, whatever they sounded like. You were not being judged because you didn’t sound like this or that. On Central, if someone had a different approach it was well accepted.”

Despite the reality of ghettoization, the prominent mythology of Central Avenue within the black community was one of open space and expansion. Central was a place where people could try new things out, where they could explore their creativity without having to feel the pressure of an established scene. But after World War II, despite its continued musical vibrancy, Central Avenue’s prime had passed. Massive layoffs in the defense industry and the subsequent rapid decline of disposable income had a severe impact on the patronage of the clubs. Concurrently, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), under police chief William H. Parker, boosted its aggressive stance toward Central Avenue’s nightlife. “Under previous police chiefs Central Avenue’s boisterous, interracial night scene had simply been shaken down for tribute; under Parker—a pietistic crusader against ‘race mixing’—nightclubs and juke joints were raided and shuttered.”

As the attacks on clubs grew worse, patrons and musicians were less likely to spend time in these volatile nightspots. Beyond police pressure, the loosening of housing covenants in neighboring areas, especially the Crenshaw district to the west, proved extremely influential in Central’s decline. When given the opportunity, most longtime residents of Central Avenue opted to relocate in an attempt to move up the social ladder. Finally, one of the strongest unifying factors of Central Avenue, the musicians’ union Local 767, was in the process of breaking up. With the increased openness of Hollywood unions, many black musicians left the Central Avenue union for the opportunity to integrate into the mainstream. Soon after, Local 767 was dissolved. The increased openness of race relations and social policies contributed greatly to the decline of this vibrant community. Central Avenue was constructed out of necessity—as a means of coping with a culture and a city that wanted nothing to do with African Americans. As soon as there were possibilities for assimilation, the community quickly eroded.

Despite the adverse conditions that necessitated its existence, Central Avenue is remembered as an ideal space, symbolizing a unity to black life in the city. As the African American population continues to geographically shift and socially diversify throughout Los Angeles, the nostalgia for a cohesive community is embodied in the “origin myth” of Central Avenue. The history of black Los Angeles is tied to this romanticized place in history that was forced into existence by racist laws and a frightening antagonism toward race mixing. The reality created under these adverse conditions is in some ways still seen as a place to return to. Horace Tapscott said of the Avenue:

[It] brought a lot of people together musically, artistically. I think Central Avenue is just as legendary a place as the Great White Way that they speak about. It had all of the musicians, the artists, that helped make the music of this country what it is today. That’s what Central Avenue gave to this community, all these people, and they’d be right there on Central Avenue gathering together. It was like a bonanza. There was gold coming out of Central Avenue.
The myth of Central Avenue has played an integral role in the current manifestation of Leimert Park—not in the form of a self-conscious reconstruction of the area’s geography and architecture, but instead in the form of a psychological and cultural connection to the Avenue. Horace Tapscott is perhaps the best illustration of this cultural shift, as his life paralleled the move from Central Avenue to Leimert Park.

Tapscott was one of the most under-recognized and influential figures on the Avenue. In 1943 he and his mother moved there from Houston, Texas. Arriving in Los Angeles at the age of nine, Tapscott was thrust immediately onto the music scene. “I got down on Central Avenue, and I started seeing things unfold in front of me,” Tapscott recalled. “The first place we went, before I got to my house, my mother told the driver to stop the car. Our suitcase was still in the trunk. And I said, ‘This is where we live?’ She said, ‘No, this is not where we live. I want to introduce you to your first music teacher.’”

Tapscott’s experience was not unusual. According to several testimonies from Central Avenue musicians, they received pressure from their parents to immediately get involved in the music scene. Jazz was a means of cultural preservation; it was at the core of life on the Avenue; it was the adhesive of a community literally under attack from all sides. Tapscott understood this. He recognized the interplay between music and community, making this the foundation of his art on Central Avenue, in Watts, and finally, in Leimert Park.

Known by everybody as “Papa,” Tapscott refused the more prestigious life of a touring musician with Lionel Hampton’s band in the late 1950s for the less-glamorous life of a community artist. “With his talent, they said, he could have hit worldly heights. Instead he stayed and made ‘community artist’ a noble profession.” He left Hampton’s band because he felt like he wasn’t able to do his own thing. He felt pulled in directions he wasn’t happy about going. “That’s why I got off the road to start my orchestra,” he said, “to preserve black music. I wanted to preserve and teach and show and perform the music of black Americans and Pan-African music. To preserve it by playing it and writing about it and taking it to the community. And that to me was what it was about, being part of the community.”

Tapscott’s orchestra was called the Pan Afrikan People’s Arkestra—a teaching and performance group he began after leaving Hampton’s band. The Arkestra was slow in getting started due to a lack of funding and support, but in 1965, during the Watts uprisings, Tapscott was noticed for his unique approach to community art. He and his Arkestra traveled the streets of Watts on a flatbed truck, playing their music. Crowds danced in the street as Tapscott rode by—assuredly creating an ironic juxtaposition of joviality and destruction. This dramatic contradiction was immediately picked up by the media. It was the perfect television sound byte to embody the anger, guilt, and confusion in the popular consciousness.

Tapscott’s actions during the uprisings gave him the distinction he needed to receive state and federal funding for the Arkestra. He wasn’t threatening; instead, he symbolized a cultural vibrancy in Watts that public funding organizations were wont to support. The Pan Afrikan People’s Arkestra created a windfall of funds into Watts. After the uprisings, large sums of money were funneled into the area to finance all kinds of
arts organizations. The Watts Writers Workshop, which I will discuss in the next section, was made possible through public money as well.

After receiving financial support, Tapscott and his Arkestra became a staple of the L.A. jazz scene—pushing the concept of performance in new directions. He gathered expert and novice musicians, poets, and singers to perform together in a kind of pedagogical and ultimately inclusive jazz orchestra. According to Jocelyn Stewart’s article in the L.A. Times, “The Arkestra was created as a vessel of memory, meant to house the culture of a people.”19 During each performance, Tapscott would say to the audience, “This belongs to you.”

The symbolic significance of Central Avenue and its connection to Leimert Park is traceable through the career of Horace Tapscott. His move from Central Avenue to Watts to Leimert Park parallels the trajectory of the idealized locations of cultural production in L.A.'s African American history. Despite the circumstances leading to the Avenue's existence, it survived within popular memory as an ideal space where community and art were absolutely inseparable. The same is true for Watts, and currently a similar idealization is being built in Leimert Park. Tapscott, who made his career on giving back to the community, is a major figure in manifesting the cultural connections between history, geographical spaces, and art. These connections are made quite obvious in The World Stage.

Kamau Daáood was a close friend of Tapscott’s, so when he and Billy Higgins opened The World Stage back in 1989, Tapscott became a regular performer. In fact, he helped define the space.

The first music to grace this place was Billy Higgins and Horace Tapscott—in a duet. They put the first vibe in this place, Billy and Horace were very integral parts of the beginning of this place, which brings a lot of history. Billy Higgins is said to be the most recorded drummer in history. Horace Tapscott, of course, coming out of Central Avenue and his rootedness in this community. The grassroots of this place is just legendary. That men of this stature would come to this space and use it as a base to operate from and to teach from and share from, is very unique.20

The meaning assigned to The World Stage by Daáood is integrally connected to Central Avenue and the work of Horace Tapscott. The interesting difference, however, is that Central Avenue was a forced situation, whereas Leimert Park is a self-conscious grassroots attempt to recreate that type of community.

For Daáood, Central Avenue was like a river. “There were places all up and down Central Avenue, and the lifestyle in the community was based around the life on Central Avenue.” In his poem entitled “Leimert Park,” he extends the metaphor:

You see, there are trees in Leimert Park
Under which old men do divinations with the bones of dominos
Degnan, a river, a new Nile on whose banks young poets sharpen their hearts
On the polyrhythms of Billy Higgins’ smile
On the World Stage where Tapscott’s fingers massage your collective memory21
Langston Hughes wrote, “My soul has grown deep like the rivers.” Daâoood uses this powerful symbol of history and memory to define both Central Avenue and Leimert Park. This is telling in a number of ways: it links Daâoood’s work to a long tradition of African American poets, and it offers an interesting insight into a particular cultural conception of African American community—a community with an indispensable connection to a troubled, often mythologized history. When I pressed him on the subject, Daâoood qualified his reference to Degnan, calling it a short river. “I think the seed and concept is there, and the thriving is there to bring art back into the lives of everyday people in the community. The ebbs and flows of Central Avenue run through the spaces of Leimert Park.”

The real space of Central Avenue is not entirely subsumed within the space of Leimert Park. Since 1996 the Cultural Affairs Department of Los Angeles has sponsored the Annual Central Avenue Jazz Festival. The summertime weekend festival takes place on Central Avenue between 42nd and 43rd Streets. Beginning at the foot of the Dunbar Hotel, the closed-off street is lined with food, art, and music booths. Each year a large outdoor stage is set up for live jazz with old locals. During the 2000 festival, Buddy Collette and the Latin jazz combo the Estrada Brothers were present. Although filled with old standards, the line-up included a good deal of Latin jazz as a means of acknowledging the demographic shift of the area. The prime function of the street festival is to celebrate African American history, but it maintains a very contemporary feel. Not simply a look back, the festival makes a conscious attempt to revitalize the contemporary space of the Avenue, emphasizing the positive role of music in the historical and contemporary construction of community in Los Angeles. A letter in the 2000 festival program from Adolfo V. Nodal, the general manager of the city’s Cultural Affairs Department, explicitly stated this purpose: “Along with bringing sheer enjoyment and entertainment, we will demonstrate once again how music can serve to promote civic pride and community spirit.”

This once-historic stretch of Central Avenue is now an empty shell of its past. Many of the storefronts are closed, the clubs are all gone, and the nightlife is virtually nonexistent. What remains is a powerful memory fueled by the occasional street fair and by individual figures that keep reminding us of the area’s history. Figures like Horace Tapscott (to whom the 2000 festival was dedicated) and Buddy Collette, who worked as the festival’s artistic director, have been pivotal in maintaining the symbolic identity of Central Avenue. Since the decline of the Avenue in the 1950s, it seems as though it has never ceased creating community. It has just been relocated. Along the unassuming block of Degnan in Leimert Park, the ghosts of Central Avenue are very much alive.

In August of 1997, when Babe’s and Ricky’s Inn, the last great blues club on Central Avenue, relocated to the heart of Leimert Park, this dislocation was made clear. The 80-year-old owner, Laura Mae Gross, otherwise known simply as “Mama,” took over the old Atlantic Club at 5229 Central Avenue back in 1963, renamed it after her nephew and her son, and kept the blues alive on Central as long as possible. Because of the virtually nonexistent nightlife on the Avenue, the club was forced to close its doors in 1993.
With the help of several fund-raising benefits, Mama and her partner Jonathon Hodges were able to move the club to Leimert Park. With the Central Avenue street sign from the original location hanging in the new space, Babe’s and Ricki’s Inn is a living homage to the Avenue, and a firm marker of Leimert Park’s future.

Central Avenue remains the foundation of the “river” currently running through Leimert Park. It is the historical referent, the origin myth, of a contemporary African American community defined by the intersection of neighborhood and art. This is not to say that the meaning of Leimert Park is not affected by other cultural referents as well. Perhaps the most telling lineage can be traced to the cultural production of Watts following the 1965 uprisings.

**Watts Happening in Leimert Park**

*What shall it avail our nation if we can place a man on the moon but cannot cure the sickness in our cities?*

—McConne Commission Report (1965)

*There are many ways to build a wall, and as many ways to level it and remove it.*

—Budd Schulberg, Introduction to *From the Ashes: Voices of Watts* (1967)

On the night of August 11, 1965, the hot summer streets of Watts exploded in what would become one of the worst race uprisings in the nation’s history. Beginning on the corner of 116th Street and Avalon Boulevard, a small police scuffle with a local resident caused five days of civic disorder in South Los Angeles. As buildings burned, black anger escalated and white fear mounted, while the media struggled madly to put a label on the seemingly never-ending destruction. KTLA’s helicopters flew relentlessly over the area, desperately attempting to define the ruckus and assuage the fear. While the city burned, the media argued over definitions, calling the event everything from a riot to a revolution. A CBS Radio affiliate in Los Angeles said, “This was not a riot. It was an insurrection against all authority.” CBS Television called it a “revolt.” KMPC Radio in Los Angeles referred to it as a “virtual insurrection probably unmatched since the Civil War.” The pressure to supply answers was monumental for the media, whose constant and often inappropriate coverage was blamed for escalating the conflict.

Beyond the pressure to name what was going on, the media was also searching for answers as to *why* it was going on. Could it be blamed on some acrimonious black people or unusually hostile white people, or was it the result of police brutality, unemployment, poverty, and institutionalized racism? And why did it happen in Los Angeles and not one of the East Coast ghettos where the conditions seemed manifestly more desperate? One opinion, voiced by the well-known black pastor Reverend H. H. Brookins, created quite a stir in the media. “Other cities are old and have lived with
the problem longer... Where the most hope is built up, the awakening to reality hurts the worst.” Those standard myths of Los Angeles, fueled in part by the history of Central Avenue, created a rift between reality and perception that, according to Brookins, resulted in a cruel awakening to the racial strife in sunny Southern California.

The contradiction is most pointedly made evident in Chester Himes’s classic novel If He Hollers Let Him Go (1942), in which a black dock worker struggles with the rampant racism in Los Angeles. The trope of the city’s contradictory racial landscape existed long before the Watts uprisings, so the event itself merely gave evidence to a condition already brewing within the consciousness of black Los Angeles. “Los Angeles hurt me racially as much as any city I have ever known,” Himes said. “The only thing that surprised me about the race riots in Watts in 1965 was that they waited so long to happen.”

LAPD Chief Charlie Parker, in an interview conducted for the 1965 CBS Reports special “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” said “Many Negro leaders agree with me that Los Angeles is the finest place in the world for the Negro because he has the greatest opportunity here on a broad basis than he would anywhere else in the world. So you have the paradox—where things were the best, that’s where the riot occurred.”

Simply left at that—a perplexing paradox—Chief Parker pushed the notion of the troubled L.A. Negro unable to appreciate his pleasant surroundings. Unlike Brookins’ sentiment that the utopian mythology of Los Angeles made the harsh realities of black life even more severe, Parker insinuated that conditions truly were “the best” in Los Angeles and that the uprisings were simply the result of some maladjusted individuals. His comment was an attempt to steal attention away from the structural problems that cause economic and racial strife in the city. Capitalizing on popular white fears, Parker’s “paradox” contributed to the construction of racial politics in the city, one that blamed the victims of poverty and racism for their dissatisfaction.

But the media response to the event was widely varied. Although Chief Parker had a rather prominent voice in the coverage, considerable airtime was given to surprisingly oppositional voices that contested the easy answers. The CBS special “Watts: Riot or Revolt?” (1965), for instance, offered the opinions of angry kids from Watts and somewhat even-handedly represented their indictment of white people for causing the conflict. This kind of coverage needs to be seen in correlation, however, with the more reactionary KTLA special “Hell in the City of Angels,” in which Mayor Yorty declared:

One after-effect may be that the great number of responsible Negro citizens in our community will take a new look at what’s been going on with some of the agitators and will get over on our side because I think they realize now that it isn’t just the Caucasians that are in jeopardy. It’s law and order in the community. And this effects them severely because they live in the area.

By positioning the responsible Negro in opposition to the agitator, Yorty created a civic model that pivoted on the individual and disregarded public responsibility for the uprisings. The two positions, as illustrated in the McCona Commission report on one hand, and Yorty and Parker on the other, are in obvious conflict with each other. This conflict,
I suggest, intensified the social need for artists of all sorts to intervene in the area’s cultural production immediately following the uprisings. The widely varied discursive construction of the event left room for artistic interpretation and, in fact, necessitated that interpretation. The conflicted dialogue evidenced in the media coverage could not be resolved simply through the material reconstruction of neighborhoods. There was an obvious need for understanding—a need that could only be satisfied through a kind of grassroots cultural production.

This need was cultivated both by white guilt and fear from the outside and by a desire to be heard from the inside; the result was a momentary cultural acceptance and even celebration of African American voices. The period of the late 1960s, catapulted by the uprising, created a kind of cultural discourse that continues to this day. The post-uprising culture that flourished in Watts in the form of music, poetry, and theater marks a significant shift in black cultural production. Assisted by public money, it was a form of cultural production that recognized the connection between geography and personal expression. Many black organizations, including Horace Tapscott’s Arkestra, were granted state and federal funds. Money came from the private sector as well; liberal-minded philanthropists from all over the city thought Watts to be a worthy (and trendy) investment.

Perhaps the most influential of these organizations was the Watts Writers’ Workshop, a workshop for new writers started by the screenwriter and novelist Budd Schulberg. Schulberg, most famous for writing the screenplay for _On the Waterfront_ (1954), felt compelled to do something about what he saw happening in Watts.

What was I to do? As an American writer, still oriented toward social fiction, I felt an itch, an irresistible urge to know. I held to the old-fashioned notion that an author has a special obligation to his society, an obligation to understand it and to serve as its conscience . . .

The responsible American writer makes it his duty to report on his corner of the nation.

Los Angeles is my corner. I was raised here. With this guilt, or sense of responsibility, Schulberg left his protected environment of Beverly Hills to begin a creative writing class in Watts. He started with a posted notice on a Westminster bulletin board that read, “Creative Writing Class—All Interested Sign Below.” No one signed up. Week after week Schulberg waited for students, but to no avail—his conspicuous whiteness was becoming more and more paralyzing. “What to do? Give Up?” Schulberg writes. “Admit that a white man, no matter how altruistic he believes his motives to be, has no place in a black ghetto?” Schulberg was very aware of his position in Watts. He knew that people would be distrustful of him—and rightfully so:

White was “Travelin’ Sam Yorty” the Mayor and his Police Chief Parker, against whom the people of Watts seemed to feel a hatred similar to the feeling of the Jews for Hitler and Himmler. White was the color of the Enemy that held you in and blocked you off and put you down and kept you there at the business end of the billyclub and the bayonet point. Finally, after a month of waiting, Schulberg found his first student—a 19-year-old boy named Charles Johnson. Johnson, as with everyone else in the neighborhood, was sus-
picious of Schulberg’s motivations, but he was intrigued by the prospect of telling stories. “I’m just me,” Schulberg told Johnson, “a writer, here to see if I can find other writers.” After a three-hour conversation, Johnson was eventually convinced to join the class and became the charter member of the Watts Writers’ Workshop. Shortly thereafter, more people signed up for the class, and the Workshop became a reality.

What began as a small class in a Westminster office turned into something that exceeded most people’s expectations. Soon the little space in Westminster was no longer big enough to house the workshop; the group moved to a humble coffeehouse in Watts called Watts Happening. The coffeehouse was located on 103rd Street between Wilmington and the railroad tracks and was funded by the Southern California Council of Churches and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Because of the burgeoning need for expression and the historical lack of cultural institutions in the area, when it opened in October of 1965, this small transformed furniture store quickly became the center of the local art scene. Writers and artists of all sorts began to meet there regularly to share their work.

By the time the Writers’ Workshop joined the already accumulating crowd at the coffeehouse, it had earned the status of group celebrity. By early 1966, the workshop amassed local and national media attention and became something of a marker for the area’s social progress.

This progress was again countered by increases in run-ins with police. Officers of the LAPD were constantly harassing the writers and making unsubstantiated arrests. One of the main instances was the arrest of Leumas Sirrah, a young poet named to receive the first Watts Writers’ Award at the Westminster Assembly Hall. The day after the ceremony, Leumas was arrested for armed robbery. But it happened that this alleged crime took place at the exact time Leumas was receiving his award. This instance of police corruption led to the expansion of the Workshop into the Frederick Douglass House, a nine-room house where writers lived and worked. In Schulberg’s words, the LAPD may be credited with an assist in the founding of the Frederick Douglass Writers’ House that has risen from the ashes on Beach Street, a few blocks down from Westminster in the heart of Watts. [It was] during a period in which I often found myself roused in the small hours for the latest emergency, that I came to full awareness of what I had begun. It had been naive or callow to think that I could go to Watts for three hours of a single afternoon once a week. A creative writing class in Watts was fine, as far as it went, but it didn’t go very far for writers who were homeless, who had to pawn typewriters, who fainted from hunger in class. Most of these writers would fall apart because they had no address, no base, no center, no anchor.

The Douglass House was to serve as that anchor. It became the foundation of the workshop—creating a safe place for people to work and create. As Schulberg suggests, a creative writing class in Watts was not the same as one in Beverly Hills. For many people, it was not just a subtle addition to an already meaningful life—it became the foundation for personal growth. The writing that took place in the workshop was not really in dialogue with a tradition of previously established poetry and prose; it truly did rise “from the ashes.” Like music on Central Avenue, to these writers, it was the only thing
that reminded them that they were alive. Anthony Hamilton explains his experience with the workshop: “I found out I could do something. And it was nothing more but write a poem.”32 It was that simple. The workshop was not about great writing, although that certainly happened; it was about introducing the concept of expression to a community long stripped of this privilege.

The Watts Writers’ Workshop became something of a phenomenon, nurturing talent like Harry Dolan (the playwright), Marla Gibbs (the actress), and Anthony Hamilton (the musician from the Watts Prophets). According to Hamilton, “The Watts Writers’ Workshop was one of the greatest workshops that’s ever been on the West Coast.... It was like a hospital. You would see people stagger in, and you’d watch ‘em for two or three weeks, and you’d see ‘em walk out with their shoulders back and their head high, and they would be into something.”33

The Writers’ Workshop functioned as therapy for some people—people who had never even conceptualized themselves as writers were all of a sudden writing things down and sharing them. Kamau Daáood, who joined much later, called it a “tool for self-discovery.” In 1968 when it opened a Westside branch in the Crenshaw district, he heard about it on the radio and decided to check it out. “I was already writing,” he said, “but it was very unconscious.” He never considered himself a writer until he found out that there were people who wrote. “You get a vague notion of writers,” he said, “and I’m writing, so maybe that has something to do with me.”34

For a lot of people, the workshop simply introduced the concept of personal expression. It was a community organization that encouraged an exciting kind of creativity. “It was a very rich environment,” Daáood said, “it was very much like those cutting sessions you used to hear about in the early days of bebop, when the cats would come to the stage and they had to keep their stuff to a certain level or they’d get booted off. It was that kind of prodding and competitiveness. But there was a lot of helping and nurturing and bonds that took place, so it wasn’t a vicious kind of competitiveness.”35

By mid-1966 the workshop garnered massive media attention—the BBC requested readings, and several American television and radio stations requested appearances and press conferences with individual writers. NBC funded a documentary about the Workshop entitled *The Angry Voices of Watts*. Broadcast on the first anniversary of the revolt, Angry Voices “received more attention, provoking more phone calls and mail” than anything since “the telecast of the Johnson election.”36 Continuing with this media barrage, Columbia Records contracted some writing from the Workshop for an LP to be hosted by Sidney Poitier entitled “From the Ashes.”37 This in conjunction with Budd Schulberg’s book by the same name helped construct a new identity for Watts—one that transcended the actuality of poverty and urban decay. However, despite this newly conceived global identity, the local existence of poverty was still very much a reality. The history of Watts, especially in the way that it is appropriated into the history of Leimert Park, is very much contingent on the negotiation between these local and global identities.

Despite all this attention, the Workshop completely disbanded before 1970. In the paranoid political climate of the late 1960s, the workshop was considered to be a subversive, militant organization that posed a threat to the government. The FBI planted agent provocateurs to keep track of its activity. Eventually, the Douglass House was
burned to the ground by one of these informants, and the Workshop was left penniless. In Daáood's words, "That was around the time that a lot of stuff started falling apart. And a lot of the original members had gone on. A lot of times, things just begin to dissipate. The Watts Writers' Workshop actually ended up becoming a group of people rather than an organization. And many of them kept in close contact—even today."38

The Watts Writers' Workshop established a community of artists in Watts and in the Crenshaw area that outlived the organization itself. The individual words of the writers in the Workshop changed the perception of post-1965 Watts from the National Guard–studded streets to an active arena of spiritual and cultural struggle. Because of the barrage of media attention, these writers became a central component in the nation's consciousness of racial conflict. Watts embodied the struggle; furthermore, the Workshop embodied Watts. Words of anger, resentment, and desire were broadcast across the nation as a form of street reportage. In addition to the powerful images of burning buildings, the nation was able to hear the angry musings of inside voices. The Workshop writer Harry Dolan, in his short prose piece "Will There Be Another Riot in Watts?" concludes with these words:

And then—and then, God help us, for a man blind with injustice does not value worldly goods, for themselves alone, and so he will destroy and destroy and destroy until the ache in his soul has burned out... No, there will be no riot in Watts; possibly, just possibly, Armageddon.39

Dolan draws attention to the severity of the issue, claiming that the uprising was more than just a fit of passion; it was just one of many symptoms of the cultural blindness toward "injustice." Dolan's words were important in giving a voice to the opposition to that injustice—not necessarily because his prose was so magnificent, but because his contentious words actually achieved a forum.

There were a few individual success stories to arise from the Workshop, but the real success was the tradition of poetry and verbal expression it helped to launch. The history of the Workshop is more indebted to the act of writing than to what was actually written. Like a kind of performance art, the writing that took place in the Workshop was a performative gesture that gave a voice to a community previously muted by racism.

And these are the voices that make up the history of Leimert Park. One could easily write a history of buildings and demographic shifts, but to truly understand the cultural geography of the area, it is important to trace the lineage of the art that defines the community. Kamau Daáood, who was trained in the Workshop, is now training young poets at The World Stage. "The workshop here is very strong," Daáood said of The World Stage. "The older members who were in the Watts Writers' Workshop with me, when they come in here, they say this is like the grandchild of the Watts Writers' Workshop." What has happened in Leimert Park, especially since the 1992 uprisings, is a reintegration, in the style of the Watts Writers, to the power of location. There is a realization that identity is specifically tied to geography. When the dangers of "South Central" are reported nightly on the news, the work of defining one's own geography takes on a very profound importance in the pursuit of defining oneself.
Conclusion: New Media and the
Exhibition of Community

You have all these rich communities here in Los Angeles, all these
diverse cultures and backgrounds, but the coloring of our minds stops
the exchange.

—Kamau Daâooood

Hollywood has the ability to hide geography. The images that are produced within the
mainstream Hollywood system are less about the individual spaces represented than
about the global system of capitalist production that produces them. For instance,
Hollywood films are shot all over the world, but they are generally perceived as being from Hollywood—as existing within an aspatial location of production. This aspatiality of Hollywood is often conflated with the larger city of Los Angeles, thus creating a
difficult and contentious relationship between the global (Hollywood) and the local (community). Local communities in Los Angeles are often created, therefore, in resistance to global influences. Such is the case with Leimert Park.

This dynamic is best illustrated in the performance and teaching space of the KAOS Network, a small storefront founded by Ben Caldwell in 1984. As an independent filmmaker, photographer, and teacher, his intention was to start a community-based media institution that could serve as an alternative voice to Hollywood. Within a few months, this became a reality. Video 3333 was located in a small storefront just around the corner from where KAOS currently stands (see Illustration 4.3). The idea was to introduce neighborhood kids to the power and art of media, allowing them to produce film and video, music, and graffiti art within the safe space of the studio. In 1990, after moderate success, Caldwell moved to his current location and changed the name to the KAOS Network. As well as being an exhibition site for video art, painting, and photography, and a performance site for poetry and hip-hop, the KAOS Network now operates as a community classroom. Caldwell teaches several classes a week on sound mixing and video production. The second story of this small storefront is packed with high-end computers and mixing boards—enough to teach hands-on classes of up to a dozen students at a time.

As with other locations in Leimert Park like The World Stage, the KAOS Network is simultaneously devoted to performance and pedagogy. In the tradition of community art, these things can never be separated. Community art, according to Daâooood “has a tendency to have much more potential than ‘larger’ art forms because commercial art is driven by money and artistic decisions are made on the profitability of the project.” By creating art concerned with pedagogy and not motivated by profit, the KAOS Network is able to operate on a local level, thus actively engaging in the process of creating local meaning.

Out of KAOS, Caldwell pioneered a program for teenagers called “video imaging,”
where he allows kids to videotape themselves and watch it. Caldwell said of this project—“It’s a means for kids to see themselves instantly. They objectively see how other people see them, [and] also [it’s a chance] to be themselves and have fun. I call it
a self-esteem machine." Caldwell has used video conferencing technologies to link people of South Central to other parts of the world. He sees the possibility of these technologies working within Los Angeles as well. "We can link gang members in the street to each other, to families, organizations, even other cities and nations. They can reach their goals through media. We've all just got to update our brains, and think of media as a new tool."

In fact, media has been the tool all along. From the music of Central Avenue to the writing of the Watts Writers' Workshop, some form of media or another has consistently transformed the local spaces of the city to the global spaces of imagination and culture. Ben Caldwell's emphasis on the use of new media as a means of exhibitionism is part and parcel of the same process that has streamed in and out of the history of Leimert Park.

I began this essay with a discussion of the need for local communities in Los Angeles to be exhibitionists. A community must exhibit itself, through the lens of local art or mainstream media, in order to produce and maintain itself. Leimert Park, through the work of several committed individuals, is actively engaged in this process. History, geography, and their media images are carefully integrated into the everyday life of the space. As a result, the community that is put on display is never stagnant—never fixed in a definition (see Illustration 4.4). It is always becoming; it is always garnering new meaning as it produces itself for exhibition each and every day.

In the early twentieth century, African Americans arriving in Los Angeles were forced to live along Central Avenue because of housing covenants. By the 1950s, when most
other ethnic minorities were given some leeway in integrating into white neighborhoods, African Americans were the most vociferously excluded. Community, therefore, was forced into prominence by white racism. The same is true of the kinds of cultural production stemming from Watts after 1965. Leimert Park, although not built under the equivalent forced circumstances, is actively engaged in a similar construction of the local. As Budd Schulberg said upon seeing Watts in August of 1965, “There are many ways to build a wall and as many ways to level it and remove it.” Perhaps the best way to level the walls of racism is to fortify anew. In Leimert Park, racism is confronted by fortifying community from the rubble of past barriers. The result is a walled community, but one that is constantly questioning the material from which the walls are erected.

Notes


4. Ibid.


11. Quoted from Central Avenue Sounds, a collection of testimonials from musicians with firsthand experience of Central Avenue. It documents the avenue from the beginning to its revitalization in Watts to its decline in the 1950s. See Clara Bryant et al., Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9-10.


13. Bryant et al., Central Avenue Sounds, 163.


15. Bryant et al., Central Avenue Sounds, 302.

16. Ibid., 289.


18. Bryant et al., Central Avenue Sounds, 301.


27. Ibid., 9.


30. Schulberg, From the Ashes, 18.

31. Ibid., 19.

32. Hamilton, Interview for the "Watts '65 Project."
33. Ibid.
34. Kamau Daáood, Personal interview, April 19, 1999.
35. Ibid.
37. This title was taken from a book by the same name, edited by Budd Schulberg in 1967, of prose, poems, and plays from many of the Watts Writers.
40. Kamau Daáood, Personal interview, 19 April 1999.
41. Video 3333 still exists as the artist-in-residence branch of KAOS.
42. Kamau Daáood, Personal interview, 19 April 1999.
43. Ben Caldwell, Personal interview, 5 April 1999.