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Chapter Nine

GRIDLOCK OF RAGE: THE WATTS AND RODNEY KING RIOTS

Scott Saul

Ice-Cold Water

I like to begin my seminar on the history of Los Angeles by popping in a battered, much-used VHS tape of *Twilight - Los Angeles* (1992), Anna Deavere Smith's dramatic monologues about the Rodney King riots. My goal is to move my students as soon as possible into a zone of engrossed discomfort. Most were toddlers when Los Angeles exploded after the verdicts in the Rodney King trial; many come into the classroom expecting to be oriented to Los Angeles as a land of relaxation and fantasy - the city, in David Rieff's words, of "no-fault divorces, no-fault therapies, no-fault insurance claims, and ... no-fault citizenship" (Rieff 1991: 145).

Twilight pours ice-cold water into the hot tub. It's nothing if not a meditation on the different shades of responsibility Angelenos bear for the city they've created, often merely by going about their business with an internal monologue running in their heads. By forcing those internal monologues out into the open, Smith asks her audience to weigh their competing claims - not simply to empathize and listen but also to analyze, adjudicate. She begins with three monologues revolving around the infliction of bodily harm: Rudy Salas's story of being beaten by police and losing his hearing; Elaine Young's tale of how her plastic surgeries went horribly awry; and Angela King's account of how her nephew Rodney could barely talk after his encounter with the LAPD. It's hard not to see the common thread tying together Salas and Rodney King - and hard not to see the juxtaposition with Elaine Young as a satirical gesture, albeit one played close to the shoulder-padded jacket that Smith assumes for the role. It's hard, too, not to be increasingly unsettled as *Twilight* proceeds - as the film weaves in the graphic video footage of the killing of Latasha Harlins and the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny, and as the ever-intense Smith adopts

persona after persona, each with his or her own vision of the interplay between violence and justice. We're stuck in what one commentator called a "gridlock of rage," and forced to take its measure (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 7).

Historians writing about the Watts and Rodney King riots face a challenge not unlike that of my students watching *Twilight*: how to sort through seemingly irreconcilable points of view, how to understand this crosstalk as the story of Los Angeles. Of course, for historians, this challenge is compounded by the crucial task of integrating the drama of these two upheavals into the larger stories we tell about how Los Angeles has changed over the past sixty years. The Watts and Rodney King riots were literally apocalyptic events in that they seemed to reveal the truth of the city, to burn its illusions down to ashes. Yet the high drama of the episodes themselves should not obscure long-term trajectories that have also defined the city's social and economic faultlines: the decline of blue-collar unionism and the selective reindustrialization of the city; the emergence of a many-pronged local civil rights movement, recently energized by union organizing of the working poor; the criminalization of poor youth and the militarization of city space; and the fracturing of racial and ethnic communities among class lines. If this sounds, on balance, like a dour catalogue, perhaps that is because the Watts and Rodney King riots act like a gutcheck against the fantasy-life of Los Angeles, calling even its greatest boosters back to earth. Both riots were examples of the "politics of the last resort," and thus force us to consider why so many Angelenos were convinced, for motives high and low, that their best option was to take to the streets.

"A journey into the mind of Watts"

The Watts riot may have been, after the assassination of JFK, the most heavily investigated event of the 1960s. Journalists, sociologists, urban anthropologists, and psychologists descended en masse upon the riot zone after the flames died out, so much so that *Los Angeles Times* writer Art Seidenbaum quipped, "I have a mental image of a USC sociologist interviewing a man on the street who turns out to be a psychologist from UCLA" (Horne 1995: 39). But while a large number of intellectuals sifted through the ashes, many fewer have sifted through the sifting. The story of Watts has yet to be reconceived in line with the new urban histories of Oakland, Detroit, and Chicago, which limn the connections between the growth of postwar suburbia and the hollowing-out of central-cities; and it is only beginning to be set in dialogue with new studies of the "long civil rights movement," which have investigated civil rights stirrings outside the South and offered a more subtle sense of the interrelationship between the civil rights and Black Power impulses (Sugrue 1996; Self 2003).

Like Harlem in 1964 and Newark and Detroit in 1967, Watts erupted in response to a confrontation between police and black residents. On the night of August 11, Marquette Frye, fresh from celebrating his brother's release from the Air Force with a few Screwdrivers, was pulled over by the highway patrol for speeding. The arrest quickly spiraled out of control, attracting hundreds of Watts residents; soon police were wading into the crowd, clubs swinging, while blacks hurled rocks and other missiles at cars driven by whites in response (Conot 1967: 3-29; Horne 1995: 45-63). Over the next six days, the Watts riot broadened in scope as residents openly challenged the forces of law and order, stoning police officers, looting businesses, and burning storefronts to the ground with the then-novel device of the Molotov cocktail. The death of a sheriff's officer on August 13 marked a turning point, the moment that "a community revolt against the police was transformed into a police revolt against the community" (Horne 1995: 72). Over half of the state's National Guard was deployed to contain 46.5 square miles - well beyond the borders of Watts. At the end, 34 people had died, 1,032 had been wounded, and 3,952 had been arrested; property damage was estimated at over \$40 million. In a symbolic coda to the week, the LAPD raided the Nation of Islam's Los Angeles temple on August 18, unloading hundreds of ammunition rounds in response to alleged fire from inside the temple. Bringing the week full circle, Marquette Frye, a new recruit to the Nation, had spoken at the temple three nights before, in a talk advertised with the slogan "Stop Police Brutality" (Conot 1967; Horne 1995; Strain 2005; McCone in Fogelson 1969).

The riot produced a flurry of journalistic accounts - of which Robert Conot's hypervivid *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness* (1967) is the best - but the terms for understanding the riot were set by the McCone Commission, which released its report four months after the unrest. The McCone Report reflected the worldview of its namesake: John McCone was a law-and-order conservative, a stalwart Republican, and committed anti-communist who had made a fortune building ships during World War II, served on Eisenhower's National Security Council, and headed Kennedy's CIA. Tellingly, he interrupted testimony from ACLU representatives with the declaration that police brutality was a "device ... [of] our adversaries, those who would like to destroy the freedom that this country stands for." LAPD Chief William Parker barred LAPD officers from testifying before the commission, and they complied (Horne 1995: 342; Cannon 1999: 131; Weiner 2007: 180). The resulting report soft-pedaled the role of police brutality, tracing the riot instead to a small rump of disaffected blacks - at most 10,000 - who had been caught up in "angry exhortations" that encouraged "disobedience to law" (Fogelson, pp. 1, 29, 93). At the same time, it was a sign of the bipartisan consensus of the '50s and '60s that the McCone Report also called for an extensive set of

publicly-funded interventions in the areas of housing, employment, and education. (Fogelson 1969: 55–6, 68–9, 87–8).

Much of the reaction to the McCone Report was so intense and negative that its repudiation (along with the repudiation of that other maligned report of 1965, Daniel Moynihan's *The Negro Family*, which shared several assumptions about black dysfunctionality) might be said to mark a more radical turn within the politics of the civil rights movement and within the academic disciplines of history, sociology, and psychology. Activist Bayard Rustin, who had helped organize the 1963 March on Washington, attacked the report in *Commentary* as the embodiment of a "liberal consensus" "paralyzed by the hard facts of Negro deprivation," and he witheringly picked apart the double standards driving the report – for instance, how it condemned black disrespect for the law but failed to condemn extralegal violence against black protest (Fogelson 1969: 151, 153, 164). When faced with the McCone Report, mainline organizations like the US Commission on Civil Rights were goaded to the rioters' defense (Horne 1995: 345–6).

The leading academic attack came from historian Robert Fogelson, who analyzed the McCone Report as the product of a particular interest group, "upper-middle-class whites" who shared "preconceptions about violence, law enforcement, ghettos, and slums" (Fogelson 1969: 118). Using the full records of the commission – an indispensable archive recently given a finding aid – Fogelson dismantled many of the authors' basic propositions. Whereas the report called the riot a "spasm" and an "insensate rage of destruction," Fogelson argued that the "looting and burning" were "articulate protests against genuine grievances and, as such, meaningful protests against the southcentral ghetto." Whereas the report downplayed white resistance to desegregation, Fogelson underlined the "tremendous stakes that Los Angeles whites have in perpetuating the Negro ghetto." And whereas the report concluded that only a small minority of disaffected blacks were involved in the riot, Fogelson undertook to demolish this "riff-raff" theory, contending that many more blacks were involved – between three and eight times the McCone Report's estimate – and that the riot itself was understood sympathetically by the mainstream of the black community (Fogelson 1969: 1, 115, 120–3, 142).

Fogelson's pointed critique was both amplified and diffused by a large body of social science research that grappled with the riot, especially by measuring the attitudes that informed its aftermath. In retrospect much of this work seems narrow in its purview, investigating self-reported individual beliefs rather than the structures of discrimination in place in 1960s Los Angeles or the dynamics of collective movements. One gets the feeling, reading some of these studies, that the authors thought the meaning of the riots could best be determined by a multiple-choice plebiscite. Researchers determined that blacks were more likely to endorse violent protest if they had little contact with whites (Ransford 1968); that middle-class whites

were more likely to be sympathetic to the riot if they had more personal contact with black people (Jeffries and Ransford 1969); and that those who perceived the riot as "social protest" were more likely to be attuned to the problem of racial discrimination, and vice versa (Jeffries, Turner, and Morris 1971). But for all the social science number-crunching, a surprising amount of this work took on a tone of moral urgency, well illustrated by Nathan Cohen's conclusion to the collaboratively conceived *Los Angeles Riot Study*: "Adequate reform of our social institutions will not be achieved without a deep look at our values. Will we be able to place human values above property values? If not, there is a real question as to how far we can go in handling the problems without resorting to extreme punitive measures which in the long run can destroy our democratic way of life" (Cohen 1970: 40). With his moderate talk of "adequate reform" balanced by his attack on the cult of "property values," Cohen was straddling a line that more radical thinkers would aim to trespass.

Within a few years of Watts, a dissonant chorus of voices on the left began seeing the riot as Exhibit A for their theories of revolt and liberation. At a "Watts Grass Roots Seminar" held at USC in 1966, Us founder Maulana Karenga channeled both Moynihan and Fanon, contending that the unrest spoke to a psychological malaise within the black community and that blacks would remain "marginal men in America" until they banded together to create a culture of their own (Everett-Karenga et al., reel 9, 0132, Kerner Commission Papers; Brown 2003: 30–1). By contrast, in *Why Watts Exploded* (1966), the Socialist Workers Party's Della Rossa took a harder Fanonian line, arguing that the riot marked the psychic liberation of black Angelenos, who were decolonizing the ghetto by evicting the "occupying army" of the LAPD. Other commentators saw the consumer society as the rebellion's key backdrop. In his tract *The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy* (1965), Parisian Situationist Guy Debord took looting as the crucial feature of this "rebellion against the commodity, against the world of the commodity in which worker-consumers are hierarchically subordinated to commodity standards" (Situationist International 2002: 230–1). In a different though related key, novelist Thomas Pynchon contrasted the "systematized folly" of white culture with the "pocket of bitter reality that is Watts" and suggested that, "far from being a sickness," the violence on display in the riot might have been "an attempt to communicate, or to be who you really are" (Pynchon 1966).

If, in 1966, Pynchon hedged his proposal that the violence of Watts was a form of communication, by the early 1970s that idea had become the basis for two similarly titled and almost simultaneously published books, David Sears and John McConahay's *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts riot* and Joe R. Feagin and Harlan Hahn's *Ghetto Revolts: The Politics of Violence in American Cities* (both 1973). While *Ghetto Revolts* laid out a broader framework for understanding ghetto riots

as “politically meaningful acts in a struggle between powerholding groups and powerless blacks” (p. vii), *The Politics of Violence* concentrated on Watts and gave new heft and subtlety to earlier rebuttals of the McCone Report. Drawing upon interviews with over 700 Watts residents, Sears and McConahay discovered that the “number of blacks involved in the rioting was staggering” – over 30,000 as active rioters and over 60,000 as close spectators (pp. 9, 13). The close spectators, they argued, formed a “permissive, if ambivalent audience,” sympathetic to the rioters and optimistic about the riot’s effects, even while disapproving of the riot’s bloodshed and destruction (pp. 14, 15).

Yet perhaps *The Politics of Violence*’s most surprising discovery came in its profile of “the new urban blacks” who were the riot’s “shock troops” (p. 145). Contrary to the suppositions of the McCone Report and even many liberal commentators, these young rioters were more likely to be reared in Los Angeles (thus disproving the argument that they were yokels who couldn’t adapt to the city); just as likely to come from a two-parent home as non-rioters (thus cutting against the logic of the Moynihan Report); and better educated and more hopeful about their career prospects – with 90 percent aspiring to a white-collar job, hardly the dreams of riff-raff (pp. 17–33, 84). They also were more politicized than other Watts residents – more suspicious of the white media, more skeptical about the redress they could achieve through conventional channels, more aware of civil rights organizing outside of Los Angeles – and became increasingly so after the riot, when they developed what Sears and McConahay called a “riot ideology,” a sense that the riot expressed legitimate grievances about police brutality, merchant exploitation, lack of political representation, and the like (pp. 70–89, 170–86). *The Politics of Violence* offered, then, an account of the dynamics of black radicalization from the standpoint of social psychology, one that established the younger black generation as the engine of Black Power.

With its formidable statistical apparatus, *The Politics of Violence* seemed to present the last word on the Watts riot – and, for almost the next two decades, many seemed happy to take it as that. Somehow the wave of urban riots had ended, and while Los Angeles’ black community suffered wrenching changes in the interim – the flight of manufacturing capital, increasing economic competition with immigrant labor, widening internal class stratification (Davis 1987; Grant, Oliver, and James 1996; Sides 2003) – there was little further reflection on the riot and its legacy in the 1970s and 1980s outside of outliers like Bruce Tyler’s 1983 UCLA dissertation “Black Radicalism in Southern California,” an avowedly partisan account of the co-optation of black radicalism after the riot.

It took the Rodney King riots to give the Watts riot a second life. The province now of historians more than sociologists and psychologists, the Watts riot was revisited with a wider-angle lens, as scholars undertook to

excavate the broader political and cultural history that informed the riot and the changes that followed from it. Gerald Horne’s *Fire This Time* (1995) was both an early part of this wave of scholarship and one of its most ambitious examples. Sympathetic to the rioters but dour about black nationalism’s inattention to class, Horne provocatively explained the unrest as, in no small part, the result of southern Californian McCarthyism: “The repression of the left created an ideological vacuum that would later be filled by black nationalism, and this nationalism exploded in Watts” (p. 5). While this thesis is open to challenge – Jeanne Theoharis (2006) has argued for the persistence of the Angeleno black left – *Fire This Time* also offers an unparalleled, prismatic account of the riot and its aftermath, with especially valuable sections devoted to the LAPD, the civil rights leadership in Los Angeles before and after Watts, the apparatus of state-supported discrimination against blacks, and the ripple effects of Watts on local, national, and international politics.

Recently, a new generation of scholars has sharply questioned the received wisdom on the riot, in part by arguing that our fixation on the riot itself has served us poorly. “It was one of the ironic legacies of the riot,” Josh Sides suggests, “that the enormity of the event obscured, to contemporary observers and subsequent scholars alike, the many more profound and enduring political and economic transformations reshaping black Los Angeles in the 1960s” (2003: 171). In his cogent political history of black Los Angeles, Sides strikingly spends as much time detailing the failure of the War on Poverty in Los Angeles and the development of Baldwin Hills – parables that suggest how black Los Angeles was increasingly polarized by class during the selective deindustrialization of the 1960s and 1970s – as he does glossing the Watts riot, which he likewise views as a tale of class and generational fragmentation in the black community.

Jeanne Theoharis and Christopher Strain, meanwhile, have challenged perhaps the most sedimented of Watts-related conventional wisdom: that it marked a radical break with the spirit of previous civil rights organizing. Strain’s *Pure Fire* (2005) draws connections between Watts and earlier national civil rights campaigns, his through-line being the recently recovered tradition of black self-defense. In his view, the Watts rioters were cousins of firebrands like Robert F. Williams, Malcolm X, and Louisiana’s gun-wielding Deacons for Defense, protecting their community from the LAPD just as the Deacons had protected theirs from the Klan and Southern law enforcement. By contrast, Theoharis’s pathbreaking “Alabama on Avalon” (2006) reorients our understanding of Watts by placing it in the fresh context of the aggressive local civil rights organizing that preceded it. Detailing grassroots campaigns around desegregation, fair housing, and police brutality that brought together a coalition of middle-class and working-class blacks, the NAACP and the Nation of Islam, Theoharis argues that the riot was the result not of the failure of black leadership but rather

of the frustrations created by the white “frontlash,” as manifested in the Los Angeles School Board’s stonewalling on desegregation, the repeal of the Rumford Fair Housing Act by popular vote, and the refusal of Mayor Yorty to recognize the problem of police brutality. It may seem that historians of Watts are constantly tilting at the specter of the McCone Report, reformulating Robert Fogelson’s objections, but in this respect Theoharis substantiates many of Fogelson’s sallies with fresh archival work.

Cultural historians of black Los Angeles have found a way to broaden the McCone-Fogelson debate by turning to the arts organizations that rose “out of the ashes” of the riot, recovering them as the cynosures of the Black Arts movement in Los Angeles. The turn to culture has produced a parallax view of Black Power in Los Angeles: unlike political historians, who have tended to emphasize the fatal friction between the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party and the cultural nationalism of Karenga’s Us organization (Brown 2003), cultural historians have underlined the astonishing creative ferment that sprang from the mood of political urgency. James Smethurst’s encyclopedic *The Black Arts Movement* (2005) treats the Los Angeles branch of the movement in a comparative context; Cécile Whiting’s *Pop L.A.* (2006) examines the Watts assemblage-art movement spearheaded by Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge; and Sarah Schrank’s “Picturing the Watts Towers” (2000) traces how Simon Rodia’s towers became a community treasure after the riot. Jazz composer-musician Horace Tapscott, a magnetic figure in Los Angeles’ black arts community who was little known outside of it, has rightly become pivotal to our understanding of this post-uprising renaissance. His autobiography *Songs of the Unsung* (2001) offers a ground-level view of the struggle to create a community arts movement, while Stephen Isoardi’s scrupulous oral history *The Dark Tree* (2006) gives the most revelatory portrait yet of the postwar arts scenes of black Los Angeles through a thick description of Tapscott’s journey as artist-activist. These books might prompt other historians to describe the relationship between black arts activism and the larger political culture in the 1960s and 1970s—a subject ably opened up by Daniel Widener (2003).

Four decades after the Watts conflagration, there are still surprising holes in the historical record. Much of the history of the riot has been the history of black men—this despite the fact that black women like Charlotta Bass and Marnesba Tackett led progressive grassroots campaigns before Watts, despite the fact that young black women were more active in the riot than black men over thirty, and despite the fact that black women spearheaded welfare rights organizing after the riot through institutions like the Watts Women’s Organization, Mothers Anonymous, the Welfare Recipients Union, and the Neighborhood Adult Participation Program. These latter groups may not have the immediate militant cachet of the Black Panther Party or the Nation of Islam (whose Los Angeles chapters are also awaiting

their histories), but they too confronted state power and set an important precedent for the cross-ethnic organizing of poor and working-class Angelenos (Marchevsky, forthcoming). Part of the promise of Sides and Theoharis’s bid to open up the history of Watts beyond the week of rioting is that it brings to light the efforts of these and other women activists.

Perhaps the most gaping hole in the record involves the other “shock troops” of the Watts riot, the LAPD officers who clashed with rioters, sometimes with a light finger on the trigger. Yet one could imagine a history of the Watts Rebellion, conceived in the mode of David Farber’s *Chicago ‘68* (1988) or Frank Kusch’s *Battleground Chicago* (2004), which would consider how the riot literally pitted insurgent black radicals and white working-class suburbanites at each other’s throats. Journalists have been more interested than historians in detailing the evolution of Chief Parker’s LAPD as a “paramilitary organization whose efficiency was its pride and discipline its obsession”—an organization so commanding and independent that Ed Davis declined to run for mayor in the 1970s because he felt he had more power as LAPD chief—but no historian has yet plumbed the worldview of LAPD street cops, much less the informers and counter-subversives who filled the ranks of its aggressive intelligence division. (Domanick 1994: 183, 196; Cannon 1999: 582). The cop archive would have to be assembled—from the LAPD’s own files, from interviews with former officers, from the cop fiction of their poet-laureate Joseph Wambaugh, among others, and from the cop dramas of the 1950s and 1960s—but the promise would be a synthetic Watts history which took the LAPD’s iron hand not as a given but as an enigma to be unraveled. In the process, we might arrive at a new sense of the interplay between suburbanization and urbanization in postwar Los Angeles, and the clash of ideologies involved.

“A day for all vendettas”

From the moment they erupted at the intersection of Florence and Normandie on April 29, 1992, the Rodney King riots were understood as Watts redux, and for good reason. Both events were sparked by the outrage surrounding a single arrest, and kindled by black Los Angeles’ underlying sense that the LAPD acted like an occupying army in their neighborhoods. Rodney King was, like Marquette Frye, a young black man stopped for a traffic violation, whose arrest became a galling symbol of the use of excessive force. The LAPD helmed by Daryl Gates in 1992, like the LAPD helmed by William Parker in 1965, prided itself on its aggressive, high-tech methods and its independence from civilian control. Gates had been Parker’s driver and had been groomed as his successor; under his leadership, the LAPD earned the prize for being, statistically, the most trigger-happy police

force in the nation, responsible for killing civilians at a rate more than double that of the next most lethal police force (Dunne 1991a, 1991b). Its "Operation Hammer," a series of street sweeps intended to eradicate gang activity around the crack cocaine trade, was notorious for indiscriminately rousting black and Latino youths in the lead-up to the riot. By the time the program shut down, almost half of black male Angelenos between the ages of 21 and 24 were listed as gang members (Davis 1992; Cannon 1999: 17–18). (Not coincidentally, the genre of gangsta rap emerged out of this milieu, taking the criminalization of black Angeleno youth as a given; Kelley 1994; Boyd 1996; Quinn 2005.)

Like the Watts riot, too, the Rodney King riots were triggered by a disillusioning series of failed attempts to press grievances through legitimate channels. Just as black Angelenos in the mid-1960s had encountered fierce backlash after trying to desegregate local schools and housing, so black Angelenos in the early-1990s were incensed by a set of jaw-dropping court rulings: Soon Ja Du, a Korean American grocer who shot black teenager Latasha Harlins in the back, was given a suspended sentence and placed on probation. More famously, the officers who had beaten Rodney King were deemed by a Simi Valley jury to have used "reasonable force" and declared innocent. In both cases, the video evidence seemingly had been so damning that the eventual verdicts came as a harsh surprise. Conservative doyen William F. Buckley wrote that "What alters the character of the episode is of course the presence of as many as seventeen other police officers who simply stood by as if they were official witnesses at an execution. There is an insensibility to the Los Angeles police that is difficult to understand and impossible to defend" (Dunne 1991a, 1991b). The verdicts, then, spoke to a manifestly unequal system of justice – one that incarcerated blacks and Latinos at accelerating rates, with harsh mandated sentences, but seemed to offer an escape clause to everyone else (Fukurai, Krooth, and Butler 1994).

Lastly, just as the Watts riot testified to the hollow promise of the "affluent society," the Rodney King riots were easily understood as a protest against twelve years of Reaganomics – "insurrections against an intolerable political-economic order" or a "referendum on redevelopment" (Davis 1992: 234; Pastor 2001: 260). "Who killed LA?" asked Mike Davis, and his answer was, in large part, "government." The riots of the 1960s had pressed for the expansion of the welfare state; the Rodney King riots responded to its evisceration. Under the Reagan administration, the federal government had slashed its aid budget for subsidized housing and job training by as much as 82 percent: the federal contribution to Los Angeles' municipal budget had plunged from 18 percent in 1977 to 2 percent in 1985 (Davis 1992: 249). Within Los Angeles itself, Mayor Tom Bradley's administration had concentrated on remaking the city as an economic hub of the Pacific Rim – plowing money into harbors, airports, and downtown

redevelopment – but had paid relatively little attention to South Los Angeles neighborhoods as they struggled with factory closings. In the early 1990s the rate of poverty in South Los Angeles surged to over 30 percent – double the overall city rate and higher than the rate during the Watts riot. More than 40 percent of South Central adults were listed by the 1990 Census as "not in the labor force" (Miles 1992; Anderson 1996: 357). The economic restructuring particularly disadvantaged young black men, struggling to compete with recently arrived low-skilled workers from Mexico and Central America: two-thirds of young black men between twenty-five and thirty-four with less than a high school education were unemployed in South Central (Williams 1993: 87). Meanwhile, middle-class black families had left South Central for blue-collar suburbs in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. One commentator judged this development "a long-term, quiet revolt with consequences far outweighing the city's outbreaks of violence in 1965 and 1992," since the exodus exacerbated the black poverty of South Central (Davis 1992: 254; Anderson 1996: 346).

Yet for all the parallels between the Watts and Rodney King riots, the divergences may be equally instructive, especially for those interested in tracking the contrasting struggles of the poor in 1965 and 1992, the impact of immigration on central cities, and the realignment of American politics in the interim. To start: the Rodney King riots are much more difficult to romanticize as an example of what historian Eric Hobsbawm has called "collective bargaining by violence" or what political theorist Harlan Hahn has called "street governance." Hahn goes so far as to describe the Rodney King uprising as participatory democracy in action: "Political sovereignty was brought down from the remote corridors of officialdom to throngs of ordinary people on the streets.... For the first time, persons who were active in the civic uprisings had an opportunity to become involved in a decision-making process that might enable them to shape their own destiny" (Hahn 1996: 81). But the "decision-making process" of the Rodney King riot left behind many victims and often operated according to a logic of racial scapegoating; the multipolar violence in the streets was quite different from the blacks-versus-LAPD struggle of the Watts riot, where twenty-six of the thirty-two deaths resulted from police shootings. Of the fifty-four people who died in the Rodney King riots, only six were killed by LAPD fire (Cannon 1999: 323).

Novelist-journalist Héctor Tobar more accurately describes the Rodney King uprising as "the municipal day of settling accounts, a day for all vendettas, private and public" (Tobar 1998: 283). If it was the "first multicultural riot," as the conventional wisdom suggests, it was also part of a long line of anti-immigrant vigilantism in California. Many blacks aimed to settle accounts not just with the LAPD and Korean-owned businesses in their neighborhood – as one might expect from the example of Watts – but also with their Latino neighbors and with the businesses these neighbors owned. George

Sánchez has argued that the Rodney King riots “were fundamentally an anti-immigrant spectacle”: “Although the violence began as a response to a verdict passed by an almost all-white jury against an almost all-white set of police officers, quickly other people of color – those deemed foreign or foreign looking – were engaged in the deadly exchange” (Sánchez 1997: 1010–11). Of the over thirty individuals beaten at the intersection of Florence and Normandie, only two – both truckdrivers, including the well-known Reginald Denny – were white; the vast majority were Latino and Asian. While the television news coverage often toggled between the two chief victims of Los Angeles’ racial melodrama – Rodney King, beaten by white cops, and Reginald Denny, beaten by black civilians – as if to call it a draw, there was little attention paid to the likes of Fidel Lopez, a self-employed construction worker whom a group of young black men punched and kicked into unconsciousness before spraypainting his chest and genitals black. “He’s black now,” said one of his assailants, underscoring the symbolic charge of this aspect of the riot (Cannon 1999: 307). Latinos suffered, too, in their role as inner-city entrepreneurs: state officials estimated that at least 30 percent of the businesses damaged in the riot were Latino owned (Miles 1992).

Although fewer scholars have scrutinized the black-Latino vector of the unrest, it’s analytically useful to consider the Rodney King riots as two interrelated riots: the first, a “justice riot” that was a predominantly black response to the verdict and largely took the form of anti-immigrant looting and violence (though there *was* a to-the-death shootout between the LAPD and young black men at the Nickerson Gardens housing project); and the second, a “bread riot” that was the response of the immigrant and black poor to the LAPD’s hapless engagement on the ground (Pastor 1995: 239; Cannon 1999: 337). Notably, the “justice riot” took root in the relatively prosperous Florence-Normandie tract, where unemployment rates were half, and home ownership rates double, the South Central average; but Florence-Normandie was also a “contact zone” where Latino immigrants were heavily displacing black residents (Pastor 1995: 247). From one angle, Florence-Normandie may have been “the most secure and affluent inner-city neighborhood ever to become the flashpoint of a riot,” but from another it was ground zero in an undeclared struggle between well-established blacks and newer migrants for jobs that, during the early 1990s recession, were hard to find (Cannon 1999: 282). Two sociologists concluded, with a provocative flourish historians might probe, that the Rodney King uprising “better resembles the communal riots of the 1900–1920s than the riots of the 1960s.... When African Americans comprise the residential majority and face in-migrants themselves, they may become the initiators of backlash violence” (Bergesen and Herman 1998: 51–2). If anything, law enforcement colluded with this anti-immigrant backlash, arresting and deporting almost five hundred illegal aliens in the melee (Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993: 122; Navarro 1994).

Latinos, however, were not simply victims of street violence, vandalism, or immigration roundups during the riot. In the “bread riot,” many of the most hard-pressed Latinos – poor immigrants who had fled poverty or political terror in Mexico and Central America, settled in overcrowded apartments in South Central or Mid-City, and taken subminimum wage jobs to support their families – enthusiastically availed themselves of food, clothing, diapers, and other goods. Here, many immigrants from Central America drew upon their experiences growing up in war-torn countries. They viewed the riot as a crisis not unlike a raid by a government or rebel army in their home country, after which stores would close for weeks; civilians learned to take fragile advantage of the chaos. In all, over half of those arrested during the riot were Latino, and 80 percent of this group were foreign born. The riot revealed a gap between the Latino community of East Los Angeles, which had longer historic roots in the city and was untouched, and the newer immigrant enclaves like Pico-Union and Westlake (Cannon 1999: 337–8). In contrast to black-dominated neighborhoods, where socioeconomic status did not fully predict the extent of damage, in Latino neighborhoods it was the poor who were generally the most hard hit (Pastor 1995: 247).

Korean Americans were doubly hit in this double riot: targeted as predatory business owners during the “justice riot,” their stores stripped of wares during the “bread riot.” Several scholars have traced how, ironically in retrospect, the suffering of Korean Americans – the razing of their stores in South Central and Koreatown, coupled with the LAPD’s lackluster response to their calls for assistance – seemed to link them, as minorities who had been refused the protection of the state, to the people looting their stores. Elaine Kim commented that the riots were “a baptism into what it really means for a Korean to become American in the 1990s,” part of an “Asian American legacy of violent baptisms.” (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 24). “Almost overnight,” suggested Edward Park, a “politics of ethnic insularity” was discredited in the eyes of both businessmen and progressive activists in the Korean American community (Park 1996: 158). Yet the place of Korean Americans in the making of the riot is so complex that it has courted controversy: Korean American entrepreneurs seemed at once stolid representatives of the petit bourgeoisie, sympathetic examples of the working class (performing the “cheap labor of American capitalism”), victims of racial intolerance, and agents of racial discrimination (Cho 1993). At least one sociologist has condemned the “Asian American abandonment narrative” as a self-serving fiction and called for more investigation of the “material basis” of Korean-black and Korean-Latino antagonism (Nopper n.d. 105). The most promising scholarship, like Nancy Abelmann and John Lie’s *Blue Dreams*, presents a nuanced account of the diversity of Korean American involvements in South Central and Koreatown, as well as an exploration of the role that Korean concepts like *hamyon toenda* (“if you try

you will succeed”) played in Korean American self-understandings of the riots (Abelmann and Lie 1995: 13). In fact, *Blue Dreams* presents a model for how other historians – interested in, say, the Latino involvement in the uprising – might trace the transnational aspect of immigrant identities, as they were remade in the crucible of the riot.

Politics of Violence author David Sears responded to the shopworn description of the Rodney King upheaval as a “wake-up call” by riposting, “Well, maybe. Somebody keeps pressing the snooze button” (Sears 1994). Sears was right to be skeptical. Just after the riots, an astonishing 70 percent of Americans revealed to pollsters that they judged the problems of American cities to be “essentially insurmountable” (Gale 1996). The official response to the riot, Rebuild Los Angeles (later known as RLA), was a private organization that looked to incorporate America to redevelop riot-damaged areas. Whereas the Watts riot had spurred federal agencies to grant more anti-poverty funds to Los Angeles than any other city, RLA was a proudly market-oriented solution to the economic crisis of South Central (Hahn 1996: 82). “RLA is not government, it is not laws, taxes, and courts,” boasted RLA literature, adding, with a touch of grandiosity, that RLA represented “the only predominantly private-sector response to civic crisis in history” (Zilberg 2002: 192). Unfortunately, the private sector was not quite up to the job. RLA had hoped to attract and manage a \$6 billion corporate investment in the inner-city, but instead devolved into a tiny non-profit organization that brought together businesses in self-help networks (Cannon 1999: 370, 586; Gottlieb et al. 2006: 178–83). When businesses did sprout in South Central Los Angeles over the next decade, they were often small businesses launched by Latino entrepreneurs rather than large-scale corporate enterprises – part of the ongoing “tropicalization” of the inner-city (Cannon 1999: 585–6; Davis 2001: 63–4).

The Rodney King riots did provoke an ironic realignment of Los Angeles politics, delegitimizing the very mayoral regime that the Watts crisis had helped launch into power. Tom Bradley, elected by a black-Jewish-liberal coalition that lasted almost two decades, declined to run for another term, and was succeeded by Republican Richard Riordan, who peeled away enough Anglo voters with a law-and-order promise to expand the LAPD without raising taxes (Cannon 1999; Gottlieb et al. 2006). Riordan’s law-and-order campaign underlined yet another ironic outcome of the riots: although the Rodney King *beating* cost Daryl Gates the approval of Anglo Angelenos, his base of support, the Rodney King *riots*, swept into office a tough-on-crime mayor who enlarged the LAPD and gave his support to anti-gang injunctions in areas like Pico-Union, formerly riot-torn and now the site of aggressive police surveillance (Zilberg 2002).

Yet the LAPD continued to be battered by a cascading series of scandals – first, the malfeasance of detective Mark Fuhrman in the O. J. Simpson case, then the discovery of widespread corruption within the Rampart

Division’s anti-gang unit. When the Department of Justice investigated the LAPD it found a “pervasive pattern” of constitutional-rights violation, and forced a consent decree upon it, mandating an independent monitor to track compliance. The 2000 consent decree counts as one of the most impressive, if oblique, consequences of the Rodney King riots; arguably for the first time since 1923, when a city charter amendment made the job of Chief of Police a civil service position, protected from the influence of the mayor and city council, the LAPD was forced into an arrangement where it could no longer run itself with a free hand (Cannon 1999: 55; Boyer 2001). Scholars would do well to explore how the LAPD evolved under the pressure of the consent decree (currently renewed through 2009), a historically novel instrument of police reform since adopted in Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and elsewhere. Progressive Angeleno activists, meanwhile, were perhaps the most consequential and organized group of people who refused to press the snooze button. At first, the riots had prompted many advocates of social and racial justice to fear “death by globalization”: it seemed that international capital would continue searching for the cheapest labor possible, undercutting wages for those at the bottom, while a well-educated, high-income American elite would retreat to their suburban fortresses (Pastor 2001: 269). Moreover, the riots had exposed and exacerbated the disunity among non-Anglos in Los Angeles, and the “human relations” model for building interethnic alliances – with the premium it placed on empathy and mutual understanding, and with its reliance on elite dialogues – seemed too weak to dissipate the tension in the air (Pastor 2001: 269, 278; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Responding to this crisis, community and labor organizers began to rethink the possibilities of the terrain. A new labor-Latino-progressive coalition emerged out of a series of concrete campaigns focusing on the struggles of the working poor: an expansive living wage campaign, union drives among home healthcare workers and janitors, the fight for affordable public transportation spearheaded by the Bus Rider’s Union, and more. Umbrella organizations like the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) challenged and redefined the term “new economy,” which conventionally conjured up images of hi-tech workers telecommuting to work in a newly rootless world, insisting instead that the new Los Angeles economy be tied to community needs for decent-paying jobs and environment-friendly practices. (Pastor 2001: 278; Gottlieb et al. 2006). The election of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, a former labor organizer and community activist, has spurred many in this coalition to imagine Los Angeles as a “laborator[y] of progressive policy reform” – even (gasp!) a “livable city” for all its inhabitants (Gottlieb et al. 2006: xxiii). It remains to be seen how this progressive coalition, pieced together in the aftermath of the riots, will reshape the city now that it is no longer in the opposition, and whether its achievements will be exportable to cities across the US, but there are grounds for cautious optimism.

Why Isn't Los Angeles Burning?

Reversing the question usually posed by social scientists, urban historian Michael Katz (2007) has asked, "Why aren't US cities burning?" After all, young people in the inner-city continue to receive inadequate healthcare, attend underfunded schools, suffer police harassment, and languish in minimum wage jobs; income inequality has risen sharply since the mid-1960s, and the spatial concentration of poverty has only intensified. Katz's answer is threefold. First, a new "ecology of power" has allowed minorities to inherit city governments at a time of urban stress, while white flight has meant fewer boundary conflicts within cities themselves. Second, American power-brokers have learned to "manage marginalization" – to selectively incorporate a minority elite into public and quasi-public employment; to institute window-dressing reforms like the Rebuild Los Angeles organization; to depoliticize minority groups by speaking to them as consumers above all; and to militarize policing, so that many young blacks and Latinos have found themselves on a fast track to prison and disenfranchisement. Third, those in power have incorporated immigrants into the workforce and, more ambivalently, into the body politic, using the vulnerability of illegal immigrants to leverage social control.

Katz's provocative question is a useful pendant to any investigation of the Watts and Rodney King riots. His equally provocative set of answers focuses our attention on the price of civil peace, a price admittedly much harder to measure than the damage caused by rioting (though we might begin tallying the latter with the annual bill for incarcerating non-violent offenders). Like other American cities, Los Angeles has generally opted to contain rather than solve its profound issues of social and economic inequality, so it continues to live on the edge of another riot. When Villaraigosa first assembled his mayoral team, he asked everyone to watch *Crash* (2004), a film that follows a diverse ensemble of Angelenos as their ethnic and racial resentments move from a slow simmer to a rolling boil. Not long after the inauguration – certainly not long enough for Villaraigosa to savor the euphoria – the mayor received a report that Latino and black students were at each other's throats at a local high school, part of a rash of such incidents, and so rushed over to calm the situation (Gottlieb et al. 2006: xvii; Fabienke 2007). One imagines that Villaraigosa felt a chill – the shadow of the Watts and Rodney King riots hanging over the city – after what had promised to be a bright morning.

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