



AN UNBROKEN CHAIN REACTION: LOS ANGELES AND THE LA RIOTS

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On April 29, 1992, a riot (eventually dubbed the LA Riots) commenced in Los Angeles, lasting six days. One catalyst to this six-day riot was the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department officers for their brutal beating of twenty-five-year-old black man Rodney King, which occurred in March of 1991. On that day, fifteen white police officers surrounded King after a high-speed car chase. As Brenda Stevenson writes, these officers “supposedly feared that Rodney was a dangerous man, high on PCP”; however, “blood tests later proved that King was indeed drunk ... but he did not have any other drugs in his system. As for his ability to inflict harm, King was not armed and did not have any weapons in his vehicle” (Stevenson 2013, 283). The officers involved later testified that they could not subdue King and thus found it necessary to use force. As Stevenson states here, King was driving drunk and attempting to evade the police; however, he possessed no weapons to use against the fifteen officers that swarmed him, suggesting that the officers’ use of force was deployed for reasons other than King’s supposed threat. The beating that King sustained was also videotaped by bystander George Holliday, who happened to be on his apartment balcony in view of the altercation. Min Hyoung Song recalls that “[t]he footage is grainy, but it is still easy to make out the slashing motions of the batons and the foot that seemed to come down on King’s neck after he was subdued” (Song 2005, 69). King’s injuries were lengthy: “nine skull fractures; a broken leg; a shattered eye socket and cheekbone; a concussion; injuries to both knees; and nerve damage that left his face partially paralyzed for the remainder of his life” (Stevenson 2013, 283). The videotape of this beating was soon playing on television sets across Los Angeles, the United States, and then all over the world. King’s beating became a symbol of police brutality in the United States, and the popular opinion was that the officers who participated in this beating would inevitably be prosecuted to the fullest



extent of the law—there was video evidence, after all. Nevertheless, all officers were acquitted of assault and use of excessive force by a nine-person, “predominately white, suburban jury” (Morrison and Lowry 1994).

Rioting began soon after the verdict was announced. Protests, violence, looting, and arson spread across the city. Much of the rioting took place in Los Angeles’s South Central neighbourhood, an area negatively associated with gang and drug activity as well as poverty and violence. The National Guard was called in on day two of the riot, and there was a curfew instituted for all Los Angelenos. Mark Baldassare describes the rioting as “a series of destructive outbursts” that “began with black crowds expressing outrage over trial verdicts, followed by black youth violence against the police and white motorists, and escalating into the burning and looting of buildings” (Baldassare 1994, 12). Min Hyung Song complicates this perspective by explaining that “the ethnic and racial diversity of those involved in the riots belied easy racial dichotomization. Many Latinos were involved in the violence both as looters and vandals, and they were operators of small businesses that were looted and vandalized. There were also whites who joined in substantial numbers the black and brown bodies taking to the streets in protest” (Song 2005, 9). Though the racial politics underlying the rioting was complex, the damage done was straightforward: 3,600 fires had been started or had caught, 1,110 buildings were destroyed, and 4,500 businesses were looted, destroyed and/or damaged. More than half--two thousand and three hundred--of those businesses were Korean owned (Stevenson 2013, 280). The seemingly targeted nature of the destruction of Korean-owned businesses is connected to yet another catalyst for the LA Riots—the murder of Latasha Harlins.

Latasha Harlins, 15, was murdered on March 16, 1991— mere weeks after the Rodney King beating—at the Empire Liquor Market in South Central. Harlins had an altercation with the shopkeeper, Soon Ja Du, who thought Harlins was trying to steal a bottle of orange juice. Harlins had the money for the orange juice clutched in her hand, but this was not visible to Du. Store surveillance footage shows Du grabbing Harlins by her sweater, and Harlins responding by hitting Du with her fist twice, which knocked Du to the ground. Du then threw a stool at Harlins, took the orange juice from her hand, and Harlins turned to leave the store. With Harlins’s back to her, Du reached under the counter and pulled out a handgun, shooting Harlins as she walked away. Harlins was hit in the back of the head, and the shot killed her instantly. The surveillance video footage of Harlins’s murder circulated with the King footage, further wounding a black community that was already reeling. Du was eventually charged with involuntary manslaughter and argued that she acted in self-defense. On November 1, 1991, she was convicted of involuntary manslaughter. The maximum sentence for this charge was 16 years, but Du served no time: “The judge



rendered a sentence that was one of the most lenient imposed on a felon convicted of voluntary manslaughter with the use of a gun in California that year: no jail time beyond what Du had served prior to her release on bail, payment of Letisha’s funeral expenses, 300 hours of community service, and five years’ probation” (Stevenson 2013, xvii).

This lenient sentence created a spark that ignited into a flame as the King verdicts were handed down. The complex interplay between these respective verdicts fueled the fires that would become the LA Riots. The socioeconomic issues present in South Central as well as many other sections of Los Angeles were also crucial factors in producing this wide-spread and destructive level of protesting and rioting. The Harlins and King verdicts became exemplary of the devastation these communities had delt with for decades. Stevenson posits that the LA riots “undoubtedly resulted from the sense that there were many community injustices,” injustices such as “high unemployment and underemployment that led, in part, to competition across racial and ethnic lines for limited job opportunities; A lack of education, health, and housing resources” as well as widespread police brutality that disproportionately effected communities of color in Los Angeles (Stevenson 2013, 287). The City of Los Angeles spent a great deal of time post-riot rebuilding and rebranding the city, holding hearings and creating committees to examine the cause and effects of the riots. Many have argued that this effort was for naught. In March of 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that “since 2018, 13% of people fatally shot by LAPD officers were Black, and 67% were Latino” (Chang 7 Mar. 2021). These already high numbers are occurring in a city that is only “9% Black and 14% Latino” (Chang 7 Mar. 2021), indicating that the core issues of police brutality and socioeconomic disparity have still not been addressed decades later. Despite the fact that LA Riots have become a central part of the city’s DNA, history repeats and repeats.



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