
**"GO AHEAD AND KILL
US, WE'RE ALREADY
DEAD..."**

**—YOUNG LATINO
PARTICIPANT IN THE 1992
LOS ANGELES UPRISING AS
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SMOKE & ASH: A LATINO WRITER LOOKS BACK AT THE 1992 LOS ANGELES UPRISING

LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ

In 1956, when I was two, my family emigrated to Watts from the Texas/Mexico border area. Although I spent my teen years in neighborhoods just outside of East Los Angeles, in 1973 I moved back to South Central LA where I later lived with my first wife, fathered two children, and began work at the Bethlehem steel mill in Vernon, once the country's largest industrial community. I even ran for the Los Angeles School Board in 1977—the only one from Watts of dozens of candidates.

From my current home in Chicago, I watched the fires that consumed miles of Los Angeles and other American cities the day a jury in Simi Valley declared four police officers innocent of excessive force against Rodney King.

Fire for me has been a constant metaphor, the squeeze of memory against the backdrop of inner city reality. I was 11 years old when the 1965 Watts uprising tore through my old neighborhood. In 1970, at age 16, I participated in the Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War—the so-called "East LA Riot"—which exploded when sheriff's officers and police attacked demonstrators, leaving at least three dead and much of Whittier Boulevard in flames.

So watching LA burn again was nothing new nor surprising. Yet the spray of TV images and the reportage which followed failed to jibe with what appeared on the streets or with what I knew. To me this wasn't about blind rage. It wasn't about "race" or "crime"—America's twin

fears. It wasn't just about Rodney King.

Unlike 1965, the recent events cannot be isolated to Blacks. Latinos were heavily involved. Whites and Asians from Fairfax, Westwood and parts of the San Fernando Valley also took part. In fact 64 percent of the violence occurred outside of South Central LA.

In cities across the country, all kinds of people led protests against the Rodney King verdicts—an issue on which most Americans agree on regardless of color.

Blacks were at the heart of this rebellion, but it quickly became the first "multi-cultural" uprising in the country. The driving force was economics. The swathe of flames traversed a course toward the more affluent areas—the targets were the most exploit-

LUIS J. RODRIGUEZ is an award-winning poet, journalist and critic. His writings have appeared in *The Nation*, *Los Angeles Weekly*, *The Chicano Reporter*, *Playboy*, and *CENTRO*, among others, and in two collections of poetry. *Always Running: A Memoir of LA VIDA LOCA*, a book about growing up in Watts and the East LA area is forthcoming from Curbstone Press.

ative markets, liquor store and businesses. Instead of "criminal looting," I saw people trying to obtain some basic necessities which have systematically been denied them. One TV image stays in my mind: Two mothers, brown and black, putting shoes on their children amidst a smoldering ruin. Yet "race" continues to be rammed down our throats.

Los Angeles is perhaps the most multi-ethnic city in America. But Latinos were still the most consistent group in almost all the communities affected by the violence. While Blacks are largely absent outside of South Central, Latinos have sizable numbers in the San Fernando Valley and even Hollywood—once almost all white. In fact, "Koreatown" is almost 70% Latino, with a per capita income less than South Central. The U.S. immigration authorities must have known the importance of this—they rounded up hundreds of Latinos for deportation during the uprising, placing the Pico-Union community in a virtual state of siege.

Yet most of the media reports have made the role of Latinos incidental or excluded it entirely. I even saw images on TV where reporters talked about "black youth rampaging" but the faces were mostly brown. By making this a "black riot," by using outdated terms and models from 20 years ago, they distort the true significance of the uprising—and its

ramifications for the whole country.

The stage for Los Angeles 1992 was set even before the Watts rebellion. Relations between police and the South Central community have always been tense. In 1965 when police arrested Marquette Frye, the unrest it sparked was the culmination of years of abuse and humiliation (see Robert Conot's *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness*).

The communities across the Alameda railroad tracks from Watts were all white then. My brother and I, at the ages of 9 and 6, once crossed the tracks into South Gate to shop for candy and milk; five white teenagers promptly jumped on us and threw us over to the other side.

The African American, Latino and Anglo communities, despite the industries which pulled them together, were alienated and isolated from one another.

But things have changed since then.

For one, Latinos now make up almost half of South Central's population (South Gate has only a few white families left—most of Southeast LA now consists of Latinos).

Also in 1965, there was a relative prosperity in the country. After the Watts uprising was quelled, the government was able to infuse the community with programs; allocations of federal funds grew from some \$10 million prior to the rebel-

lion to about \$5 billion in 1967. A new structure of poverty programs stabilized a level of leadership for the next 15 years. Nationally, the Civil Rights Act of 1965 served as the last major structural reform in America.

Police power in Los Angeles, however, became more sophisticated, more intense. After 1965, the LAPD instituted the nightly eye-in-the-sky helicopter probes that continue to this day. The department built a computerized system in the basement of Parker Center which details every street, every alley, almost every nook and cranny in Los Angeles, for quick and efficient deployment of force. The aim: No more Watts Rebellions.

Suddenly, drugs appeared on the scene on a vast scale. A long-time Watts resident told me "downers were standing up on every street corner after 1965." Heroin, PCP and later crack moved through South Central in successive stages. Whatever one may believe about the origin of illicit drugs, it always seems to proliferate in poor communities after they've tried to fight back.

Before Watts exploded, I also recall there was a low level of gang activity. The Slausons, Gladiators and Bishops were around, but they weren't as organized nor as longstanding as the barrios of the Mexican community—some which originated in the 1920s. Then by the early 1970s, skirmishes

involving a group called the Crips hit the streets. I know—I was a member of a gang in the San Gabriel Valley at the same time. In the jails and youth detention centers, we all knew about the various Crips formations. The Bloods soon followed as an amalgamation of groups such as the Brims and Pirus. Soon the devastation that would make Los Angeles the gang capital of the world flowered.

Efforts to unite the gangs in both the Mexican and African American communities were often undermined by well-timed, highly-precise “drive-by” shootings. I’m convinced they are the work of trained police personnel. Police have never talked about uniting gangs to stop violence—it’s always been to destroy them, even if they do so by killing themselves; gang unity can’t help but be directed against police. Violence, then, is not an issue for law enforcement—they can live with the kind of violence that has claimed hundreds of inner-city youth over the last ten years.

Aftermath skirmishes from the recent uprising involved the police breakup of gang members who are now rallying to celebrate unity. In one instance, in the Jordan Downs housing project in Watts, police swept through as gang members were heard yelling out “Peace, peace!” Still the rally was disrupted and some 30 youth arrested.

Since the 1960s, police abuse cases escalated, some went to court—but still no real justice. I myself participated in protests surrounding the deaths of Danny Garcia, Randell Miles, and a few others killed by LAPD or sheriff’s deputies. I myself had four of my closest friends killed by law enforcement officers before I turned 18. And beside a beating and arrest during the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in East LA, I also sustained other attacks, including a 1973 arrest for allegedly assaulting a peace officer after being jumped on by eight sheriff’s deputies one night in the parking lot of an after-hours club in Norwalk (another time, another story).

Over the years, there developed a tightening of a police state in Los Angeles. The LAPD was neither beholden to nor accountable to any elected representatives or city officials. There was no “public power” capable of curtailing the police. They ran the department with impunity—dangling the power of life and death over our communities.

Over the years, several groups tried to initiate a civilian review board, without great success. Eventually the community obtained an injunction against the use of the deadly choke hold, a leading killer of black males (although Chief Daryl Gates claimed Blacks were more susceptible to the hold because of their anatomically different wind-

pipes!)

The Coalition Against Police Abuse was formed and became a leading force in documenting and protesting abuse. Sometime between Watts and today, instances of police brutality became full-fledged police terror—a systematic, orchestrated pattern of control. The LAPD’s “Operation Hammer,” with the use of an armored battering ram, resulted in the rounding up and detention of more than 50,000 South Central youth (see Mike Davis’ book *City of Quartz*). By the time Rodney King was stomped on by Foothill division police, and captured on video tape, so many people, mostly African American and Latino, had already been beaten or killed.

Underlying all this were some deep economic transformations. The once industrial prowess of the city had been significantly sliced. For decades, the people of Watts, East LA and the formerly white Southeast LA fed into the industrial belt which ran some 20 miles from Vernon to the LA Harbor. In the 1980s, factories closed in rapid order. The Goodyear plant (in the middle of South Central), as well as Firestone and Goodrich, were shuttered. The South Gate General Motors plant and Ford’s Rico Rivera plants were closed also. And American Bridge and Bethlehem Steel (where I worked for four years) followed suit.

There had always been

high unemployment in South Central, but with the loss of some 100,000 jobs in the span of a few years, it soon passed the 50 percent mark in some areas.

Complicating the situation were the large numbers of undocumented immigrants arriving into the community. The tensions between Latinos and African Americans worsened; some Blacks saw the newly-arrived Mexicans and Central Americans as taking their jobs and their livelihoods. Many Asians set up shops in the area as well. It appeared that African Americas were being pushed aside while newly-arrived immigrants set up businesses and found work.

Unlike other groups, however, the Latino undocumented workers in South Central were just as poor as the African American. They worked, but for far less money. They had larger families to feed and often ended up with about the same yearly income as a family on welfare. Still, with the increase of Korean-owned businesses, the tensions in South Central appeared to be cut along race and nationality lines—but the underlying impulses were predicated on class.

Last October, during the Rodney King brutality trial, the *Los Angeles Daily News* reported that 57 unarmed citizens, mostly Black and Latino, had been killed by the Los

Angeles County sheriff's department in 1991. Four of the cases were brought to civil suit—but later lost. Also Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old black girl, was shot in the back after an argument with a Korean store owner over an alleged stealing of orange juice. Although this was also videotaped, the store owner received five-years probation! So when the police acquittals came in the beating of Rodney King, they came on top of a mountain of unjust verdicts.

The uprising became the first social response to an economic revolution that began years ago. While there's great abundance in this country, it is increasingly inaccessible to millions of Americans. From 1977–1987, the average after-tax family income for the lowest 10 percent of the population decreased by 10.5 percent. But for the top 10 percent, it had increased 24.4 percent—for the top 1 percent, it increased 74.2 percent! (see *The Politics of Rich and Poor*, by Kevin Phillips).

President Bush promptly called the violence "the brutality of a mob" and deployed federal troops to LA. It's evident that anything which challenges the economic and political underpinnings of poverty in America will be severely dealt with. A little more than a year after the debacle of the Persian Gulf war, the same guns are being turned against Americans! The "New World

Order" is rapidly coming into focus.

Now there's a clamor for action by Bush and other presidential candidates, there are calls to give Rodney King his justice but also for more police to control "the mob;" there are efforts for so-called "healing" and "cleaning up," but it appears to be only a concerted push for more family strengthening and increased moral education—all the apparatuses of control are being rushed into motion to stop any more LAs from happening.

But again—this is not Watts 1965. Today the gap between wealth and poverty has significantly widened—and this is changing the temper of our times. Though words like "race," "riot" and "lawlessness" are thrown about, they can't adequately describe the economic basis and class nature of recent events.

If we are to truly understand the implications of what happened in Los Angeles, we have to look closely at these and other critical issues representative of a new era—including great possibility—in this country. There just won't be any peace—in spite of all the armies, all the propaganda, all the code words to the contrary—until these great possibilities are equally and justly the providence of all. ■