

Trying to Make It:
The Rise, Collapse, and Attempted Revival of the American Dream during the 1992
Uprising in Los Angeles

By: Tommy Nguyen

Introduction

“We are not thugs. We are respectable residents. We vote, we raise our children, we send them to school, we teach them right, we take them to church, we try to participate in the American Dream”¹

-Maria Stanley testifying during the Webster Commission community hearings about the 1992 Uprising

The words of Maria Stanley, a resident of South Central Los Angeles that witnessed the 1992 Uprising first hand, are words that many residents of Los Angeles and the United States understood. The “American Dream” is not a new concept but one that was revitalized during the pursuit to make Los Angeles the capital of the world in the 1980s and 1990s under Mayor Tom Bradley’s administration. Equal opportunity to achieve the highest aspirations one can dream of was what every member of Los Angeles strived for. The success of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the first to make a profit, guided the rise of Los Angeles toward a true metropolis. Los Angeles was pitched as a trans-national city that represented the harmonious integration of immigrants and ethnic communities. The city would also be protected by the “best” police force in the country: the Los Angeles Police Department. This image was a facade for the underlying racial, economic, and geographical issues the city faced under a police department unable to adapt to the racial and cultural shifts of the city. Immigrants integrated into South Central Los Angeles, where declining jobs and rising poverty heightened ethnic tensions between the Korean, AfricanAmerican, and Hispanic populations that resided in a neglected and over-policed area. It was in this setting that the dreams and visions of the immigrant populations, city leaders, and police authorities would see a collapse on April 29, 1992. The culmination of all of these issues

¹ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.2. 9 Sept. 1992. pp. 167.

flared into a week long destruction of Los Angeles after four white police officers were acquitted of beating motorist Rodney King.

The 1992 Uprising was a flashing point not only caused by the “not guilty” verdicts of the police officers involved in the Rodney King beating, but also a “history in the middle” that was the culmination of neglect and disillusion of the inequality and boiling tensions of Los Angeles. The violence and destruction of the uprising, while severe, was absorbed by local community members as another day in racial injustice and a flashback to the 1965 Watts Uprising, a previous uprising in the Watts area of Los Angeles caused by police brutality. Through primary sources from the Webster Commission Community hearings, recorded interviews with residents and elected officials, films and literature inspired by the events in 1992, and various secondary sources, this paper analyzes the 1992 uprising from the perspective of what city officials and residents hoped Los Angeles to be before the uprising and their hopes of recovery from the ashes.

The Pursuit of the American Dream in Los Angeles

Life Magazine defined Los Angeles in the 1990s as “the dreamland” where “the belief that a dream or an idealized version can be imagined or proclaimed into existence.”² Los Angeles was founded upon this belief and the aspiration by city officials to make the best city in the world. Mayor Bradley’s ambitions allowed Los Angeles to become the host of the Olympics in 1984. The leadership of MLB Commissioner Peter Ueberroth made the Olympics the most profitable sport event in history with a surplus of 222 million dollars.³ Along with the revenue

² Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp. 8

³ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp. 7

that brought millions into the region and global recognition of Los Angeles, it prompted the vision of Mayor Bradley for Los Angeles in the form of the LA 2000 Committee. This 85 person committee would go on to discuss issues of growth, education, and infrastructure within the city in optimistic terms, declaring “Los Angeles will be *the* city of the 21st century.”⁴ Yet Los Angeles was still not in the utopian state that Mayor Bradley envisioned it to be. The LA 2000 Committee planning was an example of what Bradley wanted to see Los Angeles as: a city that led the world in social and technological advances. The culmination of all of these efforts from the Olympics to the development of the downtown area was meant to put Los Angeles toward the “brink of a great destiny,”⁵ as Bradley described it.

This overly optimistic approach toward leading the city was paralleled with the perspective of Police Chief Daryl Gates on the Los Angeles Police Department. Despite the restrained resources and funding from the city, the LAPD under Daryl Gates, embraced the “thin blue line” mentality of efficient, aggressive policing that made the department the “best in the world.”⁶ This precedent of greatness came from the previous police chief, William Parker, who overturned city corruption and made the police department “an honest and elite force” through proactive policing and separating authority of the police away from the city.⁷ These two perspectives and philosophies by Chief Gates and Chief Parker were intended to make a police force that could protect the growing city and prevent the corruption that plagued the city

⁴ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.7

⁵ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.1

⁶ “Interviews - Daryl Gates | PBS - L.a.p.d. Blues | FRONTLINE.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2001.

⁷ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.74.

administration at the time. Unfortunately, the stubbornness of these visions added to the negligence to confront many of the issues in the city directly. The leadership of the city, along with the actions of an extremely proactive police force, had high hopes and dreams for Los Angeles. These hopes and dreams were a part of the community that the police were supposed to protect, immigrant communities like the Koreans.

The Korean community numbered around 140,000 in Los Angeles County in the 1990s. Many of them faced tremendous culture shocks and participated in extensive labor and management to earn a living.⁸ The grocery and liquor stores vacated by predominantly Jewish owners after the 1965 riot came into the hands of Korean realtors that aggressively advertised the stores to Korean immigrants, who lacked the full understanding of the cultural differences that would plague many of these businesses.⁹ The stores were a means for many Korean families to set up a way of life and living for their families and children especially. The convenience stores also disrupted a gendered family structure as Korean women entered the workforce as store managers.

The documentary “Sa I Gu” explores this phenomenon by featuring Korean women’s voices during the uprising, who believed family security and an environment of growth for children were the greatest reason for moving to the United States. This reason is universal to many immigrants, but it created a new family structure for Korean households. Korean women immigrating to Los Angeles in the 1980s and 1990s came from a household of domesticity and emerged in the United States as merchant owners or factory workers in the garments district of

⁸ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 10.

⁹ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 9.

the city. This major shift in gender roles appealed to some women attempting to leave a patriarchal family structure in Korea. While the comfort of domesticity was substituted for long hours for many Korean women, the opportunities provided for children proved much more bountiful. Scholar Edward Taehan Chang explains the motivation for Korean families by using the concepts “han and jung.” In working hard to “make the American Dream come true,” Korean families could express “han.” While working together through rotating money systems to support a group of friends and friends through the concept of “jung,” investments could be made that helped create the 3,300 Korean owned convenience and liquor stores in Los Angeles.¹⁰ These terms have no literal English translation but the term “han” ties to experiences of hardship and oppression while the term “jung” is tied to feelings of love and support. The combination of these philosophies served as a coping mechanism for the culture shock of working and living in American society that helped many Korean families earn a living for their children. The investment of time, money, and energy into these commercial properties made these stores an extension of the family household where family members worked together. The stores represented a pursuit of the dream to establish financial stability that children could use to learn and eventually move on from. This dream was not isolated to the Korean-American community, but extended to the other major communities in Los Angeles, including the African-American and Hispanic communities. Unfortunately, all three communities faced consequences of a disillusioned police and city administration that left ethnic tensions and economic turmoil simmering.

¹⁰ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.113

Disillusionment and Inequality within the Ethnic Islands of the City

The Korean Americans were not the only communities with dreams of greater opportunities in Los Angeles, nor were they the only ones to suffer from the hardships within the city. The African-American community in Los Angeles has faced a tumultuous history with the Los Angeles Police Department, especially in South Central. In the city W.E.B Du Bois once called the “new promised land,”¹¹ economic disparities and discriminatory housing policies clustered much of the poor African American community alongside newly immigrated Hispanic communities and Korean store merchants. Despite optimistic estimates for the future by Mayor Bradley’s LA 2000 Committee, the end of the Cold War meant the loss of 140,000 aerospace jobs in California from 1988 to 1983.¹² These jobs added to growing unemployment, especially in Los Angeles where the poverty rate increased by 50 percent in comparison to the static national rates.¹³ The symptoms of poverty were not new in South Central Los Angeles, as economic tensions had sparked the previous 1965 Uprising. The difference at this point was the new ethnic shifts that intensified community tensions. The image of Los Angeles as a harmonious city of immigrants and diversity was quickly contradicted by the Korean merchant and African American customer relationship that created stereotypes and resentment between the two communities.

Evidence of these tensions can be found in the testimonies by the Community hearings of the Webster Commission. Gail Smoot, a resident of South Central Los Angeles and the mother of

¹¹ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

¹² Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.8

¹³ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.11

three children, testified that the community “is our community. We’ve been here for years. The Koreans have not been here for years. They came into our community. We did not go into their community.”¹⁴ The lack of inter-racial harmony and alliance is further expanded by Smoot with discussions of job tensions and Koreans “taking over our community.”¹⁵ With the economic tensions over jobs and major cultural differences between Koreans and the African American community persisting down to the linguistic level, stereotypes and flare ups often occurred inside the Korean stores.

The killing of 15 year old Latasha Harlins by store owner Soon Ja Doon has become remembered as the most infamous tragedy between Korean and African American relations that intensified the inter-ethnic resentment. The incident represented a breaking point in the hopes and dreams of both Harlins and Doon. The life of Latasha Harlins was one of great hardship and difficulty that reflected many families in South Central Los Angeles. The prospects of moving to California for a better life for African American families were hampered by growing economic hardships and the rise of the crack cocaine epidemic. Despite the murder of her mother and disappearance of her father, Latasha Harlins struggled to pursue her dreams of becoming a lawyer.¹⁶ These dreams, like the ones of her mother and grandmother, were in constant tension with her broken family life and traumas of death in the family. Only 56% of Black families in the 1980s were reported to have been nuclear, consisting of both parents and children.¹⁷ The rise of single mothers also resulted in stereotypes of “welfare queens” that Soon Ja Doon believed. Doon

¹⁴ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.2. 9 Sept. 1932. pp.162

¹⁵ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.2. 9 Sept. 1932. pp.162

¹⁶ Stevenson, Brenda E. *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp.49

¹⁷ Stevenson, Brenda E. *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp.27

confided to her to her probation officer of her opinions that “blacks were lazy and used welfare money to buy liquor instead of feeding their children”¹⁸ The perspectives of Doon seeing the ethnicity of her most common customers negatively and the perspective of many African Americans seeing the rise of Korean stores as intruding into the community broke the image of racial harmony in Los Angeles. The tragic killing of Latasha Harlins further intensified this image when Doon was charged with manslaughter, but the charge was reduced to a menial sentence of probation and community service. The injustice that African Americans witnessed from the justice system through the Latasha Harlins killing and the beating of Rodney King reinforced their oppression under surrounding businesses as well as the police force.

The aggressive strategies by the Los Angeles Police Department may have helped counteract limited manpower and resources in the form of the proud phrase “thin blue line” but contributed to an oppressive police state for many African Americans. The 1992 Uprising was a manifestation of the frustrations against the city and police department by the minority members of Los Angeles . This flash point escalated into city-wide destruction as a result of the development of negligence by the police and city that exacerbated ethnic tensions. Los Angeles resident Thomas Florio expressed his feelings on the uprising during the Webster Commissions community hearing, stating, “it doesn’t really matter what the response was on April 29th. Obviously the problems have been around this neighborhood for a very long time.”¹⁹ Poor responses by the police in South Central were common from delayed response times to excessive uses of force by poorly trained police officers. The police department was characterized as a

¹⁸ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.112

¹⁹ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.3. 10 Sept. 1992. pp.215

“racist, militaristic police force”²⁰ that had many of its issues with training and bureaucracy summed up in the case of police officer Lawrence Powell. Powell, the officer that struck Rodney King first during his arrest demonstrated failure to correctly use his baton during an inspection the morning of the beating.²¹ Despite this failure, Powell was able to continue his shift with limited training and guidance under the Los Angeles Police Department. The image of the “best police department” in the world by Daryl Gates had long been undermined by internal politics and limited funds. More officers interacting with the local community in South Central were considered as “a rookie that’s been on the job for two weeks” in the eyes of a local resident.²²

Collapse

With all of the issues and problems the city leadership of Los Angeles ignored in the pursuit of achieving the city’s greatness, the 1992 Uprising destroyed not only this image but many of the dreams of the city’s residents. The verdict of the charges against the four officers by the jury of “not guilty” was called a “modern-day lynching”²³ by civil rights activists. Despite the verdict sparking community outrage, it is clear that the 1992 Uprising was a week-long destruction years in the making by systematic inequality and negligence. The uprising in Los Angeles from April 29th to May 10th was documented to have killed 52 people and caused as high as 1 billion dollars in damages.²⁴ Years of labor and work turned into ashes or looted out stores for nearly 400 Korean liquor businesses, the controversial properties that Koreans used to

²⁰ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

²¹ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.46

²² Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.1. 8 Sept. 1992.pp.23

²³ Abu-Lughod, Janet L. *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

²⁴ Stevenson, Brenda E. *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp.299

fund their dreams but unfortunately were seen to be a symbol of the broken relationship between African Americans and Koreans. Korean businesses made up 400 million dollars of the damages with up to 2,000 businesses destroyed or looted.²⁵ This day would be known as “Sa I Gu” for many Korean Americans. The store was more than property for many of the families. The gamble to purchase the store property was a risk these families took to participate in their version of the American Dream. In a interview with a Korean women storeowner three months after the destruction of her store she stated, “America is mi-gook, how could be this mi-gook?”²⁶ The term “mi-gook” means beautiful land in Korean. The transformation of the root of the word becoming a derogatory term against Asians and the shock of the Korean store owner at how America could be a “beautiful land” is a tragic irony. This reflects what the 1992 uprising has done to the dream of many Koreans trying to make it in America. The course toward this dream for Korean Americans was one that could not be committed while ignoring the plight of life in South Central Los Angeles. It proved too late to many Korean Americans what Scholar Edward Park refers to as an “ethnic bubble” of livelihood and the way dreams cannot exist in a city like Los Angeles. However, the destruction of the American Dream was not isolated to Korean Americans, but all residents of Los Angeles.

The lack of leadership and preparation by the LAPD allowed the escalation and ultimately the destruction of South Central Los Angeles. From the community hearings to the official Webster Commission, these sources point to the absence of Los Angeles police during the initial flashpoints of the uprising on the street corner Florence and Normandie that proved detrimental to stopping the uprising before too much damage was caused. The Webster

²⁵ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.46

²⁶ Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women’s Perspectives. Center for Asian American Media, 1993.

Commission states the city had “no city wide planning effort, no specific coordination with county, state, and federal authorities and indeed, no event-specific planning within the LAPD itself.”²⁷ This planning or coordination failed within the highest levels of the LAPD. As Reverend Carl Washington put it during his community hearing testimony, “Leadership was the problem.”²⁸ The statement by the Commission reflected not the famous SWAT Police Metro department of the LAPD, the nationally implemented DARE Program, or the proactive policing that had overcome a heavily understaffed and underfunded department, but instead the negligence and disillusionment with lack of police leadership for the severe issues in the city.

At the moment of the initial flashpoint of the uprising, Chief Daryl Gates was on his way to a fundraiser in Brentwood to support a charter that would have shattered his vision of the LAPD. Charter Amendment F was a pending city charter that aimed to limit the term of the Police Chief and subject the LAPD to more civilian control.²⁹ This was something Chief Gates and his predecessor Chief William Parker stood firmly against, as to them the LAPD was an independent, uber-efficient department that should be left to its own accords. Very few leaders in the LAPD wanted to start a riot, but the disparity between their individual visions of the police department and the actual inability to plan ahead left them mistaken that the LAPD could handle anything if a riot were to occur without planning or preparation. This disillusionment contrasted with many of the rank and file officers ready to go back to Florence and Normandie and stop the destruction, who were held back by orders. For many of the officers that did serve to protect their community, the destruction forever changed their personal belief about the Los Angeles

²⁷ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.265

²⁸ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.2. 9 Sept. 1992.pp.146

²⁹ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.300

Police Department. The push to make bureaucratic victories ultimately failed to win the community and instead allowed communal frustration to turn into city-wide devastation.

While the uprising began primarily with African Americans against the rest of the community, many other groups joined in the looting of the stores around South Central Los Angeles. With television news helicopters being more active than police helicopters, footage of the initial flare ups of the uprising from the beating to Reginald Denny to the looting of Korean owned Tom's Liquor store were shown extensively on television. Newsanchor Ted Koppel described the news as "the carrier of a virus" that perpetuated the looting and arson during the uprising.³⁰ As the uprising continued, the members of the Latino community began to participate in the uprising. While most of the three million Latino residents did not participate, many that did "lived in unstable neighborhoods and had been born abroad."³¹ It was the most vulnerable and impoverished members of the Latino community that participated in the looting for essential goods and supplies denied to them by the failure of the economy. The demographic of these looters consisted of mothers and young immigrant families. While the actions of the Latino community may be seen as theft or looting, their responses are natural. In times of distress, Latino mothers and families reported that they acted only as if they had "been in their homelands after a raid by a government or rebel army," taking necessary groceries items.³² The response of gathering essential supplies during violence is a human action. They were trying to survive a conflict escalated by police brutality and failure. For many of these Latino families, they were

³⁰ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.347

³¹ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.338

³² Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. Pp. 338

taking advantage of opportunities opened by the lack of police in an attempt to solve the poor pay they received. This observation made the looting and destruction much more preventable as police presence would have been enough to prevent much of the looting. The culmination of all of the struggles by Koreans, African-Americans, and the Latino community was the 1992 uprising that police failed to respond to. The ash-filled sky of South Central Los Angeles was the destruction of the possibility for accomplishing dreams for Korean merchants. It was now out of the ashes of the uprising that new dreams and hopes were made by the city and people to rebuild.

Successes and Failures of Revival of Los Angeles

The revival of Los Angeles after Mayor Bradley lifted the curfew over the city on May 10th, 1992 was overly optimistic, inhibited by internal politics, and in the end simmered away from the city leadership point of view. Mayor Bradley introduced the “RLA” or “Rebuild Los Angeles” initiative and gave control over to the idealistic Peter Ueberroth of the 1984 Olympics to head the task force in charge of revitalizing the still smoldering city. The initiative started off quickly with weekly announcements from RLA of inner city investments including “\$5 million from Nissan for economic development in South Central, \$100 million from the Vons Companies to build new supermarkets in the inner city.”³³ These investments were supposed to make the necessary calculated 6 billion dollars needed to revitalize the communities hit hard by the uprising. 12 weeks after the uprising, 500 million dollars and 10,000 jobs were committed to support South Central Los Angeles.³⁴ This initiative through the trust of private investments and idealistic gestures of supporting a burnt out city ignored several key issues. Companies were

³³ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.361

³⁴ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.361

pulling out jobs from the city while they were committing money and more jobs at the same time.

Furthermore, Ueberroth was ignorant of the needed local support in the area for small businesses that made up the backbone of South Central. Grandeur investments were not needed but capital and security to rebuild. The constant uproar and vision of the rich building up the poor blinded Ueberroth of the real issues that the residents need to fix. In the end, Ueberroth resigned as the head of the task force, leaving another dream of making Los Angeles great victim to the negligence of listening to the actual needs of the people.

The Koreacommunity was devastated after the civil unrest and destruction of their community, but it sparked a dedication to break out of their “ethnic bubble” and become a more involved member of the city. Asian American Studies Professor and Scholar Edward Park states “the most significant Korean American response to the civil unrest was the emergence of a new leadership that would shatter ethnic insulation for political participation and grassroots engagement.”³⁵ The uprising shook what Koreans in Los Angeles expected from the government. The delayed, non-existent police presence when Korean stores burning to the ground marked what Korean times reporter Soon Cho called a “betrayal by the police.”³⁶

The 1992 uprising represented a critical shift in what it meant to be Korean in Los Angeles. The destruction of the Korean community resulted in Korean Americans “born out of the ashes of the Los Angeles riots.”³⁷ As the uprising necessitated Korean American

³⁵ Park, Edward J. .. “From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble: A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles.” *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 38, no. 1, Asian American Studies Center, Jan. 2012.

³⁶ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.336

³⁷ Park, Edward J. .. “From an Ethnic Island to a Transnational Bubble: A Reflection on Korean Americans in Los Angeles.” *Amerasia Journal*, vol. 38, no. 1, Asian American Studies

representation, the “1.5 generation” in the Korean American community came to become a prominent voice in political advocacy. Koreans that were born in Korea but grew up in the United States and could English well like Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim became influential figures that advocated on behalf of the Korean community. These Korean figures came to become their greatest strength from previous immigrant generations as they can more effectively “attempt to participate in mainstream politics.”³⁸ The success of the leadership from members of the 1.5 generation allowed multiple Koreans to enter the political mainstream and create the framework for greater political strength and representation.

Along with community success from the Korean Americans, the Latino community began to grow and brought along with it economic growth, cultural flourishing, and political representation to the city of Los Angeles. The recession in California after the end of the Cold War was countered with increasing spending and production power by Latino communities that slowly began to add small businesses and homeowners into South Central Los Angeles.³⁹ This input of business and spending counteracted the failure of the RLA in bringing corporate investments into the inner city. Instead, it was grassroot investments from young immigrant families that helped spur growth. This in turn helped contribute to political action by the Latino community, considered a “sleeping giant” finally awoken by the controversial Proposition 187 that would deny medical and educational benefits to illegal immigrants.⁴⁰ Latino voter turnout

Center, Jan. 2012.

³⁸ Park, Edward J. .. “Friends or Enemies?: Generational Politics in the Korean American Community in Los Angeles.” *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 22, no. 2, Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers, June 1999.

³⁹ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print.pp. 585

⁴⁰ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print.pp.586

grew rapidly and as political leaders saw the importance of the Latino vote, the Latino community became a major electorate in city politics for Los Angeles. This optimism of growth and representation was good news for both the Latino and Korean communities after a very devastating uprising, but this success was not as universal as the destruction of the riot.

Shattered Dreams

Despite the calls for change and action that did occur for some communities, Los Angeles saw yet another wave of broken dreams for many prominent individuals from the 1992 uprising as well as a lack of reform immediately after. The story of Rodney King, a central figure to much of the events in the 1992 uprising story, continues to be one of tragedy as his hardships and suffering did not end after his encounter with the police. The video of his beating was used “like wallpaper” according to Ed Turner, executive vice president of CNN.⁴¹ The videos of Rodney King’s beating and of the fires of Los Angeles played non stop throughout every single news outlet. It gave the media greater agency and control over the narrative than Rodney King or the people of Los Angeles. King never envisioned that night to turn into global news. He was a man scarred with history and after the uprising continued his alcoholic ways. The growing numbers of incidents did not help him when he battled legal issues for compensation against the city. Ultimately, his message of unity and reconciliation during the uprising failed to stand in the city. Instead, King was immortalized on television as a symbol of racial injustice and a polarizing symbol of the broken relationship between police and African Americans.

For some the 1992 violence and destruction was not a surprise but a wake up call to change a police force disillusioned by its once highly esteemed reputation. After the violence and

⁴¹Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.21

media coverage showed a complete failure of police presence, “morale of the police has gone down.”⁴² This drop in morale affected the police department and its officers in multiple ways. The once aggressive and proactive “thin blue line” of officers instead acted as a force dedicated to prevent the next Rodney King incident. Officers were recorded leaving their infamous PR-24 batons in their police cruisers that were used in the Rodney King beating. This level of mortality broke many of the visions officers had when joining the “best police department in the world.”⁴³ The Los Angeles Police Department was a separate entity dedicated to professionalism and stayed away from the corruption from early politics in Los Angeles. This narrative of independent authority and effective policing changed as the world transformed in front of the LAPD. An unaccountable police force that allowed “official negligence,” as journalist Lou Cannon describes, roamed freely in departments in the form of officers like Laurence Powell, who eroded the image of the LAPD until the videotape of the Rodney King beating confirmed that the LAPD was not the police force for the people.⁴⁴ A testimony from resident Henry Terrell at the Webster Commission called the uprising “an aberration. Their response was normal.”⁴⁵ Significant police reform would not occur until the next century, the time former Mayor Bradley saw as the point when Los Angeles would be fulfilling its great destiny. The police department and city leadership failed to hold the city’s issues accountable before their dreams of what Los Angeles could be. The city shined just as bright during the 1984 Olympic games as it did in 1992

⁴² Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.545

⁴³ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.71

⁴⁴ Cannon, Lou. *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1999. Print. pp.593

⁴⁵ Los Angeles Webster Commission Records, Community Meeting No.1. 8 Sept. 1992.pp.43

when it burned. The destruction and despair from the uprising, just like the Olympics, was transnational, unifying the city in both dreams and nightmares.

Conclusion

The 1992 uprising has been remembered in different ways since it rocked the core of the city and its people. The millions of people in Los Angeles remembered where they were when the city was filled with smoke. Lives separated by wealth, race, class, and location saw the same images of the city. Some were shocked, others not surprised, and some dreamed of a better future for the city. This dream is not new. It was a dream that belonged to every resident of Los Angeles. The failure to recognize the city's problems shattered the dreams of the city and thousands of Angelenos during the 1992 uprising. Many residents were not receiving the same benefits across the city and were instead given an oppressive police force full of bureaucratic negligence that generated police officers unfit to serve the city of Los Angeles. Almost 30 years have passed since the 1992 uprising but national turmoil and anger today at police and government leadership questions if this dream will ever occur. Until the needs of the people are met and the same dream can be achieved by all of the residents, the 1992 uprising will not be the aberration it seems to be.

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