

Reading Between the Lines

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Riot Diary, Part I

I was a young reporter for The Fresno Bee newspaper when the riots — or uprising, as it was termed by some — went down, and I covered the events in Los Angeles. What follows, in three installments, are my recollections and reflections on what happened during that week in LA. Perhaps equally important are my memories of being an African American woman reporting on the most devastating race riot of my generation. In journalistic terms, news coverage of the Riots brought to the surface long-simmering class and race divisions within the industry. Ten years later, we may well ask what lessons, if any, major news organizations took away from their coverage of Los Angeles during that fateful week.

Los Angeles, April 29, 1992

We plunged out of the Tehachapi Mountains as dusk deepened to blue night, the Chevrolet Lumina moving swiftly toward South Central Los Angeles. Once out of the San Fernando Valley on the San Diego Freeway, we saw splashes of flames between buildings, wisps of smoke here and there.

I was with two others in the car, a woman reporter riding shotgun and a male photographer behind the wheel. Two hours earlier we had sat in a fluorescent-lit newsroom 250 miles north of Los Angeles. Now I rode in the backseat of a silvery-blue sedan hurtling south from Fresno toward disaster. Radio antennas bobbed on the car, giving the mid-sized Chevy the look of an unmarked police vehicle. I wondered if this could be a problem.

Four white Los Angeles cops had been acquitted of criminal charges in the 1991 beating of an unarmed black motorist named Rodney King. The jury in Simi Valley had returned the verdict at 3:45 p.m. Ten minutes later, by electronic message, I flippantly told my editor at The Fresno Bee newspaper that I'd volunteer for "riot duty."

By late afternoon the flat San Joaquin Valley and the silent Tehachapi Mountains stretched between me and the nation's largest civil disturbance in history.

Realizing we needed to spread out, my reporting colleague — a white Los Angeles native — parted ways with us just north of the sprawling city. Taking one of the two bulky, first-generation cellular phones we'd brought, she set out for the Civic Center driving a rented white Chrysler LeBaron.

The photographer, a Chinese-American man I'd known since college, steered our car toward South Central. Emergency sirens sounded. Loose knots of people formed at corners every few miles. The radio announcer's voice rattling from the Chevy dashboard reported looting at downtown stores.

I had covered disasters before, natural and social, in cities across America. The rush that always preceded my covering calamity wasn't new, and the urgency of this story was unmistakable. Yet, as we neared the University of Southern California exit, something not easily recognized spiked the familiar adrenalin high. The idea of confronting a full-scale urban uprising brought queasy twitching to my stomach.

I wondered if there would be shootings, firebombings or mobs clubbing bystanders at random. But it was more than that. Something else had brought anxiety, a prickly pear I didn't want to handle. This denial troubled me further. Finally, my concentration drifting from the map opened across my lap, I owned up to what troubled me.

What if I became suddenly incapable of separating my feelings as a liberal, African American woman from those of my objective, professional self? Could I agree with the crowd's anger without endorsing its actions? Is this what's referred to in those laborious newspaper seminars as an "ethical dilemma"?

I hoped I was ahead of myself. We still hadn't confirmed widespread mayhem or the fierce race riot I envisioned. The photographer turned up the volume of a local radio news program. We listened.

Every few moments, breathless reporters from Simi Valley to Long Beach filed live reports describing small crowds gathering in streets. A Los Angeles Times building was hit, the culprits making off with a few computers. In the hours since the verdict came in, the Civic Center had drawn hundreds of angry, chanting people.

From above South Central, a helicopter pilot described watching black and brown residents yanking white-looking motorists from their cars and beating them at the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues. A firefighter aboard an engine racing to a burning building had been shot. Mayhem.

I struggled against obsessing myself into panic. We had about an hour to find the action in South Central, interview residents, police, fire officials and get to the Associated Press office at Second and Figueroa Streets downtown. From there, we would transmit the story to Fresno.

Pulling into the intersection of Normandie Avenue and LaSalle Street, about four miles away from Florence Avenue, we realized we'd somehow missed our mark. Turning back wasn't an option. We watched a crowd gathering along a commercial strip.

A furniture store and an apartment building were ablaze. Firefighters, stunned by reports that they were being shot at, positioned their engines between themselves and the crowd as they worked to extinguish the flames. We parked a half-block away on LaSalle, locked the car, and stood looking a moment toward the intersection at Normandie Avenue.

The photographer, like me, was a native San Franciscan. We had gone to the same university, circulated in the same tight circle of twenty-something Bay Area print

journalists. During college and afterward, on the streets of Berkeley, San Francisco and Oakland, demonstrations, protests and marches were regular assignments for us.

We had both recorded the sweeping momentum that often overtakes public protests. We talked quickly of the potential danger his ethnicity — Chinese American — presented in this situation.

He buckled the clasp of a small canvas pack tightly about his waist, its generous pocket fitting snugly against the small of his back. He slid it around to rest below his abdomen. Inside: A lens, and a few rolls of film.

A 35mm camera, heavy with a flash and lens, hung over his left shoulder. I knew that he would keep an elbow or fingertip discreetly pressing the camera's nylon strap to his side whenever he wasn't shooting.

I slipped a narrow notepad into the back pocket of my Levis and held a black ballpoint pen in my hand. I turned forward on my head the bill of the black San Francisco Giants baseball cap I wore. The night air was warm, but I snapped shut the windbreaker I'd put on.

Looking up, I watched the horizon take on a peach-colored glow. The sounds of scattered yells and sharp concussions of breaking glass grew louder. We walked quickly out of the residential neighborhood and toward the intersection of Normandie and

LaSalle. There was no longer any time for searching, of maps or of souls. Los Angeles was on fire, a disaster in the making. I was there to chronicle the calamity.

Stocky fire engines blocked the street directly in front of us, their beige canvas hoses snaking toward a pair of burning buildings that fronted Normandie Avenue. The photographer stepped gingerly toward the engines and I followed. All around us, men and women circulated. Standing with my back to the fire engines, I watched the crowd. It was small and fluid, numbering between 50 and 75. Most appeared to be young adult men; most looked black or Hispanic.

Some stood facing the engines, watching the flaming spectacle. Others moved anxiously between the street and sidewalk, with several young men shouting "F--k the police!" or "Rodney King!" or "No justice, no peace!"

As I took in the scene, a white television cameraman came lurching up the street. Looking over his shoulder, he moved quickly, a heavy video camera swinging from his hand at his side rather than from atop his shoulder as it should have been. Two young black men followed closely behind him, yelling as they closed in. One reached out and pushed the cameraman.

The cameraman stumbled, his face red and stunned. He kept walking, though, and the tense procession moved down the block, out of sight. I met the eyes of the Fresno Bee photographer. We exchanged an "oh, s—t" look and kept silent.

Uniformed police officers, their black and white cruisers idling nearby, stood at the end of the block. I veered over to speak with them, walking deliberately near the engines in the street. I stopped to speak with a white officer (I didn't see any black cops). I wanted to know the police department's direction – would they arrest looters or fire starters? How many arrests had they made thus far? Did he know of any officer-involved shootings? Leaning against the grill of his car, the officer smiled at my questions. He couldn't comment, he said, because he wasn't a department spokesman.

I looked over his dark blue uniform, its steel handcuffs, gun and wood baton clanking slightly when he adjusted his weight. A white helmet obscured all but a crescent of his face, and his eyes were light. He seemed interested in the activity, but was firmly planted well away from it. The radio at his waist began squawking. Turning his back to me, he reached for the handset that dangled from a cord strung over his shoulder. I walked away.

Returning to the blaze, I found on the other side of one fire truck a tall African American firefighter. Beneath his helmet, Michael White looked upset. He told me he was frustrated with residents who had thrown rocks at his engine as it raced here. And how can they burn their own neighborhood, he wanted to know. He had worked in the 22nd Company for fifteen years, was himself an Angeleno. White told me he understood the impetus, but didn't agree with the way residents chose to express their anger with the verdict.

"Black people work in these businesses, too, and now they'll be unemployed," White said. A tail of flame licked from the furniture store in front of us, and White returned to his work.

A few doors away from the fire, a trio of young black women huddled. Walking toward them, I noticed their appearance was at odds with the neighborhood: they wore expensive, carefully urbanized clothing topped by even complexions and smoothly permed hairdos.

They were students from Claremont College, a private university in suburban Southern California. One of the women, a 27-year-old named Michelle, told me she had driven with friends into Los Angeles earlier that day. She didn't want to talk about the looting, preferring instead to vent about the outcome of the trial.

She was angry, she said, and believed that not even her expensive college education promised to keep her as-yet unborn black sons safe from white policemen. She lived in a world far different from those who lived in this neighborhood, but felt the helpless outrage nonetheless. "We have to spend our lives conditioning ourselves to walk and talk a certain way around white people, especially police," she said. "This shit's got to stop somewhere." Her friends didn't want to talk, and so we parted ways. I walked to the side of the street where the crowd gathered.

At Jax Liquor Store at LaSalle and Normandie, a young Hispanic man held open a security grate. Dozens more black and brown people stood behind him, urging him on in amused, hurried voices. Another youth slid beneath the grate and into the store, the plate-glass door having been shattered. Seconds later, boxes of goods — laundry detergent, diapers and snacks — came flying out of the store's broken windows. Slipping and sliding on the slick

concoction of spilled detergent and soda pop that drenched the sidewalk, dozens of people stooped to pick up the goods.

I approached a woman who stood a few feet away from the orgy. Her name was Marie LaMoy, and she had lived in this neighborhood since 1968. A bump the size of a large marble had sprouted above her left eyebrow. She had been hit with a bottle earlier this evening, she told me.

A light skinned Hispanic woman, LaMoy's face was the type that might have been full and open under normal circumstances. But here she was agitated, nursing the lump on her head and scanning the street as we spoke. Like the black firefighter, she was angry and frustrated. Unlike the fireman, LaMoy admitted that she was afraid, too. Afraid that

she, or her friends or family, might be killed in the impulsive violence. LaMoy was in her fifties, and said she had raised her twelve children in this neighborhood.

"Where are we going to shop now? What's going to happen if the stores here burn down?" LaMoy asked. I took notes quickly, holding the notepad down at my hip. Mindful of the surrounding action, I noticed a tall slim black man walking slowly by us.

He passed, but then stopped a few feet behind LaMoy. He doubled back. When LaMoy turned away for an instant, the young man sidled next to me. Looking at my notepad, he asked what I was doing. Told him I was a reporter from Fresno, and wanted to know what people thought of the verdict. We looked at each other in silence for a moment.

He took in my brown skin and black baseball cap; I noticed his fade haircut and baggy jeans. Leaning down, he looked right into my face. "Reporters haven't had much luck around here tonight," he said. "No kidding," I said, and slipped the notepad back into my Levis. He walked away, looking over his shoulder at me as he went. Marie LaMoy and I remained talking there a while longer. Finally, she said she had to go home, where her youngest children waited. They had wanted to come out into the roiling night, but she had told them all to stay in, promising that she would look over the mounting melee and return directly. By now she had seen enough.

Glancing at my watch, I realized our 10:30 deadline was dangerously close. I looked for the photographer, becoming nervous in the few moments when I didn't see him. At last he emerged from the direction of the fire engines.

We walked toward the car, but he stopped suddenly. He wanted to go back and photograph the firefighters a bit longer. He handed me the car keys, told me he needed five minutes, and turned away. I didn't say it, but I worried about him being alone. He looked anxious but determined. Starting again for the car, I saw two Hispanic women walking slowly toward me.

One of them, an elderly woman in a flowered housedress, held a foot-long wooden crucifix in her hand. The second woman was her granddaughter, who told me her grandmother had insisted on coming outside.

The old woman stopped at the corner holding the crucifix outstretched before her. She spoke in Spanish, and her face was lined with the years. She chanted, the cross wobbling before her, her eyes squeezed shut. I asked the younger woman what she said. "She is praying for an end to the violence," said the granddaughter. I watched them until the younger woman, her eyes flitting over the landscape, guided the old woman back down the street.

I unzipped a narrow black canvas case and flicked the switch of a rickety laptop computer nicknamed "Trash 80." The photographer steered us out of the neighborhood and toward the Associated Press newsroom. I wanted to describe all that I had seen, wanted to dump into the portable resting across my knees every quote, every single image I had gathered. But I knew that whatever I filed would be spliced together with my colleagues' report, and those of Associated Press reporters. Choosing portions of my interviews with LaMoy and the firefighter, I melded them into a short story of the street scene. On the city desk back in Fresno, a white male reporter awaited our stories. I typed rapidly while the photographer drove. From the dashboard radio, the announcer told us that Mayor Tom Bradley had declared a local state of emergency.

Inside the Associated Press offices downtown, we reunited with our fellow Bee reporter. The scene at the Civic Center had been bedlam, she told us, where Angelenos of every stripe had toppled large buses, burned kiosks and shattered windows. Within an hour we filed our stories, then spoke by phone with the editors in Fresno.

They told us to find a motel a reasonable distance from the action, and to book at least three rooms for the remainder of the week. More reporters and photographers were being dispatched tomorrow, and we were to remain in Los Angeles for at least the next few days. Before leaving Fresno, we had hurriedly packed overnight bags.

We grabbed phone books and filtered between the main newsroom and an anteroom, where a large television set showed live reports from the streets we had just left.

Some television reporters, apparently carried away by the moment, used the words "rampage" and "savages" to describe the street action and those who carried it out. By midnight, at Mayor Bradley's behest, Republican Governor Pete Wilson told the National Guard to deploy 2,000 soldiers. Sinking into a low armchair, I watched the press conference. The adrenalin buoying me ebbed gently, though the newsroom buzzed with activity.

Reporters and photographers streamed in to file their stories and photos. Most reporters, selfish louts, don't often think of the crucial role the AP plays in disasters. We believe newspaper publishers and owners simply pony up their membership fee each year,

enabling us to grab stories and photos from the wires that clatter away dependably in our far-flung newsrooms.

But during those four days in 1992, when much of Los Angeles was a battlefield, the AP became an efficient, friendly, surrogate newsroom. Clean bathrooms, safe parking places, food that is at least halfway healthful and reliable phone lines are rare when covering calamities. We were silently relieved knowing the AP provided the resources we needed to write stories, develop photos and transmit them all unhindered. While gathering the news was difficult, we were never without top technical support.

Pouring over a phonebook in search of a hotel, I heard my name spoken across the newsroom. Looking up, I saw another reporter I knew, a white woman journalist from Bakersfield, walking toward me.

We were good friends, and laughed at the sight of each other: My baseball cap was askew, my eyes bloodshot from the smoke of fires. Her shoulder-length blonde hair hung in thin wisps, her flat black shoes were scuffed. She told me she had left her newsroom north of Los Angeles along with a woman photographer shortly after the verdicts were read.

Like my team member from the Bee, they had gone to the Parker Center, the city's civic buildings, to record the action. Thinking it would be safe, they parked their company's white Chevy Blazer on a downtown street, well away from the fracas. As the night wore on and the furor transformed and spread, the two women realized they had managed to let the crowd get between them and their vehicle.

When police in riot gear finally shooed demonstrators away from the Parker Center, the two women raced back to the Blazer. Circling the vehicle slowly, they were speechless. Every window was smashed, a huge dent sank the hood as if someone had leapt onto the truck and jumped up and down.

Two expensive camera bodies were stolen, along with the dashboard radio. My friend had left her purse inside and now it was gone. She was penniless, without identification and 150 miles from home.

By phone we secured three rooms with two beds each at a motel in Hollywood. Some other out-of-town newspapers were buying rooms in the big hotels near the AP offices in downtown Los Angeles. We worked for the McClatchy Newspapers, however, a mid-sized chain as notorious for its persistently tight hold on money as it was for the occasionally world-class journalism its papers produced. We told the Bakersfield team they were welcome to stay with us, at least until the next Bee team arrived Thursday.

Just after midnight we piled into the Chevrolet Lumina and the rented Chrysler and sped north on the Santa Monica Freeway, the helicopters, sirens and tufts of smoke falling away behind us. We saw few cars on the freeway during the short trip, a rarity for Los Angeles even at this hour. Stopping a few miles later at a convenience store off Hollywood Boulevard, we bought provisions: Beer, cigarettes, trail mix, water and beef jerky.

At the motel, my colleague from The Bee turned in. A 15-year veteran reporter, good-natured and disciplined, she was better than us at shutting down the high. I went down the walkway and into the room with the Bakersfield team. We sat watching television and drinking beer until exhaustion overtook us. At two a.m. I headed back to my room. The roller coaster would start again in a few hours.

We had laughed, told war stories and drank much beer. But I did not tell the women how off-kilter I felt, how shocked I was by the hopelessness I had watched erupt down there on two short blocks of Normandie Avenue. We had relived the night without mentioning our fears, though we had them aplenty. I held mine close, knowing they would careen through my psyche even in sleep. My fears involved lurid, disruptive snapshots of black people run amok, enraged and self-destructing. I was distressed by the uncounted damning images of Menacing Blacks that I knew were flooding America's television screens through the night. What kind of impression would these pictures leave? True, the anger was genuine, out there on the street, and yes, the resulting violence was deplorable. But the black and brown folk who hit the pavement following the trial were not animals — they were frustrated Americans exercising their right to protest. And while I didn't agree with the destructive lengths they reached, I understood the deep anger that led them to jump the chasm from protesting to pillaging.

At the same time, I imagined that my white reporter comrades, however liberal, however tied to me by a fierce, reckless love of our work, had nightmares of a different sort. Deep doubts had been present in that hotel room with us on that first night, flitting, opaque specters of how we each view blacks and whites as separate groups, rather than as individuals.

Generational memory awakened within each of us by the day's events was best ignored. A long week stretched ahead of us, and we needed each other too much to risk opening wounds that don't always heal.

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