

## Reading Between the Lines

*Amy Alexander*

### Riot Diary, Part I

Late that night, I walked with the Bakersfield team to the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. The day had taken on a carnival atmosphere. For hours we had circulated among hundreds of smiling, laughing people who carted away thousands of dollars in merchandise from South Central businesses. Genuine anger at the verdict had given way to sheer opportunism, bringing a calculated tone to the proceedings that was somehow more disturbing to me than the first night of raw, reactionary violence. But a rhythm had taken shape within me, a give-and-take of high energy and steady concentration that I needed to gather and report the news. I didn't spend much time analyzing how I felt.

The story I filed Thursday night described the shop owners and looters I had met during the day. I was careful to write that people of all races and backgrounds had been among both groups.

My colleague had written the lead story, an overview of the damage, police and political response, and portions of my reporting on the street scenes. I filed a sidebar on the merchants and looters we had interviewed. The second Fresno Bee team had arrived mid-morning, and they would work through the night.

One of our sister newspapers, the larger, wealthier Sacramento Bee, also sent teams. We smirked when they arrived at the AP on Thursday afternoon. They towed a photo technician, an expensive Macintosh color workstation, and thousands of dollars in camera equipment. We knew they had been beaten badly by their less-glamorous sister, and they knew it. The McClatchy Newspapers and its syndication wire had been one of the first news services from outside Los Angeles to send live reports to its subscribers all across the Western states. Those early stories carried the bylines of Fresno staff writers, meaning we had flown the company's flag on an important story, not Sacramento. We greeted each other warmly anyway.

Now I sat with a small group of reporters and photographers in a plush hotel lobby a block away from the AP. The high ceiling and wide room sent our voices echoing above us.

Few hotel guests passed through the generous room though it was not yet midnight. The bar was quiet, but for our loud conversation. Two men, both white, both wearing jeans and khaki vests with puffy pockets, joined us. One of the photographers told us he worked for the AP. Tall and thick, with rusty blond hair and wire-rimmed eyeglasses, the photographer said he lived in the Midwest, and had been assigned to Los Angeles this week. He had covered several international conflicts before, including most recently the Gulf War. He was cheerily ironic, even when describing how close he had come to death.

Idling at a busy intersection in South Central late Wednesday, the photographer told us he had found himself face to face with a black man. The photographer told us the black man pointed a gun through the open driver side window of the photographer's rented car. Without a word, the photographer handed up a camera.

Both arms outstretched, the man had reached for the camera with one hand, and cocked the hammer on the gun with the thumb on his other hand. The photographer hit the gas pedal, hearing and feeling an explosion just beyond his ear. The rear passenger window behind him shattered, and a whiff of gunpowder swept through the car as he sped away.

The photographer swigged from the green bottle he held in his hand. Later, we stopped in the AP's parking lot and looked at his car. The rear passenger window was gone, and tiny cubes of glass glittered on the backseat and floor. He told us he was scared shitless, much more so than he had ever been at any war zone. Before leaving the bar, he asked us if we wanted to see a photo of his wife and family.

After passing around the picture, the photographer sat quietly for a few moments, holding his wallet opened on his lap. He lingered over the photo, his wife and children smiling up at him from the plastic sheaf. We all knew his thoughts were at home during that moment. I wondered what he thought of the black gunman.

During the next 48 hours, the street action moved north and west, waning slightly as it spread. By Sunday, police arrested more than 600 looters. City officials estimated that 850 families were left homeless. At least 45 people were dead. Damage in South Central and in downtown climbed toward one billion dollars. I carry a thousand mental snapshots from those days, a kaleidoscope of sounds, smells and images:

We stopped into several shops with the words "BLACK OWNED" spray-painted out front. On Crenshaw Boulevard, as convoys of olive-green Army vehicles rolled down the street, we watched people scatter from the smoking mini-malls where they clustered. A Thrifty Drugstore flamed weakly, its broad roof listing into the remainder of its crispy, failing walls. At one supermarket that had not burned, a long line of residents formed. A manager and several employees stood at the door, letting customers enter one or two at a time.

Power was out at the market, and perishable goods like meat were given away. Some enterprising residents moved along the tense line, hawking T-shirts that read "By Any Means Necessary" and "F--k the Police."

Some residents told us they didn't think it was an accident that police seemed to step up their work as the looting and burning moved out of South Central and turned toward the wide streets of West Hollywood and the glittering shops of Beverly Hills. On a side street off Sunset Boulevard, we stumbled upon a police operation where a half-dozen officers smashed into an apartment at a run-down housing complex. With guns drawn, they had busted a stolen goods safehouse.

One of the officers told us they had been waved down by a resident who reported two men, one with a gun, fighting in an apartment at the complex. The officer told us the two men had worked methodically for hours looting nearby shops, and storing the goods in this apartment.

But as they appraised their take, the two men began arguing over the merchandise, and soon their fight escalated to gunfire. When the officers kicked in the door, they found an apartment crammed full of television sets, microwave ovens and stereo equipment. The officers caught one of the two men and yelled at him as they arrested him, their knees pressing the man's torso against the pavement in front of the apartment building.

"We get it for not being tough enough on them, and we get it for being too tough on them," one cop said to the other. The officers were frustrated because they had been instructed to hang back on the first night of the violence. Now they felt they were behind the curve, one step short of the momentum that drove events.

At a post office in South Central, we talked to residents standing in a long line. They seemed sad and exhausted, not at all jovial like some of the looters we met. At a gas station on Robertson Avenue near Beverly Hills, we waited an hour to buy gasoline.

On Pico Boulevard, we watched smoke dull the horizon to the west. The wide street was eerily absent of cars, and a faint outline of the sun burned through the black sky. We bumped into a white television reporter we knew from Fresno. A popular San Joaquin Valley journalist known for doing "hard-hitting investigative reports," he wore a dark blue bulletproof vest to this story.

On the fourth day, thousands of Korean, white, black and Hispanic residents marched through Koreatown in an earnest but choreographed show of healing and unity. At their businesses on the second and third days of the disturbance, some Korean merchants had armed themselves, a few even taking wild potshots at potential vandals.

During this period, the Fresno Bee photographer finally got the images he wanted. At twilight we happened upon a unit of National Guardsman aiming their M-16s at a smashed market. Hunching over, their helmets bobbing beneath the streetlights, they had surprised a large group of people who moved freely through the building's broken plate glass windows. Three guardsmen, their guns held in firing position, roamed through the business shouting at looters and pushing them out of the store.

We stood outside peering in, moving cautiously around the guardsmen and those they arrested. Within minutes, two dozen men and women lay face down in the street, the lights from police cruisers and Army vehicles sending red, white and blue color across their faces. They were all Central American immigrants, and told the officers they did not speak English. The photographer angled about them, working the scene silently.

Stepping across ground glass and up to the store window, the photographer stopped a few feet from a young guardsman. The soldier held his weapon at shoulder level, his eye

squinting down the barrel and into the open window. Behind him, red firelight framed the street. Other guardsmen yelled at him, but the photographer stood fast and aimed, capturing the soldier's profile, the bashed building, and the turmoil of the night around him.

On May Day, we went to the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. A mainstay of the city's black community, it curved along a steep street overlooking South Central. The church basement had been converted to a shelter, and we moved carefully between rows of cots. I talked with several stranded residents, most of them elderly or women with children. Along the sidewalk in front of the church, we mingled with well-heeled African Americans who arrived there as if drawn by a beacon.

Black actors and musicians, many of them members of the prosperous church, moved between the basement shelter and the building's adjacent offices, conferring with Rev. Cecil Murray and with city officials by phone.

Ted Koppel was preparing to broadcast live from the First AME, and dozens of reporters and photographers mixed with residents, city workers and church members who gathered all around the large sanctuary and offices. Shari Clements, a 29-year-old woman, told me she felt compelled to leave her Hancock Park home and come to the church. "My people are not animals," said Clements. Adjusting her sunglasses, she told me she felt depressed by the violence, saddened by the waste she had seen.

Yet, she understood the anger and admitted that the verdict had reminded her of her own vulnerability. Guilt had emerged as well, pricking the bubble of security that encased her upscale life. She had made it, had graduated from Howard University, lived in a nice home in a comfortable neighborhood, worked a well-paying job in the entertainment industry, had a husband who loved her. But now she upbraided herself for not being more involved in the poorer black communities.

She told us she would begin doing volunteer work right this moment, said she planned to start a carpool service for elderly black residents whose homes and businesses had burned. "White America cannot understand. This verdict is the straw that broke the camel's back," Clements said. And then she repeated: "My people are not animals."

I thought about Shari Clements as we drove back to the Central Valley on Sunday night. I recognized the emotions she described, and her words gave focus to feelings I had ignored while working the disaster, I thought of young blacks I knew in San Francisco who lived in neighborhoods similar to South Central. I knew former classmates who in all likelihood would have joined in the free-for-all, young adults from whom I had distanced myself over the years. Why did I feel like a sell-out?

At the newsroom in Fresno, other reporters had questions of their own. What was it like? Were we afraid? How were we able to work amid all that gunfire and violence? We answered them politely, but I felt irritable. Emotions that I'd bottlenecked all week began uncorking within me. I wanted to bathe in my own apartment, play with my cats and stare at the walls. I needed time alone.

Moving away from the small group and over to my desk, I glanced over the previous days' newspapers, curious to see how our stories had played. The first day stories covered the front page under a headline that read, "Los Angeles Erupts in Blood, Rioting, Burning." The front pages of three consecutive editions carried our stories above and below the fold.

The May 1 edition carried above the fold a double byline main story; a second story with my lone byline ran below. I stared down, startled by this story's headline: "Anger, hatred fuel violence."

It was the story of John Simon, Carl Price and others I had met during my second day on the scene. Someone had inserted a transitional sentence into the top third of the story, one I had not written: "But hatred for the Koreans was just another reason given by people who say it's their turn to lash out."

Reading the story again slowly, I noticed that the words "brazen" and "rampage" had also been written into the copy. I had not written those words, and I certainly hadn't described the looters as "hating" the Koreans. Like "savage," "hatred" was a loaded word, as heavy with damning imagery as a faded drawing of wild-eyed black men menacing helpless white women in the antebellum South.

But there they were in the story, sharp as gunfire: Hatred, Lash. And some unwitting copyeditor had scooped up one of them and used it in the headline. Furious, I asked the reporters who stayed in Fresno if they knew which editor had worked that story. Days passed before I got a clear answer. The story had been edited by a white assistant city editor, a man in his early thirties who had arrived at The Bee from a small paper in Wisconsin in 1991.

He did not apologize for including the language, saying only that the nightly deadline had been upon him and that he had to get the story to the layout desk quickly. I asked him whether he knew, absolutely, that John Simon or other blacks I quoted in the story really did hate the Korean merchants. They had not said they hated Koreans, which is why I had not used that word in the story. The editor ignored my questioning. What did I have to gripe about he wanted to know. I had done a great job down there, he said. We both knew it was too late, anyway. Uncounted words and images from those four days, some unadorned, some weighted with ignorance and fear, had already etched themselves into America's consciousness. Nothing I said afterward could change them.

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