The World's Greatest Vanishing Act

> By Saúl Sarabia

IT was a strange scene at UCLA after L.A.'s civil unrest began. As a fourth-year Chicano student at the university, nestled in West Los Angeles, I remember watching national guardsmen position tanks at every entrance leading into the posh shops lining Westwood Village. Meanwhile, the local news flashed the images of armed Koreans standing on the rooftops of family businesses with no protection in sight.

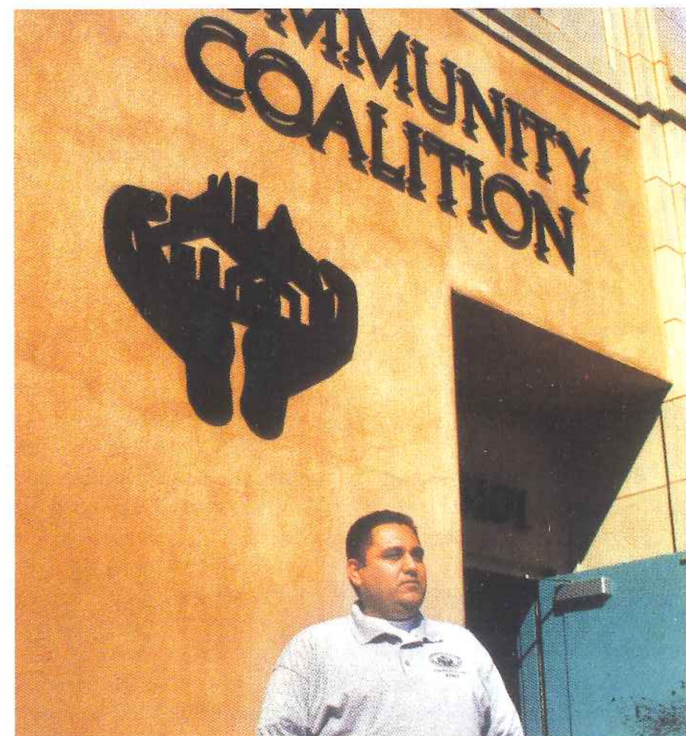
This was only one sample of the drama and irony that colored the events of the largest, most destructive and most racially-mixed civil unrest in the history of the United States. The event itself, however, came to be defined by its distortions and contradictions.

In fact, the sheer immediacy with which issues like white supremacy and economic oppression disappeared from the analysis of 1992 is an enduring legacy of the uprising and the ten years that have passed since.

Local anchors initially framed events with liberal guilt, associating the early fires in South Central to the Simi Valley verdict. There was some conceptual symmetry in the "white injustice/black rage" angle. But the images of poor Latino looters raiding supermarkets, gun-toting Asians firing their weapons, and places like Koreatown, Pico-Union and Long Beach replacing Watts as the locus of disorder complicated the scenario.

The violent beating of white motorist Reginald Denny, who was almost killed when yanked out of his truck and pelted with debris, helped supplant the liberal framework with a conservative one. "White order/minority disorder" became the new angle and could explain the varied colors and geographic diversity of the unrest that undermined the traditional white/black framework.

Once this consensus among mainstream institutions emerged, there was no hope that observers — from the millions of Angelenos trapped in their homes by curfews and fear to international observers watching the tragic events on television — might be challenged to consider the referendum that was playing out before the world.



As one of the most economically polarized and ethnically diverse metropolises went up in flames, the reality of marginalized immigrant labor, black oppression and the brutality of white supremacy was momentarily projected into three days of violence, tragedy and loss.

Like most everyone else, the day the unrest ended, I knew something significant had happened and yet felt a sinking sense of resignation when we brought out the brooms to help clean up the city. It was like using alcohol to shed your inhibitions about something you really wanted to do and then blaming your actions on a drunken stupor.

Several fictions would follow the Rodney King verdict and the multiracial unrest in order to restore the city's social order. But it was the untold facts before and during the unrest that laid the foundation for the world's greatest vanishing act.

First, the decision to move the trial of the LAPD cops, who were caught on tape terrorizing King, to Simi Valley was based on a fundamental premise of white supremacy: that white people can be objective in key institutions of governance, such as courtrooms, but people of color cannot. Simi Valley was not only overwhelmingly white, but was also a refuge for retired police officers and their families.

As L.A. burned, people questioned how the jury's decision could be possible, given the videotaped beating. But racialized tactics in changing the trial venue and in jury selection were too complex to consider.

Second, white supremacy unleashed the notion that Asian entrepreneurs, particularly Koreans, were willfully entering the country to run businesses, such as liquor stores, in some of the poorest neighborhoods to exploit minority residents, particularly blacks. This notion masked such facts as the permanence of alcohol outlets as a source of profits for the industry and lenders' biases about what types of businesses are appropriate for immigrant families.

In addition, Latinos, whose general subject position in L.A. is that we (our history, language and numbers) seem to be everywhere and yet not meaningfully engaged in civic life at all, were central figures in the unrest, but were cast as wayward residents.

Latinos were arrested, detained and deported in the largest numbers of any other group during the unrest. We interfaced with law enforcement at the height of martial law conditions and, yet, most people didn't even realize that this happened.

There were other details that captured the erased reality, even if it vanished from the mainstream radar screens. The first victim of the alcohol-fueled street justice that followed the verdict on Florence and Normandie was a Chinese graduate student, not a white trucker, but whom do we remember ten years later? The fact that, in both cases, African Americans came to their rescue and risked their lives to protect these people did little to erase the image of blacks as perpetrators of violence.

And the ultimate indignity — that one of the four black defendants convicted, the first time around, of beating Denny got a 10-year maximum sentence, while two of the four white cops convicted finally by the federal government in the King beating received 30 months — is still lost on the city.

This list of facts, erased from the official story of 1992, is mirrored in the political response to the unrest in the decade that followed. At the local level, L.A.'s decidedly Democratic electorate replaced Mayor Tom Bradley with a Republican, Richard Riordan, who declared himself "tough enough to turn L.A. around."

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On the national and state landscape, this period saw major retrenchment from some of the advances of previous social justice movements. Affirmative action was curtailed and effectively ended in public education. The rights of legal immigrants were significantly eroded in a series of federal laws, which were modeled after an infamous California ballot initiative that denied public school education and health care to undocumented residents.

While the courts struck down California's Proposition 187, some 60 percent of the state's voters had approved it, indicating that the mainstream fled rightward after 1992, as opposed to the leftward response after the 1965 Watts Rebellion.

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Of course, in all of these responses, contrived fictions clashed with reality. Immigrants from Asia and Latin America, for example, were key sources of savings in the welfare reform-driven denials of public benefits, such as food stamps.

Only through the details of the lived-in experience of everyday people can we wade through and expose the real damage done in 1992 and the last ten years.

It is enticing to characterize the content of the strife we have lived through as something having to do with vague issues like "race relations" and not racism itself. It is easier to talk about ameliorating inequality, rather than grappling with the effects of the political exclusion and social marginalization of millions of people that is inherent in class division.

But if we fail to resist these temptations, we will be just as incomplete, as individuals and as a community, as the picture that we have been fed for the last ten years.

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