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To cite this article: Darnell Hunt (2012) American Toxicity: Twenty Years After the 1992 Los Angeles "Riots", Amerasia Journal, 38:1, ix-xviii, DOI: [10.17953/amer.38.1.41017563463290q7](https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.41017563463290q7)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.41017563463290q7>



Published online: 08 Feb 2019.



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American Toxicity: Twenty Years After the 1992 Los Angeles “Riots”

Darnell Hunt

Race, for us, is like the miner’s canary. Miners often carried a canary into the mine alongside them. The canary’s more fragile respiratory system would cause it to collapse from noxious gases long before humans were affected, thus alerting the miners to danger. The canary’s distress signaled that it was time to get out of the mine because the air was becoming too poisonous to breathe.

Those who are racially marginalized are like the miner’s canary: their distress is the first sign of a danger that threatens us all. It is easy enough to think that when we sacrifice this canary, the only harm is to communities of color. Yet others ignore problems that converge around racial minorities at their own peril, for these problems are symptoms warning us we are all at risk.

—Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres

The above words open Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres’s 2002 book, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*.¹ They speak powerfully to the ways in which society’s most basic flaws are exposed by the vulnerabilities of its subordinated groups. The metaphor of the miner’s canary, I believe, is also particularly apt for helping us to make sense of where we find ourselves today in the United States, twenty years after frustration and dissent exploded so violently on the streets of Los Angeles.

The 1992 Los Angeles “riots,” as I have written elsewhere,² were popularly depicted in the mainstream media as a “black thing.” According to the conventional narrative, it was angry and disaffected African Americans who initiated the events on April 29

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when they took to the streets to protest the acquittal earlier in the day of the four police officers who had been videotaped brutally beating black motorist Rodney King. The resulting civil unrest, which the *Los Angeles Times* proclaimed “the worst riots of the century,”³ resulted in at least 51 deaths, more than one billion dollars in property damage, and thousands of arrests. The infamous beating of white trucker Reginald Denny by blacks and the targeting of local Korean businesses for looting and arson became emblematic images in mainstream news coverage of the events.

In this introduction, however, I argue that the 1992 Los Angeles “riots” were about much more than mere racial antagonism. While the racial elements were indeed quite real, they were more akin to symptoms than causes. I contend that this multiracial, multi-factor uprising—like the proverbial collapse of the miner’s canary—was an early warning of just how toxic the socio-political atmosphere was becoming in our society. Twenty years later, I conclude, even the racially privileged are beginning to feel the effects.

“The brutality of a mob, pure and simple”

The Los Angeles “riots” of 1992 clearly evoked memories of the urban uprisings of the 1960s, most notably of the Watts “riots” of 1965 and the explosion of unrest throughout the nation’s cities during the long, hot summer of 1967. Over the years, official responses to such events have been strikingly consistent: it is imperative to restore order, above all else. President George Bush’s assessment of the 1992 Los Angeles events—that they represented “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple”—reflects official definitions of similar situations before and since.⁴ That is, what might be seen as political activity aimed at reordering the status quo (i.e., as “rebellion” or “insurrection”) is instead reduced to simple “rioting,” which conjures up images of the senseless venting of frustration or simply of criminal behavior (i.e., “looting” and “arson”). The police and National Guard are thus quickly deployed to put this kind behavior in check and, with the help of mainstream news accounts of the situation, restore order.

To be sure, Dutch scholar Teun van Dijk finds that there is a common, dominant frame in use around the globe when it comes to media portrayals of such events.⁵ His comparative analysis of elite discourse reveals that the news media’s surveillance function trumps all others in the coverage of civil unrest. This surveillance function relies heavily on an elite strategy of using racist discourse in order to blame victims of societal inequities for their

own victimization and related frustrations. It is a gaze invested in focusing on symptoms rather than underlying causes—particularly those causes that might challenge the efficacy of the neoliberal, market-based logics routinely invoked by elites to justify the contemporary status quo. Thus, in the weeks following the 1992 Los Angeles events, an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* seamlessly reverts to the crime frame, despite its tacit acknowledgement of the social justice issues that drove people of all races and backgrounds to the streets: “When Violence Is Wrong: Social Injustice Is One Thing, Crime Is Another.”⁶

The consistency of elite investment in racist discourse speaks to the power (and value) of race as a central axis of social relations.⁷ From the earliest racial projects—such as the conquest of Native Americans or the establishment of African slavery—elites have promoted the idea of race in order to justify the crude division of populations into superior and inferior groups on the basis of rather arbitrary, yet socially visible characteristics. Race does not exist in nature; there is as much phenotypical difference between so-called racial groups as there is within them. Instead, race constitutes what sociologists refer to as a social construction, a category of distinction created over time through human interaction. A fluid concept, one in which assignment of racial status to particular groups and the corresponding meanings have literally changed over the years, race has nonetheless always served the purpose of stabilizing fundamental status hierarchies. In the United States, white supremacy has remained a de facto component of the social structure, despite the evolution of law and racial etiquette. This is because elites benefit from the distraction of antagonisms attributed to race; they rely upon whiteness to form a buffer between themselves and other subordinated groups that might challenge the status quo. In other words, race is essentially a mask for privilege.

Indeed, as the idea of race was institutionalized within American society, it became a key component of cultural reality, shaping the formation of individual identities—who we are, who we are not, and who we hope to be. Individuals have been socialized to police (and reinforce) racial boundaries in their daily routines, as a means of bringing order to their lived experiences. At crucial moments, the psychic compensation associated with belonging to a group defined as racially superior has motivated whites to assert a “possessive investment in whiteness,”⁸ a political stance affirming elite views of reality rather than those embraced by ra-

cialized groups with whom they actually have more in common economically. These racially subordinated groups, in turn, often invoke their own racial status in hopes of mobilizing support for collective action geared toward addressing the societal inequities they face.

Such was the case for many black participants in the 1992 Los Angeles events.⁹ And their invocation of race as a rallying point, which was reflected in the practice of guarding certain community businesses with “Black Owned” signs, resonated nicely with dominant media frames pitting angry black “rioters” against gun-toting Korean store owners. Of course, the frustration and outrage of black participants could hardly be reduced to the presence of these middleman minorities. Similarly, dominant frames that explained the events primarily in terms of criminal behavior or the widespread participation of “illegal aliens” also clouded the picture.

“Can we all get along?”

Rodney King’s plea for calm and reconciliation in the immediate aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles events was famous for its poignant message of tolerance, patience, and understanding. This simple message—like the more disturbing images of blacks beating Reginald Denny or Korean store owners protecting their property with guns—gained widespread coverage in mainstream media around the nation and globe. But the lesser-known continuation of the quote complicated King’s simple message: “It’s just not right—it’s not right. And it’s not going to change anything,” King continued. “We’ll, we’ll get our justice; they’ve won the battle, but they haven’t won the war.”¹⁰

The most obvious “war” to which King refers here, of course, involves ongoing progressive efforts to establish a legitimate criminal justice system in America—one that, for example, would convict police officers actually captured on videotape administering the kind of unwarranted beating King endured. There are broader readings of the rest of King’s words, however, readings that point to the kinds of factors sociologists often associate with moments of “collective behavior” like the 1992 Los Angeles events.

In the early 1960s, sociologist Neil Smelser proposed a six-factor model of collective behavior that, despite the emergence of some critiques and revisions over the years,¹¹ has been quite influential in our efforts to understand urban unrest. Smelser’s model represented a paradigm shift of sorts by emphasizing six necessary but singly insufficient social and material factors that

Variations of the slogan "Black Owned" appeared in store fronts in graffiti or as signs.

Store owners hoped that the identification would help save their stores from looting and arson. This was a gas station in the Fairfax district. It survived.

© Ben Higa, 1992



explained the emergence of these types of events. Four of the factors include:

- "Structural conduciveness," such as surrounding conditions, including television news about the events, that facilitate participation;
- "Failure of social control," such as the inability of authorities to maintain order;
- "Precipitating event," or the event trigger, such as news of the police acquittals in the King beating case;
- "Mobilization for action," for example, the emergence of event leaders and organizational activities.

But it is the remaining two factors that are most critical in helping us to understand the 1992 Los Angeles events. One of

these factors—“structural strains”—speaks to the causal weight of societal inequities typically minimized in the dominant, elite frames used by mainstream media to make sense of urban unrest. In the case of the 1992 events, there had been a decades-long process of deindustrialization in South Central Los Angeles, which was accompanied by a devastating loss of quality jobs in the region. The gap between the haves and have-nots widened considerably in Los Angeles, as the ranks of the working poor (e.g., Latino immigrants) and non-working poor (e.g., blacks) grew. This precarious situation was inflamed further by decreases in federal support for housing, education, and inner-city community building during the neoconservative Reagan and Bush presidencies.¹² Meanwhile, other high-profile Los Angeles court cases of the period, like the Soon Ja Du case,¹³ positioned African Americans, in particular, to feel that the judicial system failed to value black life or rights.

The final factor, “generalized belief,” refers to a common understanding of the situation that motivates potential participants to actually participate in collective behavior. My own research on how people made sense of the 1992 events suggests that there were likely several generalized beliefs in play, as it was clear from my informants that people participated for different reasons.¹⁴ That is, many African American participants clearly subscribed to the generalized belief that the system was stacked against them. Others seemed motivated to participate because they were acutely aware of their oppressed class position in America and saw the breakdown of order occasioned by the events as a chance to get more of their fair share. Still, others were veteran activists, progressives, and/or would-be revolutionaries who welcomed the societal cleavages laid bare by the events as a golden opportunity to lead participants in a movement for real, meaningful change.

In the aftermath of the 1992 events, there has been considerable debate about their societal impact. Those who subscribed to President Bush’s definition of the events as “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple” primarily saw criminal behavior on the streets of Los Angeles. In their view, event participants were “rioters” that senselessly destroyed “their own communities” and the property of others. Because California was becoming majority minority and the dominant media frame associated the “rioting” with problem minorities—particularly with African Americans and Latinos—it is not surprising that subsequent neoconservative efforts

to “Save Our State” targeted these minority groups. In 1994, just two years after the fires, California voters passed Proposition 187. This legislation barred “illegal aliens” from using health care, public education, and other social services in the state. Proposition 209’s elimination of affirmative action in California’s public institutions two years later, in 1996, is clearly connected to the same neoconservative, white backlash.

But the 1992 events also seemed to give voice to the need for progressive change, however transitory. The election of President Clinton seven months after the events marked the nation’s leftward move toward the center, reversing twelve years of rightward drift associated with the policies of the Reagan and Bush administrations. Some have argued that Clinton’s victory was greatly aided by the public’s frustration with Bush’s failure to take seriously the problems underlying the events—problems exacerbated by Bush’s own right-wing policies.¹⁵ Of course, Clinton was followed by another Bush in the White House and another eight years of neoconservative policies, which suggests that whatever sentiments were stoked by the 1992 events failed to coalesce into a sustained social movement for progressive change. The emergence a movement with this kind of potential would have to wait for more than ten years.

“Occupy the world!”¹⁶

On September 17, 2011, hundreds of protesters took up camp in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned outdoor square near Wall Street in New York City. The mostly white, mostly young¹⁷ gathering had been brought together by an Internet campaign that encouraged participants to “occupy” the park on behalf of the “99 percent” who had been victimized by the “1 percent” and its obscene accumulation of wealth and power in America.¹⁸ Occupy Wall Street quickly gave birth to copycat occupations in major cities and small towns throughout the nation. From “Occupy Wall Street,” to “Occupy Los Angeles,” to “Occupy the Hood,” early news about the growing movement was relegated largely to Internet blogs and a smattering of small progressive radio outlets. The message: Corporate and elite interests have hijacked our democracy, and the people must (somehow) take it back.

Corporate media initially paid little attention. But as the movement continued to grow and the story could no longer be ignored, the dominant news frame became the movement’s lack of focus and its ambiguous demands. Weeks of occupation stretched into

months, and it eventually became obvious that authorities had grown impatient with the defiant settlements dotted across the country. Corporate news frames thus shifted to police tactics to “evict” participants and, as was the case in Los Angeles 1992, how best to restore order.

The Occupy Movement’s in-your-face attack on elite privilege was motivated by the structural strains associated with the Great Recession of 2008. In the period leading up to the 2008 presidential election, unemployment and poverty rates had hit levels not seen in decades. Market demand and property values plummeted, and homeowners all over the country were losing their homes because they could neither make the mortgage payments nor sell the properties to avoid foreclosure. As the gap between the haves and have-nots grew to levels not seen since the Great Depression, America’s hallowed middle class was being eviscerated.

Occupy participants and their sympathizers were moved by the generalized belief that the recession was the direct result of unregulated greed. The deregulation of the financial markets in the late 1990s had enabled major banks and Wall Street financiers to issue bad loans and to create phantom financial instruments, business tactics designed to inflate corporate profits and elite wealth. When the house of cards finally came falling down in 2008, the “99 percent” were left with the tab. That is, as it was beginning to look as though America might actually elect its first black president, Congress hastily voted for a 700 billion dollar bailout of the banks, ostensibly to maintain the flow of credit and the stability of the financial system. Barack Obama, a proponent of the bailout, was indeed subsequently elected president on a platform of “hope” and “change.” But the unemployment and poverty figures proved stubborn.¹⁹

In the summer of 2011, the federal government deadlocked over skyrocketing budget deficits, which Republicans insisted must be addressed with massive cuts in the types of social programs that serve the “99 percent” rather than by increasing tax revenues. Obama eventually capitulated to Republican demands by withdrawing his proposal to raise revenue by eliminating Bush-era tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans. Meanwhile, as unemployment and poverty levels continued to spike, periodic news about the multi-million dollar bonuses paid to top Wall Street executives exacerbated the profound sense of injustice felt by the “99 percent” already questioning the legitimacy of the system.

Twenty years after the Los Angeles “riots,” rampant inequality and “shock-doctrine”²⁰ austerity measures have combined to awaken those largely unmoved by the events of 1992. Today’s structural strains have given rise to a much more pervasive generalized belief that something is wrong in America. In 1992, the flaw was framed primarily in racial terms: problem minorities felt wronged by a system that used race to limit their opportunities and claims to full citizenship, which often put the groups in competition with one another. While the Occupy Movement has yet to articulate a clear anti-racist politics,²¹ it has nonetheless succeeded in exposing truths about elite privilege traditionally masked by racial antagonisms. To be sure, the kinds of sentiments corporate media associated with the “senseless rioting” of problem minorities in 1992 are expressed today by white Americans, young and old, who see no viable future for themselves in the status quo. In this sense, the Occupy Movement and Los Angeles 1992 are linked.

The warning delivered by the collapse of the canary has been ignored over the years. The political atmosphere in America has become so toxic that the miners themselves are beginning, finally, to feel the effects.

Notes

1. Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres, *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003): 11.
2. See Darnell M. Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles “Riots”: Race, Seeing, and Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
3. Shelby Coffey III, ed., 1992, *Understanding the Riots: Los Angeles Before and After the Rodney King Case* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times): 49.
4. Indeed, nineteen years after the 1992 Los Angeles events, British Prime Minister David Cameron had this to say about similar events in London during the summer of 2011: The uprising was “not about politics or protest, it is about theft.” See <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/world/uk-looters-and-rioters-face-court/story-e6frf7lf-1226113122420>.
5. For example, see Teun A. van Dijk, , “Race, Riots and the Press: An Analysis of Editorials in the Press about the 1985 Disorders,” *International Communication Gazette* (1989).
6. *Los Angeles Times* editorial, May 20, 1992.
7. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
8. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

9. Hunt.
10. Available online at: <http://www.sweetspeeches.com/s/1257-rodney-king-rodney-king-speaks>.
11. See Gary T. Marx, Foreword, in Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New Orleans: Quid Pro, LLC, 2011).
12. See James H. Johnson, Jr., Cloyzelle K. Jones, Walter C. Farrell, Jr., and Melvin L. Oliver, "The Los Angeles Rebellion: A Retrospective View," *Economic Development Quarterly* 6 (1992): 356.
13. In the same month that a camera videotaped Rodney King's infamous beating, another camera captured the killing of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old black girl, by Soon Ja Du, a Korean liquor store merchant. Soon Ja Du had accused Harlins of attempting to steal a bottle of orange juice. After a brief struggle between the two, Harlins placed the bottle on the counter and turned to leave. The video shows Soon Ja Du pulling out a handgun and shooting Harlins in the back of the head. Nine months later, a white superior court judge, Joyce Karlin, sentenced Soon Ja Du to five years probation and no jail time for the shooting.
14. Hunt.
15. For example, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, "The Los Angeles 'Race Riot' and Contemporary U.S. Politics," R. Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
16. Memorable Twitter quote from October 15, 2011.
17. According to one survey, 81.2 percent of participants were white, and only 32 percent were over 45; see <http://www.fastcompany.com/1792056/occupy-wall-street-demographics-infographic>.
18. The top 1 percent of Americans owned 43 percent of the nation's financial wealth in 2007, while the bottom 80 percent of Americans owned only 7 percent; see <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>.
19. The overall U.S. unemployment rate was a staggering 9.1 percent in August of 2011 (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics). By September of 2011, 46.2 million Americans were living below the poverty line, the highest figure in the 52 years the bureau has collected figures on poverty. See <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/14/us/14census.html?pagewanted=all>.
20. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).
21. Robin D. G. Kelley, "Occupy Dreams Deferred," *Bunche Center News* (December 2011/January 2012).