The New York Times https://nyti.ms/2XWu0Rp

In Los Angeles, the Ghosts of Rodney King and Watts Rise Again

Los Angeles has been one of America's reference points for racial unrest. This time protesters are bringing their anger to the people they say need to hear it most: the white and wealthy.

By Tim Arango

June 3, 2020

LOS ANGELES — Patrisse Cullors was 8 in 1992, when Los Angeles erupted in riots after four police officers were acquitted of assault for the beating of Rodney King, which occurred outside a San Fernando Valley apartment building not far from where Ms. Cullors grew up.

"I was scared as hell," she recalled. "As children, when we would see the police, our parents would tell us, 'Behave, be quiet, don't say anything.' There was such fear of law enforcement in this city."

With America seized by racial unrest, as protests convulse cities from coast to coast after the death of George Floyd, Los Angeles is on fire again. As peaceful protests in the city turned violent over the past few days, with images of looting and burning buildings captured by news helicopters shown late into the night, Ms. Cullors, like many Angelenos, was pulled back to the trauma of 1992.

The parallels are easy to see: looting and destruction, fueled by anger over police abuses; shopkeepers, with long guns, protecting their businesses. The differences, though, between 1992 and now, are stark. This time, the faces of the protesters are more diverse — black, white, Latino, Asian; there has been little if any racially motivated violence among Angelenos; and the geography of the chaos is very different, with protesters bringing their message to Los Angeles' largely white and rich Westside.

"South Central has been completely quiet and peaceful," said Ms. Cullors, now a prominent activist and co-founder of Black Lives Matter who organized a protest on Saturday in the Fairfax District, west of downtown. "That's an important distinction, that these current situations are not happening in black communities."

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Los Angeles, in many ways, is America's reference point for urban racial unrest, including the Watts riots in 1965 and the uprising in 1992. The Rodney King beating in 1991, captured on film, was one of the first viral videos of a black man being abused by the police, before cellphones even existed. In those uprisings, dozens of people were killed — 34 in 1965, and more than 40 in 1992.

Some of the most searing images from 1992 were of racially motivated violence on the streets — the beating of Reginald Denny, a white truck driver; gun battles between Korean shop owners and black looters. But the mayhem largely stayed in the historically black community of South Los Angeles and in Koreatown.

A cross, flowers and a banner urging an end to violence sat on the ruins of a service station at Florence and Normandie Avenues in South-Central Los Angeles, on May 3, 1992. Reed Saxon/Associated Press

Now, organizers here say, they have very deliberately brought their anger to those they believe need to hear it the most: the white and the wealthy.

In 2013, when Black Lives Matter held its first demonstration in Los Angeles, it was in Beverly Hills.

“We launched it there because we said, ‘Hey, our community knows about this issue,’” Ms. Cullors said. “‘Let’s go into the heart of what is symbolically white in Los Angeles, which is Beverly Hills. These people need to hear our pain and our grief.’” Ms. Cullors added, “We wanted to bring this to communities who often aren’t dealing with police violence.”

The protest on Saturday in Fairfax stayed peaceful for hours before descending into chaos after confrontations with the police. Looters ransacked hip boutiques, running off with expensive sneakers. They looted expensive purses from Alexander McQueen and tagged graffiti on the walls and windows of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills, a symbol of privilege and luxury.

The people turning out this time are different as well. The first rocks and bottles hurled in the 1992 riots were in working-class black neighborhoods, where white and Hispanic bystanders were attacked. This time, the participants are mostly young and from diverse backgrounds and races.

In these protests, rage and anger over racism and police abuses have been compounded by outrage at another of America’s most profound issues — growing income inequality. In an annual countywide survey by the Luskin School of Public Affairs at University of California, Los Angeles, nearly two-thirds of residents under 40 said this year that the Los Angeles area was not a place where people who worked hard could succeed, but rather “a place where the rich keep getting richer, and the average person cannot get ahead.”

Erwin Chemerinsky, who in 1992 was a law professor in Los Angeles living in the Fairfax District and is now dean of the law school at University of California, Berkeley, said he remembered explaining to his children what was happening in 1992.

Now, he said, they are calling him from L.A. about new images on CNN of burned-out cars and broken storefronts, stretching far more deeply into their neighborhood than last time.

Race in America ›

Recent Changes Sparked by the Protests

Updated June 29, 2020

- Mississippi lawmakers voted to retire the state flag, which is dominated by the Confederate battle emblem that has flown for 126 years, adding a punctuation point to years of efforts to take down Confederate symbols across the South.
- The Army will remove photographs of candidates in promotion board hearings, senior officials said, as part of an effort to address why so many black officers are being passed over in favor of their white counterparts.
- President Trump signed an executive to encourage changes in policing, including new restrictions on chokeholds. But the order will have little immediate impact, and does not address calls for broader action and a new

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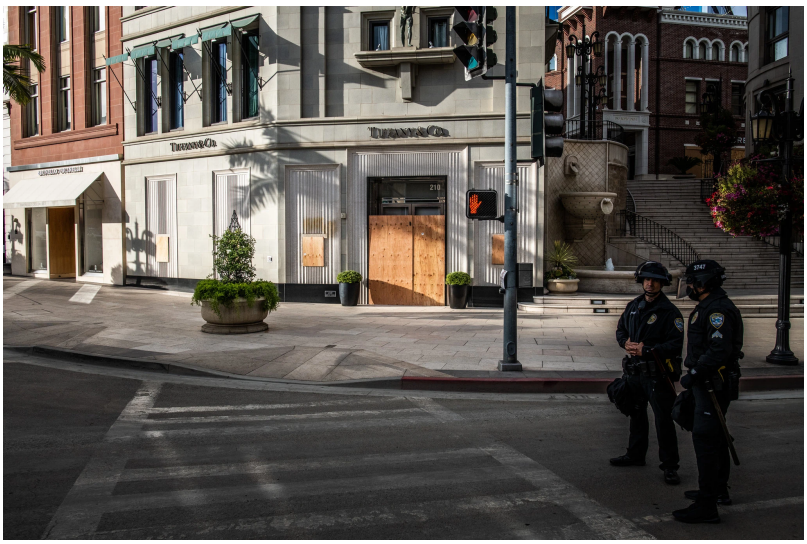
“It’s just sad,” Mr. Chemerinsky said. “It’s sad that the police violence against African-Americans continues in the same way that precipitated riots in the 1960s. It’s sad that we have this enormous economic disparity that has made people so desperate. It’s sad that there is so much anger and that we are so divided."



Police officers were deployed on Saturday near the Rodeo Drive area of Beverly Hills, where high-end boutiques were boarded up after protesters entered the area and isolated looting incidents occurred. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

For city and county officials in Los Angeles struggling to contain the violence, the trauma of 1992 never fully healed and has rarely been far from mind in recent days.

Hours before the city erupted in violence over the weekend, Mayor Eric M. Garcetti tried to assure his anxious city, saying he would not need to call on the National Guard.

“This is not 1992,” he said.

A few hours later, with chaos growing, Mr. Garcetti was on the phone with Gov. Gavin Newsom, asking him to send in the Guard. Mr. Garcetti made a point to say that they would not be patrolling South Los Angeles — now predominantly Latino — an acknowledgment of the painful history, but also largely a moot point because the streets there have been calm.

“I think it’s very different from 1992 because this is a collective national pain,” Mr. Garcetti said in an interview. “It happened in Minneapolis on top of an incident in Louisville on top of an incident in Georgia.”

In 1965, Mark Ridley-Thomas was an 11-year-old boy, standing on the corner of Vernon and Hooper in South Los Angeles, watching the National Guard roll through his neighborhood.

In 1992, as a first-term City Council member, he was at the First A.M.E. Church awaiting the verdict in the Rodney King case. On Saturday night, Mr. Ridley-Thomas, who is African-American and a member of the powerful county board of supervisors, was at home because of the pandemic watching the footage on television, and thinking about history.

“The locus of the crisis was not pinpointed in Los Angeles,” he said, of Mr. Floyd’s death in Minneapolis. “So there’s some real differences, but the pain, the hurt, the disgust, the frustration, the anger is real and is cumulative. So it’s not hard for people to reach back to ’92 and many events since that time.”

George Gascon, who was a 38-year-old L.A.P.D. sergeant on the ground in South Central in 1992, when the riots erupted at the corner of Florence and Normandie, said he was, “brokenhearted” over the weekend watching the television footage.

After the 1992 unrest and the Rampart corruption scandal, the L.A.P.D. underwent a number of reforms and improved relationships with black and brown communities. But the city still faces accusations of abuse, and to this day, police officers are rarely prosecuted for shootings — the last time an officer faced charges was in 2000.

“At the end of the day, as soon as the dust settles, as soon as the fires are put out and the broken glass is fixed,” Mr. Gascon said, “we go back to business as usual. And we go back to giving a pass over and over and over again to a broken policing system.”

He added, “Floyd was definitely the spark, but I can tell you that there are many Floyds in L.A. County happening all the time, just as there are in other parts of the country.”

On Sunday, the protests moved further west, reaching Santa Monica, just on the ocean.

Jaaye Person-Lynn, a lawyer who was out protesting there on Sunday, was mindful of the history of Watts and Rodney King and said in an interview with Spectrum News 1, a local news channel, that this time was different.

Protesters chanted and raised their hands as some faced the police in Santa Monica, Calif., on Sunday. Bryan Denton for The New York Times

“Now we are right here on the water,” he told Spectrum. “We can’t get any further west.”

And he vowed that protesters would continue to bring their voice to enclaves of white privilege.

“We’re going to start hitting these farmers’ markets right where people are most comfortable,” he said. “While they are buying their gluten-free bread and their organic tomatoes, they’re going to have to feel it the same way we do.”

Shawn Hubler contributed reporting from Sacramento, and Jennifer Medina from Los Angeles.

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A version of this article appears in print on June 4, 2020, Section A, Page 16 of the New York edition with the headline: Old Riots, New Pain: Recalling the Past In Los Angeles