

# TWILIGHT:

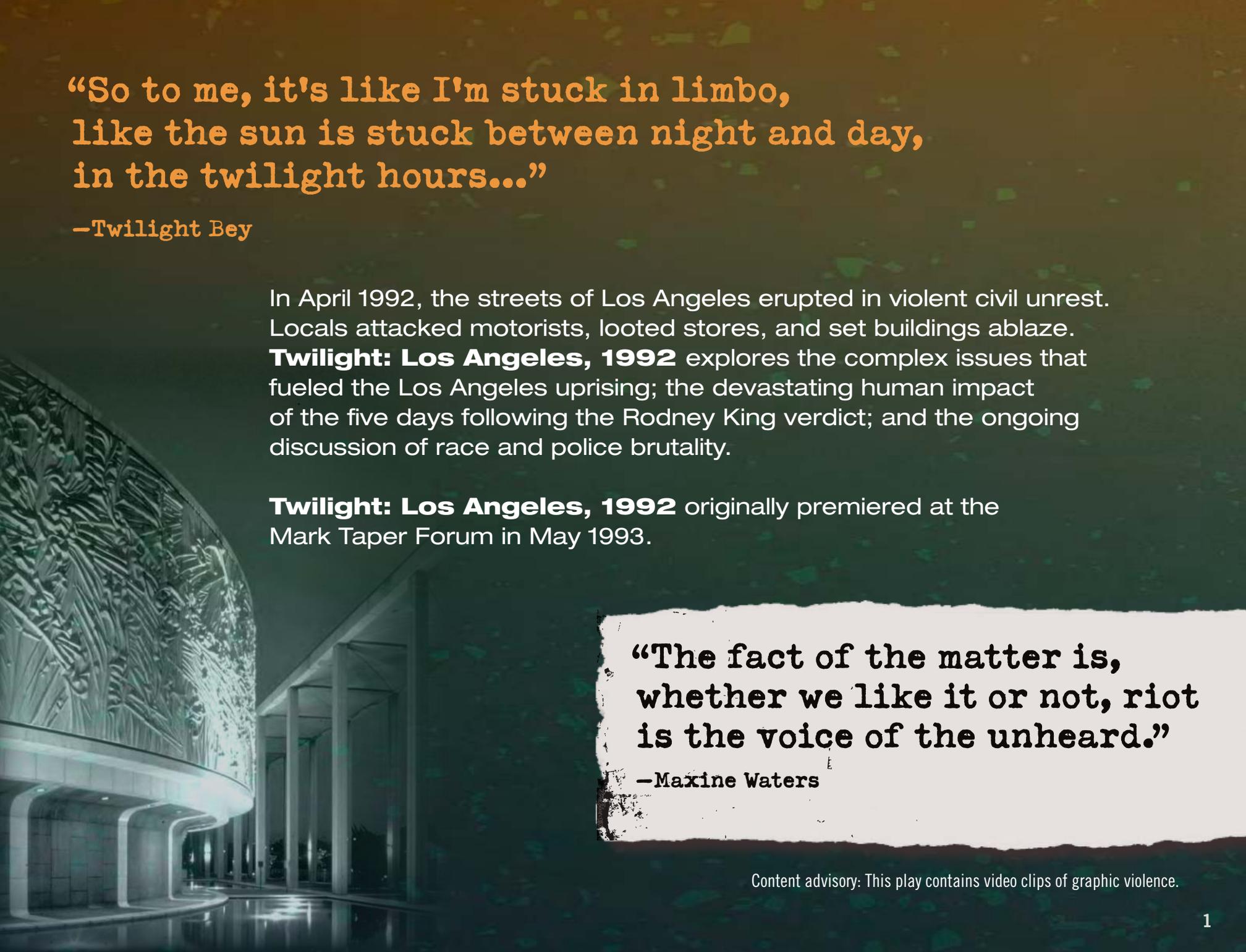
LOS ANGELES, 1992

CONCEIVED, WRITTEN, AND REVISED BY  
**ANNA DEAVERE SMITH**

DIRECTED BY  
**GREGG T. DANIEL**

**Discovery Guide**

**CENTER  
THEATRE  
GROUP**



“So to me, it's like I'm stuck in limbo,  
like the sun is stuck between night and day,  
in the twilight hours...”

—Twilight Bey

In April 1992, the streets of Los Angeles erupted in violent civil unrest. Locals attacked motorists, looted stores, and set buildings ablaze. **Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992** explores the complex issues that fueled the Los Angeles uprising; the devastating human impact of the five days following the Rodney King verdict; and the ongoing discussion of race and police brutality.

**Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992** originally premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in May 1993.

“The fact of the matter is,  
whether we like it or not, riot  
is the voice of the unheard.”

—Maxine Waters

Content advisory: This play contains video clips of graphic violence.

# Setting:

**WHERE:** Los Angeles, California

**WHEN:** 1992 to present

This play is based on 320 interviews conducted by Anna Deavere Smith soon after the civil unrest in Los Angeles, 1992. All words were spoken by real people and are verbatim from those interviews.

## **SOUTH CENTRAL**

**(known since 2003 as South Los Angeles)**

Drawn by the prospect of jobs, affordable real estate, and mild weather, Black Americans began moving to Los Angeles in large numbers after 1900. Unfortunately, segregation and racism awaited them. Restrictive covenants prevented Black Americans from buying homes in certain neighborhoods. Banks would further limit their opportunities by denying loans and other financial services.

By 1940, about 70% of Los Angeles' Black population lived in the Central Avenue corridor. Soon after, hundreds of thousands of Black Americans relocated to California for wartime jobs. "South Central" would eventually evolve into an umbrella term for all of Black Los Angeles—from Central Avenue south to Watts and Compton and west to Inglewood and Crenshaw.

In the 1980s and '90s, Los Angeles' population shifted significantly. A new wave of immigrants arrived, mostly from Asia and Latin America. As Black Americans began moving to the Inland Empire and elsewhere, more Latinx Americans moved into South Central neighborhoods. Residing just north, Korean Americans owned and operated many local businesses in the area.

Residents of many historically Black neighborhoods faced mounting challenges including unemployment, gang violence, police brutality, and drug abuse. More affluent neighborhoods such as Brentwood and Beverly Hills remained remote and unaffected by urban poverty.

**This brings us to Los Angeles, 1992...**

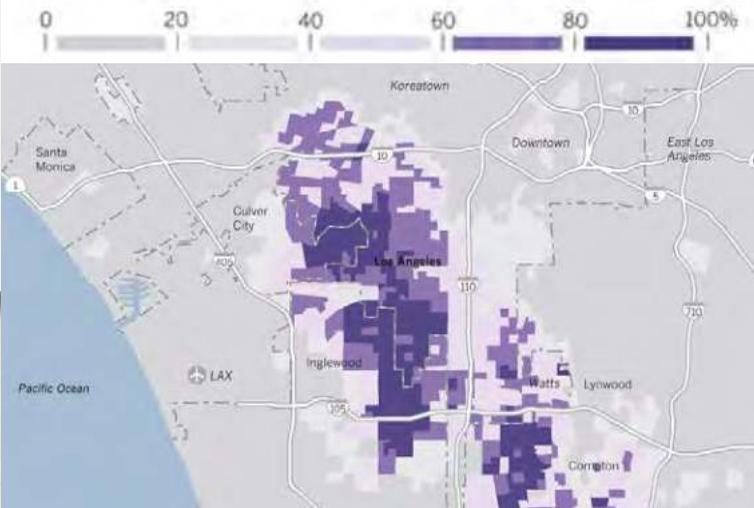
**"If you look at any community. Like right here, the people who live in the Hills? Are mostly white, with some others. The people who live in the flats are mostly black and brown, with some others. And the people who live in between? That's where most of the Asians live."**

**—Elaine Kim**

# South Central



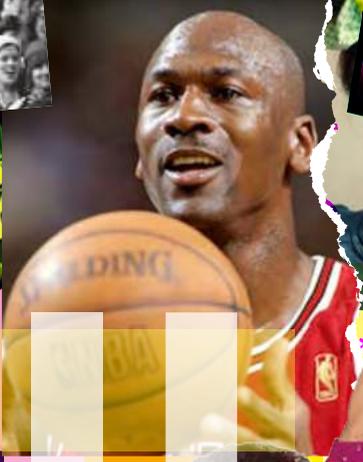
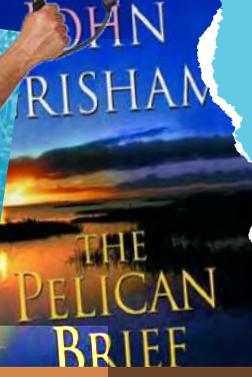
Percentage of Black population in 1990



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# APRIL 1992



# Dramatis Personae

In 2021, playwright Anna Deavere Smith revised **Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992**. This 30th anniversary production features over 40 different characters portrayed by an ensemble of five actors.

Actors play characters of different races, ethnicities, ages, and genders. Here are some of the **REAL-LIFE PEOPLE** depicted:

- **BILL BRADLEY** Former Senator, D-New Jersey
- **CHARLES LLOYD** Attorney for Soon Ja Du
- **CHARLTON HESTON** Movie Star, Former President NRA
- **CONGRESSWOMAN MAXINE WATERS** Congresswoman, 29th District
- **CORNEL WEST** Scholar
- **DARYL GATES** Former Chief of LAPD
- **ELAINE BROWN** Former Chairwoman of The Black Panther Party
- **ELAINE KIM** Author/Professor
- **ELAINE YOUNG** Real Estate Agent
- **HECTOR TOBAR** Author, Former L.A. Times Journalist
- **JESSYE NORMAN** Opera Singer
- **KEITH WATSON** Former Marine; co assailant of Reginald Denny
- **MRS. JUNE PARK** Wife of Walter Park
- **MRS. YOUNG-SOON HAN** Former Liquor Store Owner
- **PAUL PARKER** Chairperson, Free the L.A. Four Plus Defense Committee
- **REGINALD DENNY** Semi-Truck Driver, Victim
- **REV. TOM CHOI** Pastor, Westwood Presbyterian Church
- **RUDY SALAS, SR.**, Sculptor and Painter
- **STANLEY K. SHEINBAUM** Former President, L.A. Police Commission
- **TED BRISENO** LAPD Officer, accused of beating Rodney King



**Stanley K. Sheinbaum**  
L.A. Police Commission



**Cornell West**  
Scholar

**“This is a shot I had, at talkin’ to these curious people, about whom I know nothing! And I wanna learn!”**

**—Stanley K. Sheinbaum**



**Elaine Kim**  
Author/Professor



**Jessye Norman**  
Opera Singer

# Creative Artist: Anna Deavere Smith

Writer, performer, and educator Anna Deavere Smith received the National Humanities Medal in 2012 for her outstanding contributions to theatre. Her work blends journalism and art to examine critical social issues. In her renown solo performances, she seamlessly enacts a wide variety of characters.

You may also recognize her as a screen actor in popular shows such as *Nurse Jackie*, *For the People*, and *Black-ish*. In addition, she has authored articles for the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, and others. She currently works as a professor at New York University's School of Law and Tisch School of the Arts.

Smith was born in Baltimore, Maryland. As a shy child, she won the affection of her peers by secretly mimicking her teacher. Smith went on to study English Literature at Beaver College and acting at the American Conservatory Theater. After discovering early in her career that she did not fit the industry's racial stereotypes, she began creating her own work in which she could embody all sorts of people.

**“...I can't do it as an intellectual project of sitting at a desk. I have to actually get up, speak the words, and learn the words...”**

**—Anna Deavere Smith on her writing process**



**“I believe that if your art is about the world, it'll be better art.”**

**—Anna Deavere Smith**

Smith interviews people, crafts their words into a play, and then reproduces their voices and gestures onstage. Her creative process approaches characters through language by meticulously capturing the poetry of their spoken words. She reiterates every vocal intonation, cough, laugh, and “um.” Her breakthrough show, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities*, is just one of many original works that define her as a pioneer of verbatim theatre.

# Verbatim Theatre: Collecting and performing real-life stories

**“I started thinking about how the words we use are who we are...”**

—Anna Deavere Smith

Thirty years ago, the Mark Taper Forum commissioned Anna Deavere Smith to create a one-person show about the Los Angeles uprising. To begin the creative process, Smith recorded interviews with over 300 people about what

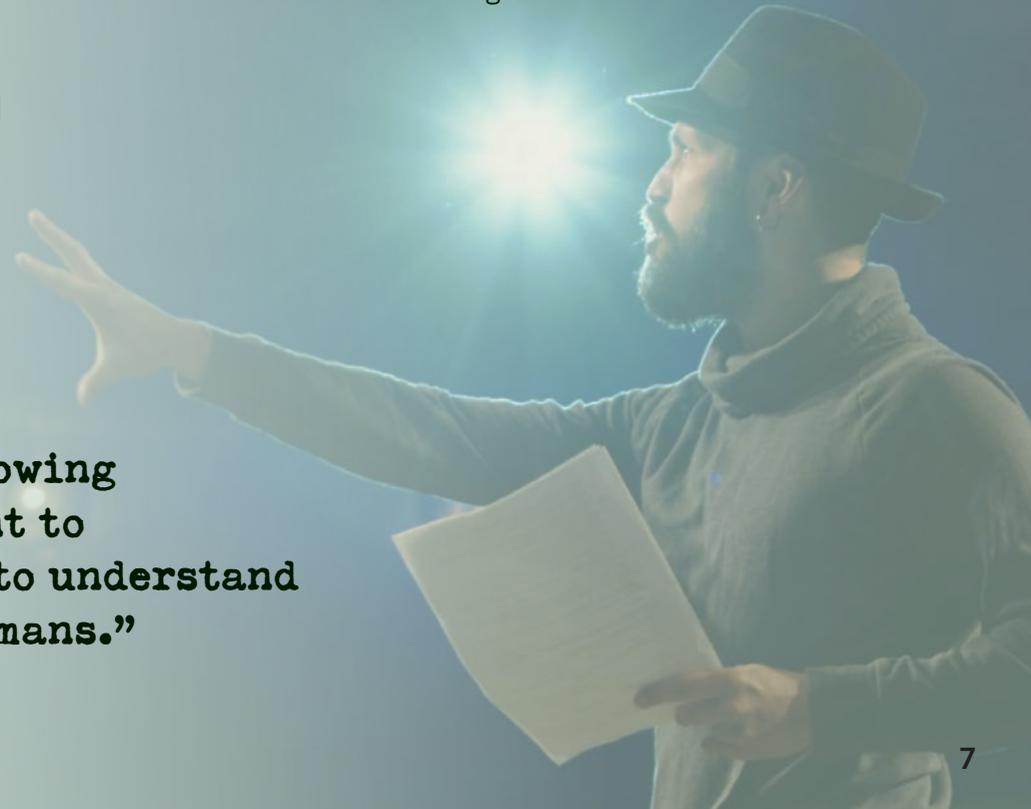
occurred before, during, and after the riots. To craft the script, she thoughtfully edited and arranged transcripts into a series of monologues. The final result—*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*—debuted as a solo performance in which she played over 40 different characters of various genders, races, ethnicities, and ages.

This branch of documentary theatre, in which a playwright uses people's exact words as text, is known as verbatim theatre. Verbatim theatre in its simplest form is collecting and performing real-life stories.

**“I borrow people for a moment, by borrowing their words. I borrow them for a moment to understand something about them, and to understand something about us. By “us,” I mean humans.”**

—Anna Deavere Smith

Aside from Smith's many notable contributions, perhaps the most well-known verbatim play of recent decades is *The Laramie Project*, which examines the impact of the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. Another significant example of verbatim theatre is *The Gaza Monologues*, which shares the personal stories of youth from the Gaza Strip in their own words. Many practitioners agree that the power of verbatim theatre lies in the impact of bringing authentic voices and real-life stories to the stage.



# Race.

**“Whiteness is a state in which the pain of history has been erased, from your consciousness.”** -Hector Tobar

*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* examines the issues of race, ethnicity, and class. To better understand the significance of the events that unfolded, it is important to first take a closer look at our common understanding of race. Race, like ethnicity, is a social construct. That is, it is a made-up label. Although race has no genetic or scientific basis; it does have powerful implications in society.

The concept of race as we know it today is relatively new. In the 15th century, Portuguese slave traders used racist ideas to justify the enslavement of Africans, essentially creating the idea of “blackness.” In the 18th and 19th centuries, scientists in Europe and the United States began to use skin color and other traits to categorize human beings into separate and unequal races. In this way, they could rank people in a racial hierarchy to suit their own prejudices. Racial labels continue to evolve.

In the United States today, the Census offers the racial categories Black, White, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and Other. It also recognizes the ethnicities Hispanic or Latino and non-Hispanic or Latino. These classifications—and the biases they evoke—often influence a person’s social class. Race and ethnicity continue to irrevocably shape our perceptions, experiences, and opportunities.

## **RACE AND ETHNICITY:**

*Most often, the term “race” is used to create social groups based on differences in physical appearances. Frequently, “ethnicity” is used to group people according to cultural expression and identification such as shared history, language, customs, and religion. Thus, people of different races may have the same ethnicity. However, distinctions are not exact, and today many people use these terms interchangeably.*

*Today, scientists in biology and social sciences prefer to use the term “ancestry” when examining human variations. This concept more aptly focuses on geographical origins and the history of one’s ancestors. For instance, instead of describing populations as simply “Black” or “White,” they may specify “sub-Saharan African” or “Northern European,” respectively.*



"I never believe misery and  
despair have the last word."

—Cornel West

# LA RIOTS

April 29 - May 4, 1992

Originally known as the “Los Angeles riots,” the outbreak of violence, arson, and looting that began on April 29 and subsided on May 4, 1992, is now also referred to as the “Los Angeles uprising.”

### **TENSIONS RISING**

Conditions that led to the L.A. uprising are complex. Causes include unchecked police violence, racial injustices, social inequities, economic inequality, and pervasive systemic racism.

**“There was an insurrection in this city before, and if I remember correctly, it was sparked by police brutality.”** —Maxine Waters

### **1965 WATTS REBELLION**

Although the L.A. uprising marked the nation’s deadliest civil unrest of the 20th century, it was by no means the first of its kind. During the 1965 Watts Rebellion, Black Angelenos rioted amidst already tense relations between police and local citizens. Turmoil arose in the streets after the tumultuous arrest of motorist Marquette Frye.

Six days of civil disturbances in Watts left 34 people dead, more than 1,000 injured and over \$40 million in property damage. Years later, some officials and reporters interpreted the event as a protest against the poverty and hopelessness of life in the inner-city.

### **SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRIFE**

The early 1990s were marked by the end of the Cold War and a national recession followed by a jobless recovery. In Los Angeles, the loss of manufacturing jobs worsened unemployment. The Los Angeles Unified School District struggled with overcrowding, and 20% of teenagers 16-19 years old were out of school and unemployed.

In South Central, one in three people lived in poverty. Unemployment neared 50%. In addition, the crack cocaine epidemic fueled deadly gang feuds, and police response to such issues became increasingly militarized.

Friction amongst Los Angeles’ Black, Latinx, and Asian communities increased as they struggled with cultural differences, competed for economic mobility and social inclusion, and navigated racism. Meanwhile rich, White communities sheltered by privilege continued to live comfortably just miles away.

**“After that I really hate this country. I really hate. We are no like customer and owner, but just like enemy.”**

—Jay Woong Yahng

# Police Brutality

During his tenure, Los Angeles Police Department Chief Daryl Gates spearheaded years of aggressive policing. In the 1980s, Black and Latinx community members spoke out against harsh treatment by the police. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and L.A. City Council members publicly criticized the LAPD chief, who denied a pattern of excessive force and racism within the institution.

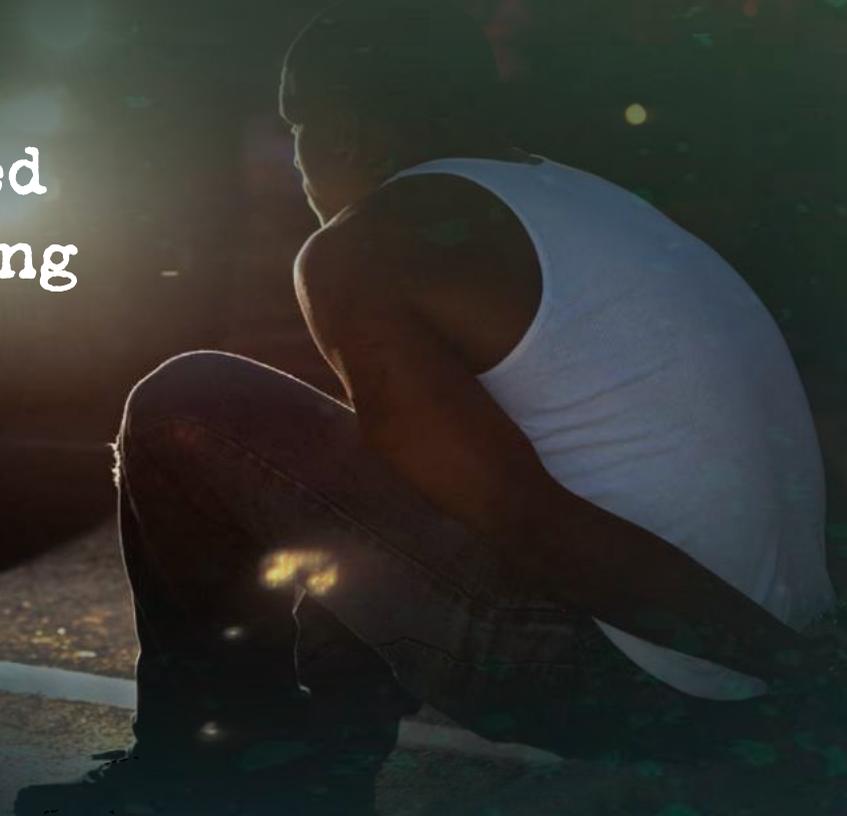
Abusive encounters with law enforcement harkened back to police brutality inflicted upon Mexican Americans in the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 and Bloody Christmas of 1951. Still, by the early 1990s, accountability for police misconduct was lacking. The enduring insular culture of the LAPD—in which loyalty to the badge remained paramount—fueled mistrust between police and the communities they were meant to protect and serve.

**“It was a mJOR disaster!  
Man made! A Catastrophe!”**

**-Keith Watson**

**“The insanity that I  
carry with me, started  
when I took the beating  
from the police.”**

**-Rudy Salas**



**“If I were a person...twenty or something, and I felt, I were being heard for the first time—it would not be singing as we know it. It would be a roar.” —Jessye Norman**

# Breaking Points

Anger and frustration in Los Angeles’ most marginalized neighborhoods had been simmering over decades. In 1992, tensions in Los Angeles boiled over in light of two significant events: the killing of Latasha Harlins and the beating of Rodney King.

## LATASHA HARLINS

On March 16, 1991, 15-year-old Latasha Harlins entered Empire Liquor Market and was shot and killed by shopkeeper Soon Ja Du. Witnesses said that Latasha put a carton of orange juice in her backpack before approaching the store counter to pay. Du assumed that the teenager was stealing the orange juice and tried to grab the backpack. A physical altercation ensued. As Harlins turned to leave, Du shot her in the back of the head.

Six months later, a jury convicted Du of voluntary manslaughter and recommended 16 years in prison; however, the judge sentenced Du to 400 hours of community service, five years’ probation, and a \$500 fine. The light sentencing sparked indignation in the Black community. A state appeals court upheld the ruling just a week before the Rodney King verdict.



## RODNEY KING

On March 3, 1991, four police officers attempted to subdue motorist Rodney King after a high-speed chase that ended in San Fernando Valley. Bystander George Holliday videotaped the violent incident from his home.

Officers used metal batons to beat King into submission; King suffered severe injuries. The next day, footage of the event aired on local television and spread quickly to national news outlets. The video of the beating evoked public outrage and triggered national debate over police brutality.

Officers Koon, Briseno, Powell, and Wind faced criminal charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force. The state trial occurred in Simi Valley. On April 29, 1992, the jury’s acquittal of the officers ignited the L.A. uprising.

**“I followed the trial cause I wanted to see if justice works and on that particular day justice didn't work.” —Keith Watson**

**“On the day of the riot, we were sitting here safe and sound in Beverly Hills, and building people started yelling in the office “Look out the window! We see smoke!” –Elaine Young**

# Five Days of Chaos

The L.A. uprising began just hours after the Rodney King verdict on April 29, 1992. That afternoon, protestors gathered outside Parker Center and City Hall, and across the city, outrage escalated into violence.

## **LOOTING, ARSON, AND VIOLENCE**

The intersection of Normandie and Florence Avenue in South Central marked the epicenter of the L.A. uprising. Within hours of the Rodney King verdict, crowds gathered. The disorder began with throwing cans at passing cars, escalated to looting and vandalizing a nearby liquor store, and intensified to attacking passing motorists. Protestors elsewhere set fire to cars and buildings. That night, the mayor declared a state of emergency.

Over the next several days, mayhem spread throughout Los Angeles, from Pacoima to Long Beach and from Downtown to Westwood. People set entire blocks ablaze, ransacked shops, and assaulted—and even killed—fellow Angelenos. Some people took advantage of the chaos to steal goods ranging from diapers to food to sofas. The events shocked the nation.



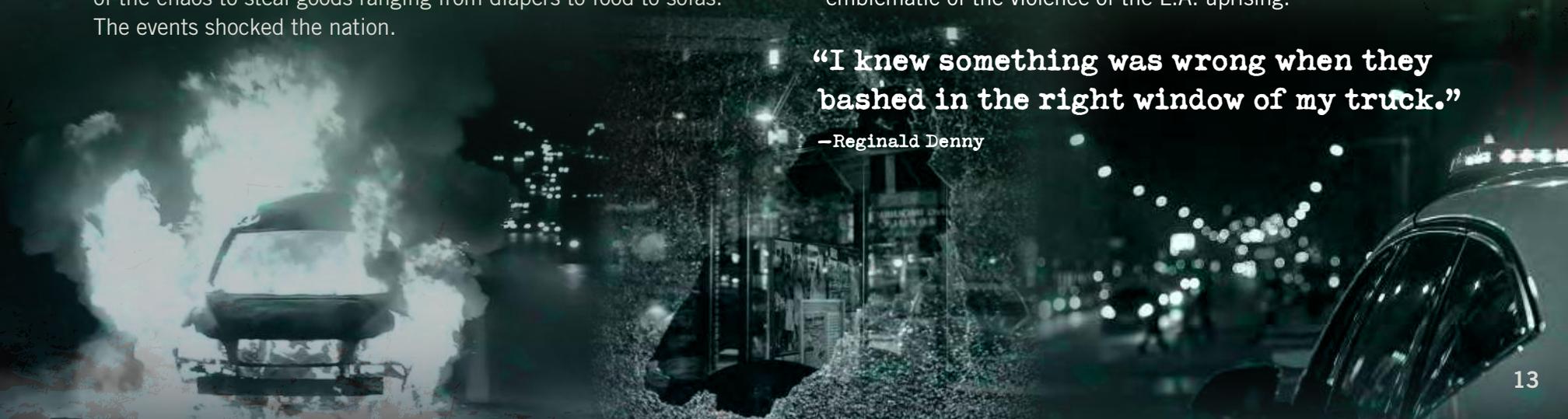
## **REGINALD DENNY**

On the evening of April 29, an angry crowd stopped a semitruck in the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenue. A group of men pulled driver Reginald Denny out of his vehicle and attacked him. A news helicopter captured the assault on video. Denny suffered life-threatening injuries but survived thanks to four local residents who had seen the events live on TV and rushed to his aid.

The four men later charged with the crime—D. Williams, G. Williams, Miller, and Watson—became known as the “LA Four.” Although just one of many brutal incidents, the attack on Reginald Denny became emblematic of the violence of the L.A. uprising.

**“I knew something was wrong when they bashed in the right window of my truck.”**

**—Reginald Denny**



**“...it was like going to war.”**

**-Richard Kim**

### **LAPD RESPONSE**

In many instances, police officers stood idle while Los Angeles burned. The LAPD was woefully unprepared to handle major social unrest of this scale. Police did not respond to initial reports of looting and violence until three hours later.

As violence spread, Police Chief Daryl Gates was attending a political fundraiser across town in Brentwood. Field officers received little or no direction. Police could not access riot gear, and command centers lacked communication equipment. Police near the epicenter of the riots were ordered to retreat and fled the scene.

After the National Guard arrived, Chief Gates was slow to deploy troops to assist. As the situation worsened, the LAPD worked to insulate wealthy West Los Angeles neighborhoods and abandoned cries for help from other L.A. residents.

**“You know like the cops wasn't doing nothing! So we said Oh I guess it's okay...”**

**-Octavio Sandoval**

### **KOREATOWN**

Much of the worst rioting occurred in South Central, Pico-Union, and Koreatown, where Korean-owned businesses were disproportionately targeted. With police nowhere in sight, merchants had to fend for themselves. Some took to arms to defend their stores from vandalism, arson, and looting.

Certainly, the divide between South Central's Black community members and Korean business owners fueled hostility, but at the time—instead of recognizing the riots as a class rebellion—the media simplistically framed the riots as a racial conflict between Black and Korean Americans.



# The Aftermath

After days of a dusk-to-dawn curfew and the arrival of thousands of National Guard troops, President George H.W. Bush declared Los Angeles a federal disaster area. As Marines and federal officers arrived, much of the turmoil had already abated. On May 4, 1992, the mayor lifted the curfew, and the city began to slowly emerge from the rubble.

## DEVASTATION

### DEATHS: 63 PEOPLE

- 28 Black
- 19 Latino
- 14 White
- 2 Asian (1 Korean, 1 Chinese)

### INJURIES: 2,300+ PEOPLE

- 250 Critically injured, sent to hospital

### ARRESTED: 12,111 people

- 51% Latino
- 36% Black
- 11% White
- 2.5% Other (primarily Asian)

### ECONOMIC COST: \$1 BILLION

- \$735 million property damage
- 1,573 buildings completely destroyed

## PERSPECTIVE

Today most scholars and historians agree that conflict between Black and Korean American communities resulted from not only prejudices and lack of cultural understanding but also each group's position within the American racial hierarchy. Moreover, many Latinx residents were both victims and perpetrators of the riots. Tellingly, most White residents of L.A.'s wealthy neighborhoods remained untouched by the violence.

Much of the frustration and anger vented during the riots stemmed from years of racial and economic inequality. Many social scientists now see the riots as the rise of Los Angeles' poor against the ills and injustices inflicted upon them over decades. Only in retrospect can we identify the root problem: white supremacy.

**“Then why, why, he had to get shot?  
You know, I don't know why.”**

**—Mrs. June Park**

**“I think that the knowledge of history is the opposite of hopelessness.”**

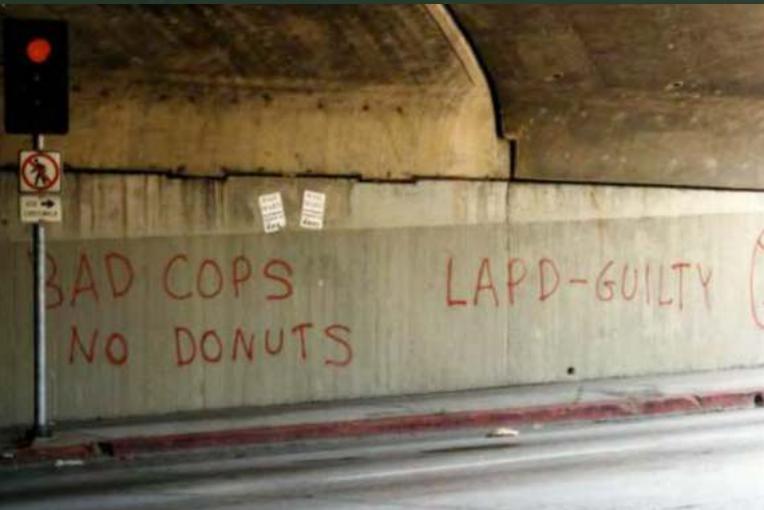
—Anna Deavere Smith

# Outcomes

In 1993, a federal trial began on the charge that officers violated the civil rights of Rodney King. The jury found Officers Briseno and Wind not guilty but convicted Officers Koon and Powell and sentenced them to 30 months in prison.

Ultimately, the L.A. uprising resulted in a law enforcement shift to community partnerships and civilian oversight. Gang members who had announced a groundbreaking truce just days before the riots transformed into community peacekeepers. In the face of continued oppression, Black, Latinx, and Asian Americans began moving toward solidarity. Neighborhoods started to rebuild.

Although some healing has taken place, scars remain. Many social issues that plagued Los Angeles in 1992 still remain unresolved today. In light of the 30th anniversary of the L.A. uprising, we can continue to gain insight from those historic events and work to attain a more equitable and just society.



**“You gon’ have to realize that this may have to be a lifetime commitment and that the longer you live, the more you can do.”** —Elaine Brown

# Civil Unrest

Riots, rebellion, insurrection, uprising, disturbances— people have used various terms in different contexts to describe the historic events that occurred in Los Angeles, 1992. Media originally reported them as the “L.A. riots.” In retrospect, the media now also label them as the “L.A. uprising.” These words describe the same events but mean different things.

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**“The Question is, how are you going to push the revolutionary struggle from your grave?”**

- Elaine Brown



? **What conditions lead to rioting?**

? **How might a riot differ from an uprising?**

? **Is one type of protest more effective than others? Why?**

# Viral Video

Today, cameras fit in our pockets and form a ubiquitous part of American life. In 1992, personal camcorders captured moments on video. Millions of viewers saw the video footage of the Rodney King beating via mass media. Consequently, some historians consider it the first “viral video” of police violence in the United States.

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**“Rodney King is not the first Rodney King... The only difference between back then and now is hashtags.”**

—Lora King, daughter of Rodney King

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- What viral videos have you viewed recently?
  - What are possible negatives of viral videos?
  - How can viral videos be a force for good in society?



# (In) Justice

Oppressive systems often maintain power by pitting communities against one other. In *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, many people recount suffering injustices rooted in white supremacy. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once pointed out, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

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“If I don't do what I'm doing for, say, justice when I do happen to die... I won't be able to really rest... 'Cause I didn't do something in terms of justice.”

—Paul Parker



? What does justice mean to you?

? Have you ever suffered or witnessed an injustice? How did it make you feel?

? In what ways do people continue to fight for justice today?

# Empathy

In *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992*, disparate characters provide different points of view. One man explains that part of being a full human being is understanding others who are different from him. The ability to recognize, understand, and share the feelings or thoughts of another person is known as empathy.

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**“And in order for me to be, a to be, a true human being. I can't forever dwell in darkness. I can't forever dwell in the idea, just identifying with people like me, and understanding me and mine.”**

—*Twilight* Bey

? What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?

? Have you ever found it difficult to empathize with someone? What happened?

? Why is it important to show empathy toward others?



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## STUDENT MATINEE PROJECT FACULTY

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

**Let It Fall: Los Angeles 1982-1992** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j96sTP8-wKk>

**New York Times Magazine Photo Timeline**

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/28/magazine/la-riot-timeline-photos.html>

**Los Angeles Times Retrospective** <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-04-27/full-coverage-30-years-since-the-1992-la-riots>

**Los Angeles Times: Mapping LA** <https://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/index.html>

**Understanding Race** <https://understandingrace.org/>

**Teaching for Justice** [https://guides.library.illinoisstate.edu/systemic\\_racism/teachingforjustice](https://guides.library.illinoisstate.edu/systemic_racism/teachingforjustice)

**Facing History and Ourselves** <https://www.facinghistory.org/>

**PBS Learning Media: The 1992 LA Riots and Civil Unrest**

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/1992-los-angeles-riots-civil-unrest-riots-video/asian-americans/>

**Los Angeles Times: Latinos' Role in LA Riots**

<https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-04-27/latinos-la-riots-forgotten>

**Documentary Theatre Commons** <https://howlround.com/tags/documentary-theatre>

## MORE FROM ANNA DEAVERE SMITH:

- Notes from the Field
- Let Me Down Easy
- Fires in the Mirror
- Brief But Spectacular with Anna Deavere Smith
- The Atlantic: The Last of the Nice Negro Girls
- The New Yorker Radio Hour Interview with Anna Deavere Smith
- Ted Talk on Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, and race
- Video clips from Twilight, Los Angeles film
- Talk to Me: Listening Between the Lines

The background of the image is a silhouette of a city skyline, likely Los Angeles, with several palm trees in the foreground. The sky is a gradient of dark blue to orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.

“I just wanna say, you know,  
can we, can we all get along?”

—Rodney King, May 1, 1992

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