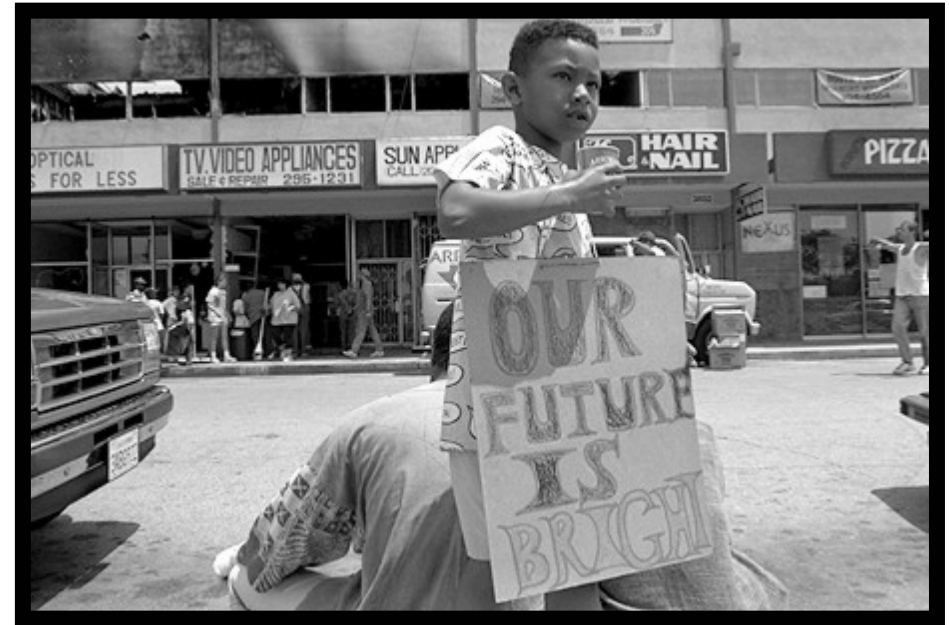




Three Days That Shook the New World Order

The
Chicago
Surrealist
Group's
Statement
on the
1992 L.A.
Rebellion



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*Outsiders of the world, unite!
Freedom Now!
Earth First!*

These three watchwords are for us but one.

- Chicago Surrealist Group, 1992



***THINGS
AIN'T
WHAT THEY
USED TO BE***

“Wherever you find injustice, the proper form of politeness is attack.”

– T-Bone Slim

“We were not able to choose the mess we have to live in – this collapse of a whole society – but we can choose our way out.”

– C.L.R. James

“Don’t be afraid. Just go ahead and play.”

– Charlie Parker

With flames hundreds of feet high and spread out over dozens of square miles, the Los Angeles Rebellion of April-May 1992 lit up the horrible domestic reality of the “New World Order.” Thanks to what is usually the most invisible sector of the U.S. population – the despised “underclass” – the fundamental injustice of American society suddenly became visible to the whole world. In a year of preposterously insipid electioneering and “opinion polls,” as Pogo pointed out that it was not the choices but the lack of choices that made U.S. elections a sham, the vanguard of the non-voting majority stated their fiercely anti-Establishment opinions loud and clear. In a time of massive political demoralization and incoherence, the most down-and-out people in the country changed the complexion and direction of American politics and pointed the way forward for all seekers of real freedom and justice for all.

The ruling-class delusions of grandeur that followed the collapse of the state-capitalist bureaucracies in eastern Europe and the USSR – delusions already interrupted by a steadily worsening recession as well as mounting revulsion against U.S. government corruption and malevolence at home and abroad – burst like a bubble as the unemployed, the homeless and the hip-hoppers of L.A. started reinventing the revolutionary traditions of May Day a couple of days early.

The L.A. rebels showed that a few Black and Latino mayors and police chiefs, a few minority TV shows and token faces of Black and Latino celebrities on billboards are not solving and cannot solve the problems of those who are forced to live in America's Black ghettos, barrios and other "bad" neighborhoods. Sons and daughters of the Watts rebels of '65, grandsons and granddaughters of the zoot-suiters and beboppers of the '40s, the L.A. rebels rapped to one and all that nothing less than a complete transformation of social relations can create a life worth living.

For three full days many tens of thousands of people said "no!" to the slave system known as daily life in America. In the highly educational enthusiasm of mass action, long-established habits and routines of resignation were discarded in favor of improvisation, experiment, and discovery. However briefly, throngs who had been condemned to a living death discovered new reasons for living, new possibilities of life.

Now, almost a year later, the walls of oppression are still shaking.

and even long overdue – in the city that gave us the word smog, and which is today a major dumpsite for toxic waste and Daryl Gates' radio commentaries.

Such new connections, however unthinkable to believers in dogmas, are the inevitable fruit of the revolutionary imagination. If the L.A. rebels drew inspiration from the poetry of rap, the rebellion itself remains a crucial factor in renewing the practice of poetry everywhere, as a revolutionary activity. The boldest dreams of poets always have expressed humankind's deepest aspirations, and any "program" that denies them is a sure ticket to misery and more misery. Any would-be "revolution" willing to settle for less than the realization of poetry in everyday life is a revolution at a dead-end before it starts.

As eco-activists, radical feminists, point-of-production rebel workers and ghetto/barrio street-fighters begin to understand each other, to find their common ground and to pool their resources in united struggle and mutual aid, we shall begin to see a movement that might just be capable of toppling the inhuman structures that are killing us all.

Steeped in humor, open to poetry, aiming at a fundamental reintegration of humankind and the planet we live on and the creatures with whom we share it, this new global revolutionary movement naturally will be the most playful and adventurous of all time. How could it be otherwise?

The struggle for wilderness is inseparable from the struggle for a free society, which is inseparable from the struggle against racism, whiteness and imperialism, which is inseparable from the struggle for the liberation of women, which is inseparable from the struggle for sexual freedom, which is inseparable from the struggle to emancipate labor and abolish work, which is inseparable from the struggle against war, which is inseparable from the struggle to live poetic lives and, more generally, to do as we please.

The enemies, today, are those who try to separate these struggles.

In April-May '92 the world witnessed one of the traumatic first flights of this revolution which must go farther than any revolution has ever gone.

and the capitalist State. In the past twenty years, the mushroom growth of the National Wildlife Federation, the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, etc., has coincided with the destruction of more U.S. wilderness than was destroyed in the preceding half-century. These groups, which are run as businesses by bureaucrats who think and act like businessmen, are to the rank-and-file eco-activist what the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is to the working class: a privileged elite whose prime function is to control the fury – i.e., the revolutionary creativity – of those at the bottom.

The L.A. rebels manifested exactly what is needed to turn environmentalism into a real and effective movement: desperation, defiance, energy, a sense of the unbearable boredom and misery of American life today, a readiness to improvise, a willingness to take risks and a beautiful determination to win release from misery. With such outsiders' perspective to inspire and guide the actions of a new movement, an ecologically healthy planet could become a reality instead of a slogan.

Those who are farthest from the administration of power, no matter how powerless they often feel, retain always the power to disrupt and therefore, potentially, the power to overturn the entire repressive order.

In the solidarity of all those who are outside existing power relations lies our only chance of vanquishing the ecocidal megamachine. Coming at a time when the infrastructures of America's cities are on the verge of collapse, the L.A. rebellion has opened exciting possibilities for the development of heretofore undreamed-of combat-alliances that could cut across and even destroy the debilitating barriers set up by short-sighted and self-serving "single-issue" groups.

Now is a time of new beginnings, and thus a time to make new connections. There is not an eco-activist anywhere who would not benefit from reading Malcolm X – the favorite author of the L.A. rebels – and radical ecologists and conservation biologists would do well not only to make their knowledge more accessible to those who need it most, but also to find ways of linking their struggles to the struggles of the oppressed people who can really change things for the better. Such links would seem to be particularly feasible –



THEIR MESSAGES AND OURS

"By what standard of morality can the violence used by a slave to break his chains be considered the same as the violence of a slave-master?... Violence aimed at the recovery of human dignity and at equality cannot be judged by the same yardstick as violence aimed at maintenance of discrimination and oppression."

– Walter Rodney, *The Groundings with My Brothers* (1969)

"The police are the absolute enemy."

– Charles Baudelaire

The bold initiative of L.A.'s daring young rebels has now enabled countless millions to see, hear and feel – as never before – the thoroughgoing crisis of this deadly civilization. In a social order in which the "doors of perception" are systematically blocked, boarded up and covered with barbed wire, the liberation of the senses is an indispensable prerequisite for all other liberation.

"Sending messages" to the people is one of the main functions of business and government. It is an official monopoly of those in power – the rest of us are regarded as mere receivers. When the President of the United States says he is going to send a message, as during the Persian Gulf Massacre and the L.A. rebellion, "message" generally means troops. The L.A. rebels, however, sent strong messages of their own – messages of resistance, revolt and freedom – and these messages were heard by millions, loud and clear.

Revolution is, indeed, first and foremost a question of human expression. Those of us who continue to dream of Revolution –

who have not despaired of creating a truly free society – proclaim not only our solidarity with the L.A. rebels and our determination to defend them, but also our conviction that their action has done more to bring fundamental questions to the fore than anything that has happened in years.

Unequivocally we are on the side of the L.A. rebels. Their enemies are ours, as is their scorn for a social order based on inequality and force-propped authority. Ours, too, are their desperation, their rage, their yearning for real life, and their sharp awareness that direct action is the only effective means of social betterment today.

First of all it is important to clear the air of the toxic ideological dust that the government and its news-machines have been scattering everywhere on the L.A. Rebellion and its aftermath. Rejecting the demeaning term “riot,” we recognize the rebellion as a truly revolutionary uprising that has challenged the exploitative foundations of U.S. plutocracy, exposed the fiction of U.S. democracy, and recharged all emancipatory forces in this country and the world. Indeed, far from being an isolated “riot,” the Los Angeles events sparked a wave of rebellion which so surpassed merely local importance that we may ultimately refer to them by date rather than place. Just as there was a May ‘68, there was an April-May ‘92.

In its direct attack on this society’s repressive institutions we recognize a practical critique that is near-total and, as such, a practical refutation of all the ideologists of the Left, Right and Middle whose partial critiques and reformist programs are little more than brand-names of stalemate, defeat and reaction.

Thus we also reject the ruling-class defamation – as set forth by countless politicians and journalists, including Mike Royko in the Chicago Tribune and Stanley “Hanging Judge” Crouch in the New York Times – that the L.A. rebels are merely “gangbangers, thugs, thieves,” “rioting street criminals,” “just another manifestation of barbaric opportunism,” and guilty of “criminal anarchy.” Such abuse reveals the smug hypocrisy of those who salute “pro-Democracy fighters” approved by the State Department, but abhor those who live and fight in the U.S. itself.

L.A.’s smoldering ruins and overflowing prisons joined the polluted air that always afflicts the city to give these bureaucrats the lie, and showed all the world that the Land of Capitalism par excellence is one of the sickest societies anywhere.

In this era of massive destruction of rainforests and other wild places, the contradiction between city and “countryside” has become central to all struggles for social change. Anyone who knows the ABCs of ecology knows that massive restoration of wilderness is today an urgent priority, second to none – indeed, the precondition for the continuation of life on this planet – and that such restoration requires, in turn, massive dismantling of industrial society’s deadly cities. In this light, the festive community burning of L.A.’s shopping malls can be regarded not only as a sensible response to unlivable ghetto conditions, but also as an ecologically sound step toward doing away with America’s poisonous urban wastelands. Objectively, in the U.S. government’s war against wildlife and wilderness, the L.A. rebels were on the side of the wild.

Subjectively, however, the rebellion’s ecological dimension stands out in even bolder relief. The fact that Black teenagers increasingly recognize themselves as an endangered species – this was in fact the theme of one of the most popular local rap recordings just before and during the rebellion – is surely one of the major revolutions in consciousness of our time. Equally suggestive, in this regard, is the fact that the planting of new trees – to bring beauty to L.A.’s non-white communities – is a major demand in the program put forth by the Bloods and Crips for the reconstruction of the city.

The rebels’ point of departure, moreover, was light-years beyond the phony “jobs versus environment” dichotomy that miserabilist demagogues of all persuasions use to paralyze the unwary. In demanding not jobs but life, and all the freedom and fullness thereof, the L.A. rebels – among whom registered voters were undoubtedly a rarity – revealed strong affinities with the most radical “no-compromise” wing of the environmental movement.

“Mainstream” environmentalism continues to be dominated by racist corporate-minded executives who, by definition, are unwilling to challenge the interests of white supremacy, Capital



AFTER THE RAIN

“The world in danger is our true and only neighborhood.”

– Guillermo Gomez-Pena

“Only poets, since they must excavate and recreate history, have ever learned anything from it.”

– James Baldwin

“We are always searching. I think that now we are at the point of finding.”

– John Coltrane

The long-range significance of the L.A. rebellion cannot be appreciated apart from the global ecological crisis. The fact that the largest urban upheaval in the U.S. in this century has been ignored by the environmental press is one more sign – and a definitive one – that middle-class environmentalism is indissolubly allied to the pollutocratic Establishment it pretends to oppose.

Clearly the rebellion, and the nationwide response it engendered, are seething with ecological implications. An extraordinary example of “acting locally,” inevitably it will affect global thinking for a long time to come.

The rebellion provided, for example, a dramatic eye-opening prelude to the Earth-rapers’ orgy known as the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro a few weeks later. The delegates (mostly heads of state) straight-facedly resolved that capitalism – an inherently ecocidal social system – is compatible with a healthy planet. But

People who find themselves in a cop-free environment for the first time, conscious that they are freer than they have ever been in their lives, cannot be expected to be exemplars of free human beings in a free society. For, into their first tentative experience of freedom they bring with them a lifetime’s accumulation of unfreedom. It would be absurd to believe that those who have been bound their whole lives will, at the moment their fetters are suddenly and unexpectedly shaken off, immediately move with a dancer’s grace. No, they will not always do the right thing, and some will inevitably commit terrible wrongs. That excesses are a part of every rising of the oppressed is a truism – the American Revolution of 1776 was full of excesses – and only lickspittles of the status quo could denounce such uprisings because of the excesses of a few.

What is important is not merely to condemn brutality by those who rose up but also, as Sister Souljah observed at the time, to place such excesses in the context of the larger brutalizations which are everyday occurrences in U.S. cities. This alone can help us all to try to avoid them in the future. In any case, let us not lose a sense of proportion. The excesses committed by L.A. rebels were hardly the most remarkable developments in the rebellion there. Hysterical denunciations of violence by those who rule ring especially hollow. America’s CIA President and the news-commentators who followed his orders tried to convince us that four Black men accused of beating a white truck-driver in the first hours of the L.A. uprising are among the most fiendish ogres of all time. To put this in perspective, one has only to consider how many lost their lives in any given hour of “collateral damage” in the 1991 U.S. massacre of the people of Iraq.

False, too, and no less a part and parcel of the oppressors’ apologia, is the “consumerist” view of the rebellion, according to which the “rioters” vied with each other in the accumulation of commodities. The rebels’ principal action, however, was attacking and destroying police stations, government buildings and businesses regarded as symbols of the dominant order. The so-called looting was decidedly a secondary phenomenon. For the

“underclass,” moreover, mass-media advertising is a cruel hoax: What you see is what you can’t afford and what you will never get.

We also reject the liberal theory – as advanced by James Ridgeway and others – that Police Chief Gates somehow engineered or managed the Rebellion: that he knew it was coming, refused (for personal as well as political reasons) to mobilize the L.A. police to stop it, and, in the long run, drew the most benefit from it. To thus elevate any of history’s least significant actors – police chiefs, politicians and other parasites – to positions of power they could never attain, is to reduce the masses to the status of history’s mere objects, inevitable victims of omnipotent authority.

The people in the streets of L.A. suffered many casualties, and for the time being have retreated. But surely it was they, not Gates or any other “prominent personality,” who made history during the last two days of April and the first of May 1992.

Finally, it is impossible to agree with those who pretend to see in the L.A. rebellion only a “tragedy.” That it had tragic qualities no one would deny, but it cannot be written off so simply. Had no rebellion occurred after the L.A. police verdict was announced – had the outrageous decision in the Rodney King case been passively accepted: That would have been a tragedy!

showing the tremendous pressure that young people can exert to break the chains which hold the suffering under the death-sentence of race and class oppression.

In the case of Black-Latino relations, there is little evidence that this initial impulse toward unity dramatically gave way to infighting as the rebellion progressed. Jack Miles' distended exercise in nativism, "Blacks vs. Browns," which disgraced the pages of the October 1992 issue of *The Atlantic*, labored mightily to make the events of April-May 1992 fit its title. They don't, even on Miles' tortured reading of them. Subheads like "A New Paradigm: Blacks vs. Latinos" are followed jarringly in Miles' essay by discussions of divisions within the Latino population, and by evidence of the common purpose of Blacks and Central Americans in the rebellion. Clearly there are Black-Latino conflicts in Los Angeles. The recent battles over construction jobs reflect as much. But as in gang rivalries, the experience of urban rebellion did not aggravate Black-Latino divisions so much as it defused them.

The case of Black-Korean conflict raises far more troubling issues. Korean-American merchants suffered disproportionate losses to looters and especially to arsonists. Korean-American ownership of liquor stores, and other eminently lootable enterprises, heightened tensions in the wake of the very light sentence of storeowner Suon Ja Du for the murder of Black teenager Latasha Harlins, and helped account for this pattern. Credit policies, which keep Asian businessmen in the ghettos (from which white capital has largely fled) and which keep African-Americans from starting businesses, obviously play a role in exacerbating problems between Blacks and Koreans. Day-to-day encounters in stores are virtually programmed to explode with both sides feeling trapped and threatened.

It would be foolish to suppose that in such situations storekeeper-customer problems remain only that, and do not bleed over into larger patterns of Black-Korean relations. It simply is not the case, for example, that anti-Korean hip-hop lyrics are confined to expressing class hatred.

But facing such grim reality is not to fantasize, as the media did, that all reality is inescapably grim where relations among America's victims are concerned. The larger story of the Los Angeles response, and the national response, and the Korean-American response, to the King verdict refutes such despair-mongering by



SPRING IS HERE

"In reality, phenomena don't always develop in practice according to the established schemes."

– Amilcar Cabral (1968)

"Up to now, misfortune has been described in order to inspire terror and pity. I will describe happiness, to inspire the opposite."

– Isidore Ducasse (1870)

Why Los Angeles? Poet Larry Neal wrote that "America is the world's greatest jailer, and we are all in jail." It is characteristic of the New World Order that America's most prison-like city, a veritable hothouse of institutionalized racism and an incubator of some of history's most insidious innovations in Capital's war on Labor, also happens to be what Mike Davis calls the "fastest growing metropolis in the advanced industrial world."¹ Nothing is less surprising than the fact that a major rebellion should break out in the city in which post-industrial misery has reached its highest tension. But the April-May '92 events cannot be reduced to the status of a "regional" phenomenon. Indeed, the rebellion revealed, in rough outline, contours and patterns that will go a long way in defining the struggle for human emancipation on this continent for years to come.

¹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992). This book provides essential background for understanding the L.A. rebellion.

Los Angeles is the most militarized city in the United States, and its cops have long been notorious as the most fascistic in the land. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) numbers 8000 officers, and the L.A. Sheriff's Police adds 8000 more. On the first day of the uprising California Governor Wilson sent in 4000 National Guard troops. President Bush sent in 4500 U.S. Army troops and Marines as well as 1200 Federal law officers from the Border Patrol, Bureau of Prisons, the U.S. Marshal's Service, U.S. Park Police, Customs Service Helicopter Units, F.B.I. SWAT teams, and special teams from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. 1200 officers of the California Highway Patrol were also mobilized. In addition to these 26,900 armed defenders of Capital and the State, several thousand more were "on standby." Moreover, L.A. has 3500 "private security" firms, all heavily armed.

That it took seventy-two hours for this huge military force to occupy the rebel neighborhoods shows that the uprising expressed the discontent and desire of a large community. Significantly, far more than in the Sixties ghetto uprisings, the L.A. rebellion quickly spread beyond the extensive liberated zones of the ghetto itself, igniting revolts among the oppressed in Hollywood, Long Beach, Pasadena and elsewhere. In all, some 10,000 businesses were destroyed. Damage was estimated at a billion dollars. Some 17,000 "rioters" were arrested. Close to 2000 were deported.

Within an hour or two of the first reports of "trouble" in L.A., police departments all over the United States were put in a state of "readiness." Reserves were called in, street-patrols increased. And all over the country local police were invited to add their own lies and threats to the non-stop propaganda barrage provided by the obedient media.

Despite this nationwide display of police and military strength, despite an utter disregard for civil liberties by the forces of occupation which reached the proportions of a state of siege in Los Angeles, Las Vegas and elsewhere, and despite the endless half-truths and untruths droned on TV, radio, in the press and from the pulpits, the L.A. rebellion inspired a positive and active response from coast to coast. No matter how slickly the "official" State Department or media commentators – who can tell the difference?

ethnicities on the screen."⁵ What, for example, were so many white kids doing pouring into the streets, putting themselves in harm's way? Why were the arrested so largely Latino? These questions were mostly ignored.

Very occasionally, a news magazine briefly quoted an "expert" to the effect that Los Angeles was a "class riot," with the poor, across color lines, acting out of a common helplessness. This analysis, vastly better than anything else on offer in the popular press, suffers from the tendency of American intellectuals to suppose that if something is about class, it is therefore not about race. The L.A. rebellion's clear class content ought not to obscure the fact that it came out of a clear demand for racial justice. "Middle-class" African-American youths, including students from the University of Southern California, University of California/Los Angeles and the California State campuses, participated energetically in the rebellion. White youth who joined the action were doing more than just expressing class grievances. They were taking decisive steps toward the abolition of whiteness by joining a "race riot" to attack authority rather than to attack African-Americans. That's news, but you'd never know it from the newspapers.

When coverage did stray from the "raging Black men versus white society" framework, it usually did so only to emphasize the tensions between African-Americans and Korean storeowners and, more recently, between Blacks and Latinos. Both these areas of tension are of tremendous importance. That the media seems able to locate anti-Asian and anti-Latino (and anti-Arab and anti-Semitic) prejudices only when such attitudes can be alleged to have surfaced in the Black community, must not lead us to ignore real differences among people of color in the United States. But the lesson of the L.A. uprising is anything but the hopeless conclusion that unity is impossible. The outrage at the King verdict was multiracial and the cry "No Justice! No Peace!" went up loudly in several languages.

⁵ Mike Davis, *L.A. Was Just the Beginning: Urban Revolt in the United States: A Thousand Points of Light* (Open Pamphlet Magazine Series, PO Box 2726, Westfield, NJ 07091).

know what to do” – women played leading roles in the streets. A New York Times photo taken shortly thereafter, but miles away, showed five people shouting, according to the caption, “insults and threats at the police”: four were women. Three of four laughing looters pictured on the front page of May Day’s Chicago Tribune were women. Some young Latina mothers brought babies with them as they looted. A British reporter noticed a Black woman methodically pitching rocks through the windows of the L.A. Times building. In Hollywood, a “mob of little white girls” – as a radio announcer put it – helped themselves to the entire stock of a large lingerie store. An exciting follow-up to the largest women’s demonstration in U.S. history – the march for reproductive rights in Washington D.C. a few weeks earlier – the L.A. rebellion gave real substance to that overworked phrase: “The Year of the Woman.”

Despite all this, far and away the media’s dominant image of the uprising was the beating of the white truck-driver, Reginald Denny, by young Black men. Armed with a small bit of videotape, the press and TV imposed its New World Order on the varied, creative, living activity of the rebellion through an insistent focus on Denny.

Thus the supposedly menacing African-American male, not police brutality, became the media’s central issue. Denny’s victimization, on this view, did not just equal King’s. It explained King’s, and the Simi Valley verdict. Black men, familiarly enough, were the problem. They were, as Quayle’s and Bush’s carefully rehearsed sound bites suggested, the pathological products of the collapse of the Black family and of incendiary hip-hop profiteers. Black women came to be cast, in the television drama of South Central, not as actors in their own behalf, but as seduced spectators, as children bearing uncontrollable children and even as mindless Murphy Brown fans driven to single parenthood by the evil example of a rich, white, forty-something sitcom heroine.

Framing the “riot” as the affair of young Black males, the news could make little sense of the multiracial and multiethnic participation in it. As Mike Davis wrote, “You hear commentators going on and on about Black youth while in fact you’re seeing other

– tried to suppress the real news from L.A., or to whitewash it with racist images and innuendo, young recalcitrants throughout the country saw through the smokescreen and took action. Direct-action protests that in some cases turned into full-scale rebellions, sparked by news of the uprising in L.A. and in solidarity with it, occurred in at least forty-four cities in twenty states.²

As is true of the L.A. rebellion itself, few if any of these solidarity rebellions were led, or indeed, in any way affected, by the organized Left. Wholly unprepared for such an uprising, which some “leading theorists” had in fact proved to be impossible in what they like to call this “post-modern” epoch, the Left – with very few exceptions³ – contributed neither to the events themselves nor to their subsequent theoretical clarification. In what passes for a Left press in the U.S., coverage of the L.A. rebellion characteristically oscillated between hand-wringing genuflections on the “tragedy” and cynical self-congratulation derived from the pretense that the uprising, like all events everywhere at all times, once again “vindicated” this or that archaic program. At their best the Left sects lent some support to the post-rebellion demonstrations, on which, however, they too often tried to impose a reformist slant by tying demands for more meaningless jobs to the fortunes of the Democratic Party, whose disgusting presidential campaign addressed the L.A. rebellion by playing the “Sister Souljah card” to reemphasize the obvious fact

² Birmingham, Alabama; Arcata, Berkeley, Davis, El Cerrito, Irvine, Marin County, Oakland, Palo Alto, Pinole, Riverside, San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, San Mateo, and Santa Cruz, California; Boulder and Denver, Colorado; Bridgeport, Connecticut; Miami and Tampa, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; Peoria, Illinois; Minneapolis, Minnesota; St. Louis and Warrensburg, Missouri; Jersey City, New Jersey; Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska; Las Vegas, Nevada; New Rochelle and New York, New York; Toledo, Ohio; Eugene, Oregon; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Charleston, South Carolina; Austin and Dallas, Texas; Olympia and Seattle, Washington; Beloit, Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and Washington, D.C. Solidarity demonstrations also took place in Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver, Canada, as well as in Athens, Berlin, Paris, and Rome.

³ In addition to the writings by Mike Davis and Robin D. G. Kelley cited elsewhere in these notes, important material on the L.A. rebellion also appeared in *News & Letters* (59 East Van Buren, Chicago, IL 60605) and *Against the Current* (Center for Changes, 7012 Michigan Avenue, Detroit, MI 48210).

that Bill “More Cops on the Street” Clinton is just another white conservative politician behind that saxophone.

Far more interesting and consequential than the flip-flops of the would-be radical intelligentsia was the bold action of the homeless, who went from being on the streets to in the streets with lightning speed, and the revolutionary lucidity and daring of the hip-hop community, and insurgent working-class young people generally, who were of course the heart and soul of the rebellion.

Contrary to those who profess to see nothing but illiteracy and ignorance in the “younger generation,” we argue that America’s poorest teen-agers, most of them high-school dropouts, are in many and fundamental ways far wiser than those who want them kept in school to prepare for (non-existent) jobs. If the best way to learn is by doing, the first thing is to decide what is to be done. There is every reason to believe that in some seventy-two hours of popular, creative destruction, L.A.’s insurgent population learned more than they did in all the years they spent confined in classrooms. Almost in passing, therefore, they proposed the only workable solution to the much-discussed crisis of American education.

That the hip-hoppers and dropouts have much to learn is obvious, but they also have much to teach. It would be wrong to minimize the inevitable confusion and, in some cases, outright misogyny and anti-Korean hysteria, that afflict the hip-hop community and the rappers who are its best-known public expression. It is nonetheless crucial to recognize in this community, and its music, the emergence of a rebellious pride, a conscious rejection of dominant values and the institutions that uphold them, and, above all, a new radical self-awareness rooted in the growing mass consciousness that revolutionary change is possible. The self-organization of these kids in X-caps has helped set the stage for nothing less than the creation of a free society.

In hilarious contrast to the grim Puritanism and “realistic” rhetoric of the Left, L.A.’s new urban guerrillas insisted on having a good time. Queried by reporters as to why they were looting, many replied: “Because it’s fun!” A front-page May 1st Chicago Tribune photo is captioned: “Looters laugh while they carry away all they can.” Ironically, the banner headline above it reads: “A nightmare

lucidity, summarized the jury’s (il)logic: “What we thought we saw in the videotape didn’t happen.”

The acquitters of the cops who assaulted Rodney King showed a terrifying ability to construct a white “Semiotext(e)” which enabled them to deny the brutality of those in power, no matter how many times they watched it. Undoubtedly even now a small army of academics is feverishly trying to make the fashions of “deconstruction” fit the realities of Los Angeles. To the extent that such intellectuals fail to see that oppression and freedom (and not just infinitely manipulatable images) are at issue, they will not manage to break from the sorry apologetics characteristic of the Paul de Man(ic) capitulation to fascism by deconstruction’s founder and the craven decision of the Simi Valley jurors.

It was not just the jury’s behavior, but the entire performance of the press and TV commentators which showed how it is possible to be literally blinded by racism. Given the arrest records, and the pictures of the rebellion, there can be no doubt that community reaction to the King verdict was, to use a term that universities have not yet fully emptied of meaning, a multicultural one.

Latino youth poured into the streets alongside African-Americans and suffered more arrests and deportations than any other group. Many of the rebels had recently come from Central American nations whose recent histories of resistance ensured that the presence of U.S. tanks was not absolutely overawing. Korean-Americans came to Justice for King rallies in great numbers and suffered hundreds of arrests. Whites formed a significant part of rebellious crowds and figured prominently in many of the most striking photographs of the uprising. Police arrested over a thousand whites.

Typically, however, when the New York Times revisited the scenes of the rebellion in November 1992, its writers managed to make this white participation vanish altogether. “The city’s white population,” according to the Times, “while largely untouched by the riot, was shaken by the uprising it witnessed.”

From the moment when a young African-American woman challenged Mayor Bradley at a pre-rebellion protest meeting – “We can’t rely on these people (Bradley et al.) to act. You (the crowd)



LYING IN LIVING COLOR

“The dream is the truth.”

– Zora Neale Hurston (1937)

“You can’t have capitalism without racism.”

– Malcolm X (1964)

“You know, this riot has been our media.”

– L.A. youth to reporters (1992)

During the L.A. rebellion it became clear that even the seemingly simplest bits of news were saturated with falsehood. Again and again we were told, for example, that “the violence began shortly after the announcement of the verdict” – as if the racist verdict itself was not an act of violence, and as if the entire King case did not show how thoroughly violence pervaded the LAPD’s daily routine, and the American Way of Life. Another dishonest refrain vented the media’s consternation that the L.A. rebels were “burning down their own neighborhood.” Their own? Does anyone actually believe that people forced to live in these depressed and terrorized communities own or control them?

Indeed, a central lesson of the rebellion was the extent to which the establishment media, and what passes as common sense among racists, encourages white Americans to deny what they see. Thus a juror maintained that King was “directing the action” and “in complete control” as he lay helpless with police raining blow after blow on him. A Chicago Tribune headline, in a rare burst of

of violence in L.A.” One class’s nightmare is another’s pleasant dream.

Coco Fusco has pointed out that “laughing at imposed identity, imposed rules, imposed laws” has long been an element in the struggle against imperialist violence. In April-May ‘92, humor was a major weapon. Those who took what they wanted from unguarded stores could hardly help making jokes about the “free market.” Less than a day after the rebellion began, stickers reading “Support Your Local Police: Beat Yourself Up” turned up on walls, windows and lamp-posts all across the land. Few things are more consciousness-expanding than a good joke at the expense of cops, bosses and bureaucrats. Moreover, as in the movement for women’s reproductive rights and against the Gulf Massacre, humorists – cartoonists, street-pranksters, billboard-revisers and graffiti-comedians – grasped the essential in the L.A. rebellion faster and more consequentially than anyone else. Social theory separated from humor can no longer serve the cause of freedom.

The L.A. rebels’ emphasis on humor, and on the pleasure of looting and other forms of rebelling, indicates that their very starting-point was well beyond all reality-principle politics. In one of the most insightful articles on the rebellion, Robin D. G. Kelley called attention to “the joy and sense of empowerment” expressed on the faces of the young Black and Latino poor, “seizing property and destroying what many regarded as symbols of domination.”⁴ In this joy and sense of empowerment lies the only future worth dreaming about.

The three-day L.A. insurrection of ‘92 was as spontaneous as the workers’ uprising in Hungary in 1956, the Paris rebellion of May ‘68, and the General Strike in Trinidad in 1970, and always will retain its honored place in the company of these and other great leaps toward freedom. Today, when all that’s left of the traditional Left are a few dried-up rinds of long-dead movements, those who have nothing to lose continue to offer us fresh fruit from the Tree of Life.

⁴ Robin D. G. Kelley, “Straight from Underground,” *The Nation* (June 8, 1992), 793-796.

