

THE 1992 LOS ANGELES RIOTS: A COMPARISON OF
MEDIA COVERAGE BETWEEN THE *LOS ANGELES TIMES*,
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER, AND THE *LOS ANGELES*
SENTINEL

by

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Between April 30th to May 4th, the 1992 Los Angeles riots caused thousands of injuries and arrests, over hundreds of destroyed buildings, and added up to over a billion dollars in damages. This violence and destruction did not occur in a vacuum; but rather, there were already pre-existent and escalating tensions – especially within the Black communities in South Central Los Angeles. News media, however, significantly diverged in their portrayals of the root causes for the unrest. A comparison between the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* showcases how differently mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers approached the incidents that began with the beating of Rodney King, the not guilty verdict of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers, as well as the violence and destruction that followed. Each newspaper was a prominent source of influence for local communities, either within the city or in the metropolitan area, and played a significant role in the public perception and interpretation of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. At the same time, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* showcased moments of significant convergence as they advanced their own news agenda, which influenced their respective narratives as well. Each newspaper showcased points of convergence and divergence in their media coverage of the “Rodney King Incident”, the murder of Latasha Harlins,

Reginald Denny's beating, and the presence of other minority groups within the 1992 Los Angeles riots. These perspectives or frameworks reflected how the *Times*, *The Orange County Register's*, and the *Sentinel* actively constructed their own portrayals throughout the unraveling of violence and destruction, and ultimately, those narratives implied different aspects of social reality experienced by the various groups of individuals in Los Angeles.

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Introduction

Everyone seemed caught by surprise. Reporters scrambled to cover the scattered protests that erupted. Newscasters looped televised images that they caught on intervals. Police officers dispatched to the intersection of Florence and Normandie were forced to retreat, in large part due to the lack of official orders and the outnumbering crowds that began to gather. Los Angeles Police Chief Daryl Gates was out of town and in Brentwood, an upscale white neighborhood, to address a political fundraiser. Officials should have been able to predict what might have happened, how the acquittal of four white police officers would set off a series of violence, but for the most part, they seemed completely unprepared. Shortly after, stores in downtown Los Angeles were looted from, set ablaze, or both. Violence erupted, and the city of Los Angeles descended into a state of confusion, chaos, and destruction. For the next five days, Mayor Tom Bradley imposed a county-wide curfew and declared a state of emergency, otherwise known as the “1992 Los Angeles riots.”¹

The 1992 Los Angeles riots were characterized by the widespread participation of individuals with various backgrounds and aims, mainly the involvement of non-Black minorities and targeted destruction toward Korean and Korean American businesses. This outbreak of violence and destruction reflected a long history of racial

¹ I refer to the events that took place between April 30th to May 4th as the “1992 Los Angeles riots”, simply because the phrase is most widely used throughout history and across society, but elsewhere, I adopt the neutral usage of “civil unrest” or “unrest” as opposed to the negatively connotated term, “riots.” See, for example, Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 248-252; Heather Ann Thompson, “Understanding Rioting in Postwar Urban America,” *Journal of Urban History* 26, no. 3 (March 2000): 391-402; and Karen Grigsby Bates, “Is It an ‘Uprising’ or a ‘Riot’? Depends on Who’s Watching,” NPR, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/04/30/403303769/uprising-or-riot-depends-whos-watching>; for more detailed arguments about how terminology can reflect different analytical frameworks.

injustice, resource deprivation, and inter/intra-ethnic conflict that could be traced back to the 1965 Watts Rebellion, or prior. Local groups experienced increasingly burdensome social and economic inequalities, especially with the influx of immigration and a general feeling of discontent. There was high unemployment, underemployment, and limited job opportunities or resources within all corners of society – but specifically, these inequalities disproportionately affected local minority groups. As a result, these were everyday people out on the streets expressing their discontent and frustration, both toward the acquittal of four white police officers involved in the “King Incident”, and what became a bigger manifestation of anger and resentment against the ‘status quo’. Each participating individual or group was motivated by a possibility of converging or diverging grievances, regardless of race or background. Between April 30th to May 5th, there were 5,633 persons arrested – 51% Latino, 36% Black, and 11% white – almost 90% were male, and 45% were under the age of 25.² Nearly half of all businesses completely destroyed were Korean or Korean American owned.³ Each participant group, regardless of age, background, and ethnicity, were motivated by the possibility of shared or varying grievances.

Media coverage played a significant role in the portrayal and perception of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, simply because this medium can manipulate the construction and transmission of a social or political movement. More commonly, media can lend itself to the collective experience and legitimize current conditions. Oftentimes, scholars

² Joan Petersilia and Allan Abrahamse, “A Profile of Those Arrested,” in *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*, ed. Mark Baldassare (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 140.

³ Jane L. Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising: Race, Place, and the Story of the “Riot”: Racial Ideology in African American and Korean Newspapers,” *Race, Gender & Class* 8, no. 4 (2001): 141.

identify rioting as a reflection of popular discontent, and an important indicator and/or mechanism for change within the social, political, and economic spheres News media, however, does not serve to simply reflect detailed events of a day or hold a mirror up to reality. Media presents stories about events to their audiences – triggered by actual occurrences, but for the most part, those are only a small set of selected incidents. Each news organization is subject to their own procedures and constraints, including (but not limited to) commercialism, organizational forces, codes of professionalism, resources, and other regulations. Editors, journalists, and staff members operate within certain personal or external beliefs, values, and/or ideologies – oftentimes, enforced by media companies or the general public. The mainstream news perspective is a combination of various influences and constraints that dictate how journalists choose and construct everyday stories or articles. Therefore, the “news perspective” is centered around mainstream American values, and influenced by ideas related to individualism, moderatism, peace and order, leadership, ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, capitalism, and small-town pastoralism.⁴ This framework is unconscious, but common and pervasive within the newsroom, frequently upheld and reinforced by everyday practices related to the status quo. As a result, the news media can be advantageous or disadvantageous toward certain groups and/or individuals, because media organizations can choose to adhere or ignore to certain values, beliefs, or ideologies. Mainstream news media may find the “news perspective” convenient, simply because they already adhere to mainstream ideologies, and their audience (un)consciously upholds similar

⁴ William J. Potter, *Media Literacy, Second Edition* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 95-96.

ideas. On the other hand, ethnic minority newspapers may struggle with the “news perspective”, or reject the framework entirely, because their inherent position or organizational operations juxtaposes the status quo. Media coverage remains subject to a variety of internal and external influences within individual organizations, and therefore, play a significant part in how the public views an event (i.e., the 1992 Los Angeles riots).

My research aims to provide a broader understanding for how the 1992 Los Angeles riots unraveled, newspapers’ portrayals of the event, and examine how the different public narratives fit within a greater historical context. During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, news media widely documented the outbreak of violence and destruction. News journalists and photographers captured “iconic moments” through personal accounts or surveillance photos, and as a part of the evolving narrative within the local communities. Scholars vary in their interpretations for the reconstructed chronology, and either identify the end as May 4th, when the curfew was lifted; May 8th, when the national guard began to pull out; or on May 10th, when deployment ended, and the federalization of the national guard lifted.⁵ My research focuses on the series of events as reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel* between April 30th to May 5th, supplemented by other news or incidents before and after these given dates. Guided by textual analysis, I examined how the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* constructed their own version of the unrest. I analyzed news stories to identify their rhetoric, themes, and

⁵ Sina Kramer, “Multiplicity and Collective Contestation in the 1992 Los Angeles Riots/Rebellion”, in *Excluded Within: The (Un)Intelligibility of Radical Political Actors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2, Oxford Scholarship Online.

which incidents or issues were given priority. How did each newspaper portray the 1992 Los Angeles riots? Where did they converge or diverge? Each newspaper made conscious and varied decisions about the stories to publish or omit, on what page, and which photographs would be used to supplement those news articles. My research examined three different regional newspapers in order to analyze how their ideological framework influenced the public narrative about the 1992 Los Angeles riots. I chose the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, because they represent a white-liberal, white-conservative, and mainstream Black framework, respectively. Each had the largest distribution in the area of their genre. They were all founded and/or operated within the surrounding areas of Los Angeles, though *The OC Register* was south of the city, while the *Times* and *Sentinel* was situated within it. Regardless, the *Times*, *The OC Register*, and the *Sentinel* each played a significant role in how the public perceived the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Scholars have studied media coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but there is relatively little analysis comparing and contrasting how regional newspapers reacted to and portrayed the events. Oftentimes, there was a larger focus on the national response or narrative, such as detailed analysis from the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.⁶ This was simply because the unrest did not take place in a vacuum, and ultimately, public awareness and related incidents spread across the

⁶ See, for example, Anan Wan, Tara Marie Mortensen, Yicheng Zhu, and Jo-Yun Li, "From Confrontations to Civil Liberties: Newspaper Photo Framing of Police Brutality and Riots in Los Angeles 1992 and Ferguson, Missouri 2014," *Newspaper Research Journal* 39, no. 3 (2018): 270-286; Shannon Campbell, Phil Chidester, Jamel Bell, and Jason Royer, "How Mass Media Delegitimize Rioting as Social Protest," *Race, Gender & Class* 11, no. 1 (2004): 158-176; and William L. Solomon, "Images of Rebellion: News Coverage of Rodney King," *Gender & Class* 11, no. 1 (2004): 23-38.

country. There have been multiple other studies that analyzed the *Los Angeles Times*, either stand-alone or in comparison to other non-regional newspapers, but few have adopted a regional approach nor perspective toward the interracial dynamics within the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Several scholars have analyzed the prominent ethnic minority newspapers within Los Angeles, such as *The Korean Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, but do not fully delved into the issue(s) of interracial conflict and/or race relations between the local white and Black communities.⁷ Subsequently, there has been no scholarship about media coverage related to *The Orange County Register*, as a politically conservative and right-leaning alternative to the narrative portrayed by the *Los Angeles Times*. My research aimed to provide a deeper understanding about media coverage within the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and at the same time, bring forth additional analysis between several different regional newspapers. The *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* may have been operating within the common journalistic norms of their day, but ultimately, each newspaper approached and/or portrayed the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a part of their own news agenda.

Given the distinctive political and historical frameworks of the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and *Sentinel* generally diverged in their portrayals of the causes for the violent unrest. However, there were significant moments of convergence

⁷ See, for example, Hemant Shah, "Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict: Examples from the Los Angeles Riots of 1992," *Journal of Dispute Resolution* 177, no. 1 (2007): 177-184; Michael C. Thornton, "Meaningful Dialogue? The *Los Angeles Sentinel's* Depiction of Black and Asian American Relations, 1993-2000," *Journal of Black Studies* 48, no. 8 (2011): 1275-1298; Soo-Kwang Oh and Justin Hudson, "Framing and Reframing the 1992 LA Riots: A Study of Minority Issues Framing by the Los Angeles Times and Its Readers." *Revista de Comunicaci3n* 16, no. 2 (2017): 123-146; and Twomey, "Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising," 140-154.

that reflected how the same information from news events could advance different news purposes or agendas. Each newspaper portrayed the “Rodney King Incident” as the major catalyst to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers varied in their own approach toward the beating, verdict, and unrest. Mainstream news media converged around a Black and white binary framework, and in turn, the concept of race and race relations remained a popular story telling strategy. As a historically Black newspaper, the *Sentinel* focused on their coverage of the local Black community and explored historical grievances suffered by the Black population within the area. In turn, the *Sentinel* recognized the implications of Latasha Harlins’ murder and *People v. Du*, unlike the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*. The newspaper identified the causality between the murder of Latasha Harlins, the “Rodney King Incident” and Reginald Denny’s beating, but prioritized media coverage about rescue or recovery efforts within the Black community. On the other hand, mainstream newspapers placed emphasis on their coverage of Denny’s beating, as both identified how the incident was comparable to the “Rodney King Incident.” This framework situated Denny as a major flashpoint within the unrest, and in turn, failed to recognize the possibility of other injustices or inequalities prior to and throughout the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Each newspaper attempted to convey their own stories surrounding the unrest, ranging from their portrayal of the “Rodney King Incident” to the beating of Reginald Denny, as rooted in the journalistic norms of their day.

The *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and *The Sentinel* constructed varying frameworks about the 1992 Los Angeles riots that implied different aspects of social reality and while those news stories or events advanced alternative news agendas, they all operated within a mainstream narrative.

Chapter 1: Race and the Print Media

The 1992 Los Angeles riots showcased how race and racial ideology framed the portrayal of mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers in their coverage of the unrest. Race became a major part of the narrative as news media struggled to balance between hypervisibility and invisibility in the coverage of the Black community. News media helped racialize the unrest, and oftentimes, used the Black/white interracial framework to oversimplify underlying complexities within Los Angeles. The 1992 Los Angeles riots arose from intersectional conflict between different local groups, and exhibited multiple minority-related facets, but a majority of news outlets categorizes the origins within the Black community. This mainstream narrative hinges on a simplified causality between the unrest and the “Rodney King Incident”, which ignores any number of other social, economic, or political factors responsible for the violence or destruction. News media relied on the beating and acquittal verdict as the overwhelming reason behind the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and in turn, failed to acknowledge the deep-rooted injustices and inequalities that led to the outbreak of violence.

News media converged in their use of racial ideology to portray the the “King Incident”, and subsequently, the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This storytelling strategy implicitly (or explicitly) reinforced the status quo, because within racial ideology, the concept of white racial hierarchy remains central and constant.⁸ A white racial hierarchy categorizes the white race as the highest in rank across multiple different realms, because they are “perceived to be socially, culturally, economically,

⁸ Victor M. Valle and Rodolfo D. Torres, “‘Policing’ Race: The Media’s Representation of the Los Angeles Riots,” in *Latino Metropolis* (Ann Harbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 45.

and morally superior.”⁹ People of color are ranked based on their relationship to the white race – who remain the “default group”, and in turn, this structure motivates competition between different minority groups. Groups are distinguished as ‘better’ or ‘worse’, and oftentimes, perpetrated by images of illegitimate victims or “model minorities” within the public sphere.¹⁰ Mainstream news media featured the local white and Black communities, either as victims or perpetrators of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This was simply because any type of interracial conflict focused on white-on-Black violence or Black-on-white violence.¹¹ On the other hand, minority newspapers tend to situate themselves within a niche position or target specific individuals and groups. A majority of early Black newspapers established themselves amidst a crusade against slavery, and nowadays, continue to promote social change and act as “the Black’s helper.”¹² Each newspaper may portray different assumptions or expectations about race and racial relations, but ultimately, those ideals reflect societal norms to varying degrees. Racial ideology, in turn, remains a major factor within mainstream and minority newspapers.

During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* constructed the popular narrative for the local Black community. The weekly *Sentinel* was (and still is) Los Angeles’ largest African American owned newspaper. Primarily read by older citizens of the local Black community, these were (are) individuals who largely

⁹ Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising,” 142.

¹⁰ Hye Jin Paek and Hemant Shah, “Racial Ideology, Model Minorities, and the “Not-So-Silent Partner:” Stereotyping of Asian Americans in U.S. Magazine Advertising,” *Howard Journal of Communication* 14, no. 4 (2003): 226.

¹¹ Shah, “Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict,” 179.

¹² Armistead S. Pride and Clint C. Wilson II, *A History of the Black Press* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), 256.

identified and supported local social and religious institutions.¹³ The *Los Angeles Sentinel* (originally named the *Eastside Shopper*) was first established in 1933 under the leadership of Leon Washington Jr.; the newspaper championed economic equality and entrepreneurship opportunities for Blacks within Los Angeles.¹⁴ He served as a major influence for the newspaper over the next three decades, even when a series of health problems forced him appoint to his wife as assistant publisher and business manager in the late 1940's. Washington passed away at the age of 67 in 1974, but the *Los Angeles Sentinel* became the largest Black circulated newspaper on the West Coast. Today, the *Sentinel* remains Black owned and operated – independent of white leadership and influence. Generally, “news emanating from ethnic-minority papers tends to act as ballast” to mainstream news coverage, and their rendering of society provides alternative reasons, description, and/or frames for how the world operates.¹⁵ From the very beginning, the Black media set out to challenge mainstream portrayals that rendered Blacks invisible or viewed as inferior. They have been forced to provide alternative perspectives and perceptions on Black (or other racially-related) news events, because Black press are required to have “double consciousness” – and report on white, mainstream activities due to their influence on Black life, as reflected by other ethnic minority newspapers.¹⁶ Black newspapers can be active or passive agents of

¹³ Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising,” 144.

¹⁴ Kevin Hodder, “Leon H. Washington, Jr. (1907-1974),” BlackPast, accessed April 26, 2021, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/washington-jr-leon-h-1907-1974/>

¹⁵ Thornton, “Meaningful Dialogue?,” 1277.

¹⁶ Pamela Newkirk, *Within the Veil: Black Journalists, White Media* (NY: New York University Press, 2000), 38.

progressive reform, but for the most part, ethnic-minority press provide coverage and reporting “more fairly conveying the complexity of interethnic conflict.”¹⁷

As a historically African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* provided alternative background and context for the injustice of the “Rodney King Incident” and subsequently, covered the 1992 Los Angeles riots on behalf of the local Black community as well. The *Sentinel* was a proactive force, and involved themselves actively within the aftermath, but constructed their own framework and narrative for the civil unrest. They offered a counter narrative to the *Los Angeles Times*’ and *The Orange County Register*’s portrayal of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The newspaper strongly endorsed Rodney King’s plea for peace, and featured his famous line, “Can we all get along?” as an ongoing theme. This message corresponded with their primary audience – older Black churchgoers, and in turn, the *Sentinel* strongly condemned the violence and destruction on the streets. They pushed for peace-making, recovery, and rebuilding within the local Black community, but failed to acknowledge or recognize the possible participation of other minority groups in their focus on Black Angelenos. The *Sentinel* viewed and portrayed the events through an alternative worldview, and therefore, their narrative diverged most significantly with the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*.

Mainstream news media, on the other hand, approach events with different values, assumptions, attitudes, and narrative frames – as underscored by the portrayal of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The *Los Angeles Times* and *The Orange County Register* represented “mainstream” media, or the majority of larger (white) news organizations,

¹⁷ Thornton, “Meaningful Dialogue?”, 1278.

those who have dictated “societal understanding and public news issues.”¹⁸ Mainstream news media influences the dominant worldview, but problems arise, when audiences remain under the impression that all individuals or groups interpret everyday events or issues in a similar manner. News organizations undertake a conscious effort to create and construct their own version of the public narrative, and mainstream news organizations tend to reinforce the status quo. Some scholars argue that a majority of news presses are “more thoroughly bound than ethnic minority press to a model of reporting that seems to result in misunderstanding interethnic conflict.”¹⁹ At the same time, mainstream (and for the most part, ethnic minority) newspapers are driven by their own company ideologies, organization forces, and/or resource constraints that influence any type of advanced narrative. Newspaper organizations tend to be strongly guided by decisions that help attract bigger audience size or generate larger profits. Each newspaper, ultimately, approached the 1992 Los Angeles in order to advance respective news agendas and as a part of their own historical narratives. The *Los Angeles Times* and *The Orange County Register* constituted different aspects of mainstream mass media, and these newspapers represented a spectrum of underlying liberal and/or conservative biases.

Established in 1881, the *Los Angeles Times* remains a significant part of Los Angeles’ historical identity. The *Times* reflected a general development (and trend) toward monopoly press, especially when the newspaper organization became the major metropolitan daily for the West Coast. Popularly known as the “class paper”, the *Times*

¹⁸ Oh and Hudson, “Framing and Reframing the 1992 LA Riots,” 125.

¹⁹ Hemant Shah and Michael Thornton, as quoted in Thornton, “Meaningful Dialogue?”, 1277.

was most responsible for the establishment's point of view.²⁰ The newspaper was symbolic for the continuity of wealth and power within the history of Southern Los Angeles – rooted in four generations of familial power. Each *Times*' publisher witnessed their economic fortunes grow and political power institutionalize. They represented the development of monopoly press within “the larger world of business through its corporate parents.”²¹ According to the 1990 Census, the population of the Los Angeles metropolitan area – also called metropolis, or a major city together with its suburbs, nearby cities, and towns – was over 14 million, with 3.5 million in the city itself. The *Times* had a circulation of 1.22 million – nearly the amount of the city population and close to a quarter of the metropolitan area.²² The newspaper had a large audience and widespread readership within the local population, and eventually, the *Times* achieved national acclaim for their reporting. For instance, the *Times* won the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Spot News Reporting of their “balanced, comprehensive, penetrating coverage” on the second day of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.²³ Yet, the *Los Angeles Times* did not escape criticism for their general news coverage and portrayal of the beating, verdict, and unrest either. The Los Angeles chapter of the Asian American Journalists Association (ASJA) criticized the *Times* about “media invisibility” for Asians – despite the high number of Korean/Korean American businesses that were specifically targeted for looting, violence, or destruction.²⁴ The *Times* reckoned with

²⁰ Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking Big: The Story of the Los Angeles Times, Its Publishers and Their Influence on Southern California* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 543.

²¹ *Ibid*, 543-544.

²² Oh and Hudson, “Framing and Reframing the 1992 LA Riots,” 129; and See

²³ *Los Angeles Times*, “Pulitzer Prizes Won by the Los Angeles Times,” accessed February 25, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/about/story/los-angeles-times-pulitzer-prizes>.

²⁴ M. L. Stein, “Coverage Complaints: Asian and Black Journalists Groups Raise Objections to Media Coverage of the Los Angeles Riots,” *Editor & Publisher* 125, no. 21 (1992): 13.

their own struggle to designate and define the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and within their news framework, the multiethnic/multicultural elements of Los Angeles remained oversimplified as a part of the larger narrative. The “King Incident” and the 1992 Los Angeles riots illustrated an attempt to balance the evolving history of Southern California, a struggle for control in Los Angeles, and divergent realities within the future of journalism.

In turn, *The Orange County Register* was a daily newspaper that focused on local news events and issues pertinent to Orange County, California. Ohio-born, Raymond C. Hoiles owned the newspaper organization from the mid-1930’s until his death in 1970. He operated *The OC Register* based around his own libertarian-influenced beliefs, but those philosophies and influences weakened after his death, mainly due to outside conservative influence and a succeeding publisher who had different ideas. Between the 1980s and early 1990s, the newspaper catapulted from a provincial hometown daily to a nationally renowned publication, and circulation grew to over 360,000 on weekdays and 400,000 on Sundays.²⁵ Geographically, the residents of Orange County (and the main readers of *The Orange County Register*) were removed from the violence and destruction that unraveled as part of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. These factors of physical distance and geographical location helped frame a large part of the newspaper’s narrative around the unrest. In fact, Orange County was a part of the gated communities that arose and were “designed as self-contained suburban utopias”, mainly to separate the primarily white residents from the non-white elements arising

²⁵ Harry L. Graham, *Stop the Damned Presses!* (Clearwater, FL: Words & Pictures Press, 2005), 185.

within cities (i.e., Los Angeles).²⁶ *The OC Register* described the local reactions to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but oftentimes, those feelings were overshadowed by a sense of fear and foreboding toward the possibility of a racial “spill over” effect.²⁷ *The Orange County Register* contained a larger (and primarily) conservative audience compared to the *Times*, and therefore, their respective news stories and events varied across the political spectrum.

In turn, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* showcased divergent perceptions and portrayals of race relations. Each newspaper constructed their own narrative of the violence and destruction that unraveled as a part of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Mainstream news media failed to establish the political and economic history embedded within race and race relations in their focus of the violence and destruction on the streets. The *Sentinel* focused on the local Black community but provided little to no coverage about other ethnic minority groups, despite the broad scale presence of Hispanics and Korean/Korean Americans within the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Each newspaper covered the violence and destruction based on their own values and ideas, and oftentimes, they chose to place emphasis on a specific story and omit another issue. As a result, news media should be best understood “as a product of (unequal) struggle among competing news sources who often press competing political charged claims about issues and events.”²⁸ Various news stories or photographs implied

²⁶ Tanya Mohn, “America’s Most Exclusive Gated Communities,” *Forbes*, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tanyamohn/2012/07/03/americas-most-exclusive-gated-communities/?sh=56e4e64e6fe0>.

²⁷ Regina Lawrence, *The Politics of Force: Media and the Construction of Police Brutality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), ProQuest eBook Central, 218.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

different aspects of social reality, but race and racial ideology remained a major aspect within mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers. This framework acted as a major storytelling strategy for the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel*, as they attempted to reckon with the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Chapter 2: King, Harlins, and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

“Rodney King Incident”

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, a Black man, engaged in a high-speed police chase on Foothill Freeway (Interstate 210) in the San Fernando Valley. Recently released from jail and on parole for robbery, King got behind the wheel intoxicated. He sped several stop signs before police officers stopped him, dragged him out of his car and beat him for a total of 15 minutes. King was kicked at least seven times, shot four times with an electric Taser gun, and hit 56 times with nightsticks before he was hogtied and dragged face down out of the road.²⁹ Across the street, 31-year-old plumber, George Sullivan caught 81-seconds of the beating on his new video recorder. He sold the footage to a local television station, and soon the video was broadcast on all the major television and news networks within the country. This video captured more than a dozen white police officers watching and commenting on the beating as the incident took place. King suffered nine skull fractures, a concussion, shattered eye socket and cheekbone, a broken leg, and permanent nerve, brain, and kidney damage.³⁰ Ultimately, four white police officers – Stacey Koon, Lawrence Powell, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno – were indicted for multiple criminal charges, but mainly, the excessive use of force against Rodney King. Many people believed that the video would be unmistakable evidence for police brutality against a Black man, but for the LAPD officers, the footage was used in their defense. This video only captured part of the beating – not the entire incident, and therefore, “Rodney King was ‘hit in exchange for

²⁹ Solomon, “Images of Rebellion,” 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver’.”³¹

Over the next year, the news media’s portrayal of key decisions and processes throughout the trial provided an early example of divergent coverage between the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*. When the California Court of Appeals granted a change of venue for the trial, this decision foreshadowed a long and drawn-out legal process, that would undermine and discredit public faith in the legal system.³² This was a highly uncommon and irregular decision, and the new venue brought about a new set of challenges for the jury selection process. According to the 1990 Census, the county of Los Angeles had a total population of 8,863,134 people, where 56.8% white and 11% Black. Ventura County was 79% white and 2% black, with a total population of 669,016. As a result, the make-up of the 12-member jury panel was predominately white, with one Latino and one Filipino American.³³ This was an overwhelmingly white community and known as a popular home for current or retired law enforcement officers. In turn, the racial makeup for Simi Valley allowed white policemen to “be judged by a jury of their ‘racialized’ peers”, as a large majority of LAPD officers did not actually live in the city, but more often resided in neighborhood suburban areas.³⁴ The *Times* noted how “This was a jury of people who ran away from Los Angeles to get away from [people like] Rodney King”, and quoted several legal experts who believed

³¹ Thompson, “Understanding Rioting in Postwar Urban America,” 395.

³² Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*, 229.

³³ *Let It Fall: Los Angeles 1982-1992*, directed by John Ridley (New York, NY: Lincoln Square Productions, 2017), Netflix.

³⁴ George J. Sanchez, “Reading Reginald Denny: The Politics of Whiteness in the Late Twentieth Century.” *American Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1995): 389.

that the verdict reflected pre-existent attitudes and preconceived notions, as opposed to decision-making based on the evidence presented in court.³⁵ *Times*' journalists implied how the venue change and racial makeup of the jury would have trumped any type of video evidence or witness testimony King might have provided, had he chosen to testify (for further details on the article, see Appendix A). Compared to the *Times*, *The Orange County Register* omitted the significance of the racial makeup of the jury and the location of the trial but highlighted how King chose to plead the fifth. They reported on an interview with an anonymous juror, who situated the blame for the verdict on Rodney King. This narrative, adopted by the newspaper, clearly stated how the "verdict might have been different King testified" (for a more detailed look at the article, see Appendix B).³⁶ *The Orange County Register* did not address nor acknowledge the systemic flaws underlying the trial and verdict, but instead, they shifted a majority of the responsibility toward King's individual decisions and actions throughout the entire incident.

Examining the portrayal of the "King Incident" illuminates how each newspaper initially reacted to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Scattered protests erupted on April 29th, merely hours after the acquittal of the four police officers charged in King's beating, but the *Times* and *The Orange County Register* would not publish any related news until the next working day, April 30th. As a weekly, the *Sentinel* would publish their initial news stories on May 7th. On April 30th, the front-page headlines of the *Times* and *The OC*

³⁵ Henry Weinstein and Paul Lieberman, "Location of Trial Played Major Role, Legal Experts Say," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1992, A18.

³⁶ E. Scott Reckard, "The Jury: King Testimony Might Have Affected Verdict," *The Orange County Register*, April 30, 1992, A1.

Register reflected similar overarching themes, from “All 4 in King Beating Acquitted: Violence Follows Verdicts; Guard Called Out” and “13 Dead in LA Rioting: Guard on Standby; Fires Continue; Federal Probe Begins”, respectively (see Appendix C). *The OC Register* and *Times* placed emphasis on the violence, destruction, and state/federal intervention, but at the same time, the differing language underscored their own liberal- or conservative-leaning viewpoint. *The Orange County Register* did not mention the “King Incident” within their frontpage headline, and instead, dedicated a single article to highlight how King’s witness testimony could have made a difference in the verdict. Reporters shifted the focus away from the social and political implications associated with a not guilty verdict but placed emphasis on the unraveling violence and destruction. On the same day, the *Times* published a front-page article featuring an interview with an anonymous juror that yielded an alternative perspective. Writers portrayed how the acquittal verdict of *People v. Powell et. al.* endorsed the police officers’ conduct, and subsequently, noted how the public expressed outrage and disbelief. The *Times* showcased how a series of events –from the beating to the verdict – led to an outbreak of civil unrest, compared to *The Orange County Register*’s focus on the unrest itself (and away from the causes).

Each newspaper’s portrayal of the 1992 Los Angeles riots reflected their own active journalistic interpretations, but as the *Times* elaborated on the “King Incident”, and their news articles portrayed an internal struggle to understand the unraveling events. The *Times* showcased reactions from the local community, as most “struggled to reconcile the acquittals of four Los Angeles Police Department officers with the

alarming violent images captured on a late-night videotape.”³⁷ A few, however, claimed satisfaction with the verdict, because those police officers had done what they had been trained to do. Reporters connected the verdict with the civil unrest, and in turn, King remained a main focus as the violence and destruction unraveled. He became known as the “face of police brutality in America,” and the major catalyst for the 1992 Los Angeles riots within the *Times*’ narrative.³⁸ There were other racial tensions and conflicts that remained a root cause for the outbreak of violence and destruction, but oftentimes, those were overshadowed by the “Rodney King Incident”, and later, the beating of Reginald Denny.

In turn, the *Times* used the “Rodney King Incident” to advance their own investigative agenda, as they directed attention toward systemic police misconduct and brutality within Los Angeles. The newspaper built the “King Incident” into a serious crisis for the Los Angeles Police Chief (LAPD) Chief Daryl Gates. Southern California had long experienced deep-rooted issues of systemic police brutality, but between the late 1980s to early 1990s, these incidents reached the public consciousness in growing numbers. The city of Los Angeles paid at least \$20 million to settle excessive-forces cases, and within the fiscal year 1991-92, the LAPD was responsible for over 47 percent of the liability judgements against city agencies within America.³⁹ Yet, as David Shaw, a *Times*’ media critic states, “Neither the *Times* nor any other mainstream news took a

³⁷ Amy Wallace and David Ferrell, “Verdicts Greeted with Outrage and Disbelief,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1992, A1.

³⁸ Cassandra Chaney and Ray V. Robertson, “Racism and Police Brutality in America,” *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no. 4 (2013): 481

³⁹ Lawrence, *The Politics of Force*, 64-65.

serious look at the pattern of police use of excessive force at the end of the 1980s.”⁴⁰ By 1992, the *Times* constructed a high-profile public narrative about systemic police misconduct initially sparked by the recorded King beating. The newspaper produced four thematic news stories that explored police misconduct and brutality as an issue between 1985 and 1990, but after the beating of King and prior to the unrest, there were twenty-three related news events that appeared in 1991.⁴¹ This reckoning, however, was juxtaposed by the *Times*’ repeated reference toward the legal case involving King. The newspaper referred to the trial against the four white police officers as the “Rodney King Trial” or the “Rodney King case”, which suggested that the aggressor was King, and he was on trial.⁴² This word choice reflected a racial ideology that directly contradicted the how *Times*’ advanced police brutality and legal injustice to the forefront of public conversation, as reporters actively constructed a crisis around the beating, acquittal, and unrest. Journalists described how the acquittal verdict proved that “grainy images of a prone, seemingly defenseless Rodney G. King being clubbed by Los Angeles police officers – didn’t matter” to the jury or the criminal justice system.⁴³ This type of framework allowed police critics and local activists to seize advocate for institutional change, as the *Times*’ narrative established a political crisis for Chief Gates and the LAPD.

Meanwhile, the *Sentinel* situated the “King Incident” as a part of broader historical grievances within the Black population, and King symbolized the injustices

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 66.

⁴¹ *Ibid*.

⁴² Shah, “Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict,” 180.

⁴³ Wallace and Ferrell, “Verdicts Greeted with Outrage and Disbelief,” A1.

and inequalities experienced by the local community. Reporters portrayed King as an unfortunate victim of police brutality, and consistently referred to the legal case as the “LAPD trial”, contrary to the *Times*, because it clearly indicated that four white police officers were on trial. This word choice denoted a different racial ideology from other mainstream news media.⁴⁴ Also, the *Sentinel* chose to distance him and the Black population from the violence on the streets, and instead, highlighted the presence and participation of other minority groups. King was a major catalyst in their portrayal, but there were other underlying factors that caused the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Journalists repeatedly cited the participation of Hispanics, either as a “smiling crowd poured out of the trashed retail store carrying with them spoils of civil disobedience and chanting Rodney King’s name,” or how a “Latino family” got away with the goods from a furniture store.⁴⁵ This image supplemented an alternative narrative implied by the *Sentinel*, which indicated that the dominant participants were non-Black. The *Sentinel* established an ongoing narrative about the “moral indignation” over King’s beating and verdict, while the newspaper deemphasized the story about Black participation within the 1992 Los Angeles riots.⁴⁶

Latasha Harlins

The Orange County Register’s and *Times’* failure to showcase how Latasha Harlins’ murder laid the foundation for the unrest contrasted directly with their

⁴⁴ Shah, “Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict,” 180.

⁴⁵ Ron Dungee, “Can’t We Get Along? The Legacy of Rodney King,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 7, 1992, A3.

⁴⁶ Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising,” 144.

widespread portrayal of Rodney King as the major catalyst for the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Harlins was killed thirteen days after the beating of King. On March 16, 1991, a Saturday morning, Harlins entered Empire Liquor Market in Compton, California. Five minutes later, the 15-year-old was shot in the back of the head, and lay dying in front of the store's front counter. Soon Ja Du, a middle-aged Korean woman and owner of the market, accused Harlins of stealing orange juice, and when the younger girl denied the accusation, they engaged in a violent struggle over her backpack. Harlins hit Du, and as she turned to walk away, the shop owner pulled out her gun and shot her in the back of the head. Two crumpled dollar bills were found in the Harlins' hand: the money to pay for the orange juice. Harlins' death was caught on the store's security camera footage and broadcasted on national television across the country. Subsequently, Harlins' murder, and the verdict for Soon Ja Du coincided with the timeline for the "King Incident", and oftentimes, the footage of Harlins' death followed the video from King's beating on air.

Eight months after Harlins' murder, and merely days before the acquittal of the four LAPD officers, the trial and verdict for Soon Ja Du foreshadowed a number of the same arguments that would be applied toward the "Rodney King Incident." Du experienced a venue change from Compton to Downtown Los Angeles, just as the LAPD officers moved their trial from Los Angeles to Simi Valley. Charles Lloyd, the veteran defendant attorney, claimed that Harlins' murder was accidental, and an act of self-defense. Du "was the defenseless one in that crime-ridden store, he argued, not

Latasha.”⁴⁷ This type of an argument situated 15-year-old Latasha Harlins as the aggressor, and Soon Ja Du as the ‘real victim’, and therefore, Du had reacted logically and acted out of self-defense. Throughout the trial, Du expressed racist notions about the Black people who frequented Empire Liquor Market, showed little to no remorse for the death of Harlins, and stated that if the teenager had been “born in a better family”, she would not have done what she did.⁴⁸ Race was a major factor within the trial and verdict, but oftentimes, the defense attorney tried to shift the focus away from the underlying racial dynamics between Harlins and Du. There was extended attention directed toward Du’s status as a woman and Korean immigrant, but Harlins was linked to “all the Black people who were coming in and threatening her son or stealing from her.”⁴⁹ This argument was seemingly successful, and in a courtroom shielded by bulletproof glass, Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, sentenced to pay for Harlins’ funeral expenses, 300 hours of community service, and five years of probation without any jail time.⁵⁰ She received an incredibly light sentence, and with no jail time compared to the maximum prison sentence allowed – 16 years. This sparked almost immediate outrage, and in turn, Judge Joyce Karlin’s sentence became one of the two legal outcomes directly responsible for the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

For the most part, the *Sentinel* highlighted the important connection between Harlins and King, who were both known as symbols of the injustice and inequality within American society. Latasha Harlins’ death was different, but at the same time,

⁴⁷ Brenda Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ProQuest Ebook Central, 233.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

similar to the beating of Rodney King. The newspaper portrayed the injustice surrounding Harlins' death as a reflection of a fundamental problem within the criminal justice system and the lack of accountability, coupled with institutionalized racism and municipal neglect. As a result, the "Leader of the Black-Korean Alliance blamed the system, not Judge Karlin, for the sentence given to Soon Ja Du."⁵¹ Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Judge Joyce Karlin were all subject to an inherently flawed judicial system, and the *Sentinel's* reporters featured sympathetic Korean allies in an attempt to reduce tensions between the two communities. Harlins' death was especially significant, because as violent as King's beating was, the racial dynamic behind the violence was almost predictable – white male police officers and a Black male. *People v. Du* was uncommon. Harlins was a 15-year-old Black female with no criminal background, and Du was a middle-aged Korean woman, a naturalized citizen who ran a store in Compton, California. According to scholar Brenda Stevenson, the death of Latasha Harlins displayed the great vulnerability experienced by women, children, and minority groups – those who occupied the most marginalized places within American society.⁵² "No justice, no peace!" was used as the main catch phrase for Harlins' murder, and nearly one year later, the same expression was chanted by protesters amidst the return of a not guilty verdict for the four LAPD officers.⁵³ *People v. Du* was announced merely days before the acquittal of the four police officers involved in King's brutal

⁵¹ Holly J. Wagner, "For Du Verdict: Black-Korean Alliance Blames the System," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 30, 1992, A1.

⁵² Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins*, xv.

⁵³ Brenda Stevenson, "#SAYHERNAME: The LA Uprising, 25 Years Later," American Historical Association, accessed January 28, 2021. https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2017/sayhername-the-la-uprising-25-years-later?_zs=uwRla&_zl=kVa82.

beating. Both cases, however, reinforced the lack of justice for Black people within the criminal justice system, male, or female. None of the defendants were sentenced to any jail time.

People v. Du highlighted the injustice of the court and legal system, but at the same time, allowed the *Sentinel* call for unity between the Black and Korean/Korean American communities. The *Sentinel* advocated for action, or at least, the need for intergroup unity and cooperation within Los Angeles. For instance, the newspaper covered the Black-Korean Alliance as they unveiled a “code of ethics” to help ease the racial tensions, but the *Sentinel*’s reporters also cited how these same ideas foreshadowed the outbreak of violence as well as destruction within Los Angeles.⁵⁴ Harlins’ murder and the Du verdict stressed the injustices and inequalities toward Black victims of violence within the criminal justice system, and furthermore, showcased how other minority groups could suffer similar grievances. Harlins’ minimal (or lack of) coverage across the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and *Sentinel* underscored how the newspapers’ portrayals inadequately addressed the multiethnic and multiracial elements within the 1992 Los Angeles riots. News media’s fragmented narrative concerning the relationship between the local Black and Korean population aggravated the situation, especially as the outbreak of unrest captured headlines across the major newspapers.

Compared to the *Sentinel*, the *Times* and *The Orange County Register* did not mention the murder of Latasha Harlins nor the *People v. Du* verdict within the context of the unrest. Rodney King occupied the central role within the different narratives –

⁵⁴ Wagner, “For Du Verdict.”

not Latasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du, even when both the *Times* and *The OC Register* attempted to reckon with multiethnic or multiracial elements within their coverage. Put simply, the unrest was characterized by images of “black, Latino, and white looters”, coupled with “white and Latino passersby beaten by angry black assailants, [and] frightened Korean merchants.”⁵⁵ Koreans/Korean Americans occupied a significant role within the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but for the *Times* and *The OC Register*, their involvement was not correlated with the murder of Latasha Harlins or the *People v. Du* verdict. The *Times* portrayed how civil unrest ran counter to the newly cultivated image of a “harmonious, multi-ethnic model city”, but failed to address minority groups’ grievances within the 1992 Los Angeles riots.⁵⁶ In addition, the *Times* and *The Orange County Register* failed to capture the complexities underlying the incidents experienced by King and Harlins. Media outlets repeatedly played the two videotaped events consecutively throughout the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but any type of historical or contextual details were lost within both newspapers.⁵⁷ Harlins’ murder served as a major point of contention for Black and Korean relations within Los Angeles, but any implications were overshadowed by media’s portrayal of the unrest, centered around the injustice of Rodney King, and then, the violence and destruction.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Stephen Braun and Ashley Dunn, “View of Model Multiethnic City Vanishes in Smoke,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1992, A1.

⁵⁷ Stevenson, “#SAYHERNAME.”

Chapter 3: Reginald Denny and the Reality of Race in Los Angeles

Who was Reginald Denny?

A few hours after the acquittal of the four police officers involved with King's beating, 36-year-old Reginald Denny, a white man, drove his gravel truck into the intersection between Florence and Normandie, unaware of the erupting violence. When he tried to flee the area, a group of young Black men dragged Denny from his gravel truck, and he was ruthlessly beaten. A few Black individuals rushed Denny to the nearest hospital, while overhead, aerial footage captured the entire incident on live television. Denny underwent surgery and remained in critical condition as the video played (and replayed) across major television channels. Reginald Denny, however, was not the only white person attacked on the corner of Florence and Normandie, and definitely not the first either. There were other individuals before and after Denny's beating, but those victims were Latino/a, Black, Asian, and white.⁵⁸ None of these other incidents received the same amount of media coverage by mainstream or ethnic minority newspapers compared to Reginald Denny. In fact, quite quickly, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and *Sentinel* situated the beating of Denny in relation to the "Rodney King Incident" and adopted the popular perspective that "one unfortunate truck driver could come to represent all of white America", those who were outraged by the acquittal verdict – and other underlying racial tensions.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins*, 287-288.

⁵⁹ Sanchez, "Reading Reginald Denny," 388.

The Orange County Register characterized Reginald Denny as “one of the first victims of the riot”, but for their initial stories, the newspaper did not explicitly label the beating as a result of race or race-related violence.⁶⁰ The newspaper described how a “hate-fueled mob” committed the beating, but at the same time, they implied a racial motivation in their general connection of “riot” and “gang” to the Black population. Neither the crowd who beat him nor the people who rescued him were consistently identified as Black. Yet, *The Orange County Register* repeatedly described how “a white gravel truck driver” or “white motorist” was brutally beaten by an “angry gang” or mob. Also, this violent image was supplemented by the newspaper’s overall narrative concerning the chaos and rampage unraveling within Los Angeles.⁶¹ *The OC Register* portrayed Denny as a “symbol of lawless rage” and explained how “there was a war on the streets, and he just happened to be one of the first victims.”⁶² The newspaper described Denny’s beating as the beginning for an increase of and more brutal violence. This perspective reinforced the overarching ‘law and order’ agenda pushed by *The Orange County Register*, coupled with the call for state and federal reinforcement to bring the violence and destruction to an end.

The *Los Angeles Times* portrayed the beating of Reginald Denny as symbolically equivalent, or at least, comparable to the “Rodney King Incident.” Reporters described how Denny became “the face on the flip side of the Rodney King

⁶⁰ Beth Laski, “Man Seen Beaten on TV in Critical Condition,” *The Orange County Register*, May 1, 1992, A3.

⁶¹ Scott Duncan and Ray Richmond, “TV’s Chaotic Imagery and Lack of Perspective Questioned,” *The Orange County Register*, May 3, 1992, A8.

⁶² Laura Myers, “Assault Victims Learn of Discord Surrounding Him,” *The Orange County Register*, May 5, 1992, A3.

coin, the unofficial black-on-white response to the official white-on-black beating.”⁶³ The *Times*’ adopted this perspective in spite of the significantly different root causes, contexts, and circumstances underlying both incidents. In addition, the *Times* did not provide the contextual details for Denny’s beating, and instead, focused on the aftermath of the violent act. This framework focused the story around the individuals who rushed him to the hospital, and placed emphasis on how “four strangers – four black strangers” rescued him, as opposed to labeling them as “Samaritans” or omitting their race altogether.⁶⁴ Furthermore, *Times*’ journalists described how Denny embodied what it meant to be a white victim of Black outrage and compared him to other images that “transfix[ed] a moment in history” at every watershed of through time.⁶⁵ They explicitly characterized the violence accorded to Reginald Denny as a direct result of the “King Incident” and the acquittal verdict of the four white police officers. The newspaper implied that the image of a brutally injured Denny merely foreshadowed the violence and destruction to come (or already unraveling) in Los Angeles.

As a result, the *Times* and *The Orange County Register* shared a similar framework or narrative surrounding their portrayal of Reginald Denny’s beating. Both newspapers approached Denny’s beating in comparison to King’s. This was not particularly surprising, as both incidents shared glaring similarities through their brutal display of violence and the viral videos footages that followed. The *Times* and *The Orange County Register* identified the beating of Denny as a flashpoint within the 1992

⁶³ Laurie Becklund and Stephanie Chavez, “Beaten Driver a Searing Image of Mob Cruelty,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1992, A1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Los Angeles riots – coupled with repeated broadcasts of the incident on television and other media outlets. Yet, both newspapers framed the beating of King and Denny as a part of different but evolving narratives within their respective news agenda. The *Times*' presumption that the beating was equivalent to King's helped "recast a riot protesting police malfeasance into what some whites could interpret as a 'race war'."⁶⁶ Denny represented a "legitimate victim" to the early stages of crossfire from racial conflict, and repeatedly, as a direct correlation to the acquittal verdict of the four white police officers. Compared to the *Times*, *The Orange County Register* showcased an explicit comparison between the beating of King and Denny, as they analyzed the similarities and differences from both incidents. Denny's beating was portrayed as simple and straightforward because it was illegal to pull someone out of a truck and beat them. The newspaper described how the "King Incident" was an "aberration" on behalf of white police officers, who were "empowered to use reasonable force to subdue a suspect", and ultimately, implied that Rodney King was not without fault.⁶⁷

In turn, the *Sentinel* advanced the collective grievances of the Black community into the forefront of their news agenda and established a direct relationship between the beatings of King and Denny. They portrayed how King became a martyr and a "symbol of moral temperance" for the Black community, as a type of 'model victim', someone who continued to advocate for peace amidst his own sufferings and injustices. *Sentinel*'s journalists reported on Denny's beating, but for the most part, their narrative centered around how the four Black men involved in the violence were treated

⁶⁶ Abu-Lughod, *Race, Space, and Riots in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles*, 231.

⁶⁷ "Beatings of King, Denny Are Strikingly Similar, Yet Different," *The Orange County Register*, May 14, 1992, A6.

differently than the white police officers involved in the “King Incident.” The *Sentinel* focused on the swift prosecution of the four Black men involved in Denny’s beating, compared to the year-long process that ended in the acquittal of four white police officers within the “King Incident.” They concentrated the spotlight on the “double standard of justice” applied, and several Black community leaders claimed that the extended resources used to apprehend or try to convict the four Black men were excessive and unnecessary.⁶⁸ The *Sentinel* placed emphasis on Reginald Denny’s beating in order to highlight the systemic injustices experienced by the Black population, as compared to the portrayals adopted by the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*.

An Emergence of Multiracial/Multicultural Realities

The *Sentinel*, *Times*, and *The Orange County Register* oversimplified the race relations and racial elements underlying the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Each newspaper adopted the Black-white analytical paradigm as a part of their general storytelling strategy. There was a one-dimensional, simplistic framework applied to communities of color, and especially for the Koreans/Korean Americans in the 1992 Los Angeles riots. *The Orange County Register* portrayed the Korean/Korean American community an “Asian American model minority”, and in the words of historian Heather Ann Thompson, “not quite white but nevertheless used by whites as an example for the poor, dysfunctional, and black ‘underclass’.”⁶⁹ *The Orange County Register* situated the local

⁶⁸ “Defense Fund Started: Double Standard of Justice Seen in Case of Trucker’s Beating,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 21, 1992, A1.

⁶⁹ Thompson, “Understanding Rioting in Postwar Urban America,” 396.

Korean community as ‘legitimate victims’ to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, compared to the local Black population. They focused the narrative on the collective mobilization “to keep looters away”, coupled with local storeowners’ reactions to see their friends’/families’ businesses set ablaze on television.⁷⁰ This framework pitted the Korean/Korean American population against the Black community, both in Los Angeles and Orange County, but did not provide the historical context for pre-existent tensions between these two minority groups. Rather, *The Orange County Register* tended to portray the local Korean community as either merchants or business owners, and victims to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. This framework oversimplified the grievances of the Korean community, who felt that they themselves were “scapegoats – political victims of a senseless tragedy.”⁷¹ *The Orange County Register* situated Korean/Korean American population within the white-Black racial hegemony, as opposed to a part of the multiracial/multiethnic reality in Los Angeles.

The *Times* also struggled to reckon with the outbreak of violence and destruction rooted within multiracial/multiethnic conflict as situated outside the white-Black analytical paradigm. Reporters recognized how the outbreak of civil unrest pushed “racial anger and ethnocentrism that have long simmered among the city’s myriad ethnic communities” to the forefront of the news agenda.⁷² They attempted to provide contextual background for the racial tensions between the local communities, but oftentimes, the *Times* resorted to citing individual-level blame that placed a majority of

⁷⁰ Anh Do and Robert Chow, “OC Business Owners Mobilize to Keep Looters Away,” *The Orange County Register*, May 2, 1992, A2.

⁷¹ Anh Do, “Getting Past the Bitterness: OC Koreans’ Rally to Promote Racial Harmony,” *The Orange County Register*, May 7, 1992, A4.

⁷² Braun and Dunn, “View of Model Multiethnic City Vanishes in Smoke,” A1.

the responsibility on people of color – either for causing or escalating the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The newspaper noted that although “young Black men constituted many of the rioters and looters, Latinos, Anglos and Asians” also took part.⁷³ Businesses were indiscriminately targeted, as Korean merchants saw their businesses burned or looted, but at the same time, Black-owned stores were not spared either. The *Times* tried to counter the widespread conception of a ‘Black riot’, either with images or articles about racially diverse actors, but simultaneously, framed its main participants as irrational or criminal. As a pre-existent multiracial/multiethnic reality emerged through mainstream news media within the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the *Times* found itself caught in the middle of changing racial tensions and race relations. They attempted to promote an all-inclusive public narrative, but ultimately, the *Times* tended focus on the “Black/non-Black rift” within the 1992 Los Angeles riots.⁷⁴

Unlike the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*, the *Sentinel* attempted to provide multiracial/multiethnic perspectives within their news narrative, but for the most part, their coverage remained focused on the Black community. Typically, ethnic minority presses incorporate a broader and deeper understanding of racial dynamics, including the historical context behind specific interracial tensions or conflicts. They tend to place emphasis on “a common fight against a hostile environment, whereby a multiracial community would work in coalition.”⁷⁵ This type of framework was commonly multiracial/multiethnic in scope, as minority groups focused on common

⁷³ Victor Merina, and John Mitchell, “Opportunists, Criminals Get Blame for Riots,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 1992, A1 & A12.

⁷⁴ Thornton, “Meaningful Dialogue?”, 1283.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 1292.

causes or histories that united them against the white racial hierarchy. Yet, the *Sentinel* framed the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a cause for Black solidarity and failed to provide equal reporting for other minority groups throughout the unrest. There was little to no mention about the contentious relationship between the Black and Korean American community, despite their significant presence and the geographical proximity of Koreantown throughout the unrest. Prior to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the *Sentinel* situated Harlins' murder as a part of ongoing interracial tensions with the Korean/Korean American population, but that was rapidly replaced by Denny's beating within their news agenda. This perspective reinforced the mainstream framework that the unraveling conflicts were a part of the Black and white hegemony, and as a result, implicitly upheld the status quo within their coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

The *Sentinel* focused on cooperation and reconciliation within the local population, but their limited coverage of the Korean/Korean American and Hispanic communities served to reinforce the mainstream narrative. This type of story-telling strategy centered around solidarity within one's own race, and the lack of understanding for another's position, unless both groups were focused on a common agenda (i.e., peace-making, rebuilding, and recovery).⁷⁶ The *Sentinel* highlighted how the possibility of alliance between the local Black and Korean communities, but otherwise, remained quiet about the latter's role in the unrest.⁷⁷ Other minority groups were not incorporated as a part of the public narrative throughout the violence and destruction, and if they were, that coverage remained both limited and mostly negative. The *Sentinel* portrayed

⁷⁶ Campbell et al., "How Mass Media Delegitimize Rioting as Social Protest," 168.

⁷⁷ Marsha Mitchell, "Merchants Will Consider Hiring Some Gang Members," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 28, 1992, A1.

the Hispanic community as a part of the “street elements”, in comparison to morally upright citizens from the local Black population.⁷⁸ The *Sentinel* prioritized the Black community’s “moral standing”, as they sought to rebuild credibility through religious leaders and related coalitions.⁷⁹ Journalists attempted to provide an alternative narrative to mainstream news media, but in their attempt to do so, the newspaper failed to successfully incorporate other minority groups within their story-telling. The *Sentinel* did not elaborate on the local Black population’s contentious relationship with the Korean, Korean American, nor Hispanic communities – outside of passing references to the murder of Latasha Harlins.⁸⁰

As a result, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* portrayed a fragmented image of the multiracial/multiethnic elements within the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Each newspaper advanced their own news agenda, but for the most part their mainstream narratives converged on the issue of Blackness, or as a story of non-Black assailants and their violent acts against Black people. This was mainly portrayed as a binary narrative, oftentimes, centered around Black and white tensions with limited reference to other multiracial elements. Mainstream news media, such as the *Times* and *The Orange County Register* undermined the political, economic, and historical contexts that led to the outbreak of violence and destruction. Both newspapers drew on an oversimplified and causal connection between the “King Incident” and the 1992 Los Angeles riots.⁸¹ This framework eliminated the incorporation of other possible

⁷⁸ Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising,” 146.

⁷⁹ “Blacks Join Ueberoth to Rebuild L.A.,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 14, 1992, A1.

⁸⁰ Twomey, “Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising,” 146.

⁸¹ Campbell et al., “How Mass Media Delegitimize Rioting as Social Protest,” 160.

perspectives within their story-telling strategies, and implicitly (or to a certain degree, explicitly) reinforced the civil unrest as a “Black and white only” conflict. The *Sentinel* tried to provide a more complex perspective about race relations and racial dynamics, but their portrayal remained limited in scope. Journalists barely incorporated the Korean/Korean American and Hispanic communities, despite their presence and participation throughout the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In addition, the *Sentinel* tried to explain how *People v. Du*, the “Rodney King Incident” and the beating of Reginald Denny were a result of institutional flaws within the American system. This perspective juxtaposed the popular notion of individual-level blame – oftentimes, perpetuated by other mainstream news media. The *Sentinel* tried to provide an alternative framework to the *Times* and *The Orange County Register*, but ultimately, these newspapers shared similar perspectives toward the unraveling of violence and destruction within the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Conclusion

Perhaps, the 1992 Los Angeles riots should not have been a surprise, given the injustices and inequalities evident in the murder of Latasha Harlins, followed almost immediately by similar occurrences within the “Rodney King Incident.” The acquittal verdicts of Soon Ja Du and the four white LAPD officers did not take place in a vacuum, but rather, reflected a long history of non-Black assailants engaged in violence against Black bodies. During the 1990s, the beating of Rodney King unfolded under the scrutiny of mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers, coupled with “viral” video footage broadcasted across major television networks. Media coverage played a significant role within one’s personal and collective worldview. Print media, especially prior to cable television and social media, influenced the input and output of ideas, values, and other beliefs within mainstream society. Each newspaper may have had their own primary readership or target audience, but for the most part, their influence remained far reaching and widespread. As a result, news media played an integral role in shaping America’s view of the beating, acquittal verdict, and subsequently, the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Race relations and racial ideology remained a major news frame for mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers, as they attempted to reckon with the multiethnic/multiracial nature of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. On the outset, mainstream news media constructed their own story-telling strategy around the “Rodney King Incident”, which situated the beating and verdict as the major catalyst for the violence and unrest. There was an explicit connection established between the acquittal verdicts and the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but without sufficient context and historical

background for the deeply rooted economic, political, and social inequalities suffered by the local Black community. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* aimed to provide contextual information and background to their audience, but as a niche newspaper, the news organization catered themselves to and on behalf of the Black population. As a result, the main differences between the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* arose from the newspapers' attempts to appeal to their constituencies, as their political, racial, and social frameworks reflected the values and beliefs of their main audiences.

At the same time, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* remained dominated by a binary racial narrative, as they situated the 1992 Los Angeles riots within a white-Black framework. They failed to incorporate the Korean/Korean American and Hispanic communities within their narrative, despite their significant presence and participation in the events following up to the unrest, or in the outbreak of violence and destruction. News media focused primarily on the illegal acts committed, and identified "rioting" as a Black problem, despite its roots and origins within the systemic flaws of American society.⁸² Mainstream and ethnic minority newspapers rushed to situate "blame" for the outbreak of violence and destruction on a specific group or individuals, and oftentimes, those shifts in responsibility advanced their respective news agendas. Each newspaper constructed their own set of news frames and ideologies, often centered around race and race relations, but overlooked certain multiracial or multiethnic elements involved. Newspaper organizations advocated their own separate news agenda, but for the most part, those story-telling strategies remained largely consistent with the dominant racial ideology and related frameworks. No

⁸² Thompson, "Understanding Rioting in Postwar Urban America," 393.

mainstream or ethnic minority newspaper attempted to portray the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a logical or justified response to the “Rodney King Incident,” but rather, sought to confront the outbreak of violence and destruction as their main objective. Race relations were pushed to the forefront of the news agenda, but with limited reference toward other multiracial or multiethnic elements within the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

Regardless, the implications underlying moments of convergence and divergence within the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* remain significant today. Each newspaper impacted how the public perceived the 1992 Los Angeles riots, because as they constructed their respective narratives through news events and stories, these frameworks implied different aspects of social reality. These newspapers contributed to the public narrative regarding the unrest, mainly due to their distinctive political frameworks and historical backgrounds. In turn, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* advanced their respective news stories and agendas within the journalistic norms of their day. During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the *Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Sentinel* adhered to basic facts and truth-telling. They generally diverged in their portrayals of the causes for the violent unrest, but there were significant moments of convergence that reflected how the same information from news events were used to advance different news agendas. Today, these implications operate on a much larger scale, coupled with technological advancements and the lack of truth-telling or misinformation.

Appendix A

Location of Trial

On April 30th, 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* published an article that highlighted how the location of the trial played a major role in the acquittal verdict of the four white police officers involved in Rodney King's beating. This article provided important context for the systemic flaws within the criminal justice and legal system within American society. However, this portrayal of the acquittal verdict was juxtaposed by a similar news article published by *The Orange County Register*, as their journalists situated a majority of the blame on the individual, or Rodney King.

Location of Trial Played Major Role, Legal Experts Say

■ **Court:** 'This was a jury of people who ran away from Los Angeles to get away from Rodney King,' one said.

By HENRY WEINSTEIN and PAUL LIEBERMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

The acquittal of four police officers accused of beating Rodney G. King was determined not so much by intricate courtroom strategy or any piece of evidence, but by geography and preconceived notions, legal experts said Wednesday.

The case may have been decided the day Superior Court Judge Stanley M. Weisberg ordered the trial moved from Los Angeles to Simi Valley, an overwhelmingly white, conservative community long known as a popular home for law enforcement officers. In another locale, jurors might have understood "the implications of being a black man in a car being chased by police," former Manhattan prosecutor Ruth Jones said. In a black community, she said, "the thought that police officers would use excessive force is not a leap of faith."

But in Simi Valley, "the thought that these guys were just doing their job was not a leap of faith for them," said Jones, who monitored the trial for the Courtroom Television Network. Several experts similarly said the verdicts clearly reflected pre-existing attitudes—support of police, fear of street crime, perhaps racism—held by the jury rather than their reaction to evidence presented in the courtroom.

Most of those interviewed were stunned by the outcome. They had expected convictions of at least three officers because of the graphic videotape of King's beating and the fact that one of the defendants, Theodore J. Briseno broke ranks by saying that his colleagues' actions were "out of control."

"I'm shocked because in this case you had the most compelling form of evidence in support of the charges—a videotape of the beating," said Loyola University law professor Laurie Levenson.

But the verdicts also were "a very strong statement by the jury" in support of street police officers, said Ed Hayes, a former Bronx prosecutor.

Indeed, the only juror who discussed the verdict issued a ringing defense of the officers, saying, "They're policemen, they're not angels. They're out there to do a low-down dirty job."

She saw King, on the other hand, as "obviously a dangerous person."

Some questioned two prosecution decisions: the choice not to call King as a witness and the prosecution's failure to vigorously oppose the introduction of "expert testimony" on whether the use of force was excessive.

"When you have experts testifying on both sides of a case, you create reasonable doubt," said New York attorney Harvey Weitz, who also monitored the case for the Courtroom Television Network. "The jurors say, 'Who am I to second-guess?'"



Jurors in the Rodney G. King beating trial board a bus in Simi Valley after Wednesday's verdict.

However, many legal observers said Wednesday, that those decisions didn't really matter in the end.

"Given this jury, they might have still acquitted the defendants and ordered King to jail," said New York University law professor Burt Neuborne. "This was a jury of people who ran away from Los Angeles to get away from Rodney King. And they are the ones who sit in judgment."

Neuborne, former national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, said it was startling to him that eight of the jury members had served in the military. "The jury certainly was not a cross-section of Los Angeles."

"To this jury . . . these defendants didn't look like what defendants are supposed to look like," agreed Jones, who currently works for the NOW Legal Defense Fund.

Last year, a state appeals court ordered the trial out of Los Angeles County because of "extensive and pervasive" media coverage and "intense" political fallout that showed no sign of abating. In the past, attempts to move numerous sensational cases—including those of Charles Manson and the Hillside Strangler—failed.

Weisberg chose Simi Valley over Alameda County or Orange County as the site for the trial.

Neuborne deplored the transfer of the King case, noting that it failed to find a jury out of the reach of the publicity—all the members of the panel had seen the infamous videotape. And the result was a jury with no blacks, a factor that will have lingering negative effects, he said.

"The integrity of the verdict will simply not be accepted because of the absence of blacks on the jury," Neuborne said. "If the same verdicts had been returned with a fair representation of blacks, it would have been accepted as the way the [criminal justice] system works."

The legal experts groped for explanations of why the jury did not find the videotape the conclusive evidence that the prosecution—and much of the world—had thought it was.

"In this case, seeing was not believing," Southwestern University law professor Myrna Raeder said.

Throughout the case, lawyers for the four officers had urged jurors to consider what had happened before the videotape—King's speeding, his aberrant behavior, his refusal to obey police commands after he was stopped following a high-speed chase.

In addition, Hayes said, the defense was wise to assert that there was more than one way to look at the tape and that King was shown trying to rise and charge the officers.

"The tape in slow motion told them something different than what they were told by the prosecution," he said.

Los Angeles criminal defense attorney Howard Weitzman stressed that the videotape did not explain the officers' intentions—a critical element of proving the crime. "The key to this case is their state of mind," said Weitzman, who successfully defended auto executive John DeLorean on narcotics charges in another trial in which it appeared that an incriminating videotape made for an open-and-shut case.

Most of the experts said they thought the prosecution's striking decision not to call King as a witness had been wise despite the outcome. Whatever might have been gained by King's description of his suffering, they said, could have been outweighed by the opportunity it would have given the defense to highlight King's criminal record, in effect putting him on trial.

But Weitzman and Raeder said the prosecution might have benefited by having King tell the jury what he had experienced.

"The videotape is incredibly strong stuff but when you see that videotape over and over and over and you don't have any feeling for the individual, I have to surmise that the jurors got desensitized to the video," Raeder said.

Weitzman said that if he had been a juror, "I would have liked to have heard from Rodney King, what he felt, why he continued to move and what was going through his mind."

The decision not to call King was made by Dist. Atty. Ira Reiner after lengthy discussions with the two prosecutors and other members of his staff.

While prosecutors drew some second guessing, experts praised defense attorneys for their seemingly risky "all or nothing at all strategy"—their decision not to offer the jury an alternative of lesser misdemeanor charges such as battery.

"That was saying to the jury: 'Who is the criminal—Rodney King or the police officers?'" Levenson said.

To many of the observers, it was clear that these jurors had little trouble answering that question.

"The decision . . . reminds me of the classic case in Texas where [noted attorney] Racheeorne Haynes got an acquittal for three police officers accused of beating a Latino man," said Los Angeles lawyer Barry Tartow.

The case was moved from Houston to a rural county. After the verdict, Haynes was asked when he thought he had won the case. He replied, "When I got the last redneck seated on the jury."

Neuborne, too, said he feared a "worst side" to the verdict: "that it simply means white suburban America is as frightened of black people that they'll tolerate any behavior by police."

But, he cautioned that there could be another interpretation: "That it was just 12 people who had a reasonable doubt."

Appendix B

The Jury

Contrary to the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*'s article (as showcased below) situated the acquittal verdict on Rodney King's refusal to provide witness testimony within the trial. Journalists omitted the possible significance of location change, and instead, focused on how it was King's responsibility to prove that there had been police misconduct and brutality. Published on April 30th, this article showcased how the jurors believed that King could have been the aggressor, and in turn, they judged that the video was insufficient evidence to prove the opposite true.

JURY: Panel member has no regrets about innocent verdict

FROM 1

"Time and again, the juror told me, 'King controlled the action, he could have stopped it. When he got out of the car, he could have put his hands in the air, he wouldn't have been touched,'" ABC newsman Ted Koppel reported.

The juror questioned the severity of King's beating. The jury looked at the tape more than 30 times.

"A lot of those blows, when you watched them in slow motion, were not connecting," the juror was quoted as saying. "Those batons are heavy, but when you looked at King's body three days after the incident, not that much damage was done."

As for the suggestion of racism, the juror pointed to the presence of two other blacks in King's car who surrendered and were not beaten.

A juror interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* but not identified by the newspaper offered a similar

impression of King's conduct.

"He refused to get out of the car," the juror said. "His two companions got out of the car and complied with all the orders and he just continued to fight. So the police department had no alternative. He was obviously a dangerous person. ... Mr. King was controlling the whole show with his actions."

A juror interviewed by NBC over the telephone with a voice distortion device would not speculate on whether testimony from King would have changed the outcome.

"Had Rodney King gotten out of his vehicle, as he was ordered to do, and complied with the policemen's orders, nothing would have happened to him," the juror said. "Rodney King was not being abused."

It was not clear whether the newspaper and the networks interviewed the same juror.

Appendix C

Front Page Headlines

From left to right, the front page(s) of the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Orange County Register*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* provide visual imagery for how each newspaper initially reacted to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The *Times* and *The Orange County Register* published initial coverage of the verdict and/or unrest by April 30th, but the *Sentinel*, a weekly publication, would not release related news stories until May 7th, 1992 (as displayed below).



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