CHAPTER 1

The Making of a Multicultural Metropolis

Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr

THE HISTORY of the Los Angeles region took a new turn on April 29, 1992. On that afternoon, nine jurors—all white, all residing in a white suburban enclave just outside Los Angeles County—acquitted four white officers of the Los Angeles Police Department who had been accused of using excessive force against black motorist Rodney King. Police violence against L.A.'s black and Latino populations was nothing new, but in this case, the beating had been videotaped and then broadcast to the region's teeming millions time and again. Within hours of the jury's action, violent protest engulfed the city's historically African American South Central district; it then quickly spread throughout the region. As the whole world watched, Los Angeles burned.

Was it a riot, as the forces of law and order charged, or a rebellion, as some leaders and spokespersons of L.A.'s Latino and African American communities maintained? Continuing controversy makes it hard to label the events of those days and nights of spring 1992. But what happened then told Angelenos—and everyone else interested in the City of Angels and its environs—that something new, different, and hard to comprehend was occurring under the Southern California sun.

In a sense, the events of April 1992 encapsulated L.A.'s transformation into a few tension-packed days. The African Americans among whom the initial outbursts occurred were quickly joined by their neighbors, who turned out to be new immigrants, mainly from Central America and Mexico. The rioters directed their fury against the local storeowners and landlords, an ethnically diverse group among whom Korean immigrants loomed

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particularly large. Unlike the Watts riot of 1965, which had remained confined to a fairly narrow area deep in the South Central ghetto, the disturbances of 1992 spread throughout the Southland, as the locals call it. Beverly Hills, Long Beach, Pomona, and even the San Fernando Valley—the very apotheosis of white suburban living circa 1965—saw considerable violence. Meanwhile, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, the region's longest-established Mexican American barrio, remained eerily quiet. Witnessing the spectacle on their television sets were the region's Anglos, a diminishing population, many of whom, like the jurors whose decision unleashed the violence, had fled multicultural Los Angeles County for the more homogeneous areas on the region's periphery.[1]

As turmoil exploded among the palm trees, the Los Angeles that the nation had known and fantasized about for most of the twentieth century slipped decisively into the past. Ironically, this Los Angeles of old had always been a different kind of metropolis. Unlike New York, that archrival on the East Coast with its densely packed, polyglot, contentious urbanites, Los Angeles was more a slice of white bread, a settlement of Protestant midwesterners transplanted to an irrigated arcadia on the Pacific shores. Of course, Eden was never quite so blandly homogeneous as white Angelenos imagined. The Spanish had come here first, and though the Hispanic presence waxed and waned over the years, the Mexican-origin population never went away. African Americans found their way to Los Angeles as well, in numbers that grew rapidly in the three decades after 1940. And many Chinese and even more Japanese also made L.A. their home.

But in 1970, the typical Angeleno could be forgiven for looking around and seeing an incredibly dynamic region that was expanding yet ethnically looked much the same as it had for the past seven decades. A mere twenty years later, the images of stores being plundered and houses set afire made it clear that the Southland of old was no more. L.A.'s sudden, profound ethnic transformation is unquestioned; the problem, rather, is how to understand the changes so tightly telescoped into the past two decades. The region's self-invented past and equally distorted self-image clearly get in the way. So too does the unhealthy miasma of anxiety and apprehension released by the severe, unexpected economic decline of recent years. Further complicating the task is the region's aura as the province of fabulists and mythmakers, a setting appropriate for movies and mystery novels—not social science.

But Los Angeles and its people deserve a closer, searching look. California has been a trendsetter for the nation for the past several decades. And nowhere can one detect the shape of emerging America better than in L.A., where newcomers to the United States have transformed the country's second largest metropolis in complex ways and have set the region on a new course sure to be followed by other urban areas.

This volume of scholarly essays sets fears and myths aside to describe