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0521570875 - Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing, and Resistance - Darnell M. Hunt

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On April 29, 1992, the “worst riots of the century” (*Los Angeles Times*) erupted. Television newsmakers tried frantically to keep up with what was happening on the streets while, around the city, nation and globe, viewers watched intently as leaders, participants, and fires flashed across their television screens. *Screening the Los Angeles “riots”* zeroes in on the first night of these events, exploring in detail the meanings one news organization found in them, as well as those made by fifteen groups of viewers in the events’ aftermath. Combining ethnographic and quasi-experimental methods, Darnell M. Hunt’s account reveals how race shapes both television’s construction of news and viewers’ understandings of it. He engages with the longstanding debates about the power of television to shape our thoughts versus our ability to resist, and concludes with implications for progressive change.

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# Screening the Los Angeles “riots”

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Race, seeing, and resistance

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Darnell M. Hunt

*University of Southern California*



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To my family, friends, and all those who have lived the struggle.

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## *Preface*

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Two days after the fires, I spent many hours with my fiancée, brother and a friend riding through South Central Los Angeles. I wanted to see with my own eyes what I had up to that point been witnessing via my television screen. I remember being stunned by both the extent and patterning of the devastation. Liquor stores, banks, and Korean businesses were looted and/or burned to the ground. Many businesses were left untouched, "Black-owned" markers guarding them against harm. Building walls were pregnant with fresh graffiti: "Crips and Bloods Together Forever"; "LA Revolucion"; "Fuck Police"; "Blacks and Mexicans United."

On the way home, we stopped at a South Central shopping center that had been looted, to help other volunteers clean up the debris. Out of the corner of my eye I caught an aging black man looking over the remains of a looted record store. As my fellow travelers and I approached with our brooms, the old man identified himself as the store owner. He pointed out how badly his business had been damaged, noting particular items that had been stolen. But then he turned to us with a nervous smile, "This is all material," he said. "I'd sacrifice it all to help the black man rise."

In just fourteen words the old man had rewritten news depictions of the events. How many others see it this way? I remember wondering. From what position or positions were viewers finding meaning in the flames that danced across their television screens? I would like to thank that old man for awakening me to the idea for this book.

This is a book about mass media, race and resistance; it is a book about the interplay between television news, racial identity, and social change. The case study: the 1992 Los Angeles "riots." To what degree did news media work to depict a privileged view of the "riots?" How did race affect media depictions of the "riots" and audience members' understandings of them? Under what conditions might audience understandings of these

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depictions constitute acts of resistance, contributions to efforts aimed at social change?

From idea to proposal, from writing to revision, this book has been enriched by timely feedback and advice from a number of fine scholars: Jeffrey C. Alexander, Walter R. Allen, Phillip Bonacich, Steven Clayman, Teshome Gabriel, Barry Glassner, Herman Gray, Angela James, George Lipsitz, Melvin Oliver, Jeffrey Prager, M. Belinda Tucker, Darrell Williams, and my anonymous reviewers. I would especially like to acknowledge Walter R. Allen and Jeffrey Prager for their support in the project's early phases, for the direction they have provided me over the years.

Managing the logistics behind this project was an exercise in stamina and patience. I would like to thank my family – Angela James and Bruce Hunt, in particular – for accommodating me and my mood swings throughout this rather challenging, three-year period. In retrospect, data collection was the most demanding phase of the project. Chapter 4 could not have been written had it not been for the revealing interviews conducted by Margaret Zamudio. Funding provided by the Ford Foundation's Pre-Doctoral Fellowship for Minorities supported the data collection phase of the project, while a rather generous faculty start-up fund provided by the University of Southern California supported the analysis and writing phases.

I would also like to thank Deborah Callahan at Youth Opportunities Unlimited, Toni O'Leary at Community Youth Gang Services, Jackie Harper from First African Methodist Episcopal Church (FAME), and the faculty and staff from Freemont High School for assisting me in identifying potential study groups from South Central Los Angeles.

I am also grateful to the people at Cambridge University Press – especially Catherine Max and Jayne Matthews – for their support in bringing this work to press.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the sixty-five young women and men who made this study possible by opening up their ways of seeing to me and my camcorder.