Revisiting the 1992 Los Angeles riots: an analysis of geographical perspectives

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REVISITING THE 1992 LOS ANGELES RIOTS: AN ANALYSIS OF GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by

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B.A., California State University, Fullerton, 2000
December 2003
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ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to investigate the complexities of the 1992 Los Angeles riots from a spatial perspective. To study the 1992 Los Angeles riots is an attempt to understand dynamic and unpredictable events, events that can result in multiple deaths, vast property damage, and leave irrevocable scars on a community for years. It is these reasons that should call geographers to the challenges of studying riots.

Part of this thesis is to critically evaluate previous quantitative work on the 1992 Los Angeles riots and to argue for a new investigative approach in understanding riots in general. My goal is not to abandon inquiry through quantitative methods, nor to discount findings from previous work, but to start looking into qualitative methods that have applied applications, which will undoubtedly produce new insights to the spatial distribution of damage, as well as to the human networks produced during rioting.

Ultimately, to approach the study of riots from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives is ideal, blending the two equally powerful methodologies that would position observant participation and ethnography side-by-side with thematic mapping and statistical analysis. This well-rounded approach is possibly the only way to truly explain the complexities of human agency during a chaotic event. Thus, a complementary blending between the two methodologies is the best-case scenario for the study of riots.
1.1 Greetings

I should perhaps not admit this, but I used to sneak out of work early on a regular basis (actually of the two years I worked for this company, I snuck out early every night except maybe three). In the early 1990s, Seattle just had too much nightlife going on, and I have always prided myself on how well I prioritize. A few blocks from where I worked, there was this dumpy little bar that sold cheap beer, which allowed for an economical buzz before hitting the clubs. One night, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed there was a really bad cops and robbers movie on the bar’s television showing police officers beating the shit out of some unfortunate criminal with their nightsticks. The bartender kindly told my friend and me that what we were viewing was not a low-budget movie but the late-night news.

The Rodney King beating affirmed to White America what Blacks have known all along, which was that racist police brutality still existed in the United States, especially in Los Angeles. For example, Mychal Wynn explains the 1988 tactic of Operation Hammer used by the Los Angeles Police Department whereby police officers in the area known as South Central were more likely to stop non-Anglo youth:

By 1990, over 50,000 young people, primarily black and Hispanic young men had been arrested, harassed, and degraded. They’d been handcuffed, had guns pointed in their faces, treated like animals and forced to lie down in the filth of Los Angeles’ city streets. Few of them were ever charged with a crime. Guilty only of being black or Hispanic (1993, 19).
Although Wynn may not be a recognized scholar, he did live in Los Angeles, and had personally experienced racism by police. In spite of one’s opinion of Operation Hammer or whether the LAPD only harasses African Americans and Hispanics, personal experiences, real or perceived, have a profound effect on shaping an individual’s view. Therefore, if Wynn’s experiences tell him there is racism in Los Angeles, then to him that is his reality, regardless of what skeptics may believe, and it was the collective experiences of Wynn and others that boiled the blood of those who would eventually take to the streets.

If you find yourself traveling south down Interstate 5 in Los Angeles at night between the 5, 10, 60, 101 interchange and Lorena Street, there is a brief gap in the sound wall where the city opens up and one can see thousands of lights illuminating several dozen square miles of continuous urbanity. This brief view is really quite impressive, for it shows Los Angeles’ vast built environment. My first time seeing this view at night, I was on my way home from a hearty night of consumption. A couple hours earlier in the evening, I had turned off that mechanism which stops uncensored thought from becoming words. When the city opened up between the sound walls, and I saw the thousands of lights dancing in the background, a thought loudly blurted out: “There must have been a geography to the riots!”

1.2 Outline

The intent of this thesis is to investigate the complexities of the 1992 Los Angeles riots from a spatial perspective. To study the 1992 Los Angeles riots is
an attempt to understand dynamic and unpredictable events, events that can result in multiple deaths, vast property damage, and leave irrevocable scars on a community for years. It is these reasons that should call geographers to the challenges of studying riots.

To start, I will briefly preface both the 1965 and 1992 riots in Los Angeles with the events that led to each one, then present a chronology highlighting major developments of the actual riots. Two works analyzing the 1992 Los Angeles riots from a quantitative perspective will follow, leading into a general understanding of the riots using demographic data. Moving on, there is a map analysis comparing other scholars’ cartographic work on the 1965 and the 1992 riots, as well as a detailed map set produced for this thesis, including an analysis of riot-damaged structures.

I then shift gears and look at three works by scholars that have studied riots from a qualitative perspective, and how these qualitative perspectives can richly contribute to understanding the 1992 Los Angeles riots. I examine other scholars’ qualitative work from a participant-observer position, whereby the researcher relies on first-hand data. Then, in a paradigm twist, I introduce Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory as a provocative means of studying riots, which requires the researcher to become an observant participant.

However, being an observant participant in an actual riot would be dangerous as well as against the law, both of which are out of the scope for this thesis. So instead, I apply Thrift’s idea of observer participant to the study of public protests. For my fieldwork, I participated in three public protests in
Washington, D.C. in January 2003 in order to obtain a feel for the complexities of such public human interactions. I conclude by advocating a blending of quantitative and qualitative methods for studying the 1992 Los Angeles riots whereby one method is not in competition with the other. Rather, both methods form a complementary relationship.

1.3 Riots and the City of Los Angeles

Both academic and popular literature describe the 1992 Los Angeles riots with a variety of names, including riot, rebellion, civil disorder, and uprising—to mention a few. The uncertainty over how to officially describe the event speaks of contested multiple interpretations. For instance, Baldassare (1994) describes the event as riots, almost sensationalizing the word riots in his edited work by displaying the word in all capital letters on the front cover. Useem (1997) goes one step further by addressing the event as a riot/protest. Striking a different chord, Jackson et al. (1993) defines the event as one of civil unrest. Johnson et al., however, are more adamant, writing:

We have purposefully defined this civil disorder as a rebellion, as opposed to a riot, because of the gaping disparity in economic opportunity and in treatment by the criminal justice system of poor residents in South-Central Los Angeles, the site of the conflagration (1992, iii).

While various scholars are perhaps highly vested in a particular description, serious debate addressing the validity of one description verses another distracts from the overall issues of such a destructive event. Therefore, to call the event in Los Angeles riots is solely my interpretation and is not meant to elbow its way past any other descriptions. In fact, the event represents a multitude of meanings to a variety of scholars, which to me is a strong indicator
of the overall complexities before, during, and after the 1992 events in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles has experienced two large-scale riots within twenty-seven years: the Watts riots in 1965 and the Los Angeles riots in 1992. Both had major impacts upon the region in terms of loss of life, property damage, and psychological stresses, such as racial tensions and the distrust of both law enforcement and local government.

The incidents that led to the 1965 Watts riots and the 1992 Los Angeles riots have one similar characteristic: each involved Anglo police officers and an African-American motorist. Anglo police officers had stopped African-American motorists Marquette Frye (1965) and Rodney King (1992). Although the white cop/black motorist led to the same ends, there were different means by which those ends arrived (see Figure 1).

1.3.1 The 1965 Watts Riots

On Monday, August 9th, 1965, “Los Angeles simmered in 95-degree temperatures beneath a yellow-gray coverlet of smog,” states Robert Conot (1967, 6). This may not be considered a heat wave to some, but in Los Angeles, where tall, dandelion-esque palm trees provide little to no shade, and where many residents living in this normally mild, Mediterranean climate do not have air conditioning, ninety-five degrees can be quite uncomfortable. By Wednesday afternoon, the heat had not let up, and Marquette Frye was enjoying a chilled Screwdriver with his brother Ronald and mutual friend Milton (Conot 1967).¹

¹ A Screwdriver is one ounce vodka with two ounces orange juice served in a Collins glass with ice.
Marquette, Ronald, and Milton invited some girlfriends to join them. As luck would have it, the girlfriends never made it, so the three young men continued to consume three or four more Screwdrivers and talked. Around 7 p.m. Marquette and Ronald decided to drive home for dinner. Perhaps Marquette was driving too fast. Nonetheless, a motorist flagged down CHP motorcycle police
officer Lee Minikus informing him of a potentially drunk driver (Crump 1966; Conot 1967).  

After several blocks, Minikus caught up with the Frye brothers who were driving their mother’s 1955 Buick (Conot 1967). When Marquette failed his sobriety test, officer Minikus radioed in that he needed a patrol car to take Marquette to jail, as well as a tow truck to transport the car to an impound lot. But Marquette was stopped one block from his mother’s house. With this in mind, Ronald attempted to negotiate with Minikus to drive the car back to the family home, but Minikus declined. Ronald, instead, ran home to retrieve the owner of the Buick, Rena Frye (McCone 1965; Crump 1966; Conot 1967).

Because it was a warm evening, many people were out on their porches or hanging out on the corners, so by the time Rena Frye arrived at the scene where her sons had been pulled over, nearly three hundred people were on the street, some of whom were taunting the newly arrived police officers. Up until this point, Marquette had been good natured and cooperative, but when Rena Frye publicly scolded her son for driving while intoxicated this was his turning point (McCone 1965; Crump 1966).

Marquette refused to go to jail, for he felt he did nothing wrong. Evidentially, the ever-growing crowd felt the same way, as they cursed the police. CHP officers on the scene radioed for more back up, and three additional motorcycle officers arrived to a swelling and excited crowd. Minikus drew his baton and attempted to arrest Marquette, but Marquette freed himself screaming

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2 CHP is an abbreviation for California Highway Patrol and is the law enforcement agency that patrols California’s highways.
that the police would have to kill him before they took him to jail (Conot 1967).

Ronald, in a concern for Marquette, attempted to maneuver through the thickening crowd towards his brother when a CHP officer stopped him. While Ronald was explaining to the CHP officer that he was Marquette’s brother, another officer approached Ronald and jabbed him in the stomach with a baton, followed by another blow to the stomach, dropping Ronald to the street where he was then handcuffed and placed into a patrol car (Conot 1967).

Just a few steps away, Marquette was still avoiding arrest by Minikus. The same officer that took out Ronald swung his baton hitting Marquette in the forehead, then stomach. Fazed by the blows, Marquette surely saw a galaxy of stars orbiting his head. Minikus and the other police officers took advantage of Marquette’s subdued state, and were finally able to place their assailant into a patrol car (Conot 1967).

Disturbed by how the police had physically abused her two sons, a furious Rena Frye jumped upon Minikus’ back, ripping his uniform as they both briefly fell to the ground (McCone 1965; Conot 1967). Officers then bent Mrs. Frye over the trunk of a patrol car, handcuffing her, and placing her inside. Individuals in the vociferous crowd began yelling at the police for arresting Mrs. Frye, as well as claiming police abuse for the aggressive and apparently unjustified handling of Marquette and Ronald (Conot 1967).

Several minutes earlier, Joyce Gaines had been having her hair done at a beauty parlor when she saw hundreds of people on the street, accompanied by the sounds of police sirens. Gaines, wearing pink curlers and a green smock, went
outside, walked up the block, and saw the police beating the Frye brothers. As CHP patrol cars transporting the Fryes drove away from the scene at 116th Street and Avalon Boulevard, Gaines spat upon a CHP police sergeant. Against the advice of fellow officers, the sergeant ran into the crowd chasing after Gaines. The remaining CHP officers again called for additional back up. When the LAPD arrived moments later, there were estimated to be more than one thousand people on the streets (Crump 1966; Conot 1967).

The sergeant, along with another police officer, grabbed Gaines from behind and forcefully dragged her through the crowd towards a patrol car. During the scuffle, Gaines kicked and screamed for help; her pink curlers falling from her hair on to the street. To some bystanders, Gaines’ green smock made her look pregnant, resulting in more obscenities towards the police officers, as well as a rumor that the police had abused a pregnant woman (Conot 1967).

Nearly forty-five minutes had passed from when Minikus pulled over the Frye brothers to the arrest of Gaines. As the last patrol car drove away, the vocal crowd became physical. This was the turning point, according to Crump: “The tragic riot had started” (1966, 37).

The crowd began to break up into smaller groups, some of which roamed the streets throwing rocks at the windows of passing vehicles. A few groups pulled Anglo motorists from their cars and beat them. In some cases, these thugs would turn the cars over and set them ablaze (McCone 1965; Crump 1966). By 11 p.m., one hundred Anglo police officers had entered the eight-block area where the Frye’s were earlier arrested, but this seemed to anger the rioters even
more. As midnight approached, however, the riot quelled, but not before some fifty cars had been destroyed or burned (Crump 1966).

Thursday evening a crowd of nearly two thousand people gathered at 116th Street and Avalon Boulevard. The night was hot and humid, with temperatures steady at seventy degrees. Like the night before, thugs pulled Anglo motorists from their cars, stoned and beat them. Firefighters were also stoned and shot at as they attempted to put out the first of the riots’ many structural fires (McCone 1965; Crump 1966).

Rioters’ weaponry became more dangerous when some began launching Molotov cocktails at passing cars as well as at neighborhood businesses, while others acted as snipers, shooting at firefighters responding to the evening’s seventy-six structural fires. The crowd grew to some eight thousand, and for the first time began to diffuse from the original place where the Frye’s were arrested to adjacent neighborhoods (McCone 1965; Crump 1966).

Unlike the previous two nights, Friday’s crowd began to form and looting resumed as early as 8:00 a.m. The crowd grew to three thousand by mid-morning, and, by early afternoon, rioters began to systematically burn Watts’ commercial area (McCone 1965). Looting and arson moved sixty blocks north, towards downtown Los Angeles, as late afternoon faded to early evening. Nearly ten thousand rioters were on the streets by nightfall, mostly roving in packs of two to five hundred strong. Liquor stores were the rioters’ primary targets, as some used the flammable alcohol within the glass bottles as Molotov cocktails. By 1:00
a.m., the City of Los Angeles had one hundred engine companies attempting to
fight fires as well as dodging snipers’ bullets (McCone 1965; Crump 1966).

Over three thousand members of the National Guard were on the streets by
3:00 a.m. Saturday, a number that would increase to 13,900 by that evening.
Additionally, rioting had also spread to the west, which resulted in the 46.5 square
mile curfew area imposed for Saturday night starting at 8:00pm (McCone 1965).³
Crowd control and firefighter protection were the National Guard’s two main
responsibilities, as well as setting up a network of roadblocks that enabled
enforcement of the curfew. Once the curfew was implemented, by 8:00 p.m., the
National Guard was finally able to control the looting and burning experienced
over the past three nights (McCone 1965).

Ironically, the National Guard was deployed to help protect people and
property, yet Saturday night alone accounted for twenty of the thirty-four overall
riot deaths. In fact, of the twenty deaths on Saturday, sixteen were African
Americans, and most deaths were the result of the National Guard firing upon
either aggressive looters or those who broke through the roadblocks (Crump
1966).

Some arson, looting, and sniping occurred on Sunday, but the number of
these incidences had plummeted compared to days before, so the arson fires that
did break out were immediately and safely extinguished by firefighters. The
nearly four thousand National Guard troops remained throughout Monday and by
2:00 p.m. governor Edmund Brown announced the riots had officially ended
(Crump 1966).

³ This curfew area is only slightly smaller that the entire City of San Francisco.
According to McCone’s report (1965), the Watts riots left over 600 looted and burned buildings, 200 of which were gutted by fire, causing over 40 million dollars in property damage.\textsuperscript{4} Ultimately, the police arrested 3,438 adults, and charged 71 percent of the arrestees with burglary and theft. Sadly, there were 1,032 reported injuries along with 34 fatalities.

1.3.2 The 1992 Los Angeles Riots

At 12:30 a.m. on March 3, 1991, CHP officer Melanie Singer was patrolling the Foothill Freeway in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley. Looking in her review mirror as she was exiting the freeway, Singer noticed a rapidly approaching car from behind. Singer immediately got back on to the freeway in pursuit of a white Hyundai. During the eight-mile chase, with speeds of 115 miles per hour and no signs of slowing down, Singer’s partner radioed for help. The chase then took to surface streets where the Hyundai was traveling at 85 miles per hour and running red lights at major intersections. By this time, another patrol car and an LAPD helicopter had joined the chase. The driver of the Hyundai finally pulled over in front of Hansen Dam Park (Cannon 1997).

Spotlights from the patrol cars and the LAPD helicopter indicated there were one driver and two passengers in the Hyundai. With police sirens still screaming and the noise of the LAPD helicopter overhead, the Hyundai’s three occupants did not hear the police officers’ requests for them to exit the car and surrender. As Cannon (1997) states, “[n]oise and confusion dominated the scene” (26). Meanwhile, three additional LAPD patrol cars, including officers with

\textsuperscript{4} McCone’s report gives no indication of the real dollar value. My assumption is that since the document was published in 1965, the real dollar value was also based on 1965 dollars.
pistols drawn, had arrived. The two passengers finally exited the Hyundai, but the driver, Rodney King, was trapped by his seatbelt and could not move. With a happy look on his face, King finally managed to unlatch his seatbelt and exit the car. Cannon states that “King then put his hands on the roof of the car, looked up at the helicopter, waved, and then did a little dance” (1997, 26).

The underdressed King was sweating profusely, even though it was a cold March night. King began to talk gibberish, and made sexual gyrations with his hips towards officer Melanie Singer; he then reached into his back pocket, apparently grabbing nothing, all the while ignoring multiple commands from surrounding police officers to lie on the ground.

Some police officers perceived King’s behavior as strange, even dangerous, including Sergeant Stacey Koon. As a result, Koon ordered four officers to physically take King down. The six foot, two inch, 250-pound King had one police officer grabbing at each limb, but he still managed to free himself. Suspecting King’s superhuman strength was from the use of PCP, Koon fired his Taser, hitting King in the back. King fell but managed to get back on his feet. Again, Koon fired his Taser, this time hitting King in the chest, yet King was still not compliant with the police, rising to his feet for a second time. A frustrated Sergeant Koon thought of something else; he ordered two of his officers to subdue King with their batons, King then charged at the officers, and witness George Holliday finally focused his camcorder (Cannon 1997).

It had been Holliday’s original plan to rise early on Sunday, March 3, 1991 with his new Sony camcorder to video shoot a friend running in the Los

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5 Taser in an acronym for Thomas A. Swift Electric Rifle.
Angeles Marathon. Instead, a LAPD helicopter and several police sirens awoke Holliday even earlier around 12:45 a.m. Perhaps Holliday wanted to test his videotaping abilities, or he was simply curious about the racket that woke him. However, according to Cannon, it was not Holliday’s intention to “…expose police brutality or make a name for himself” (1997, 21).

Holliday was curious why the police used such force against a citizen, so he called the LAPD’s Foothill Police Station and explained what was on his videotape. He also contacted CNN’s Los Angeles office. Surprisingly, no one was interested. More determined than ever, Holliday took his videotape to local station KTLA, who later broadcast the tape on its 10:00 p.m. news. But KTLA edited several blurry seconds of Holliday’s tape, reducing the original eighty-one seconds down to sixty-eight. As a result, the television station cut the introductory blurry part of the tape that showed King not only resisting arrest but also charging at police officers. KTLA distributed the tape where it was continuously broadcast by local and national stations without their prior knowledge that the tape had been edited. What the public initially saw were four LAPD officers striking King fifty-six times with their batons, for a full sixty-eight seconds (Cannon 1997).

Slightly more than one year later four LAPD police officers were on trial for beating Rodney King. The four police officers’ attorneys used expert testimony that removed self-evident notions of both the videotape, as well as the conventional point-of-view of police brutality. Each of the fifty-six blows to King were justified by the experts, ultimately leading the jury to believe that it
was King’s behavior, not the actions of the LAPD police officers’ on trial, that was out of control. At 3:00 p.m. on April 29, 1992, the jury began to read a long list of not guilty verdicts. Less than forty-five minutes later, the City of Los Angeles was experiencing the beginnings of its most deadly and destructive riots (Cannon 1997).

On the steps of a courtroom in Simi Valley, some thirty miles from downtown Los Angeles, four LAPD officers, found innocent of beating Rodney King, walked into the warm afternoon sun, where they were met outside by family members, journalists, activists, and the curious. Like with any emotional, racially charged event, opinions varied widely and were quite heated, for example:

“That man [Rodney King] was drunk, and he didn’t obey orders,” a peroxide blond tells a black woman from South Central. “Fuck you, white bitch!” is the sister’s response (Martinez 1992, 30).

Things only got worse.

Not long after the verdicts were read, a multi-cultural group of demonstrators gathered Downtown in front of Parker Center to peacefully protest the verdicts. By 6:00 p.m., some protesters had grown angry and threw rocks through the plate glass windows of Parker Center. Police officers wearing riot gear responded by inching the crowd of several hundred away from the LAPD headquarters. This led some people in the crowd to throw rocks at police, while others lit a parking-lot guard booth on fire. Not long after, around twenty-five people overturned and set ablaze an LAPD patrol car, as a few, slightly more creative rioters, set fire to palm trees (Coffey 1992; Martinez 1992).

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6 Parker Center is the headquarters of the Los Angeles Police Department.
Several miles southwest of Downtown, in a predominately African-American neighborhood, at the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues, a crowd of two hundred people assembled, some of whom were throwing bottles and rocks at passing motorists. A few members of the crowd were pulling motorists, including entire families, from their cars, robbing and badly beating them. Los Angeles Times reporter, Shawn Hubler witnessed that “[a]s each car approached the intersection, young kids—teen-agers—were loping out, taking a look at the people inside and then heaving chunks of concrete and brick at anyone who wasn’t black” (quoted in Coffey 1992, 50).

LAPD police cruisers were also the targets of the crowd’s flying bricks and rocks, as well as firefighters and other emergency personnel. African-American police officers became targets of verbal abuse, and, to a lesser extent, physical attacks. Soon the police and other emergency professionals were simply outnumbered. As a result, Lieutenant Michael Moulin of the 77th Street Precinct gave orders not to respond to emergency calls near Florence and Normandie (Coffey 1992; Webster and Williams 1992a).

Radio and television broadcasts were warning motorists not to travel in the area, but at 6:43 p.m., Larry Tarvin drove his radioless delivery truck into the intersection of Florence and Normandie. A mob beat the 130-pound Tarvin and looted his truck of its medical supplies. Three minutes later, Reginald Denny, an unsuspecting truck driver who was listening not to the news but instead to country music, gingerly approached the intersection. Sitting high in the cab of his semi, Denny could see people looting Tarvin’s vehicle up ahead. Denny’s truck lacked
power steering, so he abandoned the idea of a u-turn. Besides, Denny thought, he was only hauling sand, something that had little value to looters. When Denny entered the intersection, rocks were smashing through his window. Thugs pulled Denny from the cab of his truck onto the street where he was brutally beaten. As Denny lied motionless on the street, Lance Parker pulled up on a motorcycle, “took a shotgun from his gym bag and fired a shot at the gas tank of the truck. He missed, which probably spared Denny from being incinerated” (Cannon 1997, 305).

Across town, at the corner of Foothill Boulevard and Osborne Street in the San Fernando Valley, a crowd of over 200 people formed at the site where Rodney King was beaten, and a few began throwing rocks and bottles at passing motorists. Not far away, a crowd of 300 assembled at the Foothill police station as police officers dressed in riot gear were dodging rocks and bottles hurled by some of the demonstrators. Gunshots were fired from somewhere in the crowd. Police officers responded by breaking up the crowd, removing the gunman, along with other agitators, and setting up a police perimeter around the Foothill station for the rest of the night (Hutchings 1997).

The first reported structural fire was at 7:45 p.m., and the number of fire-related emergency calls would grow to 502 before the night had ended (Hutchings 1997). By 9:05 p.m., the CHP had closed freeway exits on many parts of Interstate 110, the freeway that bisects South Central. Around the same time, street-level snipers were shooting at police helicopters. As a result, commercial airliners, whose flight path normally travels over South Central into LAX, were
re-routed. And throughout South Central, looters began to steal firearms from pawnshops and gun dealers, in some heists, taking as many as 1,700 firearms including ammunition (Coffey 1992).

Between midnight and 3:00 a.m. Thursday morning, there were reports of three fires per minute (Coffey 1992; Webster and Williams 1992a). This prompted Mayor Bradley to issue a curfew for South Central at 12:15 a.m. By 10:15 a.m., the next morning the curfew area geographically increased from Vernon Avenue to Jefferson Boulevard, a northward extension of a mile and a half. At 12:45 p.m., the curfew became citywide (Webster and Williams 1992b). During the same time, the Los Angeles Police Department had ordered all of its 8,000 officers onto the streets. In an attempt to arrest as many looters as possible, the police would barricade an area and then arrest everybody within the perimeter. Additionally, the police arrested individuals for non-riot activities such as drug dealing and curfew violations, which accounted for 4 and 37 percent of the total arrested, respectively (Petersilia and Abrahamse 1993). Throughout the entire City of Los Angeles, city bus service, child-care centers, and all public and some private schools, including the University of Southern California, were closed (Webster and Williams 1992b). Los Angeles literally shut down.

Early Friday morning, President George H.W. Bush ordered federal troops to assist in restoring order. But, even though the National Guard was already in place, Friday was still an active riot day, with dozens of fires and 1,082 arrests (Webster and Williams 1992a). By Friday evening, Rodney King made a television and radio plea for peace, stating his now famous words: “Can we get
along?” (Coffey 1992, 98). The following day, the rate of fires had decreased, as well as other riot-related crimes, mostly due to the visible military presence. Saturday also marked a time of psychological healing as 30,000 people marched in Koreatown to show support for those who lost their businesses. In addition, there were cleanup efforts in parts of South Central and Koreatown (Coffey 1992).

On Sunday, grocery stores and Interstate 110’s off ramps reopened. Bus service resumed, and commercial planes could once again fly over South Central into LAX. Also, regularly scheduled programming was back on television, which must have been a welcome change from the intense media coverage of the event. According to Webster and Williams (1992a), Monday was the last day of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. By this time, Mayor Bradley lifted the curfew and students went back to school (Coffey 1992).

1.4 Statement of Challenge

The Los Angeles riots took place from April 29 to May 4, 1992, and for months after I heard discussions regarding the areas that were hardest hit by the rioting. Place references like Downtown, Koreatown, and especially South Central were used to identify locations where the riot damage was most severe. As a result, these places were stereotyped as areas to be feared and most definitely avoided by non-residents.

Nowhere were the stereotypes more prevalent than those regarding South Central, an area that I heard many outsiders commonly associate with gangs,

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7 April 29 to May 4, 1992 are the dates used by Webster and Williams (1992a, and 1992b). In fact, a few structure fires were reported and arrests were made up until the early morning of May 4, 1992.
poverty, and violence. However, South Central seems to be a mythical place, one without a set of fixed boundaries, for “[t]here is no clear agreement on what exactly constitutes South-Central Los Angeles” (Anderson et al. 1992, 5). Instead, I found its mythical boundaries are defined and redefined depending on the current urban tales, most of which are negative. A friend’s mother once said that South Central is any place in Los Angeles where a Black person commits a crime.

Although there is an abundance of material dedicated to the subject of riots in the United States, focused especially on the civil rights period of the mid-1960s, much of the material is rooted in criminology, political science, and sociology. Scholarly inquiry by geographers on the spatial characteristics of riot events is rather thin: as Michael Ridland has noted, “. . . it appears that geographers have had very little interest in riots” (1993, 5). This holds true for the 1992 Los Angeles riots as well.

More importantly, geographers and non-geographers that have spatially studied the 1992 Los Angeles riots have only explored the neighborhoods of South Central. However, Bergesen and Herman (1998) included most neighborhoods south of the Santa Monica Mountains, but they overlooked the rest of Los Angeles (see Figure 1). This thesis geographically extends beyond previous work and examines structural damage for the entire City of Los Angeles, not just those neighborhoods hardest hit by the riots, or that the media sensationalized. After all, recognizing areas with slight to moderate riot damage speaks to the riots’ spatial outliers, as well as to its overall intensity.
1.4.1 Statistical Methods

For his first statistical query, Michael Ridland (1993) tested whether the spatial distribution of riot-damaged structures in South Central were highly clustered or evenly dispersed. He hypothesized that riot-damage areas were not necessarily clustered within specific locations; rather, they were linear in form along major commercial corridors. Ridland used a Coefficient of Dispersion (CD) test, which takes an event and compares what would likely occur to what would actually occur, generating an index of randomness. For example, if the randomness number is greater than one, the event pattern is more clustered. Conversely, if the randomness number is less that one, the event pattern is more dispersed. Ridland organized his data into three categories: fires, vandalism, and all damage.\(^8\) He then ran a CD test on all three categories with the following results: fires (3.49), vandalism (1.88), and all damage (3.10) (Ridland 1993, 54). Ridland’s CD test supported his hypothesis concluding that “[T]he damage patterns did appear to follow major streets, with only minimum events occurring elsewhere in the study area” (1993, 56).

Ridland (1993) also stated that census tracts with higher levels of riot-damaged structures directly correlated with socioeconomic variables of high poverty levels, a greater population density, more young people, and a larger immigrant community. Conversely, Ridland suspected there were inverse correlations between census tracts with high levels of riot-damaged structures to both lower education levels and a lower proportion of married couples. Here he applied a Chi-Square Goodness-of-fit Test, which compared riot-damaged census

\(^8\) Ridland’s (1993) all damage category is the aggregate of the fires and vandalism categories.
tracts with socioeconomic variables. The Chi-Square measures the observed frequency of a variable with its expected distribution, determining a level of significance between the two. Ridland found no significant correlations between census tracts with higher levels of riot damage and his selected socioeconomic variables. He concluded: “These hypotheses appear to be extremely poor predictors of riot damage of any type. The traditional hypotheses used in explaining ordinary crime seem not well suited for riot damage explanations” (Ridland 1993, 67).

Using statistical methods to understand the spatial patterns of the 1992 Los Angeles riots led Ridland to the sobering conclusion that, “[t]hese results suggest that the study of riot damage may be more complex than previously thought” (Ridland 1993, 69). Indeed, riots are complex events, for human agency is continuously reshaping the event over space and time. In the case of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, this reshaping was not just simply one event; rather, it was multiple events occurring simultaneously—in dozens of neighborhoods and over six days.

Sociologists Albert Bergesen and Max Herman (1998) also used a quantitative approach to study the 1992 Los Angeles riots by testing hyper-ethnic succession theory. Bergesen and Herman (1998) examined migration of new ethnic-minority residents who settled in areas with an already established ethnic majority. The authors hypothesized that housing and jobs were secondary in creating ethnic tensions in these areas; rather, the catalysts, in their view of urban riots, are the rates of residential in-migration. Bergesen and Herman elaborated
by stating, “…demographic situations in which a rapid in-migration of new ethnic
groups alters the ethnic composition and produces resentment that fuels defensive
backlash violence by a residential area’s dominant racial/ethnic group” (1998,
41).

Bergesen and Herman (1998) gathered data on riot violence at the census
tract level, with a primary focus on riot fatalities for the City of Los Angeles.
Although there were only fifty-one\(^9\) reported riot fatalities during the 1992 Los
Angeles riots, the authors felt this was the least biased data set in which to test
their hypothesis explaining that “…they [riot fatalities] are a clear and
unambiguous indicator of serious racial violence” (Bergesen and Herman 1998,
43). They noted that arrest-record data sets are often misleading because a
portion of those arrested were for curfew violations, which was not a good
indicator of riot participation. The authors also claimed that property-damage
data sets are not reliable indicators of riot violence either because it is possible
that some insurance assessments were inflated (Bergesen and Herman 1998).

For hyper-ethnic succession theory, the dependent variable assigns each
census tract either a one (riot fatality), or a zero (no riot fatality). Independent
variables, then, are the racial and ethnic composition of those residing in each
census tract. The authors used a difference-of-means test to compare census
tracts with and without a riot fatality to each of the independent variables. Their
hypothesis stated that census tracts with higher riot fatalities also have higher
rates of in-migration by ethnic minorities. Bergesen and Herman (1998) found

However, my personal copy of Webster and Williams (1992a) states that there were only forty-
two riot-related deaths.
that riot fatalities were more likely clustered in areas of ethnic overlap, or, as the authors stated—contact zones. In this example, the contact zones were in census tracts where Blacks and Latinos each made up greater than forty percent of the population, indicating that riot fatalities were more prolific in areas of desegregation than in areas of segregation (Bergesen and Herman 1998).

Although Bergesen and Herman (1998) made an interesting case for hyper-ethnic succession theory, their use of riot fatalities as the main indicator may not have been the best variable. The authors made the case that riot fatalities were unbiased, but some riot fatalities are curious and may not have been riot related. For example, the person who was shot and killed by a gang member because the victim refused to join that gang (the incident happened to be near a building that was in the process of being looted), or the person who was “[s]trangled by a supermarket produce manager in a dispute over corn husks” (Webster and Williams 1992b, section 9-3, pp. 1-5). This does not derail Bergesen and Herman’s (1998) hypothesis, but it shows that most data sets have some biases, and that using only fifty-one supposed riot fatalities to support a hyper-ethnic succession theory is not a large enough sample size. An equal emphasis on all three data sets of arrest records, damaged properties, and riot fatalities would have made for stronger results.

1.4.2 Charts and Graphs

Morrison and Lowry (1993) addressed themes of ethnic succession as Los Angeles’ demographics shifted from an Anglo majority to a multi-ethnic plurality fueled by Anglos leaving Los Angeles County coupled with the prolific in-
migration of Hispanics and Asians, as well as the out-migration of African Americans from South Central into the adjacent and formerly Anglo suburbs (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percent of population by race/ethnicity for Los Angeles County. Source: Ong and Blumenberg (1996).

At the least, the demographics of South Central are dynamic, changing from a predominantly African-American stronghold to a multi-ethnic mix, mostly of Latinos and a handful of Asians (Morrison and Lowry 1993; Sears 1994). Like a thirty-year frontal system moving across the landscape, African Americans have been migrating in a westerly direction. Whether this is because African Americans have been feeling the push from in-migrating Latinos, or if this is by choice, a sort of Black flight, is difficult to tell. Perhaps it is a combination of both (see Figure 3).

Morrison and Lowry (1993) claimed the availability of young males perpetuated the rioting in Los Angeles. At the time of the riots, young males
Figure 3. Source: Oliver et al. (1993).

(those between the ages of 16 and 34) represented seventeen percent of South Central’s population. The authors stated this is a common proportion to the total population; however, what is alarming is that forty-two percent of this age group was “…either unemployed or not in the labor force” (Morrison and Lowry 1993, 18). Thus they were, as the authors put it, available. South Central, then, had
“…a critical mass of young males who had no regular occupation, little reason to feel bound by social rules, and the physical energy needed to stone, loot, burn, and run from the police” (Morrison and Lowry 1993, 18). The authors concluded that these social conditions, the availability of young males, along with the ethnic tensions brought about by changing demographics, were the preconditions for the development of the riots in South Central (Morrison and Lowry 1993).

However, by focusing only on the Rodney King and Reginald Denny incidences, whereby white cops patrolling affluent suburbs beat a black motorist and blacks later take revenge on a white trucker in the ghetto, the 1992 Los Angeles riots may give some a misleading impression of an event of black verses white. Some scholars consider the 1992 Los Angeles riots as America’s first multi-cultural riots (Anderson et al. 1992; Kwong 1992). In fact, writer Wanda Coleman states, “[A]s I was a witness, people—of nearly every ethnic description—were in the streets smiling as they looted” (2002, 37). If this is true, then the nature of rioting in the United States, particularly in Los Angeles, is growing out of the black/white paradigm of the 1960s and developing into something new and more diverse.

To support this notion of multi-cultural riots, Petersilia and Abrahamse (1993) analyzed 7,056-arrest records from April 30, 1992 to May 9, 1992 and found that Latinos made up fifty-one percent of those arrested (see Figure 4). This not only adds to the complexity of studying riots, but also debunks any notion that the 1992 Los Angeles riots were exclusively an African American uprising. More importantly, though, is Petersilia and Abrahamse’s (1993) finding
that feelings of anger are not exclusive to only one group, and that all racial/ethnic groups, under the right conditions, have the ability to riot, not just African Americans from South Central.

Morrison and Lowry (1993) have pointed out the inaccuracy of quantifying the riot; for the data, especially arrest records, are subject to whom the police decided to pursue. Furthermore, Petersilia and Abrahamse (1993) acknowledged that the police were unprepared to handle the initial rioting on the first afternoon and evening. Therefore, arrests were not made until the following day, which skews the overall number of arrestees. So when asking the question of ‘who rioted?’, it must be noted that an undetermined number of rioters were not caught, and, therefore, these individuals were not accounted for in the data. Additionally, the data for Hispanics may be skewed downward because some riot participants were transferred to immigration for deportation and not sent through the court system to be prosecuted. Lastly, Morrison and Lowry recognized that
arrest-record data sets are problematic, especially when breaking the numbers down by race and ethnicity. However, the authors argued that these arrest records are nonetheless valuable, and stated that “[a]lthough demographic factors cannot ‘explain’ riots, they are one salient, quantifiable facet of the tensions and processes that fuel them” (1993, 2).

There are a variety of methods for studying the 1992 Los Angeles riots, each with its own set of strengths and weaknesses. Population and Arrestee graphs build a foundational knowledge that should not be taken for granted, for they show the big picture of the riots, which could lead to smaller, more detailed clues. Although questionable, Bergesen and Herman’s (1998) testing of hyper-ethnic succession theory shines light on a possible symptom that contributed to the intense structural damage in South Central, and is a hypothesis that could be used to examine future events. We should also appreciate Ridland’s (1993) academic honesty when he states that certain statistical analysis may not totally explain what happened in Los Angeles. However, the above work does provide great insight because the more one understands the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the more he realizes the riots were incredibly complex.

Chapter Two will focus on mapping the damaged structures resulting from the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The goal is to gain insight by looking at the event spatially as a snapshot in time, piecing together evidence that will build a more solid understanding.
CHAPTER TWO: RIOTS AND MAPS

2.1 Geography and Riots

My interest in riots began as an early teenager when my mother gave me a book entitled, *Life: The ’60s*. On page twenty-three, a young boy lies in his own blood. What I found compelling about this photograph was that, Joe Bass, Jr., looked lifeless, wounded from a police officer’s shotgun blast during the Newark riot in 1967. This photograph not only touched my heart but also sparked my curiosity regarding the insanity of such an occurrence, insanity that would leave a police officer no choice but to use his weapon, resulting in the downing of a twelve-year-old boy.

I casually investigated the subject in local libraries and became aware of a wave of rioting in the late 1960s, which included: Detroit, Newark, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Kansas City, and Watts. Watts, a neighborhood in Los Angeles, was the first major riot of the 1960s; it is also my last name, so it immediately drew my attention. My stepfather’s side of the family is from Los Angeles, and they would occasionally recollect their experiences of living in Los Angeles during the 1965 Watts riots. They told stories of tension and anxiety, feelings that lasted for years thereafter. Perhaps the fires were out in Watts, but an ember was still glowing, and, like the hibernating bear, it would eventually rise from its sleep, angry from hunger.

Like millions of others, I watched the 1992 Los Angeles riots from the comfort and safety of my living room. At the time I was living in San Francisco

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1 See O’Neil (1989) in References for full citation.
where there was a small-scale riot brewing on Market Street, just a few blocks
from my apartment; but the televised chaos in Los Angeles was far more
captivating, for the news media reported the developments like a sports
broadcaster would call the play-by-play action of a major sporting event.

   It was not until I was an undergraduate in geography that I became
interested in riots as an academic subject. I was immediately surprised at the lack
of geographic literature. Surely, I thought, riots are spatial events with an
ongoing dispersion similar to crime, disease, and transportation patterns—all
things geographers study. There was plenty of material on riots by academics in
sociology, political science, and criminal justice but very little by geographers.
My frustration level increased when I purchased a book entitled, *The Los Angeles
Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future.* In reading the biographies for each of the
contributors, I was dismayed that of the seventeen authors, only one was a
geographer. Moreover, geographers who did examine the 1992 Los Angeles riots,
such as Ridland (1993), approached the event as if it were a snapshot in time, with
limited attention to diffusion, dynamics, or fluidity.

   For this thesis, I was interested in the locations of structural damage
caused during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, so a question I needed to ask myself
was: How do geographers study riots? The most obvious answer would be to
map the event and display various spatial arrangements, such as location, and
intensity. Structural damage could also be broken down into themes like fire and
vandalism. Moreover, comparing structural damage with census-tract

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2 See Baldassare (1994) in References for full citation.
demographics—categories containing information on education, ethnicity and race, and income—could provide valuable insight.

2.2 The City of Los Angeles and the Riots of 1992

2.2.1 An Atlas of South Central Los Angeles

Anderson et al. (1992) have compiled a set of choropleth maps that includes 526 census tracts representing an area the authors refer to as South-Central Los Angeles. Individual maps are based on themes such as ethnicity, followed by economic, social, and political characteristics, and, lastly, crime. Additionally, the authors produced twelve, point-distribution overlays that spatially correspond to the choropleth maps. These point-distribution overlays map data revealing shopping centers, businesses that sell alcohol; the maps also show major streets and freeways. In addition there are four point-distribution maps that pinpoint emergency phone calls from 3:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., by 8:00 p.m., by 9:00 p.m., and by 10:00 p.m., which indicate “…the locations of the major fires and looting during the opening phases of the riots…” (Anderson et al. 1992, 4) (see Figure 5).

According to the authors, the first emergency call to the Los Angeles Police Department was at 3:43 p.m. A second emergency call was over a half-hour later at 4:17 p.m., followed by a third call a few minutes thereafter at 4:21 p.m. (Anderson et al. 1992). These three emergency calls could be interpreted as the radii of the riots’ core, with subsequent calls reporting riot activities disseminating outward. Watts, and places east of Interstate 110, reported emergency calls by 8:00 p.m. Between 8:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., reported

3 See Anderson et al. (1992) map set in Appendix.
riot activities jumped north across Interstate 10, heading out of South Central and towards Koreatown. Finally, Downtown was reporting riot activities, as the event shifted to the east.
One question that may never be satisfactorily answered is: Did the riots actually move from the core east to Watts, north to Koreatown, then east to Downtown? To suggest the riots moved implies a personification of the event, but did rioters travel out of the core to adjacent neighborhoods, or did information travel, whereby individuals sought to emulate what was occurring in South Central in their own neighborhoods? Perhaps it was a bit of both.

What is noteworthy is that the authors, both spatially and temporally, provide strong evidence that the 1992 Los Angeles riots disseminated from South Central, which may be why the intensity of riot-damaged structures is so high in this area. After all, the radii had more time to build pressure, fueling the core’s inertia in which to cause more structural damage. This is probable when viewing the sequence of emergency phone calls from 3:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m., for there appears more ‘in fill’ development of emergency calls within the core than diffusion outward to the periphery, namely Koreatown.

Maps produced by Anderson et al. (1992) show that Downtown had a burst of emergency phone calls between 9:00 p.m. and 10: p.m. My speculation is that individuals protesting the Rodney King verdict assembled Downtown for a demonstration, which eventually led to vandalism, particularly around the Parker Center (Webster and Williams 1992a). However, I believe the reason Downtown did not sustain the same level of structural damage as other areas is largely due to that most protesters did not live Downtown and had enough insight to drive home, or as a Santa Monica journalist, Lisa Alvarez, states after she and her friends had
seen numerous cars and palm trees on fire: “We decide[d], with little hesitation, to leave” (Alvarez 2002, 12).

2.2.2 The Civil Disorder Damage Survey

According to Ridland (1993), on June 5, 1992, the Los Angeles Department of Building and Public Safety, in conjunction with the Los Angeles City Fire Department, published the Civil Disorder Damage Survey (CDDS). The CDDS (1992) is a detailed dataset that identified damaged structures and their specific locations resulting from the 1992 Los Angeles riots. I obtained a copy of the CDDS in August, 1998 from then computer analyst, Karen Penera. For unknown reasons, my copy of the CDDS (1992) contains twelve unreadable entries of 1,107 total entries. However, this represents only 1.08 percent of the total entries.

From the CDDS (1992), I located and mapped 1,095 damaged structures in the City of Los Angeles during the 1992 riots. The CDDS (1992) divided each entry into three categories based on its type of damage: Either Fires, Vandalism, or Other. Fires accounted for 635 structures, Vandalism accounted for another 305 structures, and Other lists 155 structures. Additionally, the CDDS (1992) has a category labeled Vacated for each structurally damaged property. 5

2.2.3 Supplemental Data

As a supplement to the CDDS (1992), I also incorporated the work by Ong and Hee (1993). The authors’ data set is compiled from four other data sets, including the CDDS (1992), as well as the State of California Insurance

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4 The Other category listed various types of damage such as heat, water, other, and RD (my guess is riot damage). Additionally, some entries had no damage listed; the entry was simply blank.

5 The CDDS categorized Vacated as: Yes, No, Partial, or the entry was simply left blank.
Commission, the Korean newspaper *Korea Central Daily*, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (Ong and Hee, 1993). But what makes Ong and Hee’s (1993) data set important is they also list the percentage of each structure’s overall damage. Mapping the percentage of each structure’s damage provides a more in-depth insight to the varying intensities of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and how this intensity plays out spatially throughout most of incorporated Los Angeles.

When merging multiple data sets there are usually data that do not match, which was the case when I combined the CDDS (1992) with Ong and Hee’s (1993) data. Most of Ong and Hee’s (1993) entries match with the 1,095 entries from the CDDS (1992). However, Ong and Hee (1993) had an additional 140 entries that did not match. Thus, the additional 140 entries listed by Ong and Hee (1993) were added to the entries from the CDDS (1992) for 1,235 total entries representing damaged structures during the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

To avoid duplication, I referenced Ong and Hee’s (1993) entries to the CDDS (1992) to compare addresses. Each of Ong and Hee’s (1993) entries not found in the CDDS (1992) had to fall outside the inclusive range of ±8 street numbers to be considered a non-match and, thus, a new entry. For example, if Ong and Hee (1993) had an entry located at 550 Broadway, but the CDDS (1992) had an entry located at 558 Broadway, the Ong and Hee (1993) entry was considered a duplicate and, therefore, not included in the final data set.

Conversely, if an Ong and Hee (1993) entry was listed as 560 Broadway, it would be included and considered part of the additional 140 entries. The reason
for selecting the inclusive range of ±8 street numbers was to insure that if structures were destroyed beyond recognition, those involved in the Los Angeles City Fire Department’s reconnaissance would not mistake addresses, unintentionally adding duplicates.

Perhaps to both data sets’ disadvantage, the CDDS (1992), and the Ong and Hee (1993) entries only include damaged structures located within the City of Los Angeles. Therefore, riot-related fires and vandalism in cities outside of Los Angeles’ municipal boundary are excluded from this thesis’ map set (see Figure 6). The *Los Angeles Times* reported fires and vandalism in cities within Los Angeles County, such as Compton, Long Beach, and Pomona, but they did not publish the actual street address (Meyers et al. 1992; Young 1992). However, for this thesis’ map sets, the City of Los Angeles provides ample entries over an expansive area offering an in-depth analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

### 2.2.4 Parameters

Similar to Anderson et al. (1992), this thesis also uses a set of GIS-produced thematic maps for its map analysis as seen in the map schematic (see Figure 7). For example, the point-distribution map All Structural Damage identifies all reported damaged structures during the 1992 Los Angeles riots by combining entries from both the CDDS (1992) and the Ong and Hee (1993) data sets (see Figure 8). Thus, point-distribution maps entitled Percent of Structural Damage, Type of Damage, and Structure Vacated? are subsets of All Structural Damage. Additionally, point-distribution maps entitled One Hundred Percent Damage and Vacated are for emphasis: For instance, One Hundred Percent
Damage is a subset of Percent of Structural Damage and only maps destroyed structures, while Vacated is a subset of Structure Vacated? and only maps structures that were so badly damaged its occupants were forced to abandon the property, meaning all structures that had been completely destroyed were vacated, but not all vacated structures were completely destroyed.
A four gray-tone scheme is used for the choropleth maps, producing sharper distinctions between shades, especially when superimposing the color point distribution maps. Numeric breakdowns for choropleth maps are generally based on a quartile classification, by which “[t]he total number of values is divided as equally as possible into the desired number of classes” (McGrew and Monroe 2000, 24). This allows a researcher to describe features based on increments of twenty-five, or, for instance, the top seventy-five percent, or the top quarter.

The race and ethnicity maps (see Figures 9-12), however, were classified into four, numerically uneven categories. The reason for this was to show a majority, at fifty-one percent, for the top bracket, allowing me to make statements like: “The majority of residents…” For example, the first range is between 0.1
Figure 8. All Structural Damage map. Created by Paul Watts (2003).

and 9.9 percent inclusive. This is where race and ethnicity are often observed on a daily basis, in places like the grocery store or the movie theater. The second range is between 10.0 and 24.9 percent inclusive. Here, specific races and ethnicities are more than simply observable but also have a presence. This presence includes businesses, such as restaurants, that cater to all races and
ethnicities, as well as local festivals celebrating a specific race or ethnicity. The third range is from 25.0 to 50.9 percent inclusive, and it is here where a race or an ethnicity has influence. For example, businesses have enough support by their own local race or ethnicity, so there is no need to cater to outsiders. It would also be standard to hear the indigenous language spoken on the streets, in the shops, and in the home. At this range, a specific race or ethnicity would likely have significant political power in neighborhood government. Finally, the fourth range is the 51.0 to 100 percent inclusive, and represents the majority, a majority that, depending on its economic resources, has likely established political power or influence, especially in local government.

2.2.5 A Bit About the U.S. Census Bureau

Data for the choropleth maps were obtained from the United States Census Bureau web site. 1990 data was downloaded at the census-tract level for Los Angeles County and converted into a database spreadsheet. The raw numbers were normalized to show each census tract’s percent of a variable, such as education or income, then brought into a GIS program for mapping purposes.

Race and ethnicity can be sensitive subjects, especially when discussing the aftermath of a major event, such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots. For the purpose of consistency, this thesis will also use the language of the U.S. Census Bureau regarding race and ethnicity during the map analysis; and they are as follows: African American, Anglo, Asian, and Hispanic. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanic as “…those who classify themselves in one of the

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6 The 1990 census tract data for Los Angeles County can be found by the U.S. Census Bureau’s search engine at: http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet, under the query: 1990 Summary Tape File (STF1) – 100 Percent Data.
specific Hispanic or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 of ACS questionnaire—‘Mexican,’ ‘Puerto Rican,’ or ‘Cuban’—as well as those who indicate that they are ‘other Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino’” (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

2.2.6 The Map Sets

Like with the work by Anderson et al., then, the map analysis for this thesis is designed to provide “…a clearly intelligible reference work that might prove thought-provoking and useful to people from all walks of life” (1992, 3). Therefore, this map analysis will address a number of generalizations, but they should be taken as that—generalizations.

2.2.6.1 Race and Ethnicity

When looking at the four maps showing the distribution of race and ethnicity, Los Angeles appears segregated. A Hispanic majority resides in four major concentrations, as well as several isolated census tracts located throughout Los Angeles, with the Santa Monica Mountains as the largest exception (see Figure 9). African Americans, on the other hand, are highly concentrated in the western and southern areas of South Central (see Figure 10). Moreover, as a non-statistical observation, where African Americans are, Anglos are not (see Figure 11). In fact, there is a near void of Anglo residents in every census tract with an African American majority. This is partially true with Hispanics, as a Hispanic majority dominates the eastern census tracts of South Central, and the African Americans the western census tracts. Although there can only be one ethnic

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7 This quote can be located in the Glossary, under Section G, page 1, of the American Fact Finder, U.S. Census Bureau: www.census.gov.
majority for each census tract, which gives the impression of cartographic segregation, African Americans and Hispanics seem to be the most soluble of the four major race and ethnic groups.
Like with Hispanics, Asians reside throughout most areas of the city, yet Asians only represent an ethnic majority in six out of Los Angeles County’s 1652 census tracts, five of which are located within the City of Los Angeles (see Figure 12). In addition, only one damaged structure shows up as being located within the
Figure 11. Anglo census tracts and all structural damage. Source: U.S. Census Bureau (2003). Map Created by Paul Watts (2003).

boundaries of a majority Asian census tract. Asians may have owned riot-damaged structures located in Koreatown, but residents living in the area consisted of an ethnic blending of African Americans, Anglos, Asians, and
Hispanics. In fact, the racial and ethnic majority of the area is between Anglos and Hispanics, not Asians as the name Koreatown implies.
2.2.6.2 Structural Damage

When looking at the All Structural Damage map (see Figure 8), it becomes clear that structural damage occurred throughout the City of Los Angeles, which might be why the event was called the Los Angeles riots, not the South Central riots, or the Koreatown riots. The Santa Monica Mountains and some of the foothills in the north-most areas of the San Fernando Valley were, for the most part, exempt from the riots’ damage, so too were some neighborhoods east of Downtown.

Boyle Heights and Highland Park are two predominately Hispanic neighborhoods east of downtown Los Angeles. The census tracts in these neighborhoods are as high as ninety-eight percent Hispanic, with several census tracts showing a majority with less than a ninth-grade education. Also, most census tracts fall into the lowest quartile for median household income, and the seventy-fifth quartile for population per housing unit. In other words, Boyle Height and Highland Park have very similar characteristics to South Central, yet Boyle Heights and Highland Park only had seven reported riot-damaged structures.

The Vacated map shows only three locations each for the San Fernando Valley, the San Pedro/Wilmington areas, and the Boyle Heights/Highland Park neighborhoods, all other vacated structures are located in a centralized area consisting of South Central, Koreatown, Hollywood, and Downtown (see Figure 13). Actually, this centralized core is not one big riot zone; rather, it is a relationship of commercial thoroughfares facilitating the rioting from one area to
Figure 13. Vacated map. Created by Paul Watts (2003).

another. However, because the map set is at such a small scale in order to show
the entire City of Los Angeles, this centralized core, particularly South Central,
appears to have a higher-than-actual intensity of damaged structures.

However, even more confined to the centralized core is the One Hundred
Percent Destruction map (see Figure 14). In this case, the San Fernando Valley is
entirely absent of this level of damage, while there are only two instances in Highland Park, and one in San Pedro. These isolated cases of total destruction are perplexing, for they are spatial outliers located miles away from the centralized core. So in order to supplement the notion of where things do not happen, it now becomes important to explore beyond the binary outlook of occurrences and non-
occurrences to include the various layers in between the two opposites. Thus, creating cartographic gradations gives a more accurate portrayal, especially to the overall riots’ intensity.

The Type of Damage map (see Figure 15) indicates the amount of damage to each structure and corresponds to the Structure Vacated? map (see Figure 16). Now, it is now easier to understand the riots’ nuances in the San Fernando Valley, where non-vacated structures represent a six-to-one ratio over partially-vacated or totally-vacated structures. San Pedro and Wilmington indicate a greater intensity than the San Fernando Valley, whereby the two portside areas have a two-to-one ratio of not vacated over partial and totally vacated, respectively.

Refining the riot-related damage even further, the Percent of Structural Damage map (see Figure 17) is data gathered from Ong and Hee’s (1993) data set, and is amount specific, although I chose the actual breakdown for each category. Ong and Hee (1993) do not explain what might constitute a structure with five percent damage. However, I image it would be a shattered window, which is unfortunate, but a business can still operate. The San Fernando Valley only reported one property as having a damage amount greater than five percent. San Pedro and Wilmington, on the other hand, indicate a greater riot-damage range, as did Boyle Heights and Highland Park. By far the most damage, though, is the centralized core, particularly South Central. However, areas such as Downtown and Hollywood show more yellow points, indicating that northward from South Central still maintains a high intensity but also includes an integration of structures with a lesser percent of riot damage.
Figure 15. Type of Damage map. Created by Paul Watts (2003).

This northerly decrease from the centralized core also applies to the Type of Damage map, where fire dominates in South Central but then decreases in intensity when moving northward, gradually morphing into areas where vandalism is more prevalent. Also of interest here is the San Fernando Valley where nearly half of the riot damage is from fire, even though only one of the
Fires caused significant structural damage (all other fires were either listed as causing less than five percent damage or there was no data available for the percent of structural damage category).

No doubt it is vital for the geographer to identify where riots occur, which is one reason this thesis has examined the entire City of Los Angeles, not just the
areas with higher concentrations of damage like South Central. However, in the case of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, it is equally important for the geographer to identify where the riots did not occur. It is easy to isolate South Central as the riot hotbed. Other areas, such as the San Fernando Valley, did not boast the same intensity as other areas, but, nonetheless, saw a share of riot-related damage.
In conclusion, this brief map interpretation was intended to be general and open to additional interpretations. Unlike previous maps of the 1992 Los Angeles riots (see Anderson et al. (1992); Ridland (1993); Bergesen and Herman (1998)), this map set explored riot-related damage for the entire City of Los Angeles, and was not exclusive to specific areas such as South Central. Although this thesis did not discuss some areas, other areas that past studies overlooked had some much deserved attention, specifically the San Fernando Valley as well as the port neighborhoods of San Pedro and Wilmington.

2.3 Maps of the 1965 Watts Riots

Scholars also produced maps for the 1965 Watts riots (see Figures 18 and 19). For example, Crump (1966) offers a detailed map showing individual locations of damaged structures, as well as riot-related deaths, including where public-service employees, such as firefighters and police officers, died in the line of duty. In Fogelson and Rubenstein’s compiled work (1969), they present a black and white version of Crump’s (1966) map but also include the Los Angeles city street grid, whereas Crump (1966) only shows major thoroughfares. Nonetheless, both maps show two noteworthy clusters of riot activity: First, the intersection of Vernon and Central Avenues; and, second, the intersection of Century Boulevard and Compton Avenue, which is near the heart of the Watts neighborhood. More importantly, Crump’s (1966) map makes a very strong point. He writes:

The labeling of the violence as the “Watts Riots” in newspapers throughout the world actually was incorrect. The rioting covered a large section of southern Los Angeles, of which Watts is a part, and also flowed into other cities (Crump 1966, 11).
The notion of a ‘Watts’ riot implies a specific neighborhood, a neighborhood that now wears the stigma of social precariousness and violent destruction. One popular, and recent, work on the 1965 Watts riots sensationalizes this stigma. On the inside front and back covers of Horne’s (1995) work is a map of Los Angeles County. Both maps are identical and place
a symbol over the Watts neighborhood to indicate a location point. Acting as a legend underneath the map, this symbol appears next to the words “CENTER OF UNREST,” which was the first feature on the map that caught my attention,
giving me the impression of a core/periphery relationship between Watts and the 
rest of Los Angeles (Horne 1995).  

Although Watts’ commercial district took a heavy hit from the rioting, it 
was neither the epicenter nor was the exclusive bearer of structural damage, yet its 
name carries the burden. Rioting in August 1965 went beyond Watts, beyond 
South Central, or even the City of Los Angeles, for that matter. In fact, rioting 
was reported as far south as San Diego, reaching north to Pacoima, and east to 
Monrovia (McCone 1965). Thus, the idea of a 1965 ‘Watts’ riot is in name 
only.  

As noted earlier by Ridland (1993), riots are complex events, so post-riot 
map interpretations can be difficult to verify. Sears notes there is “…no simple or 
single interpretation…” of the 1992 Los Angeles riots; however, he asserts that 
“[t]his is not to open the door to post-modernist license, wherein any 
configuration painted on an empty canvas is regarded as equally valid” (1994, 
251). Regardless of the quantity or validity of various interpretations, maps allow 
each reader to conceptualize the event and to see it holistically, even if it is just a 
snapshot. Nevertheless, if a picture is worth a thousand words, then a map is 
worth at least that many interpretations.  

Chapter Three moves away from directly analyzing the 1992 Los Angeles 
riots and begins to explore how to study riots in general. I look how other

8 The phrase, “CENTER OF UNREST” is actually written in all capital letters and is the largest 
font used on the page.
9 According to McCone (1965), San Diego had three days of rioting. Pacoima is a neighborhood 
in the San Fernando Valley, some 20 miles from downtown Los Angeles; the City of Monrovia 
is 25 miles to the east.
10 However, I also call this event as the 1965 Watts riots.
qualitative geographers have studied riots, particularly new cultural geographers who examine riot events by building the event around a political or theoretical framework. This is followed by qualitatively mapping the 1992 Los Angeles riots using data supplied by eyewitness accounts as a means of gaining more in-depth detail for each riot occurrence. Lastly, I analyze Nigel Thrift’s (1997, 1999, 2000) non-representational theory as a possible technique for studying future riots.
3.1 New Cultural Geography

In cooking, a dish may be prepared in a variety of ways. True, most people follow a recipe, but the better chefs only use a recipe as a set of guidelines, not a steadfast order of rules. Innovation develops out of an awareness of the guidelines, coupled with implementing new and perhaps provocative ideas. The result is tantalizing cuisine, surpassing its utilitarian function of simple nourishment, to arousing the senses. Geography has done the same.

Sprouting from a critical reaction to the notion of culture developed by Carl Sauer and the Berkeley school, New Cultural Geography formed out of cultural studies in the 1980s and sought a new means of explaining space (Cosgrove 2000). The Berkeley school grounded itself in empirical applications to understand cultural habitation upon the landscape. Fieldwork was the cornerstone of this tradition, requiring the researcher to examine three primary themes: diffusion of cultural traits, identification of cultural regions, and the cultural ecology, which is, very generally, the relationship between collective group practices and their natural environment (Duncan 2000).

Conversely, New Cultural Geographers explore such concepts as gender, memory, and performance, and how these concepts construct a societal framework within the larger body of abstract space. Whereas the Berkeley school largely overlooks social and political constructions in its work, New Cultural Geographers, on the other hand, have thrived in such areas. This oversight by the
Berkeley school, therefore, became one of the principle targets at which New Cultural Geographers took aim.

This brief overview introduces works by three New Cultural Geographers. The authors synthesize issues of place and space with riots, drawing from diverse riot situations: Carnival in London, England, racialized geographies in Lexington, Kentucky, and People’s Park in Berkeley, California. Each riot situation forms a foundation in which to build a theoretical framework. By doing so, a scholarly relationship is constructed between an event and its social/political situations, creating a viable qualitative methodology for the study of riots. These qualitative accounts differ from quantitative work on riots in that maps and statistical analysis are either secondary or nonexistent.¹ Physical locations are described by either neighborhood names or street intersections, and statistical information is limited to rudimentary figures indicating number of people arrested or injured. I am not arguing that well-done maps and statistical analysis are irrelevant to New Cultural Geography, but rather pointing out that they need not be the primary focus.

3.1.1 Carnival

Peter Jackson addresses the idea of Carnival not merely as a social event but as a multi-faceted spatial development stating, “Carnival is a contested event that expresses political and ideological conflict” (1988, 214). Jackson traces London’s Notting Hill Carnival from its colonial roots in Trinidad to its present location, which led to a riot between Carnival participants and the police in

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¹ In fact, only one of the three articles even includes a map (Mitchell 1995, 111), and this map is used to describe the layout of People’s Park, not to show riot-damaged areas.
August of 1976. He focuses on the racial perceptions of whites towards Notting
Hill Carnival’s participants, and how local news media hyperbolized the notion of
Carnival violence with race, specifically casting a negative light on black males.

Jackson (1988) suggests this negative portrayal of Carnival participants in
general, and black males in particular, started one day after the English news
media reported on Carnival’s cultural diversity. This quick turn of public opinion
may have unmasked an underlying racism that had been present all along in white
English society. Carnival in Notting Hill represented a collective inner conflict
among whites whereby the feelings of racism inconspicuously existed, yet, at the
same time, the status quo began to gingerly embrace such an overt and
extravagant event. However, when violence erupted, the underlying feelings of
racism rose to the surface. Therefore, the 1976 Carnival riot acted as an exposure
mechanism, or as Jackson wrote, a “…continuation of politics by other means”

3.1.2 Racialized Geographies

Similar to both the 1965 Watts riots and the 1992 Los Angeles riots,
Lexington, Kentucky had an incident between a white police officer and a black
resident. The difference in Lexington, however, was that resident, Tony Sullivan
was killed. What followed was a protest in Lexington’s Bluegrass-Aspendale
neighborhood that turned into violent outbreaks between local residents and
police. In the end, there were four arrests, fifteen injuries, and at least a dozen
damaged properties (McCann 1999).
Eugene McCann (1999) applies French philosopher Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the productions of space as a framework to synthesize racial identity and public space with the Lexington riot. McCann is critical of Lefebvre’s “conceptual triad” of spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces because “…Lefebvre’s failure to explicitly discuss race is problematic.” McCann continues, “his [Lefebvre’s] conceptual triad provides the opportunity to set racial identity at the center of our understanding of U.S. urbanism” (1999, 173).

Still, McCann (1999) uses Lefebvre’s conceptual triad to explain a struggling relationship between the state (Lexington’s city planning offices) who create homogenous abstract space, and subordinate groups (African-American rioters), which create differential spaces or counter-spaces. McCann emphasizes the riot in Lexington is beyond simple binary geographies of black and white, for it represents “…the social construction of subjective identity and political activity through spatiality” (McCann 1999, 180). To McCann, the Lexington event produced a temporary assertion of public space for the city’s African Americans, whereby “…‘marked’ bodies can negotiate the future on a free and equal basis” (1999, 181).

3.1.3 People’s Park

Don Mitchell (1995) discusses an attempt by the City of Berkeley and the University of California, Berkeley to renovate what is locally known as People’s Park. Berkeley officials saw People’s Park as a magnet for the criminal element, while activists viewed People’s Park as the quintessential public space, which

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2 McCann borrows Lefebvre’s terms of differential spaces and counter-spaces.
included everybody: from college students to the homeless. But when merchants from nearby Telegraph Avenue thought business was suffering due to the dangerous image of the park, the city stepped in. According to Mitchell’s sources, the Berkeley police used wood and putty bullets in street skirmishes with protesters, as well as allegedly beating bystanders. In response, protesters “…threw rocks and bottles, smashed windows, and lit street fires” (Mitchell 1995, 114).

Mitchell argues that public spaces, such as People’s Park, are fought over by a variety of interests: “public space as a place of unmediated political interaction, and public space as a place of order” (1995, 125). So, what is the proper use of public space? In the case of People’s Park, space became political. Four days after the riot, Berkeley officials transformed People’s Park from a place of unmediated political interaction to its new use of a place of order by constructing volleyball courts that would presumably attract more students, a sort of gentrification. For Mitchell (1995) public spaces like People’s Park are where a democratic society fights its social battles, making such spaces a necessity.

Public space is political, whether it is the play of Carnival, forging racial identities, or contested visions of city parks. Battling over the use of public space is a fluid process in that domination and power are always changing hands. Additionally, the battle over public space is dynamic—the ebbs and flows of exchanged power vary over time, space, and intensity. Riots, therefore, represent more than just damage to property; they also tell a story of social fluidity and
dynamics, thrust in motion by politics and power, all played out in the public realm.

All three authors use riots as a backdrop to display New Cultural Geography’s strength as a formidable qualitative approach, which could nicely complement statistical analysis and/or thematic mapping. By selecting various qualitative and quantitative themes, we can create a wide-angle view of riots, one that expands our peripheral understanding of an event. Cartographically, applying this blending to the 1992 Los Angeles riots produces a map where data points tie together specific spatial locations with descriptive details. Now the map becomes personal, even scary; for it shines attention on the human experiences of the riots, lending insight to the processes that lead up to specific situations.

3.2 Other Means of Understanding

My grandparents once owned a 1977 Chevrolet Monte Carlo with a dark red exterior, offset by a cream-colored vinyl top. I remember not liking the Monte Carlo very much, for its plastic seats felt like a hot skillet as they fried my legs in the summer, and, when sitting in the front, the hood was so long it obscured my view, forcing me to always look out the passenger-side window. The back was worse, however. Here I felt trapped in this two-door monster, imprisoned behind its large bench seats and tiny back window, a back window with less viewing area to the outside world than the windows of most commercial airliners.

At the intersection of Florence and Normandie Avenues, another Monte Carlo, perhaps a different year than my grandparents’, was abandoned and burnt,
“…serving as a silent testimony to the terror some motorists experienced during the early stages of the unrest” (Coffey 1992, 104) (see Figure 20). This was also the same intersection were Larry Tarvin and Reginald Denny were beaten, again depicting the terror of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. However, the Monte Carlo, along with Tarvin and Denny, were not represented in either the CDDS (1992), or the Ong and Hee (1993) data sets and, therefore, have not shown up on any of this thesis’ map sets. Yet these three incidences were still a part of the riots and ideally should be represented by geographers when doing work on such events.

Aside from serving as a silent testimony, the Monte Carlo also represents a side of the 1992 Los Angeles riots overlooked by the scholars’ quantitative work discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis. So a question presents itself: What else happened? The Qualitative Map calls attention to events related to the 1992 Los Angeles riots not considered structural damage, such as the Monte Carlo (see Figure 21). Since it is impossible to account for every situation, I was limited to a handful of incidents from mostly eyewitness accounts by journalists and writers.

Even with just sixteen samples, it is quite evident that there was more to the 1992 Los Angeles riots than just structural damage. In fact, rioters destroyed automobiles, palm trees, bus stop benches, and probably thousands of other things. The riots also indirectly affected Los Angeles with freeway off-ramp closures and power outages. Most importantly, however, not all events during the riots were negative. For example, the Qualitative Map locates the nearly 25,000 people who marched in Koreatown in a show of support for merchants
who lost their businesses, as well as the heroic efforts by a lone man who
successfully fended off a group of rioters from vandalizing a liquor store (Coffey 1992).³

The Qualitative Map points to the possibility of another means of understanding the 1992 Los Angeles riots, one that documents both the positive and the negative, including events that indirectly resulted from the riots. This chapter explores other potential research methods that may be applied to the study of future riots. My intention is to address these other qualitative research methods as a complementary approach to the quantitative work supported by statistical analysis and thematic mapping.

3.3 Waters of a Qualitative River

It required at least eighteen years of fieldwork. Such a demanding prerequisite, an achievement very few resumes could boast. Moreover, the ideal

³ See the Qualitative Map Metadata in Appendix A for a listing of sources.
candidate for this position possessed a dedicated character; one whose time spent in the field was continuous. There were no paid vacations or sick days, nor was there offered a retirement package, health insurance, or maternity leave. The individual would always be on call, even during the holidays, and the pay was lousy.
Yi-Fu Tuan taught Environment and the Quality of Life for twenty-five years, yet, coincidentally, every student who enrolled in the course met his strict and demanding prerequisite. This prerequisite was, well, each student’s own life experiences: “They had been in the field all their life without knowing it…” (Tuan 2001, 41). In a sense, life is fieldwork, for everyday experiences add up, enabling an individual to draw from them anytime, at the present, or in the future. These experiences are what contribute to the richness of life, including falling in love, traveling to new places, raising a family, and living in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots.

Compiling various individual experiences from the 1992 Los Angeles offers many stories to be told, richly describing the event, and, in some cases, empowering voices that may otherwise not be heard. This is fieldwork by proxy, and it is here where the Qualitative Map becomes endowed with a greater depth, whereby each mapped incident is represented both vividly and spatially. The following four vignettes are personal accounts, each identifying a specific location in Los Angeles during the 1992 riots, along with a level of detail obtained only by living the experience.

3.3.1 Vignette 1

“People were clamoring in the streets, darting here and there as gun shots whined through the air, cars slammed into each other and buildings, sirens screamed, and police and news helicopters swarmed about pyres of flame like giant mechanical moths” (Phillips 2002, 130). Writer Gary Phillips vividly,
perhaps dramatically, describes his neighborhood after returning from work. He and his family witness the developing events from the second floor of a friend’s duplex located near Pico and Fairfax in the Mid-City section of Los Angeles.4 “Shit was happening all round,” Phillips explains, “…yet all you could do was watch out your window—unsure of who was in charge and who wanted to be” (2002, 130).

3.3.2 Vignette 2

A political activist during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, now a professor of English, Lisa Alvarez recalls attending a demonstration at Parker Center.5 Referring to a guard booth located in an LAPD employee parking lot, Alvarez describes a developing scene:

It’s small. It’s unoccupied. It’s built of wood and glass. It takes a few people, but not many, to topple it, and once it’s on its side, all it requires is a couple of young men with gas canisters and matches. Someone adds an American flag to the mini-conflagration. Many in the crowd roar their approval while others try to remove the flag (2002, 10-11).

3.3.3 Vignette 3

On her way home from work in Santa Monica, writer and actor Lili Barsha describes an event during her approximate twelve-mile drive. “While stopped at a red light near Pico, a Volkswagen bug driven by a woman pulls up next to me. A guy with a baseball bat gets out, smashes the window of the car in front of me and punches the driver” (Barsha 2002, 17).6 She continues, “[T]he man with the bat and his girlfriend speed away. La Brea becomes a freeway. Every witness to the scene drives without regard to traffic signals. The point becomes not stopping”

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4 See green cross on the Qualitative Map for Phillips’ location (Figure 21).
5 See green square on the Qualitative Map for Alvarez’s location (Figure 21).
6 See green circle on the Qualitative Map for Barsha’s travel location (Figure 21).
Once at her apartment on First Street, Barsha describes a looting scene she watched from her living room window to see “…men rush[ing] home from Vermont Avenue with stolen television sets, and women hurry[ing] back with stolen diapers” (Barsha 2002, 18).

3.3.4 Vignette 4

Cruising around South Central Los Angeles, Journalist Lynell George reports that “[B]y sundown rocks and bottles sail toward the windshields of passing cars, through store windows, at nothing in particular. Random debris jams the city works.” She elaborates:

[M]y tires eat glass, trundle over big, splintered husks of plywood, of brick, and clods of dirt. On my left I see a waterfall of glass. Out the other window I watch six pairs of hands pry apart white iron security gates…black and Latino teenagers coming together to lift a sofa out of a furniture store’s showcase window, onto shoulders, then down the sidewalk (George 2002, 66).

I smell alcohol in the air, strong, oozing out of broken glass that has hit the pavement. Then come the stones. Random. They thud against the thin metal of my car. Random, I slowly understand, we’re in the heart of chaos. I wind back to Adams. At the corner of Western, where looms the Golden State Mutual Life insurance company…two men set fire to a wooden bus bench. The first flames are weak….I watch transfixed for too long as the fire leaps, changes in color. I remain because I know that tomorrow I will not recognize this corner. I want to preserve what I see now (George 2002, 67).

George continues:

Crenshaw Boulevard traffic is sluggish since all the signals are out for blocks after exiting the freeway. No one has the time to direct traffic, so crossing the intersection requires steely determination. The pace, however, gives a driver sufficient time to read the hastily scrawled signs making desperate pleas: ‘Black Owned. Black Owned Business. Employs Black Young Mothers.’ Some of the messages are a bit more

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7 See green asterisk on the Qualitative Map for Barsha’s home location (Figure 21).
8 See green triangle on the Qualitative Map for George’s first location (Figure 21).
9 See green lightening bold on the Qualitative Map for George’s second location (Figure 21).
sinister than others: ‘Black Owned/Not Korean Owned’ – the ‘O’ in Korean filled with a frowning face. Tags on shells of buildings read, ‘It’s a black thang’; little boys loot a wig store on a dare and then sport their spoils. This revolution has become cacophonous (2002, 69-70).

The above personal accounts, combined with the Qualitative Map, are the processes for bridge building, whereby rich empirical data telling the human experiences of the 1992 Los Angeles riots is also spatially represented in the form of a dot-distribution map. This bridging provides a wide-angle, bird’s-eye view, like standing high on a quantitatively constructed bridge and looking over its side to see the qualitative waters flowing below.

3.4 Non-Representational Theory

What if we move away from personal accounts and dot-distributed mapping altogether and, instead, completely embrace a qualitative approach representing the quintessential form of empiricism whereby the researcher is not observing an event from a distance, but the researcher is an event himself? Here I will explore Nigel Thrift’s non-representational theory in order to find an alternative and provocative approach to not only understanding the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but future events as well. Because this approach requires the researcher to become an active participant, and since I have never been directly involved in a riot, my ideas from Thrift’s framework are purely speculative. Nonetheless, it is essential to put forth alternative ideas to expand the way scholars study human agency in riots.

This next section asks: how does the researcher actively study a riot? I will attempt to answer this question by applying Nigel Thrift’s non-

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10 This is not to imply that researchers are exclusively men. Rather, for clarity and simplicity, I wanted to remain consistent, and limit myself to the use of he, him, himself, etc….
representational theory as a framework in which to base my ideas. An essential quality of non-representational theory is that the researcher must be part of the event. Perhaps Thrift’s most striking statement, “…non-representational theory allows of no hiding place. You must be in it,” identifies the component that breaks from the traditional methods of the social sciences of participant observation (Thrift 2000, 556). According to Thrift (2000), the social sciences, especially cultural geography, take the passive and contemplative role of observer, in what I interpret as a step removed from the action, meaning the researcher watches the action; he is not the action. The essence then of non-representational theory is, “…the witness must become an observant participant rather than a participant observer” (Thrift 2000, 556).

To apply non-representational theory towards the study of riots, the researcher must become a rioter. This essentially means breaking the law, and here is where an ethical conflict emerges. However, in a speculative manner, which is what part of this thesis is strictly addressing, the researcher must possess a riot mentality of searching for opportunities, whether they are smashing car windshields of passing motorists or setting fire to liquor stores. So, like the photographer hunting for that perfect millisecond where he can shoot an image, thereby capturing a still slice of its fluidity, the geographer seriously applying Thrift’s non-representational theory must become keen to his surroundings, living the unfolding events while seeing with a spatial lens.

One of the very few limitations of photography is that, even though it can capture a split-second image with amazing detail, it does not tell how the fluid
event arrived at that point of time and space, nor does it indicate how long or in what direction the event will continue. For Thrift, however, the now is a major tenet of non-representational theory, for it seeks to understand the construction of continuous-yet-temporal sets of the now as a process in the making (Thrift 2000). Riots can be seen as always in the now, with the past influencing the present influencing the future, manifesting in the realms of both time and space.

Thrift also sees non-representational theory as “…networks of heterogeneous actors…who are able to produce more or less durable moments by forging connections” (Thrift 2000, 556). With non-representational theory, it is necessary to see riot participants beyond race and ethnicity like Petersilia and Abrahamse (1993) do; to see them as individuals influencing, and influenced by, other individuals. Speculatively, a person angrily screaming at police officers directly influences another person to throw a rock, subsequently shattering a storefront window, and then, with a dozen other looters, raids and burns the store.

Actor-forged connections, however, create networks that do not necessarily follow a set pattern or produce predictable outcomes (Thrift 2000). For instance, the predicted outcome of an individual throwing a rock is to shatter a specific storefront window, whereby the store might then be looted and eventually burned. But what if the rock-thrower missed the storefront window entirely? Instead, the poorly executed throw embarrassingly hits a telephone pole in front of the store and ricochets the rock back onto the street. Meanwhile, three police cars arrive at the scene, and the riot participants scatter, leaving the building neither looted nor burned.
This leads to the question of why were some buildings destroyed while others were spared? Perhaps more thought provoking is where riot damage almost happened, but its spatiality was altered because of individual or group actions. The following three vignettes on the 1992 Los Angeles riots offer examples of individuals influencing other individuals, essentially altering the course of the riots.

For instance, Apeles recalls her father’s experience as a Filipino gas-station owner in South Central:

“Rioters grabbed whatever they could—cash box, cigarettes, merchandise, etc. They smashed up the windows, and even tried to set the station on fire. The next day our local window washers who we had befriended over the years, James and his wife (both African-American), told us they were able to stop the rioters from setting our business afame” (2002, 14).

From a political activist’s perspective, Lisa Alvarez offers another example from a demonstration outside Parker Center shortly after the Rodney King verdicts:

I recognize it. The Children’s Museum. A woman breaks apart from the group and runs ahead. She leaps up the steps. She faces them and shouts, “You don’t want to hurt this place. This is a good place. This is the Children’s Museum.” She stares them all down. “Now,” she says, “the L.A. Times is right down the street.” She points vaguely to the right, her long skinny arm like an arrow. “I suggest you go there.” The group seems to follow her suggestion and troops, almost as one, down in the direction of Times Mirror Square (2002, 11-12).

Writer Gary Phillips provides a final case as he described a scene from his Mid-City neighborhood:

Three middle-aged women, one with a pistol in her apron pocket, stopped a roving band of gangbangers from torching the Texaco station at the corner of our friend’s duplex on Ogden (2002, 130).
Inductively, the above accounts seem to lead towards a paradoxical notion that riots are neither random nor systematic: random in the meaning that there appears no explainable pattern to the chaos of such an event; and, systematic in that human agency is the catalyst behind each individual’s actions and reactions. Therefore, human agency is not arbitrary but highly selective, which partially explains why some buildings were destroyed while others were spared. In the case of the above accounts, Thrift explains that “[n]on-representational theory is anchored in an irreducible ontology in which the world is made up of billions of happy or unhappy encounters…consisting of multitudinous paths which intersect” (1999, 302).

If we use Thrift’s (1999) notion of encounters, it is these encounters between individuals that appear to be the essence of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, not the spatial patterns of damaged structures. Depending if this is true, previous works examining spatial associations between damaged structures and census tract demographics could be misleading. Moreover, by looking at the 1992 Los Angeles riots through a wide-angle lens, individual agency is all-to-commonly categorized into tidy groups based on race or ethnicity. This seemingly simple classification may actually be an unintentional red herring, especially when a journalist catches wind of researcher findings and publishes what I feel is a sensational headline stating, “51% of Riot Arrests Were Latino, Study Says” (Lieberman 1992).
3.4.1 Dance and Riots

Thrift applies non-representational theory to the study of dance to explain common, everyday experiences, “…and how they provide, especially in embodiment, alternative modes of being…continually evolving symbolic resources” (Thrift 1997, 125). Dance is then the processes of embodiment whereby movement becomes an interrelationship between “[s]ubject and object, mind and body, the visible and the invisible…” (Grosz, cited in Thrift, 1997, 139). Thrift divides dance into leisure and formal, where he distinguishes leisure dance as “…movements of dancers together create[ing] a potential space in which individuals can evolve imaginary powers of feeling,” whereas formal dance places the dancer as performer and the audience member as observer (Radley, cited in Thrift 1997, 148). This distinction between leisure and formal may also be applied to rioting.

Using Thrift’s (1997) approach, leisure rioters would possess a frustration level that would push individuals to break laws and violate community standards by causing as much possible damage to both property and to other individuals. Because the leisure rioter is subject to arrest, the individual is covert and inconspicuous, which may be why most fires occurred at night (Webster and Williams 1992a). The formal rioter, on the other hand, is more interested in creating a performance, to be seen by others as a protester against social injustice. Additionally, the formal rioter’s right to peacefully assemble is protected by the First Amendment. Here the formal rioter can legally be a spectacle, and—with a little luck—this spectacle can become immortalized by the media.
Geographers may find an interest in the spatial relationship between leisure and formal rioters. First, it is my assumption that leisure rioters are acting in areas with high concentrations of commercial establishments located in neighborhoods perceived by outsiders as dangerous during such an event. However, the formal rioter is demonstrating in high-visibility places, places where the media is comfortable reporting, such as Parker Center. Second, because of familiarity, the leisure rioter may only operate in close proximity to his own neighborhood. Also, due to the citywide dusk-to-dawn curfew, local looting and arson is less risky on foot, instead of by car, which would increase the chances of crossing paths with an edgy band of law-enforcement officers. Conversely, if the formal rioter is seeking to be part of a public performance, then the best exposure is during the daylight hours when there is not a curfew, and when it is generally safer to travel across neighborhoods to an organized protest.

3.4.2 Critique and Closure

Thrift’s idea of observant participation is provocative, for it requires the researcher to become what he is researching. In the case of this thesis, applying observant participation means that I become a rioter. My definition of a rioter, however, is an individual who knowingly breaks the law by intentionally destroying public and private property, as well as physically attacking other individuals during a temporal period collectively understood to be a time of disorder. Since I am unwilling to assume the position of a rioter, observant participation for this type of research remains only an idea.
However, this does not condemn observant participation as strictly a theoretically based idea, one without a practical application. On the contrary, the power of observant participation as a research method lies in being in the action, influencing, and influenced by, other groups and individuals, or what Thrift (2000) refers to as actants. The point is to be a part of an event’s spatial unfolding, from its birth to its death. Chapter Four explores several scholars’ works on empirical research, including some of the potential dangers, and leading to descriptions of my preliminary fieldwork on public protests where I am both an observer and a participant.
4.1 Riots vs. Public Protests

All of a sudden, there were people shouting. This was common before most punk rock concerts that I attended at dozens of Seattle-area venues during the late 1980s and early 1990s, for the energy level is quite high in anticipation of the upcoming performance. Something was unusual about this shouting, though, but I paid it no mind and continued talking with my friend Tom. Seconds later there were several faint whistle sounds, followed by abrupt splashes. Bottles shattered near where Tom and I were standing, sending shards of broken glass off my denim pant cuffs. More shouting came from behind me, closer. As I turned around, someone punched me in my left temple. My friend and I were under attack.

I wound up pinned against the side of a van parked on the street, unable to run away. An unknown number of people were punching me, yelling something about my skin color. The pounding continued. I could feel a sharp, fast wind before each blow made impact upon my upper body. My forearms were covering my face and ears, yet some of the blows were still making direct impact. When I curled into a fetal position, about to fall to the ground, somebody grabbed by jacket collar and began to pull me away from the van. It was Tom.

Perhaps my assailants were getting bored gang beating me because I do not remember absorbing too many blows thereafter. Tom dragged me towards the front door of the venue, but somehow the thugs separated us. Meanwhile several
concertgoers helped me inside to safety, while several more went outside to save Tom, but not before I saw one of the thugs kick Tom squarely in the face. Both Tom and my bands performed a short while after.

My experience of being beaten outside a small performance hall was hopefully the closest I will ever come to a first-hand encounter of a riot. Riots are dangerous, often deadly, and since my fieldwork experiences are limited, it would be better to study something less risky. For this chapter, I will adjust my gaze by turning away from the 1992 Los Angeles riots and hone in on the spatial characteristics of public protests, specifically three public protests in which I participated during January 2003.

Riots and public protests are similar in the sense that both produce networks of spatial flows among their participants, whereby an event’s development depends on the actions and reactions of each individual. Public protests, however, are more conducive for my fieldwork than are riots for three reasons: First, public protests are much safer. Occasionally, individual protesters become belligerent with the police and physical altercations may occur, but the actions of most protesters are law abiding. Riots, on the other hand, are about rising up against the state or some other authority and often result in violence and property damage. Second, in the United States, the right to peacefully petition the government, such as a public protest, is protected by constitutional law, whereas riots are collective acts of lawlessness. Third, public protests are scheduled and promoted events, so time and location is known in advance, while the time and location of a riot is unpredictable, which makes planning fieldwork difficult.
4.2 Public Protests

My preliminary fieldwork experiences\(^1\) have led me to believe that public protests are complex and dynamic events, consisting of more than only protesters; they also include, but are not limited to, anti-protesters, bystanders, police officers, and journalists. To add to the complexity, there is a variety of ideologies within the ranks of the protesters. Many protesters are fragmented into factions based on overlapping themes; for example, I noticed some groups adamantly supporting anti-war platforms, while other groups focused on U.S. imperialism, and a few groups promoted state annihilation. True, these three groups may share a few ideological characteristics with each other, but they nonetheless promote different agendas. Yet, like the combination of spices comprising curry, these groups blend to form what is seemingly a single political and spatial project.

Another observation led me to wonder just how were protesters expressing themselves: by holding signs, chanting, shouting, wearing costumes? A number of protesters were creative in their form of self-expression, both verbal and visual; however, it was difficult to calculate how many protesters were participating—a few, some, the majority, I really could not determine. Not to be overshadowed by visual spectacles, there is also an auditory component to public protests, with some protesters chanting and singing, a few anti-war protesters engaged in vociferous argumentation with pro-war demonstrators, various groups of younger protesters pounding bongos, and a handful of activists ranting over public address systems.

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\(^1\) See the 4.3 Washington D.C. Fieldwork section of this chapter for a complete analysis.
4.2.1 A Qualitative Gaze

For the study of public protests, especially in an attempt to understand the complexities and dynamics of such events, I feel it would be more appropriate to apply a qualitative-based methodology, one that will allow me to be at and participate in the scene. Qualitative methods, according to geographer Susan Smith, “…presume the world to be an assemblage of competing social constructions, representations and performances” (2001, 25). And these characteristics were quite overt during my preliminary fieldwork. So to apply Smith’s (2001) notion of qualitative methods with public protests requires me to examine the human network, whereby observing how those involved—individuals, groups, or both—act with and react to each other and the environment.

Unfortunately, quantitative approaches simply cannot extract the complexities and dynamics as well as I would like for this project, which is not to imply that a researcher should abandon quantitative approaches when studying public protests. Standing alone, however, a quantitative approach may be able to explain statistical generalities, but it cannot adequately capture the subtle nuances of human behavior. Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, are a means of “…adopting a strategy that recognizes the diversity of human experience, that addresses the complexity of how lives are lived, and that confronts the fact that people’s characteristics and experiences do not group into neat mappable parcels or tidy policy-relevant units” (Smith 2001, 25).
Those who have used a quantitative approach, like Bergesen and Herman’s (1998) study of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, tend to classify the human experience, usually with statistical tests in an attempt to accept or reject a hypothesis. This method certainly adds perspective by taking a step back and holistically analyzing an event, and since the 1992 Los Angeles riots were played out over such a large area, a holistic view is worth perusing, which is one reason the map sets of this thesis are relevant. However, “…qualitative research does not aim to be statically representative, and so, unlike in quantitative studies, it will be the depth and richness of your encounters rather than the number of people who participate in the study that matter” (Valentine 2001, 46). As a result, the in-depth richness of a qualitative approach may sacrifice the holistic analysis produced from a quantitative method, or as Dowler explains, “…what one gains in depth, one gives up in breadth” (2001a, 158). So the question emerges: qualitative/depth or quantitative/breadth?

4.2.2 Participant Observation

Prior to my preliminary fieldwork examining public protests in Washington D.C., I felt that I would be better served by an empirically based approach in order to understand the spatial networks that played out at these types of events. Also for future work, an empirically based approach will allow me to extract subtle details between individual protesters, as well as organized political groups, and how their various ideologies play out spatially. Empiricism as a qualitative approach directly connects the researcher to his research by exploring “…the feelings, understandings and knowledges of others through interviews,
discussions or participant observation” (Dwyer and Limb 2001, 1). For the study of public protests, then, an empirical approach appears to be the best suited method.

Since an empirical approach requires the researcher to become engaged, meaning the researcher must physically go to the field site and actively participate with his research subjects, many qualitative researchers apply a form of participant observation. Lorraine Dowler defines participant observation as “…a methodology that uncovers the everyday experiences of people’s lives” (2001a, 154). She explains that “[i]f quantitative methods imply detachment and minimal contact with one’s subjects, then participant observation implies attachment, involvement and intense contact with them [the subject(s)]” (Dowler 2001a, 157). In the case of public protests, I would physically attend an event and observe the action in an attempt to capture its essence with a variety of mediums, including audio recordings, ethnography, field notes, or photographs.

As with any methodology, however, participant observation has some drawbacks. Perhaps the greatest challenge for participant observation is access to the subjects, for the researcher might spend quite a bit of time forging contacts within the community (Valentine 2001). For my preliminary fieldwork, however, community contacts represent a deeper level of investigation, a level that I will eventually reach. Currently, my preliminary fieldwork and analysis is based in the anonymous public environment. Thus, the public is the subject, so contacts—or for my research, actions—are plentiful and readily available.
An additional weakness of observant participation is that this method is subjective and open to researcher bias, so with my observations also come my views, the things I see, and the stories I want to tell. “Researchers are not innocent subjects who are in the field only to listen and learn from local people,” Sangarasivam claims: “We bring research agendas” (2001, 98). For this reason, participant observation findings from one individual should not stand as the final word on describing an event. “Fieldwork legitimizes the basis for claims of knowledge,” asserts Hyndman; she continues, “but the findings of fieldwork, especially the sequence in which the claims are pieced together and the meanings attached to them, are all mediated by researchers” (2001, 266).

Because participant observation is so narrow in both scope and scale, one primary challenge is to simply take it all in, but even after countless public protests or years of experience in the field, my work will still not produce a complete understanding. In reference to conclusive observations, Hyndman states, “…one’s findings in the field never capture the whole picture. In fact, no whole picture exists” (2001, 267). From my own preliminary fieldwork, I realize that it is physically impossible to see everything. For example, during a public protest I attended in Washington D.C., fifty or so protesters, bound together by twine, sat in the middle of H Street NW and had to be removed by the police (Fernandez 2003). I was not aware that this had happened, although at the time I was only a block away, and I did not learn of this spectacle until I read about it the following morning in the newspaper.
Finally, participant observation placed me at the scene of three public protests, so my presence—even as a researcher—became political. During my preliminary fieldwork, I had become keenly aware of an underlying animosity between some of the protesters and a few members of the police. Any association with the other side, be they protesters or police, could raise suspicion and thereby jeopardize my attempt as a non-biased researcher. “Many people view researchers with suspicion, fear, or hatred,” state Eley and Northon (2001, 389), and these emotions from all sides of the political spectrum will most likely produce a tangled web, placing me in the position of an outsider. Dowler explains that, “[P]articipant observers can never fully shed their status as outsiders…” (2001a, 153), but perhaps this status as an outsider will produce a representation of objectivity among future subjects.

Overall, participant observation is an appealing approach, for it lends itself well to the study of public protest, allowing the researcher to see the action as it unfolds. This is because participant observation is both active and direct: Active in the sense that the researcher is live at the scene and in the event; direct in that the researcher is receiving unobstructed information. In reference to fieldwork in a dangerous setting like Northern Ireland, Dowler boldly states: “We need firsthand research, not filtered, received material” (2001b, 421) and this is precisely the research niche that participant observation fills.

4.3 Washington D.C. Fieldwork

In this section, I analyze my preliminary fieldwork conducted on public protests. I participated in three public protests in Washington D.C. during the Dr.
Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial weekend of January 2003. My goal was to gain fieldwork experience in order to both sharpen my observation skills as well as become comfortable with my new research position of actively taking part in public protests as a participant. Here, in a descriptive manner, I tell my experiences, attempting to place the reader in a participant’s position.

It is germane to first define the actors involved in public protests. These actor definitions are strictly my interpretation and serve for clarity, not to incite debate. I define event as an occurrence, such as a riot or a public protest. A protest, then, involves an organized group of individuals where some, or perhaps most, make an active declaration for or against an issue. Therefore, a marcher is an individual who makes a passive declaration for or against an issue. For example, he is present at an event but is not intentionally making a known presence. To a greater extent, a protester is an individual who makes an active declaration but may not have an active affiliation with a political organization. A protester, moreover, makes his presence known at an event by perhaps chanting, carrying signs, or banging on a drum, among other noticeable activities. An activist is a member of an organized group of protesters, one who adheres to the organized group’s political framework or agenda and likely has an active affiliation with a political organization, perhaps as a protest organizer. Along the same line, a speaker is one who verbally addresses the crowd for purposes of motivation, usually through a public address system. Additionally, the crowd refers to the collective participants in an event. Finally, a participant is an individual involved in an event, from a vociferous protester to a curious onlooker.
4.4 No War in Iraq

I took the Blue Line to the Capitol South station. Once outside sirens originated from several locations, suggesting multiple police vehicles screaming down the street in what appeared to be all directions, and which, for me, not only created a controlled chaos but also a sense of excitement. On 18 January 2003, the Washington D.C. police established a strong presence: they patrolled by foot and bicycle, rode horses and motorcycles, drove squad cars, and buzzed around the sky in helicopters. Some ground units traveled in an organized formation while other individual officers were stationary, sharply observing. But it was this presence, ubiquitous in both sight and sound, urgent in every move that impressed upon me the scale of the upcoming event.

The protest started on the Mall between the Capitol and the Washington Monument. After an hour-long rally, including speeches from two famous activists, the participants slowly made their way to the street. I was near the front of the crowd, frantically trying to catch up on my note taking, while simultaneously shooting pictures, all without crashing into someone. This area of Washington D.C. had a gently rolling topography, so when I happened to look up the block towards the front of the march, I realized that the march was moving up a small hill. Near the top of the hill stood several dozen people looking back at the march, many of whom were standing on an embankment snapping photographs. I wove my way out of the crowd towards the embankment, leaped upon it, turned around, looked down the hill at the body of the march and was in awe of its size, which extended several blocks in length. We traveled east, then
south, and arrived at the Washington Naval Yard, a journey that took me four
hours to complete.

4.4.1 Some Sights of Protest

A visual tactic used by some protesters was to march with banners,
something that produced a division of labor between the leader and the banner
holders. It was the leader’s responsibility to act as a gatekeeper and make sure
each banner maintained maximum exposure for those bystanders, mostly the
media, to read. Photographers were the banner holders’ target audience, and they
were poised along the side of the march, snapping shots of the passing banners.

Spatially, this meant the banner holders had to march at a slower pace than
the participants ahead of them, creating a gap in the crowd to expose the messages
advertised on each banner. As a result, there were human back-ups behind the
banner holders, similar to a large, slow-moving truck during freeway rush hour
with a slew of cars attempting to get past. This produced a resistance by fellow
marchers who were held up by the banner holders. Some marchers reacted by
moving around the banner holders, only to occupy the precious space in front of
the banner that the leader was so adamantly defending. In one instance, a leader
barked at the banner holders to come to a complete stop, an action that produced a
minor disruption to the march’s flow.

Individual protesters carried large signs as a means of visually expressing
their opinions. Although some protesters held mass-produced signs, signs with
identical color schemes, font and size styles that stated generic slogans such as
“No War in Iraq,” the majority of protesters created their own homemade signs,
some of which I found memorable. For example, one colorful sign read, “Drop Acid, Not Bombs,” another sign was a parody of President Bush’s axis of evil phrase stating: “Bush, Sharon, Blair: The Asses of Evil.”

4.5 Student and Youth March Against War and Racism

I thought I was late, for the flyer stated the 19 January 2003 event started at noon. Although it was only 30 degrees Fahrenheit, I was still sweating, overheated from wearing several layers and walking far too briskly. As I turned on to Pennsylvania Avenue, two to three hundred people had assembled for a pre-march rally.

Several speakers addressed the crowd, each taking turns at unleashing a variety of political claims against the current administration’s position on the impending war. Protesters with a greater level of fervor formed a core group surrounding the speakers in the shape of a semi-circle, while the less-boisterous protesters formed the periphery with a clear pathway on the sidewalk between the two. Each speaker, then, addressed the protesters from the sidewalk, on the same level, with no hierarchy between the two. As a result, the event was intimate, and I felt a closer connection to the college-age speakers than to the famous activists I listened to the day before.

For this march, there appeared to be more people with cameras snapping pictures than there were actual protesters. Many of the photographers, both professional media types as well as amateurs like myself, buzzed up and down the sides of the moving crowd, although a few thrill-seeking photographers
maneuvered themselves rather gracefully through the narrow spaces between the participants.

At the time of this event, the Bush administration demanded that United States weapon inspectors search Iraqi arsenals. Due to the administration’s demands, and to mock the administration in general, the speakers demanded their own weapons inspection at the White House. How this was going to be done was not clear, but this notion motivated the protesters to chant: “1-2-3-4, we don’t want your racist war. 5-6-7-8, stop the violence, stop the hate.” The chanting became a springboard, and, with the high-octane political agendas, the march was launched.

4.5.1 Tension

A point came when I realized that there seemed a greater police-to-protester ratio at this event than at the protest the day before. After all, the youthful protesters were noisily marching towards the White House to demand their own weapons inspection. The police were likely aware of the protesters’ agenda and perhaps anticipated that a few people would get out of line. As the crowd marched towards the White House, the police presence increased. Now instead of a few motorcycle officers on patrol, there were dozens, literally forming a wall along side the participants.

Riding down the street in the back of the pick-up truck, the speakers shouted slogans through a public address system, and the crowd fed on their words, which, in turn, energized the speakers, creating a speaker-to-crowd feedback loop. On several occasions, the speakers announced that the police were
not going to let the crowd near the White House. At this point, tension from the
crowd as well as the police increased for reasons unknown to me. Several
individuals wrote down police badge numbers, while a few photographers pointed
their lenses inches from the faces of the motorcycle officers, well beyond a
socially acceptable comfort level of personal space. Both the crowd and the
police were under each other’s watchful eyes. The speakers demanded access to
the White House. The crowd cheered in response. The police sat on their
motorcycles, glaring. And as a rolling boil slowly builds, the pot eventually
spilled over.

I just remember running. There was a general state of anomie, where the
old rules no longer applied, and the new rules had yet to be implemented. The
once-constrained crowd ran erratically in every direction, like a room full of
roaches after the lights have been turned on. I heard the revving of motorcycle
engines as officers whizzed past. One protester ran into a moving police
motorcycle. As she fell to the ground, her friend tried kicking the back of the
motorcycle:

Protester to Motorcycle Cop: “You asshole!”
Motorcycle Cop to Protester: “Get the fuck out of the way!”

I turned the corner onto the next block. Behind me were a dozen or so protesters
arm-in-arm in an act of resistance, forming a human barrier in an attempt to
hinder a pursuing police car from catching up with the rest of the participants.
Several nearby participants directed the scattering crowd away from the police
and towards the White House.
4.5.2 At the White House

When I finally arrived at the White House, hundreds of protesters had already gathered. There was frantic electricity in the air, and I was unsure about what was going to happen next. In front of the White House a chest-high iron fence separated the public grounds from the sidewalk. Riot police stood behind the iron fence, forming a human barricade. Behind them was a row of police in urban-action jumpsuits and, lastly, a wall of police mounted on horses. Their message was clear: the White House is closed. However, this did not sit well with some protesters who demanded from the riot police that they be allowed on the White House grounds. A scuffle broke out several yards from me, so I, like all the other hungry photographers, moved closer to get a better look. When I arrived, several protesters had already jumped a police barricade; they had trespassed. Riot police on the other side of the barricade escorted the trespassers into a police truck parked fifty feet from the growing crowd of onlookers. Lenses focused and shutters clicked as photographers snapped off shot after shot of the arrested trespassers, who calmly climbed into the police truck and sat down. The few remaining trespassers sat on the ground, handcuffed, forlornly looking back the crowd.

Three youthful-looking protesters, wearing sweatshirt hoods over their heads and bandanas covering their faces, approached the line of riot police. I thought this might become interesting, so I approached too. One of the protesters mumbled something to the riot police about freedom. A tall, confident riot cop smiled and calmly asked back: “So, you don’t think you’re free?” The riot cop
must have heard this talk about freedom before; he seemed to expect the question, and perhaps that is why he smiled. “Yeah, but…but…,” retorted one of the protesters, tripping over his own tongue. The three protesters left a few seconds later, leaving me alone to face the police.

“Why don’t you come to one of our neighborhoods,” the only female riot cop snorted at me. She was implying that if I thought the police were fascists, such as the three protesters claimed, I should spend some time in a rough part of town where I would likely find myself in a little trouble and need the help of a police officer.

“What do you mean?” I replied and followed, “I’m not a part of the protest, I’m just observing.” I was mistaken for one of the three protesters, although I dressed nothing like them.

“You’re still here, aren’t you?” She fired, unconvinced of my position.

“Yeah, but I think all this is really neat,” I paused, “I’m just a tourist.” It was very cold out, and my lips and mouth were both frozen. As a result, my response sounded a little too meek, but it worked.

The female riot cop and her partner both chuckled. The three of us chatted for a couple of minutes. Both riot cops encouraged me to go on a ‘ride along’ where I ride in the back seat of a patrol car for a shift and observe the day-in-the-life of a street cop.

“Do you have a record?” She inquired.

“No, ma’am.” I smiled.

She then pleasantly asked, “You’re a U.S. citizen, right?”
“Yes, I am.” Good question, I thought. After all, I was wearing a stocking cap with a Canadian flag embroidered on the side.

“Then you’ll just need to fill out some forms. Go to any precinct, role call is at ten,” she said.

I thanked them and walked away.

4.6 MLK Memorial

On 20 January 2003, I attended a memorial service for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. held at the Washington National Cathedral followed by a march to the White House. The memorial service for Dr. King set the tone of the march, which created a thoughtful and reserved feeling among the protesters. This protest was not about making noise or being arrested like with the Student and Youth March Against War and Racism event. Moreover, the police were on the scene for controlling traffic, not for controlling people. Thus, there were no barricades, riot cops, police on horses, arrests, loud sirens, or police helicopters.

4.6.1 To the White House

Upon exiting the National Cathedral, each person was given a battery-powered candle to symbolize a collective unity, so, instead of chanting slogans, the crowd had an equally powerful impact with hundreds of lights. As the protesters reached the street, several photographers were taking pictures of the event; but my impression was the protesters seemed indifferent about the photographers, for the protesters barely looked over at the photographers as they clicked away. Additionally, most protesters did not carry signs, so there was not the need to pose for a photographer’s camera.
What I noticed about this event was the extent to which crowds attract non-participants’ attention. For instance, during this protest, a dozen automobile drivers honked and waved as they drove past the protesters, apparently in support of the protesters’ theme. Other drivers were more forthcoming in their support as a few gave the thumbs-up sign, and I saw two different drivers roll down their windows, raise out their arms, and clench their fists while saying “Right on,” which was quite an effort considering they were not only driving, but it was also a brisk winter day. Conversely, a few drivers, apparently angered by the inconvenience of waiting in traffic for the march to pass, continuously sounded their horns for several seconds to half a minute.

4.6.2 The Vigil

The protest’s destination was a church within view of the White House. A prayer vigil was to be performed here, and, just as I arrived, choir members began to sing *Let it Shine* and *Down by the Riverside*, each syllable powerful and magnetic, drawing my attention to lyrics and away from the night’s cold. There were no barricades or police lines. In fact, unlike the two previous protests, the crowd spilled out onto the street, with no mind for boundaries between church grounds, sidewalk, or street.

By this time, everybody in the crowd turned on their battery-powered candles and raised them to shoulder level. As the choir continued to sing, some candles danced with the rhythm while others remained motionless. A minister asked everyone to reach out and place a hand on his or her neighbor’s shoulder for a moment of silence and prayer. My left arm extended out to the person in
front of me; my palm rested upon his shoulder, as the palms of two others rested upon mine. Trying to be inconspicuous, I carefully looked around at the protesters. With one arm on my neighbor’s shoulder and another holding a battery-powered candle, the protesters created a network of light and touch, which produced a powerful feeling of support for the anti-war viewpoint. The minister spoke. His voice during the final prayer vibrated throughout my body; for me, his words were not heard but felt.

The march closed with the song, *Amazing Grace*, a song that has always tingled my spine, even though I never bothered to learn the words. As the crowd sang, I could feel a cold wind burning my cheeks, and the urge to relieve myself was becoming unbearable, but I wanted to stay, for the feeling of being part of this experience was truly moving, and, like the indulgent fan, I wanted an encore. When Amazing Grace finished, the minister asked the protesters to turn off their candles and place them in one of several collection bags. As I gracelessly dropped my candle into the collection bag, the volunteer holding the bag smiled and thanked me for attending. The protesters quietly dispersed, and, as they walked away, each individual exhaled a short-lived, whitish cloud into the night’s frozen air, and I walked back to the Blue Line.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

5.1 Conclusion

Geographers have not fully explored riots, yet riots continue to explode around the world. As stated in the beginning of this thesis, to study riots is an attempt to understand chaotic and unpredictable events, events that result in multiple deaths, property damage, and can irrevocably scar communities for years. Additionally, it appears that human agency produces spatial networks, influencing a riot’s development and diffusion. I suspect too that this same human agency is the catalyst for a riot’s dynamics and unpredictability. It is for these reasons that should call geographers, especially human geographers, to the challenge of studying riots.

Part of this thesis is to critically evaluate previous quantitative work on the 1992 Los Angeles riots and to argue for a new investigative approach in understanding riots in general. My goal is not to abandon inquiry through quantitative methods, nor to discount findings from previous work, but to start looking into qualitative methods that have applied applications, which will undoubtedly produce new insights to the spatial distribution of damage, as well as to the human networks produced during rioting.

Ultimately, to approach the study of riots from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives is ideal, blending the two equally powerful methodologies that would position observant participation and ethnography side-by-side with thematic mapping and statistical analysis. This well-rounded
approach is possibly the only way to truly explain the complexities of human agency during a chaotic event. Thus, a complementary blending between the two methodologies is the best-case scenario, followed by a supplementary relationship where one method takes precedence over another. An antagonistic association between the two, however, would be as destructive as the riot itself. Geographers should therefore avoid methodological antagonisms altogether, keeping in mind that it is the spatial we are after, not each other.

5.1.1 The City of Los Angeles and Riots

I feel very passionate about southern California in general, and Los Angeles in particular, which is why I am so fascinated by individual perceptions of this area. Ironically, the perceptions many people have of Los Angeles are not from individuals’ experiences but from the multiple images, some of them apocalyptic,¹ that Los Angeles produces of itself; for example earthquakes, wildfires, street gangs, freeway traffic, and—of course—riots.

Most people that I have talked with feel the 1992 Los Angeles riots were strictly an African-American phenomenon, one that was geographically isolated to specific neighborhoods, especially South Central. However, African Americans rioting in South Central was what a lot of people saw on television, at least that has been my impression based on what most Anglos have told me during casual conversations. So even after Petersilia and Abrahamse (1993) debunked the myth that the 1992 Los Angeles riots were strictly an African-

¹ The first Terminator movie is a great example of apocalyptic Los Angeles, especially since the star of the show was elected governor of the State of California on October 7, 2003. Also, see Davis (1998, 1990) for a healthy apocalyptic flavoring in his popular works on Los Angeles, as well as Dear and Flusty’s (1998) academic project on postmodern Los Angeles.
American uprising, as well as the CDDS (1992) and Ong and Hee’s (1993) data sets that showed the event was not isolated but spread throughout Los Angeles, it appears in the popular imagination that African Americans and South Central likely still carry the burden of responsibility for the riots’ destruction and violence. In the end, individual perceptions of both African Americans and South Central may be more damaging than the actual riots.

5.1.2 Human Agency

I once attended a lecture where writer Ernest Gaines was the featured speaker. An audience member asked Mr. Gaines if his storylines were developed before he writes. Mr. Gaines emphatically replied, “No.” He went on to say that writing for him is like traveling by train from Los Angeles to New York; he knows he will be making stops in Dallas, St. Louis, and Philadelphia, but he does not know what he will encounter until he arrives at each of those places, as well as all the places in between. The study of human agency in action is no different.

My preliminary research on public protests taught me that such chaotic events are difficult to study because they are in a continual state of development. So, like Mr. Gaines’ train ride, I will know the proposed route of a protest, who is featured to give a speech, and a general set of ideologies harbored by the protesters. I might also be able to sense a level of excitement by the protesters and use that level of excitement as an indicator of a protest’s intensity, but I will not be able to predict the event’s outcome, nor will I be able to foresee the protesters’ subtle actions and reactions to each other, as well as to the police, the media, the built environment, and any other unpredictable variables.
5.1.3 Gonzo Geography

Since riots, and to a lesser extent public protests, are chaotic events, some may question why I want to place myself close enough to a situation where I could be in danger. Aside from any physical danger, one pitfall is that I might become pidgin holed as a thrill seeker (Lee 1995). A concern is that my peers in academia may deem my empirical methodologies as seeking action for action’s sake and, therefore, discredit my findings. In defense such of risky fieldwork, Dowler writes, “…I believe that academics who conduct ethnographic studies of violence are not on a quest for adventure; rather, they hope to foster social change” (2001b, 416).

One question I have come to terms with is: does empirically studying riots justify putting myself in danger? My answer is yes! Eley and Northon explain that “…geographers must evaluate the consequences of their actions and decide whether the ends justify the means in terms of result and personal risk” (2001, 398). And, while this does not imply that I must put myself in unnecessary danger, I do believe that in a discipline with a rich tradition of fieldwork, geographers should feel compelled to venture out.

Additionally, John Wright states that “[f]ieldwork is how we learn actual geography” (2001, 17). In the case of studying future riots fieldwork will be an essential component in the understanding of such events. However, a statement of caution is in order: I am not endorsing the notion that researchers should make

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2 Gonzo Geography is a play on the writing style of Gonzo Journalism, which was started by freelance writer Hunter S. Thompson. Gonzo Journalism is where the writer, or in this case–the geographer, literally lives the experience he is writing about, attempting to bring the reader into the event he is experiencing.
their way into a riot’s epicenter, nor should researchers, experienced or otherwise, knowingly place themselves in unnecessary danger. But geographers, like journalists, should show up on the scene, use their best judgment, and attempt to observe what is developing. Fieldwork, moreover, gives the researcher insight into “…processes, places, and social relations” (Hyndman 2001, 262). For riots, then, fieldwork could provide the researcher with a first-hand understanding of how rioters act and react within the event, revealing the human condition in a way that thematic mapping or statistical methods will never be able to achieve.

5.1.4 Grabbing at History

Although I find the 1992 Los Angeles riots worthy of academic research, I am historically removed from the event. I remember traveling with my parents somewhere in rural eastern Washington, sitting in an open space behind the fold-down back seat of our orange 1973 AMC station wagon. From this perspective, I was traveling backwards. Our car whizzed past countless grain elevators, and my eyes, honed in and locked, watching each one shrink into the horizon. Like with the grain elevators, I am traveling away from the subject I want to study. Historically, the 1992 Los Angeles riots are resting on the edge of the horizon, that place where visual identification of a feature is barely manageable, a precarious position where objects appear to fall off the edge of the earth. Thirteen years have passed.

Although I was not a first-hand witness to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, I do have data sets for producing thematic maps and conducting statistical analysis, as well as a variety of publications detailing rich personal accounts from individuals
that did experience the events, and both source types lend evidence to support quantitative and qualitative approaches for the study of riots. In the future, I would like to develop a better understanding of how the human agents form multiple networks at a public protest, and possibly apply my findings towards fieldwork at riot events.

5.1.5 In Closing

This thesis has been exploratory. It has allowed me to critically evaluate quantitative works on the 1992 Los Angeles riots, as well as examine demographic characteristics and racial/ethnic classifications of riot participants. Additionally, I constructed my own set of maps indicating structural damage that looked at the entire City of Los Angeles, not just the areas with the greatest riot intensity, such as South Central, to form my own analysis. I also briefly compared the spatial distribution of riot-damaged structures in South Central for both the 1965 Watts riots and the 1992 Los Angeles riots.

My gaze then turned away from quantitative methods to various qualitative approaches starting with three works by new cultural geographers, and how each scholar built a theoretical scaffolding to drape the subject of riots. This led to selecting vivid personal accounts by individuals who witnessed the 1992 Los Angeles riots first hand and producing a qualitative map of some of their experiences. I then examined Thrift’s (2000, 1999, 1997) provocative idea of non-representational theory as a viable theoretical tool but later argued that participant observation was a more applicable fieldwork approach. Finally, I ended with my preliminary field observations during three public protests.
5.1.6 Los Angeles and Beyond

It is my conclusion that the 1992 Los Angeles riots need further examination. This is based on Ridland’s (1993) statistical analysis and statement that riots are complex events, as well as my preliminary fieldwork at three public protests where I attempted to empirically understand the dynamics of human networks in a complicated setting. In both cases, Ridland (1993) and I came to the realization that neither of our theses fully explains the events in Los Angeles. If anything, our efforts raise more queries than do they answer questions, particularly questions asking geographers to explain the human catalysts behind the destruction, not simply where the destruction was located.

To begin to answer these questions geographers need to start a new project in the study of riots, one that goes beyond the past events in Los Angeles, to a new way of seeing the underlying spatial networks produced by individual and group agents. This new project forces geographers to release themselves from the binary paradigm of researcher/subject or analyst/event and transcend into an immanent state of being the event. Fieldwork becomes live and in the action, as the geographer positions himself from within where he is both observer and observed. And from this new position, the geographer too is an agent—a node in the network.

Moving beyond Los Angeles redirects our gaze to focus on the now, to be an agent of an event, and this is why public protests are so appealing. This thesis is a launching pad for future work on human agents, their formations of temporal networks, and their dynamic and chaotic spatial characteristics. As stated earlier,
public protests lend themselves to witness the action as an observer and to know an event through experience.

I believe that for geographers to begin to comprehend the spatial networks of human agency, whether these spatial networks manifest themselves in the form of riots or public protests, both quantitative and qualitative methods—especially participant observation—are necessary, and they should be used in a complementary relationship. Thematic mapping and statistical analysis can construct a solid foundation, and personal accounts through ethnography are often enriching and provide great detail, but those who truly seek a full understanding of riots and public protests will also be on the streets.
REFERENCES


McCone, John A. 1965. *Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?: A Report by the Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots.* Los Angeles: Governor’s Commission of the Los Angeles Riots.


APPENDIX: QUALATATIVE MAP METADATA


- **Individual fended off rioters from looting liquor store.** Source: Ibid.

- **Individual attempted to fight a raging fire with only a bucket of water.** Source: Ibid.


- **120 to 150 people gathered where police beat Rodney King, some individuals threw rocks and bottles at patrol cars.** Source: Ibid.

- **25,000 people marched in support of merchants who lost their businesses during the riots.** Source: Ibid.

- **Looters attempted to break into a bank vault.** Source: Ibid.


Freeway closed. Source: Ibid.
VITA

Paul Watts was born in Seattle, Washington, and he has lived in California and Louisiana. He plans to continue his graduate research on public protests with an emphasis on the human actions during such events.