

Welcome to Los Angeles?: Riots, Race, and Immigrants in the City

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Abstract:

This paper uses primary sources from the late 1980s and early 1990s Los Angeles City Council to examine the Salvadoran immigrant community before and after the Los Angeles riots. This paper demonstrates that as discourse changed in Los Angeles following the riots, so too did the ability of Salvadoran immigrants to receive the types of resources they needed to build up their community. In examining the Salvadorans during this time period, this paper explains how discourse on race, crime, and immigration affects public policy, and it demonstrates the devastating consequences that marginalizing communities can have for all of society.

Sociologist George J. Sanchez once noted about American society, “It is clear that all Americans can get caught in the white-black paradigm of race relations, a model that relies on opposites that substitute for the complexity and diversity of social and ethnic relations in the late twentieth-century United States.”¹ A keen observer could find a perfect example of society caught up in this paradigm in Los Angeles at the now infamous intersection of Florence and Normandie on April 29, 1992. On this corner, rioters brutally beat white trucker Reginald Denny in front of video cameras, and the media subsequently cast him as a key character in the narrative of the Los Angeles riots. Less remembered or perhaps not known at all, however, was that rioters assaulted and beat over thirty people on that same intersection, and all of those beatings also took place in front of a camera lens.² Unlike Reginald Denny, however, these victims were members of minority communities whose role remains understudied and forgotten within the simplified narrative surrounding the Los Angeles riots and sometimes not mentioned at all in popular media portrayals.

What is this simplified narrative missing? The reality is that for many members of communities in Los Angeles—black and white as well as Latino and Asian—the riots had devastating consequences that would continue to impact their lives for years to come. In fact, the Los Angeles riots particularly impacted a group history rarely mentions: the Salvadoran immigrants. This community made up only a fraction of the entire population of Los Angeles, and for the most part, its members had resided within the city for less than a decade. However, the riots fundamentally altered the position of Salvadorans within the city of Los Angeles, and the riots dramatically impacted the ability of Salvadorans to receive the types of resources they needed in order to establish themselves in America.

¹ George J. Sanchez, “Reading Reginald Denny: The Politics of Whiteness in the Late Twentieth Century,” *America Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 1995). 393.

² Sanchez, 388

To understand the severe consequences that the Los Angeles riots had on these immigrants from El Salvador, it is crucial to first understand the circumstances of the Salvadoran migration to America. In the early 1980s, revolution broke out as a leftist revolutionary umbrella force known as the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) threatened state power in El Salvador. The United States government followed its Cold War policies and backed the rightist government, providing an astonishing \$6 billion in aid despite this government's continued use of death squads and its open human rights violations.³ As a result of this well-funded terror campaign, massive numbers of Salvadorans left, totaling between 20% and 30% of the country's pre-war population.⁴ Approximately half of these migrants traveled to other Central American countries or to Mexico, but the other half, with a population between 500,000 and one million, immigrated to the United States.⁵ These new immigrants put the United States government in a difficult position, because to acknowledge Salvadoran immigrants as refugees would implicitly acknowledge that the United States provided significant aid and other covert support to a government that committed atrocities against its own people.⁶ The United States government thus refused to provide refugee status to Salvadorans as a group, leaving them with an ambiguous status as they entered into the United States and tried to establish a new life.

Kevin Keogan, a sociologist from Rutgers University, explains the importance of the Salvadorans' unique position in society. Keogan notes that since 1965, common perceptions of immigrants have come from the division of immigrant groups by status classification rather than

³ William I. Robinson. *Transnational Conflicts: Central America, Social Change, and Globalization*. London: Verso, 2003.

⁴ Faren Bachelis, *Central Americans* (Chelsea House Publishers, 1990), 10

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wayne A. Cornelius, Philip L. Martin, and James Frank Hollifield. *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994.

by race.⁷ Keogan argues that refugees fall into the “high status” category, are perceived as victims, and benefit from inclusionary federal policies; legal immigrants fall into the “neutral status” category, are perceived as newcomers, and face mixed federal policies; and “undocumented immigrants” fall into the “low status” category, are perceived as deviant, and face exclusionary federal policies.⁸ This classification system is important because as Salvadorans remained undefined, they fell somewhere between receiving high status and low status treatment, and their ability to benefit from inclusionary policies remained constantly up in the air.

In addition to Keogan’s theory regarding immigrant status, knowing how racial discourse works in America is crucial in understanding how Salvadorans fit into society. Sociologist Ashley Doane notes that inequality between races following the Civil Rights Movement has continued because of racial ideologies in society, which she defines as “generalized belief systems that explain social relationships and social practices in racialized language.”⁹ These beliefs, Doane explains, have justified colonization, enslavement, discrimination, and the current stratification of races within society, but they can change as social and intellectual movements shift over time.¹⁰ Doane explains that the struggle to change racial ideologies plays out within the “racial discourse” of society, defined as “the collective text and talk of society with respect to issues of race.”¹¹ Institutions with the most power and access to “vehicles of transmission for discourse” such as the government, educational systems, and the media, tend to dominate this discourse in order to “legitimize and reproduce dominance by minimizing the extent of

⁷ Kevin Keogan. "A Sense of Place: The Politics of Immigration and the Symbolic Construction of Identity in Southern California and the New York Metropolitan Area." *Sociological Forum* 2nd ser. 17 (June 2003): 233.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ashley Doane, "What is Racism? Racial Discourse and Racial Politics," *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 255 (2006) 256.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Doane, 256

inequality, marginalizing claims of subordinate groups, and moving to make dominant group understandings normative for the larger society.”¹² While racial discourse has been a part of society throughout history, since the Civil Rights Movement, ‘racetalk,’ which uses coded and symbolic discourse to express racialized ideas, has replaced overt racial themes within the discourse.¹³

Many more localized discourses that pertain the Salvadoran struggle use racetalk to justify exclusion, and understanding these discourses is crucial to understanding the Salvadoran experience. The discourse surrounding Latinos uses racetalk and symbolic language to label members of the community as outsiders in society. Anthropologist Leo R. Chavez examines this racialized discourse of Latinos in his book, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens and the Nation*, and he documents the “Latino Threat Narrative” which, through a variety of mediums such as media and through public demonstrations, “characterizes Latinos as unable or unwilling to integrate into the social and cultural life of the United States.”¹⁴ This narrative also portrays Latinos as “societal threats,” which justifies their exclusion as citizens and turns them into “illegitimate members of the community” without using any explicitly racial language.¹⁵ Chavez’s analysis explains why even when the city government sympathized with Salvadorans and offered them support, they always drew a line at offering them full inclusion into society. As part of the larger Latino community, which struggled to be acknowledged as legitimate members of larger society, Salvadorans had difficulty gaining and maintaining recognition as “high status” immigrants worth taking care of.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Doane, 256

¹⁴ Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and The Nation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, 177.

¹⁵ Ibid.

The discourse surrounding immigration also uses racetalk to determine which immigrant groups society will accept, and this discourse played a determining role in the Salvadorans' access to resources as they arrived throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Lindsay Perez Huber, Corina Benavides Lopez, Maria Malgon, Veronica Velez, and Daniel G. Solorzano, in an article in *Contemporary Justice Review*, examine what it means to be a 'native' American by looking through history, and they note that legal documents and decisions from the founding of the nation, including the *Federalist Papers*, the Dred Scott decision, and the Naturalization Act of 1790 all tie the idea of being American to being white.¹⁶ For immigrants whose skin color excludes them from being considered 'native,' Elizabeth Keyes, in *Georgetown Immigration Law Review*, identifies two main narratives. First, there is the 'good' immigrant who works hard and searches for the American Dream. Particularly important in this category are the 'victim' immigrants, who receive especially favorable discretionary benefits from those in power.¹⁷ Second, there is the 'dangerous' immigrant who is 'dirty,' inassimilable, and who takes away jobs from hard-working Americans while using up social services. When looking at 'dangerous' immigrants, Keyes notes, "Most powerfully, this narrative equates immigrants with criminals, and it does not distinguish between those who commit the civil violation of entering the U.S. without proper inspection and those who commit crimes once present."¹⁸ This discourse does not use race explicitly, but it still divides entire groups of people into categories based upon moral values, assessments of worth, and alleged criminality. For Salvadorans arriving in Los Angeles,

¹⁶ Lindsay Perez Huber, et. al "Getting Beyond the 'Symptom' Acknowledging the 'Disease': Theorizing Racist Nativism," *Contemporary Justice Review* 11, no. 1 (March 2008): 39-51.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Keyes, *Beyond Saints and Sinners: Discretion and the Need for New Narratives in the U.S. Immigration System* (August 15, 2011). *Georgetown Immigration Law Review*, Forthcoming; American University, WCL Research Paper No. 2011-27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

they would originally benefit under this system as society labeled them ‘victims,’ but following the riots, they would quickly become criminalized.

Additionally, racetalk plays a powerful role in discourses surrounding crime. Connecting crime and race has proven throughout history to be an effective political weapon. However, issues of crime increased dramatically in the 1960s, becoming a truly national concern starting in the mid-1960s, when crime first began to top the national polls as the most serious domestic problem facing America.¹⁹ From 1964 to 1990, conservative politicians, the media, and the “crime control industry,” which included those who run institutions such as jails, created a powerful narrative surrounding crime that led to mass panic in the United States.²⁰ This rise in discussions on crime directly connected with race. In her 1997 book *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics*, Katherine Beckett explains that the politics of race have always been behind political mobilizations surrounding crime, noting that both white southern politicians during the Civil Rights Movement and Republicans trying to attract Southern Democrat voters both used hidden racial discourse to gain support.²¹ Tina G. Patel and David Tyrer, criminologists, note that the creation of this discourse “serves to create a white victimhood rationale, which is then used to justify further discriminatory attitudes and [behavior].”²² Both before and after the riots, ideas of victimhood would play a huge role in determining the extent and types of resources that Salvadorans received.

Finally, the discourse surrounding the Los Angeles riots had underlying racetalk that helped turn public opinion against minorities and limited the types of post-riot resources

¹⁹ Darnell F. Hawkins, *Ethnicity, Race, and Crime: Perspectives Across Time and Place* (New York, New York: SUNY, 1995), 256

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Katherine Beckett, *Making Crime Pay: Law and Order in Contemporary American Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23

²² Tina G. Patel and David Tyrer, *Race, Crime, and Resistance* (SAGE Publications, 2012), 5.

Salvadorans received. Anthropologist Antonia Darder notes that after the Los Angeles riots, the media felt the need to self preserve and “revalidate its own narrative authority,” and so within hours of the beginning of the riots, it began to spread two discourses: the discourse of racial conflict and the law-and-order discourse, which in turn could be subdivided into police action, marshal law plans, illegal immigrant deportations, damage to property, and rebuilding.²³ Darder notes that these narratives presented by the media surrounding the riots “ignored or minimized the social inequities” that contributed to the riot and removed “notions of causation” such as racial inequality from the discussion. Thus, the discourse surrounding the riots left citizens of Los Angeles feeling victimized by a wave of unjustified crime committed by mindless (minority) criminals, a feeling that would turn the tide against minority groups such as the Salvadorans who needed support and money to establish themselves and to rebuild.

This paper builds upon all these scholars’ theories to analyze how discourse can affect the ability of an immigrant group to receive the resources it needs. To do so, this paper looks at the shifting the type of resources Salvadoran immigrants received before and after the Los Angeles riots as the discourse surrounding crime, immigration, and race changed. There are many advantages to studying this subject. First, examining the Salvadoran immigrants’ involvement with the riots serves to dispel the racial myths surrounding the rioting, providing a challenge to conventional understandings of who was involved and what the riots meant for the entire city of Los Angeles. Most importantly, however, the ambiguous position of Salvadorans stemming from their recent arrival and the United States’ complex foreign policy decisions creates an interesting case study for how local policy can impact the ability of an immigrant group to be included into society. Tracing the inclusionary policies made prior to the riots to the criminalizing policies

²³ Antonia Darder, *Culture and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Bicultural Experience in the United States* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1995).144-145

made following the riots and examining how perceptions changed about Salvadorans within the larger context of the new post-riot discourse on crime reveals how a dramatic shift in discourse can affect the ability of an immigrant group to secure their place in the city.

By looking at how the Los Angeles riots affected the ability of Salvadoran immigrants to secure their place, this paper builds upon several already existing bodies of literature. A variety of scholars have already covered the geography and politics of Los Angeles, which is important because the city's specific features played a huge role in shaping the Salvadoran experience. *City of Quartz*, written by Mike Davis in 1990, is important because it explains the racialized and space-focused policy-making world of Los Angeles, as it was perceived in the early 1990s.²⁴ The book explains the popular racialized fears and stereotypes of the time that influenced the general public, and it examines how landowners and influential citizens divided and gained power, which is especially important as a large portion of this paper analyzes local politics and how race, fear, and power influenced decision making. The book's largest limitation as a contributor to my research is that it focuses much more on the racial relations between blacks and whites in Los Angeles, despite the fact that by the 1990s, Latinos made up such a large percentage of the city. In fact, *City of Quartz* rarely discusses Latinos and power, except when looking at immigration issues. However, Davis contributes to my research by explaining of the power relations in Los Angeles, which provides a useful context for understanding why Salvadorans struggled to be heard.

Additional works on Los Angeles, though not as well known as Davis's, also help create a context for the Salvadorans' struggles within this particularly exclusionary city. Raphael Sonenshein's *The City at Stake: Secession, Reform, and Battle for Los Angeles* from 2004

²⁴ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. Los Angeles: Verso 2008.

provides an examination of Los Angeles's unique electoral policies that helped hinder Salvadoran access to representation.²⁵ *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege*, written by Laura R. Barraclough in 2011, focuses on the underlying racist dialogue and policies used to exclude minorities from the San Fernando Valley, an affluent and mostly white section of the Los Angeles metropolitan area.²⁶ Both of these books are important for understanding the historical context of Los Angeles as an exclusionary city. They demonstrate that what happened to the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles was not random; rather, Los Angeles has used exclusionary electoral structures and discourses against minorities throughout its history. The explanations provided by Sonenshein and Barraclough regarding how these exclusionary tactics worked, when they were used, who used them, and how minority voices were kept out of the government shed insight into how Salvadorans so quickly lost access to important resources. Despite the fact that neither of these works examine the Salvadoran or even to a large extent the Latino experience, their works are valuable sources in understanding what happened to the Salvadorans following the riots.

While Davis, Sonenshein, and Barraclough do not cover Latinos as much as they could have, other scholars do provide context for the Salvadoran experience through their studies of Latinos. Three ethnographic works have been particularly influential in this field: Leo R. Chavez's *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, Nicholas de Genova's *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and 'Illegality' in Mexican Chicago*, and Mario

²⁵ Raphael Sonenshein. *The City at Stake: Secession, Reform, and Battle for Los Angeles*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004.

²⁶ Laura R. Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscapes, Urban Development, and White Privilege*. Athens: University of Georgia, 2011.

Barrera's "Are Latinos a Racialized Minority?".²⁷ All three of these works are crucial in understanding how American society understands and responds to Latinos.

All three works use different approaches to explain the Latino experience. The first, written in 2008 by Leo R. Chavez, is *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation*, which provides a comprehensive analysis of the perceptions and barriers to Latino integration in America. In this book, Chavez, an anthropologist, analyzes the "Latino Threat Narrative," a discourse discussed earlier in this paper. In order to analyze this Threat Narrative, Chavez examines statistics on fertility rates, education levels, and Minutemen propaganda to create an ethnographic picture of Latinos and explain how white America perceives this picture. The second work, written in 2005, is *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago* by anthropologist Nicholas de Genova. This work examines very different sources than Chavez, such as laws and immigration discourses from both the political left and right, in order to understand how Mexicans fit into the black-white racial binary of Chicago, how laws helped construct Mexicans as illegal citizens, and how political and legal structures prevented them from speaking out for their rights. Finally, in 2008, sociologist Mario Barrera wrote, "Are Latinos a Racialized Minority?" which argues that Latinos should be looked at as a pan-ethnic rather than racial group. To make his claim, Barrera analyzes the trajectory of scholarly discourse and data such as opinion polls to argue that the word "race" cannot be used to describe Latinos because it implies innateness rather than phenotype. Barrera argues there is nothing innate about Latinos as a group; instead, "Latino" is a social construction barring race from applying to Latinos as a group.

²⁷ Nicholas de Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago*. Durham: Duke University Press 2005; Leo R. Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and The Nation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008; Mario Barrera, "Are Latinos A Racialized Minority?" *Sociological Perspectives* 51 (Summer 2008): 305-324.

Despite the fact that none of these three works spend much time analyzing how their arguments impacted the Salvadoran community, they are useful in understanding the Salvadoran experience because they explain how American society understands Latinos. Chavez's work helps understand the broader Latino discourse, where it comes from, and how it manifests itself. De Genova helps understand the historical reasons that Latino immigrants continue to face the stigma of illegality while other immigrant groups have successfully gotten rid of that stigma. Barrera examines the problems of viewing Latinos as a singular group, problems that would become important as Salvadorans dealt with the longstanding Mexican history in Los Angeles and the confusion of residents as they struggled to understand them as new Latinos. Whether it means being a threat, an illegal, or a part of a larger pan-ethnic group, all three of these academics provide some new explanation based on different observations of what it means to be Latino, all of which help explain the Salvadoran experience.

Additional scholars examine exclusionary laws and policies towards immigrant groups, but like de Genova, Chavez, and Barrera, their works could be expanded upon because they do not focus on the Salvadoran experience. Martha Menchaca, in her 2011 book *Naturalizing Mexican Immigrants: A Texas History*, looks at Texas records and traces how racial qualifications continue to impact the ability of certain immigrant group to gain citizenship.²⁸ As discussed, Kevin Keogan examines how status replaced explicit racism in determining the type of policy immigrant groups receive. Both of these works are useful in understanding how different elements of society can racialize immigrant discourse; however, like de Genova, Chavez, and Barrera, both of these works are limited by the scope of their study. Menchaca's work provides a general understanding of the legal history behind exclusion, but the study of Mexicans in Texas has limited crossover to Salvadorans in Los Angeles. The context in which

²⁸ Martha Menchaca. *Naturalizing Mexican Immigrants: A Texas History*. Austin: University of Texas, 2011.

the Mexicans came to be part of Texas and the popular understanding of Mexicans in Texas were completely different than the circumstances and understandings faced by Salvadorans in Los Angeles. Keogan's work is also limited by the scope of his study. Because his overall work focuses on contemporary media portrayal of immigrants, he does not examine the context in which immigrants arrived. This lack of context means that his three-status theory is not as inclusive as it could be. My examination of the Salvadoran community in this paper, an example of a group of immigrants that didn't fit into his model, demonstrates the need for a more nuanced analysis of immigrant statuses and their impact on the immigrants' ability to benefit from inclusionary policy.

Finally, on a much smaller scale, scholars have recently begun looking at the Los Angeles riots and the Salvadoran community, although their works still provide many areas to be expanded upon. Mark Baldassare, in his 1994 anthology, *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*, addresses the causes, the events, and the consequences of the riot and what the riots meant to the city.²⁹ Additionally, Robert Gooding-Williams's *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* from 1993 is a useful academic work in understanding the Los Angeles riots, particularly the chapter, "A Political/Economic Analysis."³⁰ This chapter captures some of the key nuances of race in Los Angeles, acknowledging the tensions between Mexican and Salvadoran communities as they struggled to maintain their identities and establish their space in the city. Both books provide useful sources for understanding the actual riots; however, neither book really captures the unique Salvadoran experience. Additionally, neither book examines the consequences of the riot for specific communities, focusing instead on general rioting events as opposed to the resulting rebuilding attempts and resource distribution. This is an

²⁹ Mark Baldassare. *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*. Boulder: Westview, 1994

³⁰ Robert Gooding-Williams. "A Political/Economic Analysis." *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

area where both books miss an opportunity, because the rebuilding of Los Angeles highlights many important themes already discussed in their books, such as power, race, and conflict.

Recent works provide a much-needed look at the Los Angeles Salvadoran community's past, but more scholarly work on the specific history and context needs to be done. The most influential work on Salvadorans is Elana Zilberg's, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador*, written in 2005. *Space of Detention*'s primary goal is to examine the "securityscape," or the highly militarized space that exists within society, between El Salvador and the United States. In her analysis of the securityscape, Zilberg examines the larger themes of neoliberalism, globalization, media attention, and the relationship between criminal and anti-terrorist laws.³¹ Zilberg remains one of the few scholars who has examined the Salvadoran community following the riots, following how the riots changed Latinos into "Latino looters," and arguing that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) deportations of Salvadorans following the riot led to a transnational gang crisis. However, Zilberg's actual conclusions fall well outside the scope of my investigation. Zilberg focuses on modern crime and potential consequences and solutions for the future. Although her work examines the past, she focuses much more on present and future implications than a historian. Overall, Zilberg's work provides a useful source, but there is still plenty of room to elaborate on her research and insert my own analysis and conclusions.

An examination of previous scholarly works indicates that there are several areas upon which existing scholarship could be expanded. Primarily, this paper addresses the need to study minority communities outside of the black community following the riots. In doing so, this paper helps avoid the "black-white paradigm of race relations," encouraging further nuanced studies of

³¹ Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 3.

important moments in history that have been simplified. Additionally, in examining Salvadorans, my work demonstrates the importance of research on Latinos outside of the Mexican-American community, because the unique historical context in which the Salvadorans and other Latino immigrants arrived to America is much too different from the Mexican circumstances to allow for the continued belief in a monolithic “Latino experience.” Contemporary scholars like Gooding-Williams examining the community in the late twentieth century have begun to examine these differences and struggles between communities, but this work needs to continue in order to appreciate the full diversity and complexity of the city of Los Angeles. My paper also aims to increase the scholarly work available on the Salvadorans community, which is still lacking despite contributions over the past few years by scholars such as Zilburg. In particular, my work aims to focus on Salvadorans before and after the Los Angeles riots, because this moment really was a turning point in their community that influenced their trajectory through contemporary times, and it has, to date, been understudied.

Most importantly, however, this paper takes the Salvadoran experience along with the Los Angeles riots and puts it all in a historical perspective. Instead of examining the Salvadoran community focusing on one specific moment in time or focusing on present data, this paper builds upon the understanding that every challenge the Salvadoran community faced occurred within the larger context of history. Conversations about race, power dynamics within the city of Los Angeles, and United States foreign policy decisions all played a crucial role in the decision-making processes of all parties involved, and without understanding these larger contexts, it is difficult to understand what happened to the Salvadoran community and why it is important. This paper explains the background of where and when the Salvadorans arrived in America, along with the larger implications following the riots for not only Salvadorans but for the country

as a whole. By looking outside the specific facts and events at the larger forces affecting both Salvadorans and policy makers, this paper opens up a larger, more nuanced conversation regarding crime, race, and immigrant inclusion in America.

To truly understand how the Salvadoran experience incorporates these many themes, one must first understand the complicated setting into which Salvadorans arrived, because the place and time of the Salvadorans' entry into America put them into a particularly vulnerable position. The majority of Salvadorans moved to Los Angeles, and many of the structures within the city made it difficult for the immigrants to establish themselves.³² The sheer number of immigrants in Los Angeles made it difficult for individual communities. Of all undocumented immigrants, one third lived in Los Angeles, and the group was surprisingly homogeneous.³³ More than half of all recent immigrants were Latino and came from only three countries: Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala.³⁴ These immigrants also lacked socio-economic diversity; most came from the lower classes of their country, making it exceedingly difficult to get ahead as they struggled to incorporate themselves into the Los Angeles community and as the Los Angeles community struggled to accommodate them.³⁵

Finding a space to live was also difficult because Salvadorans did not have strong ties in to the city, but nonetheless, they worked to build up their own unique neighborhoods. The Salvadorans arriving in Los Angeles did not all settle in the same place, but the largest concentrated community settled in the Pico-Union neighborhood, in part because the very few

³² John M. Lipski, "The Linguistic Situation of Central Americans," in *New Immigrants in the United States: Readings for Second Language Educators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 281.

³³ Roger Waldinger. "From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City." *The International Migration Review* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1079.

³⁴ Immigrants arriving after 1965

³⁵ Waldinger 1080

Salvadorans who lived in the city during the 1970s lived there.³⁶ Pico Union is located just west of Downtown Los Angeles, and it extends all the way to Hollywood. As Salvadorans settled in the neighborhood, they expressed their cultural identities in many ways, creating new *pupuserias* or Salvadoran restaurants, Salvadoran markets, courier services that delivered directly to Central America, churches, and refugee centers.³⁷ The attraction to Pico Union was the affordable housing, along with the proximity to transportation that took them to their mostly service jobs.³⁸ New immigrants already made up most of the population in Pico Union, and despite their influence on the culture of the neighborhood, Salvadorans still did not make up a majority of Pico Union residents; instead, the neighborhood had many different ethnic immigrant groups.³⁹ Salvadorans mostly ended up living near Mexican immigrants in the neighborhood, choosing to remain in predominantly Latino areas.⁴⁰

As they worked to create their neighborhood, Salvadorans faced significant obstacles because of their background. Most of the city considered Salvadorans as on the “bottom rung” of society for a variety of reasons. Primarily, the group was so new; only 3% of adult Salvadorans had been born in the United States.⁴¹ The Salvadorans in Los Angeles also held mostly low-wage service and manufacturing jobs, receiving the lowest Latino family incomes at the time, and they continued to speak primarily their native language of Spanish.⁴² Additionally, only 34% of the Salvadoran population in Los Angeles had received a complete primary education; even in comparison to other Latino immigrant groups, this percentage was extremely low. Guatemalans

³⁶ Waldinger, Roger David., and Mehdi Bozorgmehr. ""Central Americans: At the Bottom, Struggling to Get Out." *Ethnic Los Angeles*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996. 289, 292

³⁷ Waldinger, "Central Americans," 289; Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chincilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2001), 68.

³⁸ Waldinger, "Central Americans," 292

³⁹ Waldinger "Central Americans," 291

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Waldinger "Central Americans," 279

⁴² Waldinger "Central Americans," 279

had a 38% rate, other Central Americans had a 50% rate, and South Americans had a 71% rate.⁴³

Norman M. Klein, a sociologist from Duke University writes, “ There is some indication that Central Americans (which in Los Angeles referred to Guatemalans and Salvadorans) were essentially treated as colonial inferiors, at the very bottom within the hierarchy of black to brown to white.”⁴⁴ While this is a bold claim to make, it is undoubtedly true that Salvadorans faced particularly difficult barriers and challenges as they struggled to overcome these deficits and make it in America.

Along with these initial barriers, the history of Latino immigrants in Los Angeles also contributed to Salvadoran difficulties because the long-standing history of Mexican-Americans in the city complicated Los Angeles’s understanding of different Latino groups. The 1990 census reported that people of Mexican decent made up four-fifths of the Latino population, making it by far the most dominant Latino group in the Los Angeles. Thus, as the city created and provided bilingual and social services to Latinos, not a single education program specifically targeted Salvadorans.⁴⁵ The city claimed that Spanish services were appropriate, but the differences between Mexican and Central American Spanish, ranging from grammar differences to different colloquial terms, often led to major problems of miscommunication.⁴⁶ This was a problem because although Salvadorans made up only a small percentage of the city population, 53% of all Salvadorans in America lived in Los Angeles.⁴⁷ Los Angeles served as an entry point for the majority of this new population’s people, and the city basically shut them out of culturally appropriate resources throughout its major institutions.

⁴³ Waldinger “Central Americans,” 280

⁴⁴ Norman M. Klein, "Open Season: A Report on the Los Angeles Uprising." *Social Text* (Duke University Press) 34 (1993): 117.

⁴⁵ Lipski, 290

⁴⁶ Lipiski, 290.

⁴⁷ Lipiski, 281.

The long history of Mexicans in the Southwest also helped spread ideas of illegality that would impact the Salvadoran community. In the 1830s and 1840s, Americans invaded Mexico twice, finally taking approximately half of the territory and turning it into what today is the American Southwest after both countries signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.⁴⁸ The Treaty promised to incorporate Mexicans who lived in the annexed territory into America with the “enjoyment of all the rights of citizens.”⁴⁹ However, this was a lie. Within a year, the United States government had divided the Mexican population into racialized groups, giving White Mexicans full citizenship, banning mixed Mexicans from voting, practicing law, or becoming naturalized citizens, and allowing Black and Indian Mexicans to become enslaved.⁵⁰

This incorporation of Mexicans would have consequences that would continue to hinder Latinos through present times. Leo Chavez argues, “Mexicans in particular have been represented as the quintessential ‘illegal aliens,’ ... Their social identity has been plagued by the mark of illegality, which in much public discourse means that they are criminals and thus illegitimate members of society undeserving of social benefits, including citizenship.”⁵¹ Chavez connects this representation back to the long Mexican-United States history by arguing, “Latinos are an alleged threat because of this history and social identity, which supposedly make their integration difficult and imbue them, particularly Mexicans, with a desire to remain socially apart as they prepare for a reconquest of the U.S. Southwest.”⁵² Although the city of Los Angeles wouldn’t initially tie Salvadorans with illegality, Salvadorans and Mexicans were often confused

⁴⁸ Rodolfo Acuna, *Anything But Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1995), 20.

⁴⁹ Martha Menchaca, *Recovering History Constructing Race: The Indian, Black, and White Roots of Mexican Americans* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2001), 216.

⁵⁰ Menchaca *Recovering History Constructing Race*, 218

⁵¹ Chavez, 3

⁵² Ibid.

due to their shared Meso-American roots.⁵³ Ideas of illegality and foreignness were readily available once the city of Los Angeles turned on these immigrants.

Mexicans also had a long history in Los Angeles, and this specific history would directly impact the Salvadoran capacity to gain resources within the city. Throughout the early 1900s, the city encouraged Mexicans to come to Los Angeles to build railroads, to mine, to farm, and to serve as hard laborers for the city, but despite the draw, they still faced significant discrimination.⁵⁴ Los Angeles Mexicans had a more difficult time organizing to fight this discrimination than their counterparts in other Southwestern cities such as San Antonio, because the Mexican population in the city remained decentralized, making it harder for them to consolidate power.⁵⁵ The affects of the dispersal had consequences for generations; in fact, it would take a court case demanding redistricting to give Latinos a voice on the City Council. Therefore, the potential voice for Latinos, especially vulnerable Latinos such as the newly arrived Salvadorans, was particularly quiet.

Both the initial as well as historical barriers impacted Salvadorans following their arrival into the United States; however, specific political structures and discourses within the city of Los Angeles would particularly harm Salvadorans following the riots. The structure of the city government of Los Angeles severely limited the ability of Salvadorans to get their voice heard. The Los Angeles city government was and still is made up of a mayor and a 15-member City Council; however, it is well established that the City Council has much more power than the mayor because the Council controls the decision-making process.⁵⁶ In fact, one observer noted in

⁵³ Lipski, 190

⁵⁴ Acuna, 21

⁵⁵ Acuna, 19

⁵⁶ Mark Purcell. "The Decline of Political Consensus For Urban Growth: Evidence from Los Angeles." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 99.

the late eighties that the Mayor of Los Angeles was “almost too weak to cut ribbons.”⁵⁷ In light of the City Council’s relative power within Los Angeles, the structure of the Council serves as a barrier for immigrant inclusion and representation. The fact that only fifteen people represent the entire population of Los Angeles makes the Los Angeles City Council district populations the largest in the nation, with more than 232,000 people per district in the early 1990s.⁵⁸ Because districts are so large, it is easier to drown out minority voices, creating a situation where immigrant candidates within Los Angeles require larger relative margins in order to win elections than other immigrant-heavy cities such as New York.⁵⁹ Examining political participation between New York and Los Angeles, UCLA sociologist Roger Waldinger notes other political peculiarities specific to Los Angeles hinder immigrant participation. Unlike New York and other cities with high immigrant influxes, Los Angeles does not have strong political parties.⁶⁰ Without the organized structure of these parties to help candidates with fundraising and with gaining recognition, campaigns in Los Angeles need to be candidate-centered and focused on fundraising.⁶¹ This has meant that even successful Latino candidates have still had to rely heavily on African-American and liberal white support in order to get elected, limiting the Latino voice in politics.⁶²

The result of these peculiarities was that throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, despite the significant Latino population, not a single Latino candidate won a City Council election, which meant Latinos in Los Angeles had no access to the most powerful government institution

⁵⁷ Purcell, 99

⁵⁸ Timothy B. Krebs, “Political Experience and Fundraising.” *Social Science Quarterly* 82, no. 3 (September 2001): 539.

⁵⁹ Waldinger “Central Americans,” 1080

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Krebs, 539.

⁶² Waldinger, “Central Americans,” 1085.

in the city.⁶³ However, slowly, things began to change. The City Council made District 14 the first Latino majority district in 1972.⁶⁴ In 1985, Mexican-American Richard Alatorre won the 14th District seat, becoming the first Latino in more than two decades to hold a seat on the City Council. However, Alatorre still relied strongly on the white, conservative voters within his region to gain his seat.⁶⁵ Two years later, Mexican-American Gloria Molina joined Alatorre as the first-ever female Latino voted into office after the First District, the District containing Pico Union, was redistricted to give Latinos a 69.1% majority.⁶⁶ Both Molina and Alatorre won with a strategy of appealing to the maximum number of registered voters on race-neutral issues and completely ignoring non-registered Latino voters, especially those who were not citizens and could not register.⁶⁷ Therefore, within the largest political institution of the city of Los Angeles, the Salvadoran community still had little to no say despite Latino gains. In 1991, however, Molina stepped down Council Member, and Mike Hernandez, another Mexican-American known to be a community activist who ran on the slogan “one of us”, replaced her.⁶⁸ While he would give more a voice to residents in Pico Union, especially after the riots, Salvadorans still lacked a direct voice on the Council.

The diverse constituencies and priorities of other Council Members also hindered Salvadorans from getting what they needed. African Americans were largely concentrated in the Eighth, Ninth, and Tenth Districts, although the Fifteenth and Sixth Districts also held sizable

⁶³ Michael J. Dear and Eric Schockman, Greg Hise. *Rethinking Los Angeles*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Press, 1996.

⁶⁴ Raphael J. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993). *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles*, 17.

⁶⁵ Michael A. Burayidi. *Multiculturalism in a Cross-National Perspective*. University Press of America: 1997, 211.

⁶⁶ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 17.

⁶⁷ Michael A. Burayidi. *Multiculturalism in a Cross-National Perspective*. University Press of America: 1997, 211.

⁶⁸ Burayidi, 212.

minorities of African Americans as well.⁶⁹ Roderick Wright and, starting 1991, Mark Ridley-Thomas represented the Eighth District, Gilbert W. Lindsay and, also starting in 1991, Rita Walters represented the Ninth District, Nate Holden represented the Tenth (and largely middle class African American) District.⁷⁰ While many times Latino and African American members would vote together for issues concerning both their constituencies, with funding allocations, rifts sometimes broke out along racial lines in the fight to get the limited resources of the city.⁷¹

Representing the largely white, affluent, and historically conservative San Fernando Valley, Representatives Ernani Bernardi, Joy Picus, Hal Bernson, and Joel Wachs also had very different interests. Ernani Bernardi, nicknamed “Mr. No,” for his opposition to city spending, represented District Seven, a fairly racially mixed District.⁷² Joy Picus, the first woman to represent the San Fernando Valley and a liberal Democrat, represented District 3, an 82.3% white District. Hal Bernson, one of the strongest conservatives on the Council who vigorously advocated for the secession of the San Fernando Valley from the City of Los Angeles and for the creation of a school district just for Valley residents, represented District 12, an 83.1% white District, and Joel Wachs, an independent conservative who both supported civil rights and fought the misuse of city funds represented the 74.7% white District 2.⁷³

The remaining Council Members also served specific interests. In addition to the San Fernando Valley, the West Los Angeles Districts were largely white districts as well, each having over 80% white residents.⁷⁴ Zev Yaroslavsky represented the Fifth District, called the “Jewish District” because Jewish people made up nearly 30% of its residents. Yaroslavsky was a

⁶⁹ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 216.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 216.

⁷² Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 18

⁷³ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 18

⁷⁴ Ibid.

strong opponent of the LAPD who worked with the American Civil Liberties Union to fight against police surveillance of citizens and protested against police treatment of suspects.⁷⁵ The other Western Los Angeles District was District 11, an 82.5% white District represented during this time period by Council Member Marvin Braude, a liberal who concerned himself with environmental conservation and gun control.⁷⁶ And finally, in the heterogeneous Districts Four, Six, and Fifteen, John Ferraro, Ruth Galanter, and Joan Milke Flores worked to represent their constituents' diverging interests.⁷⁷ All of these different Members with different constituencies and priorities came together to form the Los Angeles City Council during the Salvadoran arrival and through the riots, and the decisions of these members would have a huge impact on the Salvadoran community.

Along with the initial, historical, and political barriers, the Los Angeles riots also impacted Salvadorans particularly hard because many of the current discourses and thought patterns running through the Los Angeles City Council had already connected Hispanics and crime. Prior to the riots, Los Angeles officials on the City Council along with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) had at least some awareness of crime within the Salvadoran community. The only LAPD Report available on Gang Crime in the City of Los Angeles, prepared by the Gang Information Section, Detective Support Division and released October 17, 1991 reveals that the police were tracking the all-Salvadoran MS-13 presence in 6 of the 19 Divisions of the LAPD along with other Salvadoran-associated gangs such as 18th Street in a few more districts.⁷⁸ However, reports indicate that while crimes committed by MS-13 and

⁷⁵ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 18

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Sonenshein *Politics in Black and White*, 18

⁷⁸ "Los Angeles Police Department 3rd Quarter Report: Gang Crime in the City of Los Angeles" Prepared by Gang Information Section, Detective Support Division (October 17, 1991) Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

Salvadoran gangs occurred and were accounted for, they represented only a tiny fraction of the total gang crimes in the city. In four of the six Divisions police identified Salvadoran gangs in, these gangs committed less than 5% of all gang crimes, and in 2 of those divisions, they committed less than 1% of all gang crimes. Additional evidence of the lack of connection between Salvadorans and crime comes from the “Report on Youth Gang Violence in California” written by Attorney General John K. Van de Kamp and released in 1988 to the City Council of Los Angeles. On the definitions page of this report, Van de Kamp defines Hispanic as a term that “incorporates the terms Chicano, Mexican, Mexican-American, Latino, Puerto Rican, Panamanian, etc. In California, this term is almost exclusively used to describe Chicano or Mexican-American individuals.”⁷⁹ This definition clearly demonstrates that Salvadorans remained off the radar of policy-makers watching crime prior to the riots.

Despite the seemingly low correlation on official reports between Salvadorans and crime, academic and law enforcement thought distributed to City Council Members had already established the foundation for many of the future connections between these two that would play a key role in defining the type of resources Salvadorans received after the riots. Prior to the riots, officials showed a growing awareness and concern about Hispanic crime. Many of the City Council Members had extensive files on crime, and all City Council Members received numerous reports from a variety of law enforcement and social service agencies along with academic institutions describing the nature of crime. In large part, these reports identified Hispanic crime as foreign and difficult to control. A report from Public Services Library Tim J. Watts at Valparaiso University School of Law entitled “The New Gangs: Young, Armed and Dangerous” within the 1988 City Council files concluded, “Established law enforcement

⁷⁹ John K. Van de Kamp, “Report on Youth Gang Violence in California. Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

techniques apply much better with the Black gang members than the Hispanic, as the Black member's personal freedom is more important to him than his gang."⁸⁰ The same report that defined Latino as Mexican noted, "Law enforcement officers responding to the commission of a crime by a Hispanic gang member must be concerned not only with the crime itself but the gang's ideology, long-standing tradition, and strong loyalty."⁸¹ Later, this Report noted, "Gang violence rates are higher among Hispanic compared to black youths, but nongang violence and property crime rates are higher for black than Hispanic youths," and that Hispanics tend to commit more violent offenses than Blacks.⁸² In a report entitled "Gangs in Los Angeles County: 1991 & 1992," written to help parents identify gang behaviors in their kids by Jerry Watson, the coordinator for Attendance and Welfare in the Los Angeles organization Build a Safer World for Children and Youth, a section discussed Hispanic Gang rituals. This section described a need for "proof of loyalty to the gang" that would "involve a news worthy act" such as a "criminal act, drive-by shooting, etc," a "bold act such as battery on policeman," or a "battery on school officials."⁸³ Overall, these reports demonstrate that officials and those focused on crime were well aware of Hispanics as a potential threat, and they had associated Hispanic criminals with violent, organized crime. Additionally, while these reports associated Black criminals with American values such as the desire for freedom and property, they also characterize Hispanic criminals as having ties too strong for any American institution to sever. Already prior to the riots, officials were using discourse that reinforced the "Latino Threat Narrative" by portraying

⁸⁰ Tim J. Watts, "The New Gangs: Young, Armed and Dangerous," *Valparaiso University School of Law*. Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid

⁸³ Jerry Watson, "Gangs in Los Angeles County: 1991 & 1992 *Build a Safer World for Children and Youth*. Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

Latino criminals as fundamentally foreign, and this discourse would later justify the Salvadoran exclusion from resources.

Additional discourses prior to the riots show that Americans had begun to associate new immigrant groups with crime as well, another discourse that would eventually affect Salvadorans. The California Council on Criminal Justice's State Task Force on Gangs and Drugs released a publication to a variety of important institutions including the Los Angeles City Council in January 1989 which noted, "Numerous gangs are formed within ethnic and immigrant communities."⁸⁴ This statement appeared fairly neutral; however, throughout the 1980s, Council Members received multiple files on sensational stories about violent and organized immigrant crime. An entire series by the Data Center and Clearinghouse for Drugs and Crime sent to the entire City Council in 1991 noted, "The most recent influx of immigrants to the United States brought with it criminal organizations native to other countries. Vietnamese, Thai and Jamaican gangs have established strongholds in their new American neighborhoods and exhibit a propensity for violence that surprises even veteran law enforcement officers."⁸⁵ While it was too early for Salvadorans to be mentioned, these reports, which criminalized entire new immigrant groups created narratives that officials would use to describe Salvadorans in later years.

A common theme of victimhood that would reemerge to limit Salvadoran resources following the Los Angeles riots underscored all of these discourses surrounding immigrants, Hispanics, and crime. The idea of everyday citizens as victims of irrational criminals permeated official literature to the City Council; for example, in 1988 the police sent out their LAPD Annual Report to the City Council, which they also made available to the public. This report

⁸⁴ "Gangs." *California Council on Criminal Justice State Task Force on Gangs and Drugs* (January 1989): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 658971: Woo-LAUSD Anti Gang Task Force

⁸⁵ "Gang Violence: Response of the Criminal Justice System to the Growing Threat." *Data Center and Clearinghouse for Drugs and Crime* (1991): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

described gang members as “predators who are terrorizing law-abiding citizens” and “thugs” who commit “indiscriminate violence.”⁸⁶ Additionally, Assistant Attorney General Jimmy Gurulé wrote a report on the Office of Justice Program’s Gang Initiative, which he released through the National Institute of Justice and which the City Council received September 1991. This report stated that “Honest, law-abiding citizens are prisoners in their own homes, afraid to walk the streets of their neighborhoods at night. Recreational parks have been turned into drug bazaars. The growth of the street gangs threatens the stability of the urban community.”⁸⁷ Through victimhood, these reports could put the blame of crime entirely on the shoulders of the criminal and clear society of all responsibility for those who resort to crime. A similar absolving of responsibility would follow the Salvadoran community as society began to label them as criminal, which would give policy-makers an excuse to limit the types of resources Salvadorans received following the riots.

All of these barriers to the Salvadoran community may have put them in a particularly vulnerable position; however, prior, to the riots, Salvadorans actually received significant support from the Los Angeles City Council and other city government institutions and benefited from a number of inclusionary policies. For example, Mayor Tom Bradley, the first African American mayor of Los Angeles known for his capacity to build multi-racial coalitions, reached out to accept the Salvadoran community.⁸⁸ On June 5, 1986, the Mayor’s Office put out a notice declaring a public hearing regarding the Central American refugees in Los Angeles. The Mayor’s

⁸⁶ “War in Our Streets”, Los Angeles Police Department Annual Report to City Council, *Los Angeles Police Department* (1988): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. B-2355: 1988 LAPD Annual Report to City Council

⁸⁷ Jimmy Gurulé, “OJP Initiative on Gangs: Drugs and Violence in America.” Office of Justice Programs, *National Institute of Justice Research in Action* (September 1991): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 606082: Hernandez—Gangs

⁸⁸ Sharon D. Wright, “The Limitations of the Deracialization Concept in the 2001 Los Angeles Mayoral Election.” *Political Research Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (June 2004): 290.

Office wrote, “As Mayor of the City of Los Angeles, I am taking the unprecedented step of convening a Public Hearing on Central American refugees in Los Angeles to focus on their reasons for coming to this country; their needs and problems here in the United States, and the contribution they are making to our country.”⁸⁹ The Mayor’s Office added at the bottom, “As we reflect on the 100th Anniversary of our Statue of Liberty, it is crucial to reaffirm this country’s proud tradition of providing a haven for ‘the tired, poor, huddled masses yearning to be free.’”⁹⁰ Even though the mayoral position did not have as much power in Los Angeles as it did in other cities, coming from an important figurehead in Los Angeles, this was a major acknowledgement for the Salvadoran community. These words demonstrate the positive feelings initially felt for the Salvadoran community within the Los Angeles government.

In a much more substantial sign of support, the City of Los Angeles went so far as to provide funds for members of the Salvadoran community when officials perceived they as victims of a gross injustice. In 1987, a rising fear of “death squads” coming from El Salvador to the United States and terrorizing Central American refugees gained popular attention, and several community leaders expressed words of support for the entire Central American community. Pico-Union representative Gloria Molina’s office wrote to the community, “She supports you, and all efforts to put an immediate halt to such actions, and she promises her support to you and to all the Central American refugees who are in Los Angeles who are in fear for their very lives.”⁹¹ A *Daily News* article from August 12, 1987 noted that the Los Angeles City Council ended up voting to give “\$10,000 for relocation assistance for Central American refugees allegedly threatened by Salvadoran death squads,” and that the Council called for a

⁸⁹ “Declaration of a Public Hearing.” Office of the Mayor (1988): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. C-1584: Molina-Immigration, Illegal Aliens

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Letter to the Community of Pico Union.” Office of Gloria Molina (1988): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. C-1584: Molina-Immigration, Illegal Aliens

congressional investigation into the issue.⁹² This gesture by the City Council as well as Mayor Bradley's powerful words demonstrate the support that Angelenos were willing to give when they identified Salvadorans as legitimate victims, offering them unprecedented attention and relocation monies.

Even when crime came to the Pico Union neighborhood, prior to the riots, the city did not criminalize the entire community and continued to give Salvadorans support. In a striking contrast to the reactions following the Los Angeles riots that reveals how attitudes towards crime in the Pico Union neighborhood changed, a letter from Gloria Molina in 1988 to the Pico Union Housing Corporation in regards to a meeting stated:

The purpose of the meeting was to [coalesce] support for increased police and employment in the area. In addition, it was hoped that the residents of the neighborhood would get a feeling of support and solidarity since the area had been hit with extraordinary violence over the last few weeks. There were shootings, gang violence, and police intervention at more than five points over that period.⁹³

The focus of the meeting discussed in the letter was, apparently, not on the actual crime wave itself, but rather to show "support and solidarity" for the community that suffered from violence. Instead of blaming the entire community, the wording of this letter indicates an understanding of residents in the community as victims rather than criminals. Later, as Salvadorans began to become associated with the criminality rather than just as residents of criminal neighborhoods, the responses to the Pico Union neighborhood community would change. Clearly, prior to the

⁹² "City OKs \$10,000 for refugees." Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. C-1584: Molina-Immigration, Illegal Aliens

⁹³ "Letter to the Pico Union Housing Corporation," Office of Gloria Molina. (1988): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. C-1584: Molina-Immigration, Illegal Aliens

riots, Salvadorans benefited from inclusionary words, actions, and attitudes from key institutions within the city.

Even when officials perceived Salvadorans as victims, however, there were limits to what the City of Los Angeles was willing to give to the Salvadorans—limits that were clearly established in 1985 as the city debated whether or not to give Salvadorans ‘sanctuary’ within Los Angeles. Overall, this debate represented the vulnerability of the Salvadoran population to perceptions by the public and by officials due to their still-ambiguous status. The debate over giving sanctuary is important because Los Angeles did not have a problem with the policy of sanctuary: the city had a long history of ignoring the fact that many immigrants were undocumented. In fact, in 1979, the Office of the Chief of Police in Los Angeles had issued Special Order No. 40, which went out to both the City Council as well as the general public. This Special Order stated, “it is the policy of the Los Angeles Police Department that undocumented alien status in itself is not a matter for police action.”⁹⁴ Additionally, the Special Order promised compliance with social service agencies in resolving social issues for “undocumented aliens;” it promised that “police will be readily available to all persons, including the undocumented alien, to ensure a safe and tranquil environment;” “officers shall not initiate police action with the objective of discovering the alien status of a person;” and finally that “officers shall not arrest nor book persons for violation of Title 8, Section 1325 of the United States Immigration Code (Illegal Entry).”⁹⁵ The police reinforced this policy on June 17, 1982 when following an INS raid, the Office of the Chief of Police noted that “The emphasis on the enforcement of immigration laws by the INS does *not* alter the policy or practices of the Los Angeles Police

⁹⁴ “Special Order No. 40.” Los Angeles Police Department (1979): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 608356: Wachs—Immigration Issues

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Department regarding the enforcement of immigration violations.”⁹⁶ And on November 25, 1990 the City Council passed a motion that reaffirmed this policy again.⁹⁷

No one seemed to have an actual problem with the policy of sanctuary, especially since it had been around for such a long time; people instead seemed to have a problem with the language used to describe the policy. A firestorm broke out in response to a city resolution that declared, “as part of a national policy of providing refuge to persons seeking asylum from political and not economic persecution” Los Angeles was a “City of Sanctuary.”⁹⁸ While the actual resolution basically reaffirmed federal policy and additionally reaffirmed the prior Police Department policy rather than stating something new, the use of the word “sanctuary” raised opposition.

This particular issue led to a large number of constituent letters to City Council Members, and these letters revealed how fragile the Salvadoran position in the city was when other residents began to weigh in on policy issues. Those who opposed the sanctuary movement did so for a variety of reasons—federalism, resource allocation, crime, space, and greed—but these reasons reveal the easiness by which old-standing discourses could be applied to the Salvadoran situation, and they demonstrate how quickly Salvadorans could lose all of the support from beneficial policies that had thus far sustained them in America. Many constituents bought into the “Latino Threat Narrative” described by Chavez, claiming the city should not provide resources to immigrants who could not, would not, and would never be able to become “American.” A variety of these constituents wrote into their City Council Members, and many of

⁹⁶ “Motion Adopted Relative to the Modification of Los Angeles Police Department’s Cooperation Policy with Immigration and Nationalization Services.” Honorable Board of Police Commissioners and Los Angeles City Council, *Los Angeles Police Department* (1990): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 608356: Wachs—Immigration Issues

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “Motion Relative to the Declaration of Los Angeles as a City of Sanctuary,” Los Angeles City Council: Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 608356: Wachs—Immigration Issues

these notes remained in the Council Members' files. One constituent wrote to Councilman Wachs, "THE SO CALLED LOWER CLASS OF THIS COUNTRY ARE BEING FORCED OUT OF A JOB, AND ON THE STREETS, THEY ARE NOT HISPANICS THEY ARE BLACK AND WHITE (AMERICANS U.S.) CITIZENS. THE SOUTH OF THE BORDER PEOPLE ARE TAKING UP ALL THE LOW COST HOUSING THATS LEFT." Another concerned constituent asked in a letter to the entire Council, "Also, when the people flee to welcoming Los Angeles, who will house them? Who will employ them? Who will feed them? And who will pay for it?" Still another constituent noted the Central Americans' lack of ability to fit in, stating to Council Member Picus that allowing these immigrants in was a "slap in the face of all Americans. English is not even spoken and not understood either." And many constituents commonly used the word "invasion" in their letters to express their concern.⁹⁹

Additional concerns focused on the motives of Central Americans arriving in America, demonstrating the difficulty the general population of Los Angeles had in conceptualizing the unique position of Salvadoran and other Central American immigrants outside of the three immigrant classifications described by Keogan. One constituent wrote in to the Council declaring, "The idea of giving political sanctuary to people fleeing poverty and not political persecution has national implications."¹⁰⁰ Finally, just like the academic literature given to the City Council, many of the constituent letters connected immigrants and crime. "Look at the facts: the crime rate is worse than ever before, over one million illegal aliens enter the U.S. every year," one concerned constituent wrote to Council Member Picus, while another noted, "The courts are clogged with illegal alien criminals—house burglars, drug dealers, car burglars. An

⁹⁹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA 1985) B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁰⁰ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA 1985). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

overwhelming number of drunk driving arrests are attributed to illegal aliens, most of whom are uninsured and unlicensed.”¹⁰¹

In the end, a very similar resolution without the phrase “sanctuary” passed with little problem through the City Council; however, this larger battle represents two important facts about the Salvadoran position in America. First, even as they received support from the most powerful members of the city, this support had defined limits, especially when constituents who were less aware of the unique Salvadoran circumstances weighed in on their access to inclusionary policy. Second, the debate over the sanctuary decision indicates that even before the public became truly obsessed with crime as it did following the riots, they still quickly would turn to pre-written discourses surrounding Hispanics, crime, race, and immigration as they discussed vital issues. And while Salvadorans could still function within Los Angeles even without the term ‘sanctuary,’ in future debates, the stakes would be much higher.

In fact, these stakes rose significantly following the massive destruction and new wave of funding that came with the Los Angeles riots. In total, damages from the riots were estimated to be over a billion dollars.¹⁰² In order to address the significant destruction, federal, state, and local resources poured into the city. Government agencies alone spent more than \$800 million on emergency assistance, business disaster loans, home loans, and community programs, while corporations put in another nearly \$400 million on economic development and revitalization, job training, and community activities.¹⁰³ How officials allocated these funds was crucial for communities affected; not only were the funds themselves used to restore and rebuild destroyed areas, they could also be leveraged and used to build confidence amongst investors and business

¹⁰¹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA 1985). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁰² Tom Larson, "An Economic View of South Central Los Angeles," *Cities* 15, no. 3 (June 1998): 199.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

owners and bring new opportunities into neighborhoods.¹⁰⁴ For communities within Los Angeles still needing to establish themselves, gaining access to funds was absolutely essential.

Access to resources and funds was especially important to Latinos in general and Salvadorans in particular because the riots hit their communities especially hard. 26% of the people killed in the riot and 51% of arrestees were Latino. In addition, following the riots, police handed over more than four hundred of the people arrested during the riots, many of whom the police only arrested for curfew violations, to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS).¹⁰⁵ Many were determined “illegal” and deported to Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and El Salvador.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, over 40% of the property and businesses destroyed and almost 50% of all businesses affected belonged to Latinos.¹⁰⁷ Of the four districts most impacted by rioting, only one had less than 40% Latino population, while two had more than two-thirds Latino population.¹⁰⁸ A statistical summary filed by Mike Hernandez declared that in District One, in which the Pico Union neighborhood can be found, rioting had damaged or destroyed 113 buildings, 25 buildings were completely destroyed, and the total cost of damages was \$62,450,000.¹⁰⁹ Media caught on and singled out the Pico-Union neighborhood in particular as a high-intensity riot location. The day after the riots, the *Daily News* wrote an article about neighborhoods affected by the riots. This newspaper, the second largest in Los Angeles which targeted Valley readers, noted, “Across the freeway in City West and Pico Union, it was like a

¹⁰⁴ Larson, 199.

¹⁰⁵ George Ramos and Tracy Wilkinson. 1992. Unrest Widens Rifts in Diverse Latino Population Communities: Some leaders distance themselves from violence. Recent immigrants resent taking blame. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 8, 1992. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/281633805?accountid=8285> (accessed July 17, 2012).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Villaneuva Sr., "Voices of Business Tell How to Rebuild L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992.

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Commission, "Pico-Union Damages" (Los Angeles, CA, May 1992). 606078: Hernandez—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

war zone with several residential buildings still in flames, including one large apartment building at 7th Street near the Harbor Freeway.”¹¹⁰

Following the public rioting in Pico Union, many discourses that had existed prior to the riots intensified, impacting the types of resources the Salvadoran community received. As the riots ended, the public turned to the media to understand what happened, and the most prominent newspaper in Los Angeles was the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Los Angeles Times* distributed around 1.02 million copies and had a readership of approximately 4.4 million people at the time, making it by far the most influential print news in Los Angeles.¹¹¹ J.H.C. Vargas, in his work for the Vera Institute of Justice, conducted a study of the *Times* coverage of the riots and found that the newspaper portrayed the riot as an even that “occurred outside the realm of good, rational, and normalized citizenship.”¹¹² Thus, the largest influencer of public perception portrayed the perpetrators of the riots as irrational criminals with no larger purpose, a portrayal that would influence the resulting discourses affecting communities involved.

This coverage of the Los Angeles riots opened the door for new speculation regarding crime and organized threats in the city, which would eventually shift the focus onto illegal immigrants. Local papers began discussing conspiracy theories surrounding the riots immediately after they occurred; for example, the *Daily News* declared that the Communist party had instigated of the riot as a battle between classes.¹¹³ This need to create a conspiracy was not limited to local newspapers, however. Official reports also created an

¹¹⁰ *Daily News*, “Devastated: The Bleak Morning After May 4, 1992: Glass Strewn Sidewalks, Charred Buildings, Litter from Looting, and Left Groping for Comprehension, the Shaken Populace,” May 4, 1992: 1,4.

¹¹¹ J.H.C. Vargas, “The Los Angeles Times’ Coverage of the 1992 Rebellion: Still Burning Matters of Race and Justice,” *Ethnicities* 4, no. 2 (June 2004): 209-236.

¹¹² Vargas 219

¹¹³ *Daily News*, “Devastated”

imaginary perception of large networks fighting against the decent public. Following the riots, the Los Angeles Fire Department released an extensive report—over 300 pages long—on its experiences with the riot, which they published and distributed to city institutions such as the Los Angeles City Council. This report stated, “Prior to the verdict, very little indication of civil unrest had been observed. However, there had been subtle signs of a potential problem by way of threats from gang members and others in South Central Los Angeles.”¹¹⁴ This statement, which seems to indicate that gangs had something to do with the start of the riot, was only the beginning. The Report went on to describe “large groups of gang members” showing up at crime scenes, and the report describes “large, angry crowds composed primarily of gang members.”¹¹⁵ Additionally, the report noted, “a Light Force (a division of a Fire Department Company that usually deals with smaller issues) was assaulted by gang members wielding AK-47’s; and several ambulances and fire apparatus were struck by gunfire.”¹¹⁶ Despite the fact that official investigations of the riots reveal little to no gang organization and participation in the riot, organizations distributed and spread many rumors of these types of activities.¹¹⁷ And while the concept of rampant gangs was not directly tied to Salvadorans or Latinos, fears of organized groups attacking innocent citizens would eventually lead to immigrants as targets.

Ideas about conspiracy ran rampant throughout the city. These more official communications regarding a larger conspiracy were tamer in comparison to unofficial claims surrounding the riots. A man named “Mark,” who frequently sent memoranda to Joel Wachs, sent him a Memorandum entitled: “Riot Related Rumors” that started with the following phrase,

¹¹⁴ Los Angeles Fire Department, “The Los Angeles Riots: How Did We Do?” (Los Angeles, CA, May 1992). 606085: Riots, L.A.-Systems: Los Angeles City Archives

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Los Angeles Fire Department, “The Los Angeles Riots: How Did We Do?”

¹¹⁷ “Riot Related Rumors” Constituent Letter. (Los Angeles, CA May 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

“The following information is Police Intelligence and not for public knowledge. It is being distributed to all Police divisions.” While there were several “rumors” in the memorandum, the two most extreme were: “A 1987 Nissan truck used by DWP was stolen. It has a government license plate and police fear it may be used to enter restricted areas,” and “Gang members will be using an airplane to drop a bomb on Foothill Division and then storm the division.”¹¹⁸

While not every constituent was as extreme as Mark with his conspiracy theories, the riots heightened the overall feelings of panic and awareness of crime throughout the city. Through December 1993, constituents continued to write in, expressing their fears as victims of criminal neighborhoods. One constituent wrote in to the Council complaining about the difficulties of running a business in a tough neighborhood on November 23, 1992, writing, “Potential customers are constantly harassed on the streets. Any decent, law abiding citizen is afraid to walk the streets, even during broad daylight. The streets are home to gangs, thugs, drug dealers, etc. They have taken over, PERIOD!”¹¹⁹ Another letter from October 13, 1992 to Council Member Wachs stated, “The end result of the lawlessness was the riot, in which ½ of my shopping center was burned out, by the same young gangsters who operate on the corner still today.”¹²⁰ The ideas of crime and of a larger network out to get the “good,” “decent” citizens of Los Angeles had spread throughout the city, causing panic and increasing awareness of potentially dangerous groups.

Many of the discourses surrounding crime didn’t specifically mention race, but the heightened awareness led to the direct targeting and blaming of illegal immigrants by constituents and the media. One constituent letter written to Council Member Braude stated,

¹¹⁸ “Riot Related Rumors” Constituent Letter. (Los Angeles, CA May 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹¹⁹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA November 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹²⁰ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

“There is one thing that the leadership in this City is overlooking and it is coming to the breaking point and that is illegal immigration...Illegals are uniting and becoming more militant, demanding more and more of the resources that should be going to our Citizens.”¹²¹ Another one of Braude’s constituents noted, “The frustration that occurred in our city in April was partially caused by the large and rapid influx of new immigrants over the last ten years leaving the needs of minorities of this country unattended.”¹²² A third constituent of Braude’s argued, “We urge [you] to evaluate the effects of illegal immigration on our community and to encourage a responsible public debate on related issues. Unresponsive government creates anger and frustration and can lead to anarchy, as seen during the recent Los Angeles riots. What is your response?”¹²³

While these letters focused on illegal immigrants and their burden on city resources, other letters would draw the connection between crime and illegal immigration, which would significantly impact the types of resources a majority-immigrant neighborhood like Pico Union received. The *Daily News*, for example, quoted a source saying, “It’s a strange feeling. You know, at the beginning of demonstration, it was really concerned protesters. Then later you recognize gang members from the projects, everyday gangbangers and illegal aliens—they’re the ones who were torching things. They were venting frustration not about Rodney King but about life in general.”¹²⁴ This quotation provides just one example of the media tying criminals and illegal immigrants as partners in the riots. Television also established the connection between criminal and illegal immigrant. In one instance, KABC, a local ABC affiliate, broadcasted a conversation between reporter Linda Mour and news

¹²¹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹²² Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹²³ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹²⁴ *Daily News*, “Devastated”

anchor Harold Greene regarding whether or not the looters were illegal immigrants.¹²⁵ The *Los Angeles Times* television critic Howard Rosenberg noted, “Perhaps Mour was able to identify them as illegal because some of the looters had that stamped on their foreheads,” but regardless of the critiques of the coverage, viewers throughout the Los Angeles area heard these claims made as statements of fact on local television, creating an even stronger connection between crime and immigration.¹²⁶ And the images of Pico Union, a neighborhood already known to have a large immigrant population as well as massive rioting, only reinforced this idea.

Zilberg, in her book *Space of Detention*, notes that constituents and media easily made a connection between the rioters and illegal immigrants because society already equated illegal immigrants and violations of space. Zilberg notes, “In the case of the riots, the looting of private property by [Latinos] came to stand in for the wanton and opportunistic pilfering of state coffers and the transgression of national sovereignty by Latino immigrants.”¹²⁷ The new images of the so-called Latino looters stood as part of a larger metaphor for illegal immigrants looting the United States and taking what did not belong to them, and this metaphor would have powerful consequences.

This view of the Latino looter grew stronger as public figures made accusations against new immigrant communities. Immediately after the riots, Police Chief Daryl F. Gates publicly blamed illegal immigrants as responsible for the extensive damage.¹²⁸ Representative Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican representing Orange County, wrote to

¹²⁵ Zilberg, *Space of Detention*, 59

¹²⁶ Zilberg, *Space of Detention*, 59

¹²⁷ Zilberg, *Space of Detention*, 15

¹²⁸ Patrick McDonnell. 1992. Riot Aftermath Scores of Suspects Arrested in Riots Turned Over to INS Police: Immigrant advocates say action inflamed situation and violated LAPD policy. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 6, 1992.

President George H.W. Bush demanding that illegal immigrants arrested during the riots be deported quickly.¹²⁹ Robert M. Moschorak, District Director in Los Angeles for the Immigration and Naturalization Service stated to the *Los Angeles Times* “We seek it as our responsibility to weed out illegal aliens involved in the disturbance.”¹³⁰ All of these statements by key public officials bolstered the idea of illegal immigrants as the criminals responsible for the riots.

In addition to these increasing attacks upon their community, new immigrants living in Pico Union also found themselves isolated from the larger Latino community. Mexican-Americans began to speak out and publicly distance themselves from the “less stable” immigrant communities.¹³¹ Mexican-American community leaders congratulated the East Side, Mexican Americans on remaining calm during the riots, clearly separating themselves from areas like Pico Union that suffered heavy damages.¹³² Even the *Los Angeles Times*, a newspaper not generally known for nuanced portrayals of minority groups, picked up on this divide noting, “Latino political leaders—exclusively Mexican-American—were mostly silent in the wake of the violence.”¹³³ The *Times* even went so far to acknowledge the lack of resources given to Pico Union, quoting “immigrant advocates” as saying, “the more recent arrivals from Latin America have been ignored in these days of painful post-riot recovery. Or, worse, they are

¹²⁹ Eric Bailey. 1992. Rohrabacher Blasts Rioters in U.S. Illegals. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 7, 1992.

¹³⁰ Patrick J. McDonnell. 1992. Immigrants’ Advocates Allege Mistreatment. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 16, 1992.

¹³¹ George Ramos and Tracy Wilkinson. 1992. Unrest Widens Rifts in Diverse Latino Population Communities: Some leaders distance themselves from violence. Recent immigrants resent taking blame. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 8, 1992. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/281633805?accountid=8285> (accessed July 17, 2012).

¹³² Ruben Martinez. 1992. PERSPECTIVE ON THE LATINO COMMUNITY ‘This Was About Something to Eat’ Latinos were both protagonists and victims of the riots, despite the media’s stress on black/white conflict. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 18, 1992.

¹³³ Ruben Martinez. 1992. PERSPECTIVE ON THE LATINO COMMUNITY ‘This Was About Something to Eat’ Latinos were both protagonists and victims of the riots, despite the media’s stress on black/white conflict. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 18, 1992. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/281633805?accountid=8285> (accessed July 17, 2012).

shouldering the bulk of the blame for the chaos that ruled the city's streets for three days.”¹³⁴ In addition to the media coverage, constituent letters reveal the growing desire for some Los Angeles Hispanics to distance themselves from the new immigrants. One Latino wrote to the City Council, “Illegal aliens in the states are in violation of U.S. immigration laws and their illegal entry undermine **our** Latino community values and **our** respect for the law.”¹³⁵ Another constituent called in to the office of Council Member Wachs, leaving a message that stated, “I’m a Latino but I’ll never align myself with a minority group again.”¹³⁶ Overall, the new immigrants found themselves increasingly isolated as the associations between their community and crime grew stronger within the public discourse.

Along with increased isolation, the sympathy given to the Salvadoran community throughout the 1980s and early 1990s disappeared as the citizens, media, and City Council re-evaluated who the real victims were and focused more on the white or “decent, law-abiding” citizens. Constituent letters most prominently embodied this shift. Starting April 29, 1992, constituents began writing strong letters to Council Member Braude. One asks, “What in hell have you done for all the people who Rodney King has victimized, what damages have they collected?”¹³⁷ On April 30, 1992, a different constituent wrote in to Braude declaring, “the decent people are being left not only unprotected, but Bradley and his cohort are inviting the scum to attack us and other decent citizens area.”¹³⁸ The letter ends, “We also cannot understand why the police are not arresting or shooting the scum that has destroyed this city?”¹³⁹ A neighborhood grocery store took the initiative to write a newsletter, which they sent to the City Council,

¹³⁴ Ramos and Wilkinson “Unrest Widens Rifts”

¹³⁵ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹³⁶ Phone Messages from 4.30.1992 at 9:15 AM; Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 666399: Wachs—Amnesty-Riots

¹³⁷ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). 606078: Hernandez—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹³⁸ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA November 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹³⁹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA November 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

stating, “The police, far from being oppressive, are just not able to handle the crime that has overrun this city. When it becomes OK to loot, rob, kill and set fires just because the police are not reacting, our society has really broken down.”¹⁴⁰ Additionally, many later letters about crime in neighborhoods invoked the Los Angeles riot even many months after it occurred. Another letter from November 23, 1992 states, “I know we can’t rebuild L.A., can’t attract business to L.A. and we certainly can’t expect business to stay if we can’t provide basic police protection to our citizens.”¹⁴¹ Even media like the *Los Angeles Times* contributed to the narrative of victimhood. One article printed in the newspaper read:

Metropolis is in trouble. But where is Superman? Evil Lex Luthor, who is plotting to blow up Los Angeles if he doesn’t get his ransom, has plenty of helpers.... the thugs who brained the white truck driver Reginald Denny and the ‘community leaders’ who demand amnesty for them, Korean shopkeepers rude to their black customers, the black and Latino robbers of Korean merchants murdered in impressive numbers before the riots, and Pacifica station KPFB, which thinks the whole thing was started by the FBI in unmarked cars. The list of Luthor’s evil little helpers marches into hyperspace. But what about us poor souls who live here? ¹⁴²

Following the riots, increasing attention focused on the ‘pour souls’ who lived in Los Angeles and viewed every ‘other’ group as a threat to their security. And the feelings of panic and

¹⁴⁰ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁴¹ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA October 1992). D-816: Braude-Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁴² Sigal Clancy. 1992. PERSPECTIVE ON THE RIOTS Faster Than a Speeding Bromide The ‘progressives’ find their posture powerless against the mob; our ‘Metropolis’ awaits rescue from itself. Series: PERSPECTIVE ON THE RIOTS. Faster Than a Speeding Bromide. First of two parts *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, June 9, 1992.

victimhood failed to abate following the end of the riots. Through December 1993, constituents continued to write in, and the same themes of invasion and victimhood permeate the letters.

All of this pressure created the white victimhood that Patel and Tyrer noted would “justify further discrimination,” and it culminated in a new way of looking at how the city distributed resources and programs.¹⁴³ Increasingly, residents became unwilling to pay for rebuilding, and they became more interested in implementing programs of control and crime reduction in neighborhoods affected by the riots—particularly the Salvadoran neighborhood of Pico Union. This new attitude was evident from constituent letters sent in to the City Council. One constituent wrote to the Council, “NOTHING BUT AN IDIOT WOULD BURN, BATTER, AND STEAL LIKE THEY DID. THE BULK OF THESE PEOPLE WERE BLACK AND LATINO. I, FOR ONE, DO NOT WANT ONE DIME OF MY TAX DOLLAR GOING TOWARD THE REBUILDING OF ANYTHING IN THE RIOT AREA. PERIOD.”¹⁴⁴ City Council members were aware of the increasing unwillingness to pay for new programs. Councilman Wachs, in a handwritten note to a staff member, wrote, “One of the real jobs will be to convince people in other parts of the city that they should support efforts to rebuild the damaged parts.”¹⁴⁵

As the attitudes shifted, the resources distributed and policies made towards the Salvadoran community shifted as well. On May 10, 1992, a Latino business owner and former president of a television channel stepped forward and stated “50% of the funds and resources must be earmarked and directed to Latino concerns and firms within the affected areas.”¹⁴⁶ This, however, was not meant to be. Both the *Los Angeles Times* and *Daily News* reported stories that

¹⁴³ Beckett, 23

¹⁴⁴ Constituent Letters (Los Angeles, CA November 1992). B-714: Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁴⁵ Handwritten Note from staff meeting. (Los Angeles, CA) June 1992, B-714 Wachs—Riots: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Villaneuva Sr., “Voices of Business Tell How to Rebuild L.A.,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 1992.

Hispanics, particularly those from the Pico-Union area, were not applying for nor receiving the monetary support that would be expected based upon the percentage of damages incurred.¹⁴⁷

Fernando Oaxaca, board member of several Latino organizations and businessman, stated about the Latino situation, “We thought our complaints would be addressed by the government and the private sector while they took care of everyone else. Well they are not.”¹⁴⁸ Bert Corona, president of Hermandad Nacional Mexicana, a Latino service organization, noted, “the federal government, the local government and even Rebuild L.A. have primarily targeted their assistance and attention to the African-American community and a portion to the Korean American community.”¹⁴⁹ A variety of speculation surrounded the reason for Latino neglect: some stated language barriers, fears of deportation, and cultural barriers as reasons for the low rates, but the city never reached any definitive conclusions or enacted any successful counter-measures.

The Salvadorans and their allies fought this treatment, trying to recreate the previous discourse of their community as high status refugee victims. The community mobilized in a variety of ways, through organizations, actions, and by using their allies. The Central American Resource Center (CARCEN), Community in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), and El Rescate Legal Services were examples of strong community organizations that supported the Salvadoran community and continued to work to change the discourse. El Rescate sent a letter to the City Council June 2, 1992 filed away in the general city records calling for increased funding, and to ask for funding, El Rescate turned back to the narrative of Salvadorans as victims. The organization wrote a letter stating, “Central Americans continue to be one of the

¹⁴⁷ See for example Mary Anne Perez and Hector Tobar. 1992. Latinos Seek Power With Unity Forum Conference: Activists strive for political gains in post-riot Los Angeles. Organizers hope to bring together diverse elements of the community. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, June 18, 1992.

¹⁴⁸ Carmen Ramos Chandler, “Riot-aid ‘Difficulties’ spur Latinos to Seek Wide Coalition” *Daily News* (May 27, 1992): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. 607451: Wachs—Latinos

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

most exploited and marginalized communities” and “Los Angeles can serve as a model for our other urban communities as we construct what our communities never had.”¹⁵⁰ Additionally, Salvadoran activists and members of the community held press conferences to increase their visibility. At one such event, activists produced affidavits that stated that Immigration and Naturalization Service had abused the confusing environment of the riot and had arrested immigrants to be deported not because they had looted or committed a crime but because they had been out during the curfew hours, which in many neighborhoods were too unclear for residents to understand.¹⁵¹ Like the letter, these events tried to shift the discourse back to focus on the community in a more positive light. While a few Spanish news channels covered these events, they are important to note because they demonstrate how the Salvadoran community continued to fight the discourse, despite its prevalence within the government and media.

They didn’t fight the discourse alone. A variety of other minority groups reached out to support the Salvadoran immigrants and change the discourse. Mexican-American City Council Member from District One, Mike Hernandez, was vocal in his support for the Pico-Union community and reached out to offer them the resources they needed. Following the riots, he held a large press conference covered by the *Los Angeles Times* in which he denounced the INS immigration raids, he became the first elected official to travel to the Pico-Union neighborhood and set up an assistance network for people to reach out to, and he spoke on both Spanish-language television shows and radio broadcasts, calling for calm amidst the unrest.¹⁵² Other

¹⁵⁰ Oscar Andrude (Executive Director, and Kay Echhoff (Director of Development), “Letter to Selene,” (June 2, 1992), 606085: Riots, L.A.-Systems: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁵¹ Elana Zilberg, “A Troubled Corner: The Ruined and Rebuilt Environment of a Central American Barrio in Post-Rodney-King-Riot Los Angeles.” *City & Society* 14, no. 2 (December 2002): 189.

¹⁵² Louis Sahagun and Patrick J McDonnell. 1992. AFTER THE RIOTS: THE SEARCH FOR ANSWERS Mother Prays, Burns Candles for Disabled Girl Missing in Riot. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 7, 1992; George Ramos and Tracy Wilkinson. 1992. Unrest Widens Rifts in Diverse Latino Population Communities: Some leaders distance themselves from violence. Recent immigrants resent taking blame. *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 8, 1992.

minority groups stepped in to support the Salvadorans; for example, an African American organization fighting for criminal justice change wrote in to the Council demanding, “amnesty to all who were arrested and deported during the Los Angeles rebellion” and demanding that police “Stop the deportations NOW.”¹⁵³ However, the pressure and blame that had been placed at the feet of the Salvadorans were just too much. Public perception regarding the Salvadorans had changed, and the funds they would receive as a result were very different than those they had received in the past.

Instead of receiving rebuilding funds, the resources that Salvadorans did receive indicate a turning point in public perception of their community. The new program launched specifically in the Pico Union neighborhood was called Weed and Seed, and it was a program that started under George H.W. Bush. A summary of the program stated, “The program is designed to first ‘weed’ gang leaders, violent criminals and drug dealers from neighborhoods using various law enforcement strategies. Second, the areas will be ‘seeded’ with social services and economic incentives.”¹⁵⁴ While this may seem like a positive program, the problem was that all “seed” money was contingent upon enacting the “weed” programs into the community.¹⁵⁵ Julie Garfield, professor at University of Chicago’s School of Social Service Administration notes that the Weed and Seed program “marks a departure from the Keynesian model of welfare that proliferated in the 1960s and 70s, a model that framed federally funded cash and in-kind public assistance programs as America’s preferred anti-poverty edifice,” and instead turns to prisons as the answer to crime.¹⁵⁶ Garfield also argues that Weed and Seed is “an expression of a penology

¹⁵³ “Protest Letter to the Los Angeles City Council (May, 1992): Los Angeles City Archives, Erwin C. Piper Technical Center. D-816: Braude-Riots

¹⁵⁴ “Weed and Seed Program Overview” Received June 1, 1992 607472: Wachs—Police-Crime: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Julie Garfield, “Landscaping Neoliberalism: The Weed and Seed Strategy,” ed. Emily Oshima, Virginia Parks Jennifer Baker, *Advocate’s Forum* (University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration), 2010: 51

that largely positions crime as an unpreventable phenomena whose elements are to be managed” which mean that it “decentralizes state responsibility for the contexts in which crime is embedded. In short, this penology justifies purging social program in favor of reactive measures that aim to separate criminals from law-abiding citizens, and often diffuse remedial responsibilities to local contingencies.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, the City Council had turned away from supporting the Salvadorans, opting instead to control the neighborhood while taking no responsibility for its conditions. The City Council was not looking to give away funds when it supported Weed and Seed; now everything came with conditions that focused on control and the criminality of the area.

Along with the actual policy of Weed and Seed, the implications of the program also signified a significant departure in policy towards Salvadorans. Examining the linguistic connotations behind the policy and their history, Tim Cresswell notes that the term ‘weed,’ implies an “out-of-place” person, which reinforces the “representation of ‘aliens’ invading the proper order of the American city.”¹⁵⁸ Looking further, Cresswell goes on to note that the Weed and Seed phrasing plays into the *city as ecosystem* metaphor.¹⁵⁹ Cresswell argues that through history, this metaphor helped reinforce legal segregation throughout America’s history, because “judges often acted metaphorically; they acted as though people were plants that invaded spaces, formed ecosystems, and producing barriers.” Cresswell concludes by saying, “The metaphor, in other words, provided not only a new way of describing the city, but also a way of thinking and acting.”¹⁶⁰ Enacting Weed and Seed had larger symbolic consequences for Salvadorans outside

¹⁵⁷ Garfield, 53

¹⁵⁸ Tim Cresswell. "Weeds, Plagues, and Bodily Secretions: A Geographical Interpretation of Metaphors of Displacement." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (Taylor & Francis, Ltd.) 87, no. 2 (June 1997): 336.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Cresswell, 336.

of the immediate political consequences, and what it represented was a new way of thinking about Salvadorans in the city than before. Salvadorans no longer were residents of the city that the City Council needed to support, now they were out of place invaders that the City Council needed to manage.

Additionally, when looking at the indicators of Weed and Seed, the City Council's willingness to implement the program demonstrates a marked shift in priorities towards the Salvadoran community. Julia Garfield notes that while administrators of Weed and Seed examined crime rates to evaluate the success, they completely ignored other important indicators of the community, limiting the scope of the program to crime. Garfield notes that there was little to no improvement in unemployment in Weed and Seed communities, and no one ever really examined economic well being to say whether or not the program had been successful.¹⁶¹ Thus, the program clearly really only cared about crime rates rather than about community well being. Finally, Weed and Seed had the potential to make life worse for not just the criminals but also the residents of communities in which officials implemented the program. Criminologists from the University of California, Irvine, Blaine Bridenball and Paul Jesilow examined a California community under the Weed and Seed program and found that citizens' fear of being a victim of a crime went up rather than down, as the program planted ideas of crime in their neighborhoods that led to continuing discontent for more than a year.¹⁶² Despite its problems, however, this program was very popular amongst particular residents and local institutions. Constituents from the more conservative City Council Districts mailed in letters of support, one going so far as to

¹⁶¹ Garfield, 53.

¹⁶² Paul Jesilow and Blaine Bridenball, "Weeding Criminals or Planting Fear: An Evaluation of a Weed and Seed Project." *Criminal Justice Review* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 65.

mail the summary of the program to his Council Member Wachs indicating he should “look into this.”¹⁶³

As City Policy and public opinion shifted towards finding Salvadorans inherently criminal, the attitudes of the police shifted as well. On May 19, 1992, the newly instated Chief of Police Willie L. Williams responded to City Council suggestions regarding relations with the INS. Although the Chief of Police stated that their policy to follow Special Order No. 40 remained intact, the memo marked a significant divergence from the Order as it was created in 1979. When asked by the City Council to reaffirm the LAPD’s commitment to not work with the INS unless required to by federal law or in the case where someone has committed a felony, and when asked that the police should not “detain witnesses or victims or assist the INS in such detention, unless there is probable cause to believe that those individuals have committed any criminal violation,” Chief of Police Williams responded by saying, “These recommended changes...should not be adopted as they would prohibit any LAPD officer from inquiring into the immigration status of almost all persons.”¹⁶⁴ He went on to say, “To address any concern involving the borders of the United States, the INS must be dealt with in the same professional manner that we deal with all other law enforcement agencies.”¹⁶⁵ Later, in response to another City Council Recommendation, the Office of The Chief of Police wrote, “This Department does not, as a matter of policy or routine practice, release immigration status information. However, circumstances do arise from time to time which require that such information be divulged.”¹⁶⁶

The report slowly reached the final conclusion, where it recommended, “The Department *revise*

¹⁶³ Note attached to “Weed and Seed Program Overview” Received June 1, 1992 607472: Wachs—Police-Crime: Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁶⁴ “City Council Recommendations to the Los Angeles Police Department” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ “City Council Recommendations to the Los Angeles Police Department” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

and amend Department Manual Section 1/390, ‘Undocumented Aliens’ (Special Order No. 40 1979) and that such revisions include specific procedures to be followed by all officers when confronted with a situation they believe may require notification of the INS.”¹⁶⁷ Police Chief Williams backed his way out of a policy that had stood for twelve years, clearly indicating shifted attitudes surrounding criminality of immigrants as well as the responsibility of the police towards these immigrants. What once had been a policy so strong it had inspired some Council Members to use the word “sanctuary” to describe Los Angeles now clearly had changed.

Police policy was not the only policy that changed following the riots; as a political institution, the City Council responded to the fear, blame, and claims to victimhood spreading around the city. In response, they created two motions. The first, proposed by Joan Milke Flores and Joy Picus and issued May 6, 1992, stated:

The community, which experienced the trauma and is now confronted with the economic hardships brought about by the riot, is now witness to a judicial system which is failing to adequately punish the guilty. The City Council has a responsibility to its citizens to express to the Court System its view that the judicial rulings in these cases are inappropriate given the gravity of the offenses and that harsher sentences are warranted.¹⁶⁸

A second Motion presented by Council Member John Ferraro stated, “In addition to serving time, those convicted should be made to return what they stole; they should be made to pay for the damages they caused if they are financially able; they should be made to perform community work to help clean up and they should be required to participate in job training programs to help

¹⁶⁷ “City Council Recommendations to the Los Angeles Police Department” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives (emphasis added)

¹⁶⁸ “Proposed Motion by the City Council” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

rehabilitate them.”¹⁶⁹ Both of these motions made life harder on those arrested in the riot, the majority of whom were Hispanic.

In addition to motions passed, other motions that the City Council wrote but did not pass reveal a shifting tide away from Latinos and particularly Salvadorans. One considered motion reads, “To argue that all those who committed crimes during the riots did so because they were rebelling against social injustices is to stretch the truth far beyond its breaking point.”¹⁷⁰ Later, the same motion states, “And all those who may become innocent victims in the future want to know that we are sending a clear message that criminals—yesterday, today and tomorrow—will be punished.” Although this motion did not pass, it represents the infiltration of the concept of white victimhood into the City Council’s decision making. A different motion presented by Rita Walters and Mark Ridley-Thomas arguing the opposite observed, “The violence is an unfortunate reaction by many who knew no other way to demonstrate their frustration.”¹⁷¹ The reaction to this motion reveals a sharp divide over City Council feelings, because Council Member Wachs annotated this phrase by writing, “B.S.”¹⁷² Some members of the City Council did not feel the responsibility to address underlying issues related to the riots. Times were changing. No longer did the City Council respond to help Salvadorans establish themselves in their neighborhoods; there were new victims in the city.

Perhaps the most revealing change within the city can be seen from the motions not created at all. Although the INS raids following the riots sparked civic protests and multiple *Los Angeles Times*’ articles, the City Council, who had up to that point been so active in producing

¹⁶⁹ “Proposed Motion by the City Council” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁷⁰ “Proposed Motion by the City Council” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁷¹ “Proposed Motion by the City Council” (Los Angeles, CA May 1992) D-397: Los Angeles City Council Files, 1956-Present Los Angeles City Archives

¹⁷² Ibid.

resolutions of support and of substance for the Salvadoran community, did not pass any motion at all regarding the deportations.¹⁷³ The silence of the City Council is important, because the deportations turned out to have significant effects on both the Salvadoran community and the world. A good proportion of the Hispanics arrested and deported were Salvadoran, and some of those deported had connections with the all-Salvadoran Mara Salvatrucha or MS-13 gang.¹⁷⁴ Transported to a world they didn't know, these gang members not only continued their activity with MS-13. They also expanded the gang in the Salvadoran cities where violent youths and weapons were easily available following the Civil War, and this led to the expansion of a more violent version of MS-13 across national boundaries.¹⁷⁵ As the gang spread and continued to grow, so did the increased speculation, fear, and attention towards MS-13. What once was a street gang now had become a cultural phenomenon. Scholars began speculating that MS-13 was working with al Qaeda, and National Geographic named the gang the "World's Most Dangerous Gang."¹⁷⁶

Press reports surrounding the gang, even as it expanded, always tied gang members back to Salvadorans, criminalizing the entire community. One *Los Angeles Times* writer went so far as to call it a "Youth Gang of Central Americans in Los Angeles."¹⁷⁷ Additionally, whenever given the opportunity, these writers specifically tried to tie the gang to El Salvador; for example, an article about the reaction in San Salvador to a new Salvadoran immigration policy in the United States noted, completely unrelated to the rest of the article, that Mara Salvatrucha was written on

¹⁷³ Patrick MCDONNELL. 1992. Riot Aftermath Scores of Suspects Arrested in Riots Turned Over to INS Police: Immigrant advocates say action inflamed situation and violated LAPD policy. *Los Angeles Times* (pre-1997 Fulltext), May 6, 1992.

¹⁷⁴ Zilberg *Space of Detention*, 63.

¹⁷⁵ Zilberg *Space of Detention*, 63.

¹⁷⁶ Lisa Ling. "World's Most Dangerous Gang." *National Geographic* January 2006.

¹⁷⁷ Johnson, John. "Youth Gangs of Central Americans in L.A. on Rise." *Los Angeles Times* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Apr 24, 1990. 1

the walls behind a mayor who was interviewed.¹⁷⁸ Council Members no longer organized community meetings to support neighborhood residents who had to deal with growing violence. Now, the Salvadoran residents had become criminals themselves, tied to a terrifying gang from a country some had never even visited. The treatment Salvadorans once received from the City Council during the 1980s would now be almost unrecognizable in this very new environment.

Overall, the Los Angeles riots represent a turning point for Salvadorans in the city. Once building a community within an immigrant neighborhood and slowly creating a vibrant culture in their newfound home, the riots destroyed perceptions of Salvadorans and limited the types of resources they received. While many cultural and political bodies still exist from which Salvadorans can emerge as a prominent and influential immigrant group, the new criminalized associations with this community will ultimately make it much more difficult for them than it was before. The Los Angeles riots closed a window of opportunity open to the Salvadorans, changing their trajectory in America.

Examining these few moments in history before and after the Los Angeles riots serves as both a good reminder and warning for all citizens. The Salvadoran story during the Los Angeles riots captures the very essence of the danger of a single discourse. By failing to see beyond the black-white narrative of the riots, history missed a turning point for a small immigrant group that has international consequences and represents the complexity of racial relations in society. And by falling into old discourses surrounding Latinos, race, immigration, and crime following the riots, the City Council, the Los Angeles media, and many of the residents in Los Angeles failed at a chance to rebuild a more equitable city when the funds and opportunities were available, instead criminalizing an immigrant group and altering their trajectory in this country. This was the ending of the story for Salvadorans following the Los Angeles riots, but it does not have to

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, 1

be the end of the story for Salvadorans in America, and it does not have to be the end of the story for any immigrant group. As new immigrants come to America, as new technology opens the door for more voices to be heard, and as new demographic shifts change the face of America we will have a new set of choices. Like the city of Los Angeles following the riots, we will have the incredible opportunity to change our country and rebuild something that the world has never seen before. Or, like the city of Los Angeles, we can fall into the same old discourses that are easy and readily available and will eventually come back to create even bigger problems for us in the future. The rest of the story remains to be told.

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