Fear and Loathing in LA

The Rodney King case provoked outrage and bewilderment in almost equal proportions. Ian Hoskins explores some of its roots.

Soon after the all-white jury handed down a 'not guilty' verdict in the Rodney King case, America's most successful black news presenter, Bryant Gumbal, interviewed one of the jurors. It was a rare moment of unscripted poignant emotion. Gumbal's style is usually one of automated fluidity. His most excruciating mode is 'serious'. But in keeping with the need for 'balance' and 'professionalism' Gumbal commands a range of emotional modes. Both Gumbal and the NBC Today show have a seamlessness which, paradoxically, counters attempts by the viewer to relate and connect issues and news items. All is forgotten when the next segment arrives and Gumbal's intensely knitted brow dissolves into a commercial break or Willard Scott's weather report.

But the night of the jury decision was different. Gumbal wanted to know, as so many of us did, how the jury could reach its verdict in the face of seemingly irrefutable evidence: video and audio tape recordings of the beating and subsequent police radio conversations. When questioned, the juror repeated the arguments offered by the defence counsel: Rodney King had provoked the attack and was actually in control of the situation. The juror responded: King had remained in control the whole time; he was making the decisions; the police were only responding.

Throughout this short dialogue, NBC ran the video footage of the beating. We watched Rodney King lying on the ground surrounded, beaten and electrically stunned by police officers while the juror continued to argue that King was in control. When the camera cut back to the studio, Bryant Gumbal's face showed a mixture of incredulity and disgust. For a brief but powerful moment auto-emotion had given way to the unrehearsed.

Clearly, the question had not been answered satisfactorily. Perhaps it is necessary to rephrase the question and ask how and when such an episode can be made to seem reasonable. As a TV viewer, I certainly found it somewhat difficult to make the imaginative leap into the world of that juror. But it is important to get beyond this impasse. Conclusions which simply label the jury members 'bigots' are not overly helpful. While the LA riots were clearly multi-focused and multi-ethnic, their catalyst—the image of a black man being beaten repeatedly by white police officers—is historically loaded in American society and culture. A more insightful analysis of the verdict must therefore begin with a historical look at violence against African Americans.

Few social phenomena present the problem of this imaginative impasse more starkly than the bitter legacy of lynching, particularly in the American South. While some lynchings were simply spontaneous responses to accusations or grievances, many were more elaborate, planned and sometimes publicised affairs. They brought together the white community in a public ritual of torture and execution. Everyone was involved either actively through participation in the torture and killing or passively as spectators.

Lynching was largely a Southern practice. Its peak in the 1890s coincided with the maturing of a black population which had no direct memory of slavery. In the wake of slavery, lynching served as a reaffirmation of the solidarity of the white community, the pattern of race relations and the image of the 'dangerous nigger' commonly represented in literature and academic works as an insatiable black man. The ideology of lynching was heavily underscored by the perceived threat of black violence, particularly sexual violence. Miscegenation had become the symbolic threat to white society and the almost ceremonial attacks on the bodies of the victims were symbolic of the social expurgation of African Americans.

So, in the name of social stability and the maintenance of order, God-fearing white men, women and children stabbed, burned, shot, hanged and dismembered at least 3,500 blacks between 1882 and 1968. The photographic and written accounts of these lynchings reveal that they often performed these acts with enthusiasm and good cheer.

The customary extra-legal control of African Americans was given tacit support by the judicial system. No white would be found guilty of murdering a black, at least in the Southern states. But the ideology of lynching was also reinforced more directly by the legal discrimination of disenfranchisement and the Jim Crow segregation laws. The right to vote, granted to black men after the Civil War, was revoked throughout the South. Blacks and whites were not only segregated on street cars, in hotels and schools, they had to swear on different bibles in courts of law. Blacks were confined and regulated spatially and socially within cities and small towns. Contact between the races was increasingly limited to clearly defined work relationships: overseer and labourer on the farm and in the factory, mistress and maid in the home. In this sense, segregation replaced the intimacy which was permitted by the rigid institution of slavery.

But if lynching was essentially a Southern folkway, the coincidence of extra-legal violence, legal repression and spatial separation had its origin in the cities of the North in the preceding...
century. Slavery had petered out there by the end of the 1820s, but racial antagonism had not. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s the pattern of legal and extra-legal anti-black violence, segregation and disenfranchisement spread through Northern cities in response to the perceived threat to white economic and spatial security. In the wake of slavery in the North, as in the South, blacks had to be 'shown their place', both figuratively and literally.

With the social upheavals of two world wars and the huge migration of blacks to the North and West, fresh waves of race riots swept American cities: East St Louis in 1917, Chicago in 1919, Detroit in 1940 and Los Angeles in 1943. Legal segregation remained in force in the South until the 1960s, while Northern cities, particularly Chicago saw de facto segregation. Any transgression of these undrawn boundaries could prompt swift and terrible violence.

Los Angeles today is a huge sprawling metropolis, a city with many centres. Along with Chicago it remains one of the most ethnically segregated cities in the United States. This segregation is spatial, but also economic, social and cultural. Poorer blacks tend to live in the Watts and South Central areas. Hispanics, the fastest growing ethnic group, have traditionally gravitated to East Los Angeles—though they too are moving to South Central. The Vietnamese community is centred in nearby Orange County, Koreatown sits on the edge of South Central and, as the name suggests, is home to the majority of Korean immigrants. Whites have tended to move to the security of suburbs to the north and the outlying counties to the east—vast areas of shopping malls, video outlets and comfortable houses.

Movement between these areas is economically defined. Hispanic men and women service the gardens and houses of middle class whites during the day and most return to their neighbourhoods at night. Koreans run their liquor stores and super markets in the black and Hispanic areas of South Central. Many young unemployed black and Hispanics stay in their barrios and 'hoods'—landscapes overlaid with an invisible matrix of gang territories.

The jurors who sat in judgment on the Rodney King case came from Simi Valley, a predominantly white community in Ventura County, north-west of Hollywood. Some have described it as a retirement home for police Officers. The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) itself is nearly 70% white. Its upper echelons are almost exclusively white. Most of the officers live in neighbouring counties such as Ventura, San Bernadino and Riverside.

Each working day they travel from their suburban homes to their jobs—policing the black and Hispanic quarters to the south and west. These are areas known only to the police from the inside of a patrol car or from the vantage point of a helicopter fitted with spotlights and infra-red night-scopes. The LAPD is one of the most mechanised and hi-tech police forces in the country. In this segregated city the highly mobile officers employ a tactical logic based on spatial and ethnic 'profiles'. Any Hispanic or African
American homes via news broadcasts, television, police dramas and ‘real life’ exposés of crime in America’s Most Wanted and Cops. In the segregated city the white audience travels to the other side through these filtered images. They both reflect and generate public perceptions of law and order.

When the amateur video recorder shot the videotape of police officers clubbing Rodney King he brought the filmic representation of policing operations as close to reality as it can perhaps possibly get. The home video camera would seem to be the ultimate democratisation of the medium. Citizens can now videotape their own real life police dramas unedited and unrehearsed. Here the camera was pointed in the other direction and it was the police who were the criminals.

But, for this jury, the filmic reality was only one negative image amid a thousand positive ones.

Kevin Ryan, now a Sydney barrister, had a successful Rugby League career with Sydney clubs St George and Canterbury in the 1960s. He was a state Labor MP from 1976-1984. Since taking over the unpaid position of president of the Players’ Union two years ago, he has succeeded in having the draft—the system by which the League controlled the transfer of players between clubs—declared illegal. Now, he has his sights set on establishing an industrial award for players.

Under your presidency the Players’ Union has taken steps towards becoming more like a ‘real’ union. How much further would you like to go along that path, and in what directions?

I saw the Players’ Union initially as a tame and captive sort of union, a bosses’ union. Fortunately, way back in the early 1980s, someone had registered it under the Trade Union Act, and also under the Industrial Arbitration Act. I took that one step further by affiliating it with the NSW Labor Council. The court case where we overturned the players’ draft was a big victory and that’s helped to entrench the Players’ Union as a true union, and also to lift the morale of the players. At the moment, we’re pursuing an industrial award in the State Industrial Commission. Hopefully within a few weeks, it will put in place an award structure requiring minimum payments to the players, including allowances for training, proper insurance cover and superannuation.

Having an industrial award will be the basis of true unionisation. It will be the first of its type in the world—there have been some collective bargaining agreements in American sport, but this will be the only one under a centralised wage-fixing authority. After that we’ll be looking at improving conditions for players by, for example, achieving more say in the rule-making department—players at the moment are ignored in this area, and they’re precisely the ones who should be consulted.

How has the League reacted towards the increased militancy of the Union?