

Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch

Essays on Race and Sexuality

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5 Feel the Rage

A Personal Remembrance of the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising

(I have chosen here to preserve the perspective from which this essay was originally written on May 3, 1992, just on the heels of the Los Angeles uprising, which began April 29, 1992. I was a resident of Los Angeles at that time, attending graduate school at UCLA. The piece was published a few weeks later in a small African American progressive Christian newsletter in the San Francisco Bay Area.)

Even as I begin the process of putting pen to paper, something about this project feels hopelessly anachronistic, out of sync with time. As a people, African Americans are told almost daily by the government and the media of the “progress” we have made. We are reminded on a regular basis (as if someone were trying to convince us) of how much better off we are now than we were some thirty years ago. However, the events of the several days following the announcement of the verdict in the Rodney King case tell quite a different story. These events expose such assertions of “progress” as the same dangerous rhetoric being used at this historical moment to undergird the political right’s ridiculous claims of “reverse discrimination” and to dismantle important strategies for achieving equality like affirmative action.

Today (Sunday, May 3, 1992) I heard Congresswoman Maxine Waters deliver an invigorating speech at the First African Methodist Episcopal Church. In that speech, she outlined the complex of social and economic inequities leading up to the eruption of violence following the verdict. Her speech was so similar in tone, critique, and content to statements made by Dr. Martin

Luther King Jr. following the Watts “riots” of twenty-seven years ago, that for a moment I almost thought the congregation had been transported back in time. In the media, we saw some racially motivated violence (a thought that the media has been reticent to address) against whites by blacks, violence borne out of frustration. We witnessed burning and looting in the streets of Los Angeles, which when televised bore an uncanny resemblance to the earlier Watts rebellion as well. So, while we are often inclined toward progressive models for understanding history, “progress” for African Americans has always been somewhat of an illusion. The story of our history resembles more the impossible fate of the legendary king of Corinth, Sisyphus, who is doomed for eternity to roll the stone up the mountain even though it inevitably rolls back down on him. But history is not what I want to address in this essay. Rather, I want to turn our attention for a moment to the anger, rage, frustration, disenfranchisement, hopelessness, and injustice that gave rise to the violence we all witnessed at the close of April.

In the media, as in everyday discourse with people, we have heard those who participated in the LA rebellion referred to as “thugs,” “hoodlums,” “vandals,” “freaks,” “murderers,” “gang-type individuals” (my personal favorite), and a host of other derogatory appellations. We have heard people say that violence and destruction are not the “right” ways to respond to the verdict. We have heard people say that they are ruining “their own neighborhoods.” And, perhaps worst of all, we have heard this rebellion referred to as “random violence.” Such statements dramatize the vast difference between the way that the “haves” and the “have-nots” perceive the world and their positions in it.

Let us be clear: anger is an appropriate response to the verdict in the Rodney King case. As a people, African Americans have never gotten their fair share in the United States, to be sure. Our homelands were looted when we were first brought to this country as slaves. Our dignity and humanity were further stolen when we were counted as three-fifths human beings by the “founding fathers” in drafting the Constitution. Our labor was looted during slavery to build the legacy of a capitalist economy that continues to be re-

sponsible for the wealth of so few and the destitution of so many in this country. A further violence was committed against African American people even after the Emancipation Proclamation, when we were violated once again by the rise of Jim and Jane Crow. We were looted of our promised forty acres and a mule, our reparations for slavery. After slavery, many of us were forced negligently into urban ghettos during the rise of industrialization, where we were untrained and, because of racism, uncompetitive in the job market. This was one way of containing and controlling urban poverty and anger. Such social conditions created much of the cycle of poverty and subsequent despair that many of us live under even to this day in the United States.

Every day we are either homeless or witness to the homelessness of our neighbors. Every day we are hungry and we watch our children go to bed hungry. Every day we are unemployed or underemployed, while there seem to be fewer and fewer job opportunities to be had. Every day we are subjected to vendors who sell products of dubious quality in our neighborhoods and charge us outrageous prices for the privilege of buying them. Every day we live in close proximity to some of the most conspicuously consumptive people and places in the world (Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Bel Air, Pacific Palisades, and so forth), while we are asked to put up with subhuman living conditions. Every day we see the government spend billions and billions of dollars abroad to fight their wars, to feed the mouths of people we have never seen, and to rebuild Europe, while we are told in no uncertain terms to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps! And you wonder why we are angry? You wonder why we are violent?

Martin Luther King Jr. (quoting Victor Hugo) wrote in 1965 following the Watts rebellion that: "If a soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness." This well characterizes the situation of African Americans in this country. We have been too long left in the darkness. We have been left in the darkness of poverty, the darkness of neglect, the darkness of unemployment, and the darkness of a system that has lied to them again and again and again. So you

see, Rodney King was not the cause of the LA rebellion. Every black person in the United States knows that there have been many Rodney Kings who have been brutalized by that long, repressive arm of the state known as the police. The difference (or so we thought this time) was that there was a videotape for all the world to *see*. This time, we thought, they will have no choice but to serve justice. But alas, we were wrong. When presented with the choice of serving justice or serving the interest of the state and white hegemony, the jury chose the latter. It was more than a slap in the face for those of us who witnessed this verdict. It wounded us deep down on the inside. It cut to the very core of our souls. It was a direct affront to all of the hundreds of years of suffering, patience, and cooperation that we have tried to exhibit toward this country. And this time we could not hold our peace!

If, as Dr. King also once said, “riots” represent the voices of the unheard, that is what we witnessed here in Los Angeles. White America cannot say that they did not know the gravity of the social conditions under which the urban poor live (and let us be clear that it is no coincidence that the vast majority of these are people of color). Urban poverty experts, political figures like Maxine Waters and Jesse Jackson, grassroots organizers in the community, and even progressive intellectuals have been doing little else if not raising these issues. So, I am convinced that it is not a question of ignorance. Rather, it is a question of a refusal and an unwillingness to hear. One theologian has called it “compassion fatigue.” White America and its government simply got tired of hearing “those people” complain about their problems, their history, and their victim status. It made white America feel bad, so they decided it was no longer important to hear. And this was the continuation of leaving souls in darkness. The Reagan and Bush eras, with their “bootstraps” mentality, have created a great season of darkness for the urban poor, and they have taken it until they can take no more.

Many cannot believe how those who participated in the rebellion could think that this was the “right” thing to do. We must understand that we cannot understand unless we are willing to step out of self and to try to see the world from the position of the urban poor. What does the discourse of “right

and wrong" mean to someone who has no home, or no job, or no food, or no money, and no hope of ever having those things? Those of us who speak of "right and wrong," of "law and order," are people who benefit from the social contract. We get something out of lawfulness. Many of the people who participated in the LA rebellion have never known "law and order." What do such concepts mean when you barely have or lack altogether the necessities of life? So, when there are no other venues left to you, and your situation seems hopeless (as was the case for many African Americans after the Rodney King verdict), "sins will be committed."

But let us be clear: those sins could have been prevented. Since we know that to those to whom much is given, much is required, such preventative measures should have come from the White House, Congress, the state house, the well-to-do, and community leaders. And in order to prevent such uprisings in the future, we as a nation will need to rebuild the structures for honest communication. We will need to be sure that we do not become weary of doing good. We will need to be sure that we are willing to step out of self and to see the world from where others stand. We will need to find ways of rebuilding torn-down hopes. We African Americans must also (eventually) find ways of managing our rage so that it does not blind us from finding new ways (and I am convinced that we need *new* ways) to find the strength to love those who have spitefully used us.

I do not mean love in any facile, "touchy-feely" sense. On the contrary, I mean a love that gives us the strength to correct the wrongs and injustices that will be perpetrated upon us. I mean a love that empowers us in the way that it empowered our ancestors to hope against hope. I mean a love that will liberate us from an obsession with either deifying or demonizing white people. I mean a love that will give us the courage to refuse to suffer indignity and subordination at the hands of a government and a society that owes us so very, very much. This is the love with which we need to arm ourselves. I think it was the apostle Paul who said it best: "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and

blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”

In the meantime, my brothers and sisters, it is okay to be angry. It is human to feel frustrated. It is a further testament to our humanity that we could not hold our peace when we got the word about the Rodney King verdict. To suffer such indignity and brutality in silence is anything but human. So for right now, for this day, we should feel the rage. And tomorrow, because we are God’s and because we are all stuck here together on this orb of dust and spit we call Earth, we will find the strength to begin to love again.