

# Postcard from LALA land

David Brown

*Academic study leave isn't all nose-to-the-laptop Five days visiting the city of the angels proved eventful.*

Early morning stopover in Honolulu. Pick up copy of *US Today* and *LA Times*. Lead story the execution of Robert Harris, the first public execution in California in 25 years.

Harris ate the last supper at 8.20 p.m. His request: fried chicken, two pizzas, a cola and jelly beans. Digestion proceeding when the Western States' 9th Circuit Court ordered a stay of execution on constitutional (gas executions 'cruel and unusual') and evidentiary (fresh evidence that Harris's brother may have killed one of the victims) grounds. The US Supreme Court vacated the stays by 3 a.m. in a 7-2 ruling. Harris taken to the death chamber at 3.49 a.m. Forty-nine (not a lot crying) witnesses viewing through thick glass window include relatives of the two boys Harris had been convicted of killing in 1978. After being strapped to the chair Harris was overheard at 3.58 a.m. saying 'lets pull it'. Gurgling sound of acid being pumped into bowl beneath chair. Phone rings. A circuit court judge had ordered another stay. 4.10 a.m. Harris taken out of the chamber. Cheering from group of anti-death penalty protesters outside San Quentin outnumbered by 200 reporters and TV camera operators, members of the media circus, reduced to interviewing each other about the ghoulish behaviour of the media. Local residents of San Quentin village earned up to \$1000 per day by renting their yards and drive-ways near the prison to TV camera crews.

This stay (the fourth and final) in turn lifted by a US Supreme Court so determined to clear the way for executions that they are prepared to sit all night. Without claiming overtime. So keen they ruled in 1991 that an appeal filed one day late on behalf of a Roger Keith Coleman, convicted of murder in Virginia in 1981, would not be heard. Despite considerable doubts about his guilt Coleman was executed in late May.

But you can understand the Supreme Court position. Executions are one way of clearing some room in the prisons. From 1980 to 1989 the US adult prison

population increased by 114%. It shows how far we are lagging behind, with only a 41% national increase between 1981-1991. Only NSW is making anything like the same effort to increase its prison population with a 50% increase since the Coalition came to office in March 1988. Some States, such as Queensland under the Goss Government, have even been reducing their prison population. At the end of 1989 an estimated 4.1 million adults — about one in every 46 in the US — were under the 'care' of a corrections agency such as prison, probation, parole. And the US isn't even a former penal colony.

Harris returned to the chamber at 6 a.m. looking tired. 6.05 a.m. potassium cyanide tablets dropped into a reservoir of acid beneath the chair. Observers report that Harris took between 7 and 12 minutes to die, inhaling the gas. Official time of death recorded at 6.21 a.m.. His last words 'You can be a king or a street sweeper, but everyone dances to the grim reaper'. Nationwide search of country and western back titles for source follows. Cheers from pro-death penalty supporters outside San Quentin. Media interview each other about media ghoulishness and compete to line up live interviews with witnesses. Pages of interviews of witnesses published in the print media. The *San Francisco Examiner* which had been excluded from the Department of Corrections final list of 17 media representatives allowed to witness the killing took legal action claiming their exclusion was 'irrational'. The Department had reserved seats for the largest metropolitan dailies and let other papers compete for seats in a lottery. The court ordered an *Examiner* rep be added to the witnesses. An American Civil Liberties Union investigator was allowed to videotape the execution for use as evidence in a pending class action suit claiming California's gas executions unconstitutional as 'cruel and unusual'. Pending dispute over who is to call Nietzsche. It is not known if there were any other amateur videos made of the event. And if so whether Rupert Murdoch has secured the rights.

Settle in to the Cadillac Hotel on Venice beach, have a surf and a shower to try to wash away the disgust. Catch TV washup of execution. Main concern seems to be to find a more efficient method of execution. Debate between electrocution, lethal injection, hanging, gas or shooting. All these methods currently used in the US among the 20 States which have resumed capital pun-

*David Brown teaches law at the University of New South Wales*

ishment since 1976. Some States provide for a choice of execution method. Freedom of choice! Recall Camus arguing that state murder morally worse than private murder in that few private murderers notified their victims of the execution date years in advance and then kept them in captivity until that date. Current wait running at around 12-15 years. Premeditated in the fullest sense. 'Cruel and unusual'? A tad cruel perhaps, but hardly unusual. Harris the 169th since 1976. Currently 2509 men on death row and 38 women.

In the lead-up to the 1988 US presidential election the Republicans ran the Willie Horton commercial in which Democrat challenger Dukakis was tagged with the subsequent crimes of a paroled rapist (Queensland Liberals tried the same tactic in the recent State election). There were other Gubernatorial and DA TV election ads in which smiling incumbents walked down long corridors decorated with large passport-type photos. I wondered who these (mostly black) men were. Basketballers perhaps, endorsing the candidate. Turned out to be convicted murderers and rapists, endorsed deceased. Gesturing in their direction the governor or DA would claim credit for having them terminated with prejudice. 'I done good. Made the streets safe. Vote for me.' Plenty do. 'Unusual' an oxymoron here.

Feeling a bit nauseous but head off for a bite. Forgo the flambeed brains and seared kidneys and am tucking into a plate of pasta and an Oregon pinot noir when hit by a heavy spin. Check label for indication of alcohol volume. Notice staff and patrons alike fleeing the restaurant. EARTHQUAKE. Over 7 points on Richter. Too late to do a runner so hang on to the counter and try to look Australian unperturbed.

Following morning catch some of the last day of the Rodney King trial on TV before heading downtown to interview DA. At every break in the action a panel of expert commentators give a little summary of the legal moves and an assessment of their likely effects. Quite informative, like Sterlo calling the gamebreaking play 10 tackles before it occurs.

A key decision seems to have been to grant a defence motion for a change of venue from South Central LA where the beating occurred to Simi Valley, Ventura county. Simi's main claim to fame is being the site of the Reagan library. A good place to check out those

lines from old movies. Then try to identify which international crisis the old cowboy was able to reprise them in. Simi also the home of 2000 of the 9000 LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) officers.

Missed the defence reading of the amateur video of the Rodney King beating. The video now as well known around the world as that one from the grassy knoll. The remnants of the Black Panthers are now exhorting people to exchange their magnums for hand held video cameras. The right to bear videocam. Video deconstructed, slow motion, stop start, frame by frame to a series of stills. In a masterly lesson in hermeneutics what appeared at first 'reading' to be a brutal beating was in fact self defence, Rodney King being likely to spring up at any stage and attack the officers barehanded. Perhaps All Black front rower Richard Lowe should have been called by the prosecution to demonstrate a more economical style. Not only is the sense of movement, continuity, lost, but the repeated exposure of the blown up stills deadens the senses. Desensitisation appears to be a calculated defence strategy, defence lawyers pacing up and down swinging a heavy metal police baton. In Antonioni's *Blow Up* David Hemmings swishes the developer around and constructs a murder from the dots. Here the beating is lost rather than found, transmuted by the defence lawyers and expert witnesses into a necessary use of force according to the police manual, 'a controlled application of baton strikes' as one defence lawyer put it. A technology of the self: 'Watch Timothy Wind's posture: cautious, withdrawn, quick feet, sliding back, keeping moving, keeping clear but doing his job. This is not some orgy of violence. This is careful police work'. A triumph of interpretation.

As Charles Hagan argued in the New York Times, 'Photographic images of all sorts remain ambiguous and must be anchored in a convincing narrative before they take on a specific meaning'. The narrative offered up by defence lawyers was the 'thin blue line'. Not the movie/doco in which the main prosecution witness comes close to confessing to a murder for which another man, Randall Adams, had been convicted. The movie which led eventually to Randall Adams' release. But 'the thin blue line' invoked repeatedly in defence final addresses as in: 'the role of a police force in protecting society from the likes of Rodney King'. 'This

unpleasant incident is what we have police for' said another of the lawyers. 'He was part of the line between society and chaos'. The New York Times used the ch spelling, but I wondered if it shouldnt have been a K. Hagan added that as well as the meanings of the images depending on the narratives we fit them in to, they also depend on 'the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and who we want to be.' From Maxwell Smart to Clint Eastwood?

The head of the LA Police Protective League (union) the unfortunately named Bill Violante, later claims that the riots would not have happened if the LAPD had been allowed to apply the aptly named 'choke-hold' on Rodney King. A prohibition had been implemented by the LA Police Board after a number of 'suspects' expired upon being so restrained. Inexplicably most if not all of them were black. Giving rise to the explanation by LAPD Chief, Darryl Gates, that black people had narrower arteries and so were more prone to choke to death. This line of argument sounded familiar. I wondered if Chief Gates had ever been to Western Australia or read anything about Aboriginal deaths in custody. Anyway, according to Mr Violante, if the Police Board hadn't prohibited the 'choke hold' then Rodney King wouldn't have needed to be kicked and beaten with batons some 57 times. So really the subsequent riots were the fault of the liberal Police Board and the black Democratic Mayor, Tom Bradley.

President Bush had a much more historically informed explanation a few days after the riots had been 'put down', read sending in 10 000 National Guard, plus 1300 Marines, mostly veterans of the Persian Gulf, plus units of the 7th Infantry Light which was sent to Panama City in 1989. 'Keep the home fires burning'. The President's chief spokesman, press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, declared the riots ('inner-city difficulties') to be the fault of President Johnson and the 'Great Society' programs of the 1960s and 1970s which had stripped people of their dignity and self reliance through providing them with welfare services and employment programs ('direct handouts'). Things like school lunches, Job start, medicare, food stamps. He was too modest to add that he and Ronnie had done their best to redress the situation by slashing aid to cities, a clever strategy of disinvestment. It hadn't occurred to me at first that it was really LBJ's fault, I should have realised after seeing *JFK*.

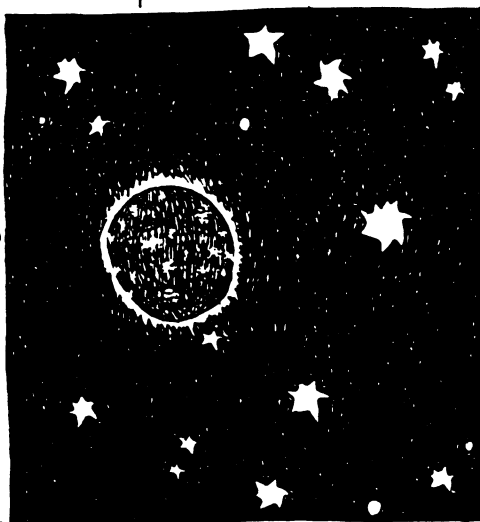
Amazing how you can miss the obvious when you are an outsider. The thickness of local knowledge. But some lessons here for John Hewson. Put the blame on Chifley rather than Keating/the car manufacturers/the churches/ teachers/ renters/the Japanese/the Commonwealth Bank/the multinationals/the ALP right/ the ALP left/Four Corners/nurses/.....

The problem with blaming President Johnson is that he was a 'real' person, I think, rather than an actor playing President. Except in *Ladybird* and *JFK* where he was an actor. Nowadays the preference seems to be for Presidents and Vice Presidents to blame characters in soaps and cartoons, unless they are foreigners like 'Sodom' with the moustache. Vice Pres Dan Quayle admonished Murphy Brown for deciding at a whim, 'a lifestyle choice', to have a baby without a dad in evidence, 'mocking the importance of a father'. Another welfare bludger. And the President then blamed the Simpsons, a dysfunctional family if there ever was one, for the decline in family values. American families should be more like the Waltons he said. I thought Homer was very diplomatic in his response. He merely said he was disappointed as he had voted for George last time. Bart advised George to 'stay cool dude'.

Buses into downtown LA take for ever and don't seem to pick up any white people, I was a bit of a curiosity. The afternoon and evening of my first complete day in LA were spent travelling to the District Attorney's office and then interviewing the head of the prison informer unit. The unit was set up after the disclosures of Leslie White, an enterprising prisoner who rang the DA from a prison phone. Posing as a police officer he obtained information from the prosecution file and used it to construct alleged 'confessions' to him by other prisoners, evidence subsequently used at their trials. Some of those convicted on the evidence of White and other prisoner informants are currently on death row. In Australia we have a more streamlined system, so that it is not necessary for the informers to bother posing as police in order to construct a confession of the 'he said he dunnit' variety. They don't even seem to have to be in the same prison at the time of the alleged confession. Shirley MacLean would be impressed by their psychic powers.

Saturday morning a long interview over brunch with the key defence lawyer opposing the use of prisoner informants. She explained that she had clients convicted of capital offences well before Harris. But they still had years worth of appeals in hand. Ranking on the state hit list (newspapers gave the latest rankings, but tastefully used stars rather than bullets to identify those moving up the charts) depends a lot on how committed the lawyers are to keeping their clients alive by continuing to work on the case for 10-15 years. And in particular how ready the lawyers are to search for fresh evidence. A lot of this work is done for little or no financial reward, or on legal aid rates, which is often the same thing.

From space the earth is a



forests & rioting cities....

blue jewel.... it sparkles with

the fires of burning rain

Sunday and time for some R and R. A visit to Universal simulations where I got attacked by Jaws, caught in an earthquake, nearly swept away in a flood, had King Kong come up beside the train carriage and nearly pull it off the line, and so on. After weathering all this I repaired to Baker Street for a pint of ale. Neither Holmes nor Watson called in for a snifter while I was there. I then caught some Miami Vice, little plot development but lots of explosions, unstructured suits, automatic weapons and drug dealers falling off towers into the bisque.

TV predicting more earthquakes. Experts predicting the Rodney King jury would be out until Tuesday or Wednesday. Like Sterlo they were spot on. Some people I spoke to complained that it was hardly a jury of Rodney

King's peers. They seemed not to have noticed that Rodney King wasn't the defendant. I felt this was rather ominous. The jurors were 6 men, 6 women; 6 Republicans, 6 Democrats; 10 white 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian American; 8 had served in the army, the forewoman a program manager for multi million dollar military contracts. The jury trooped back in the day after I flew out. 'LA International Airport/Where the big birds fly.'

Off to New Orleans (to give Oliver Stone a copy of Delillo's *Libra* and a tape of The Stones' *Sympathy for the Devil*). The next day the verdict was out. Apparently the jurors had decided on the acquittal verdicts in one day, the remaining six days were spent arguing on one count of assault against one officer, on which they were hung (not literally — legal jargon for they were split, couldn't agree). Not much later the riots were kicking off. You could watch the husband-and-wife-reporting-team-newscoper-live-eye-footage of Reginald Denny being pulled from his truck and savagely beaten and then bravely saved by four black passers-by. For those enamoured of old testimony retributive justice, here was symbolic justice indeed, one live televised beating to make amends for another. Straight from the house of Yabsley.

Yet another amateur video shows police leaving the intersection where the riot started, when a crowd started vogueing NWA. Close to where Denny was assaulted and where unsuspecting motorists were pulled from their cars and beaten. The sister of a 21-year-old black man, Anthony Netherly, the sixth person killed in the riots said later: 'Why didn't they block off the street, why did they let my brother drive into an area that was out of control?'

Anthony Netherly was the father of a four week old son. Netherly himself never knew his father, who was killed in Vietnam when his mother was four months pregnant. A number of those killed were driving in to South Central to check on the safety of friends and relatives. The LAPD later combed 380 hours of live news footage to identify rioters and looters. Nearly 19 000 people were arrested during the riots. Presumably the defence lawyers for those who beat Denny will argue on the Rodney King principle that they were

just defending themselves against a crazed hippy truck driver.

News flashes from the front line where looters seemed to be piling station wagons high with consumer essentials like jumbo size packs of jerky, porterhouse, frozen pizza, popcorn and videos. Hang on, that isn't the looters, but the good citizens of Beverly Hills and Simi Valley stocking up to withstand the siege of the Alamo. Gun shops crowded, workers stacking cartons with 3000 rounds of 9-millimeter ammunition and 1000 rounds of 12 gauge hollow-point rifle slugs. Here are the looters, stocking up on anything they can get their hands on, liquor, TVs, video recorders, LAPD caps, frozen yoghurt, one of Madonna's sequin-trimmed, purple bustiers with gold tassels. You could tell the looters from the good citizens. Mostly the looters didn't have station wagons. But better tans.

It was getting smokier and smokier, every now and then another store would go up in flames. Korean stores targeted. In 1990 a black teenage girl was fatally shot in the back of the head by a Korean South Central shopkeeper who suspected the girl of stealing a carton of orange juice. Mrs Soon was convicted and placed on probation. It was reported that Mrs Soon's store was one of the first to burn. In Koreatown Korean shopkeepers organise armed vigilante groups and shoot at looters. 'Pay respect to the black fist/Or we'll burn your store to a crisp': Ice T from *Death Certificate*. Pop pop of gunfire. Thought I spotted The Duke in there but it might have been an ad break for the late night movie.

The LAPD defence was woeful in the first half, most of them having fled to watch the helicam coverage in the safety of the station away from the big hits. This was a surprising change of tactics as coach Chief Gates had built his reputation on fearsome front-on Warren Ryan style defence marked by aggressive para-military tactics, the equivalent of the gang tackle and getting your retaliation in first, but with batons or guns. Chief Gates had a pressing talk to give somewhere, which obviously had priority over mass insurrection. Unsourced rumours that had the Chief at a meeting negotiating to sign up Mark Geyer untrue. In July 1991 the Christopher Commission, set up to examine the Police Department after the release of the Rodney King video, recommended Chief Gates retire, concluding that the department suffered from a

'siege mentality'. The Chief had finally agreed to go, in June. Or July. Was that the Chief chanting 'burn baby burn'?

Eventually after a lot of burning and beating and looting the LAPD got a bit more involved and started shooting people. The majority of the dead were minorities, 22 blacks, 17 hispanics, 2 Asians, 9 white, and two who could not be identified due to burns. Of the 52 people who were killed during the riots, police were involved in nearly half of the 27 deaths in which the circumstances leading to the killing could be determined by early May. Police commission officials told reporters they expected more deaths to be classified as police shootings. So an exact score-card was not available, but the police were clearly in front.

*The Underclass Strikes Back, The Return of the Bread Riot, Injustice Seen to be Done* and sequel *Injustice Will Be Revenged, Clash of the Amateur Videos, Get it While You Can, The Dispossessed, Waiting for Ghetto*, there are a range of narrative structures into which the riots, or as some prefer, the Uprising, can be fitted. Whatever the choice those who claim that a looting and a burning will lead to improvements in life and amenities in the ghettos should see some of the areas where the 1960s riots took place, like Watts, like Newark. Military-style policing by helicopter, *Boyz in the Hood* style, burnt out apartment blocks, vacant lots where convenience stores once were, crack houses guarded over by heavy-looking Samoan attorneys fondling Uzis and Mac 10s, no services, no employment, wrecked cars, mountains of litter, derelict, 25 years on from the riots of the 1960s.

Eventually the National Guard was flown in. The boardwalk at Venice where I had been staying was sealed off and surfers ordered at gun point from the surf. As one of the few areas left in LA where the crowd is still mixed, all shapes and sizes, colours, races, religions, diets, therapies, leotards, every known species of dog, on roller blades, chain-saw jugglers, Venice Boardwalk was suspect. This too might go off. Unlike Watts in 1965 this time the riots had spread from South Central along some of the key corridors, like Hollywood Boulevard. Frederick's Lingerie Museum at its flagship store in the heart of Hollywood lost \$200 000 worth of racy bras and panties. They offered a \$1000 reward for the Madonna bustier. 'Burn Hollywood

Burn I smell a riot going on', raps Public Enemy's Chuck D on *Fear of a Black Planet*. There were even attacks downtown on the Parker Centre (police headquarters) and the *LA Times* office. \$717 million in damage (a lot of school lunches, food stamps, medicare, work programs and other 'handouts'). A curfew. The airport closed as the smoke from the fires hung in the air. Escape from LA. But Law and Order was restored. The streets 'retaken'.

Amidst the replays and scripts for the mini series I came across Mike Davis's pre mortem vision of the riots, *City of Quartz*, a great read. Very prophetic. 'The utopia and distopia of advanced capitalism'. 'A junkyard of dreams'. Helter skelter in the carceral city, fortress LA, the hammer and the rock, rentocop to robocop, panopticon mall, bum proof benches, the destruction of public space, fortified cells. Or in Pynchonesque, a segregated collection of theme parks, supermarkets and shopping malls, pastel investment concepts and personal improvement nuclei, palms and fast food opportunities, linked by freeways and watched over by the sons of Bladerunner. The ghettos are now the middle class anglo enclaves surrounded by one of the fastest growing third world cities on the planet. The city of angels. Hard or soft g? Study leave in simulacra? On my 1981 leave the Brixton riots broke out a few days after I arrived in London. I'm not paranoid. Where is that remote control? Yo, time for the footy.

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