CHAPTER 4

“Does it Explode?”: Ghettoization and Rioting in New York City and Los Angeles

The rioting that threw into startling relief the economic disparity and racial tensions in cities during the late 1980s and early 1990s had an almost comical beginning. In 1988 NYPD personnel, trying to enforce a 1:00 A.M. curfew in the East Village’s Tompkins Square Park, found themselves besieged by a motley crowd “of antigentrification protestors, punks, housing activists, park inhabitants, artists, Saturday-night revelers, and Lower East Side residents.”\(^1\) Lasting about three hours, when the police withdrew,\(^2\) this melee was grounded in the simmering antagonism about living conditions for lower-income residents and the “rampant gentrification of the Lower East Side.”\(^3\) Three years later, the outrage, recrimination, and violence that embroiled the NYPD and African Americans and Lubavitchers (Hasidic Jews) in Brooklyn’s Crown Heights was anything but humorous. Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old immigrant from Guyana, was killed when the “three-car procession carrying the Lubavitchers Hasidic rebbe (spiritual leader) ran a red light, hit another car, and swerved onto the sidewalk.”\(^4\) Later that night came the presumably retributive stabbing of Yankel Rosenbaum, a Hasidic scholar from Australia who had not been involved in Cato’s death but who nevertheless died from the wounds. The NYPD was blamed by the African American community for letting the rebbe’s motorcade drive recklessly and censured by the Jewish community when the African American accused of Rosenbaum’s death was acquitted. Unfortunately, the tragic incidents of Crown Heights of 1991 proved to be prologue to the “explosion of interracial violence which during three days of burning, looting, and killing laid waste to parts of South-Central Los Angeles” in April of 1992.\(^5\) Triggered by the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD)
officers caught beating Rodney King on videotape by George Holliday, the rioting had a complex exigency located in the history of racism in Los Angeles. Notably, many incidents of the rioting played out—live—on nightly newscasts, like an epilogue for urbanism.

This chapter begins with a recounting of the incidents that beleaguered New York City and Los Angeles in the last decades of the century not because they have already slipped from memory, though the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have, no doubt, supplanted rioting in thoughts about urban tragedy in the United States. Rather, the chapter begins from this history because the rioting produced a moment of rupture in the history of urbanism. The rioting thrust words like “ghetto” and “slum” and phrases like “South Central” and “inner-city” into the national vocabulary in ways that nothing had previously. Prompted by televised images of buildings on fire and looters hauling plunder through streets and the LAPD assaulting an African American, Americans everywhere found themselves talking about what the inequities revealed by the riots meant for the future. Writing about the 1993 riots in Bombay, India, Jim Masselos, offers language that just as effectively describes what happened across the United States: “the riots revealed as particularly fragile . . . all those tacit assumptions, those accepted and unarticulated norms about the nature of urban living, which enable a city to function.”

This anxious introspection about urbanism played out in New York City and Los Angeles and elsewhere as arguments emerged about how to describe what occurred—rioting or uprising?—and how to go forward. Not surprisingly, a number of playwrights found themselves confronting the same question, including Djanet Sears in Harlem Duet and Anna Deavere Smith in Twilight Los Angeles, 1992. Demystifying the long, tangled history of racism and urbanism these plays stage the exigency and the legacy of the demands for social justice and racial equality that were, in the estimation of many, behind the rioting. Among the questions posed by the plays are these: what does it mean psychologically to live in the most inhospitable corners of the metropolis? And what sustains the racial divisions evident in urbanism that are tantamount to segregation?

In asking these questions, Harlem Duet and Twilight Los Angeles, 1992 stand on the considerable shoulders of Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, which debuted in 1959. The Younger family’s tenement apartment in Chicago’s Southside, in fact, becomes an illustration of the urban enclaves—defined here as communities sharing, or trapped within, the same space and same socioeconomic horizons—considered in this chapter. When Ruth announces her farewell to the apartment, she captures the humiliation and demoralization felt by the family: “If this is my time in life—MY TIME—to say good-bye—to these goddamned cracking walls!—and these marching