Study Questions: *Twilight: Los Angeles*

**Sense of Identity/Forming a Community:**

The words *community* and *communicate* both come from a Latin word that means “to make public or common.” What role does communication play in the building of a community? In keeping a community together?

Like individuals, communities and nations have identities. What kind of identity would you create for Los Angeles today? 20 years ago?

In the first part of the 20th century, Mexican Americans were one of several minorities living in a community where 95 percent of the housing was closed to them. What does it mean to live in a community where most of the city is open only to “white Americans”?

In his book on Los Angeles, published in 1935, Harry Carr describes the neighborhoods that were home to Chinese, Japanese, Jews, African Americans, Filipinos, and Mexican Americans as “foreign colonies.” What does this suggest about the way he divided the city between us and them? Who were the us and the them? How does this affect a sense of community?

**Stereotypes/Invisibility**

Carey McWilliams described two stereotypes prevalent in Los Angeles in the 1930's and ‘40's:

One is the working-class kind of stereotype. It’s the group that comes in and lacks the skills, the education, the background . . . So you exclude them. You give them the undesirable jobs, and you sort them out, residentially and otherwise. . . And of course, you fashion a stereotype to justify what you’ve done and to perpetuate it . . .

And then there is another kind of stereotype. It involves another kind of minority. And you say of this kind of minority, “They’re too smart. They’re too clever. They’re too resourceful. They’re too clannish.” It’s a stereotype, but it’s quite a different kind . . . because it has to rationalize a different kind of situation.

To what groups in Los Angeles do you think McWilliams was referring? What does this suggest about the effect of both positive and negative stereotypes?

Author Ralph Ellison wrote that as an African American “I am invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed everything and anything except me.”

What does it mean to be “invisible”? Who is “invisible” today? What is the danger to the community as a whole when individuals are “invisible”?

**Importance of Naming**

Given their backgrounds, people refer to disturbances, like the one in Watts in 1965 and the more recent one in Los Angeles in 1992, by different names: “riots,” “rebellions” or “revolutions,”
“urban explosions,” or “uprising,” among others. How important are the names we give an event? To what extent do the names we give an event shape the way we view that event?

Issues Raised in *Twilight: Los Angeles*

Josie Morales, witness to beating of Rodney King, says, “The video doesn’t show you where those officers went and assaulted Rodney King at the beginning.” The surveillance tape also doesn’t show why Soon Ja Du was so frightened that she pulled a gun on a 15-year-old girl. To what extent do videos “tell all”? To what extent do they influence what we believe happened? What might witnesses like Josie Morales add to the story? What does knowing more about the context in which the event took place add to the story?

The Rodney King tape was shown on the national news 87 times within a 13-month period. Still shots from the tape appeared in newspapers and magazines. How do you think the images shown on the tape shaped the way people viewed events in Los Angeles in 1992? The way people decided who was a victim? A perpetrator? A bystander?

According to the writer James Baldwin, “history is literally present in all that we do.” The past certainly shapes the way Rudy Salas, Sr., views events in Los Angeles. History is also present in the way other characters view the world. How do you think the personal experiences of other characters have shaped their views of Los Angeles, the police, city leaders? How might their experiences have shaped the choices the jurors made in the Simi Valley trial? How did history influence the way African Americans responded to the verdict?

What does *TLA* suggest about the idea that events like the “zoot-suit riots” or the “Watts riots” are now over and don’t need to be remembered again? What is the danger in disregarding the past?

In reflecting on the Soon Ja Du case, Samuel Pillsbury, a law professor, says that “fear drives racism and other prejudices.” How did fear drive Soon Ja Du? How does it drive other individuals in *TLA*? What does this suggest about the dangers of viewing others as stereotypes rather than as individuals?

Maxine Waters refers to riots as the “voice of the unheard.” How do people in Los Angeles or any community get heard? How can they express their outrage? What happens when voices are silenced and concerns discounted? How can listening lead to understanding?

Several characters refer to *us* and *them*. How do characters like Katie Miller and others use the words *we* and *they*? How do stereotypes create distance between *us* and *them*? What stereotypes are imbedded in those pronouns? What does it take to break those stereotypes?