

Korean American Relations From the Korean War to Obama

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Introduction

In his 1989 film “Do the Right Thing,” Spike Lee portrayed the Korean African American conflict through middle-aged, single male characters Coconut Sid, ML, Sweet Dick Willy and a Korean husband and wife pair Sonny and Kim. In one instance Spike Lee shows the tensions inherent in the Korean merchant/African American consumer relationship when he had Sid interact with Sonny at the latter’s store. Sonny cynically stares at Sid when he patronized his store and abrasively says, “no free beer” in his broken English. In the penultimate scene of the film, Lee showed how these tensions could lead to violence as Sweet Dick Willy, Sid, and ML confronted Sonny and Kim and threaten to burn their store to the ground.

Lee’s portrayal of tension between both communities was apt for its contemporaneous time period, and was prescient in predicting the future. First, Lee showed how Korean Americans were inept at communicating effectively with African Americans through his portrayal of Sonny speaking in broken English to Sid. Second, the film showed how Koreans were distrustful of African Americans when it showed Sonny watchfully protecting his store while suspiciously eying Sid to make sure that he did not steal anything. Finally, the film showed how extreme tensions between Koreans and African Americans can actually become violent through its portrayal of potential confrontation.

Much like Spike Lee did in *Do the Right Thing*, I will try to assess the causes of the Korean/African American conflict. I will attempt to show the past, present, and future of African American and Korean American relations in major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Yet because the largest and most significant

manifestation of violence occurred in Los Angeles, CA, I dedicate a disproportionately large amount of time to that area. Throughout my paper, I have used secondary sources from scholars who had already studied the conflict, however, I have primarily studied contemporaneous newspaper articles from major publications like the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times as well as local, ethnic media outlets such as the Korea Times and the Los Angeles Sentinel. I have determined that these contemporaneous voices are necessary for accurately determining the causes of conflict between both ethnic groups as they had not been filtered by any retrospective analysis. Moreover, I have also interviewed members of both communities in order to better understand the dynamics of the relationship between African Americans and Korean Americans.

Before studying the intergroup relationship between Koreans and African Americans, let us study the process that enabled both ethnic groups to interact with each other – Korean immigration into the United States. In 1903, the first group of Koreans entered the United States. Fifty-six men, twenty-one women, and twenty-five children arrived in Honolulu Harbor aboard the SS Gaelic on January 13th, 1903. In the next two years, 7226 Korean immigrants arrived in the United States. Yet Korean immigration to the United States soon ebbed in the first 62 years of their presence in America. Between 1903 and 1965, the United States government implemented racially discriminatory measures that inhibited non-European migration into America. For instance, the 1924 Immigration Act (otherwise known as the Oriental Exclusion Act) implicitly denied Asians from immigrating into the United States with a provision that the total green cards given by the United States government must be “distributed among the different quota

nationalities in the proportions which the inhabitants of continental United States having each national origin in 1920 bear to the total population in 1920". Thus with its intentions of perpetuating contemporaneous racial demographic numbers from a time period when whites made up the vast majority of the American population, the United States' government showed that it was unwilling to compromise America's Caucasian supermajority.

As a result of racially discriminatory policies enacted by the United States government, Koreans made up a negligible proportion of the overall American population for the first two thirds of the country's history. Yet this changed in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration Reform Act, which was inarguably the most effective measure in facilitating Asian immigration into the United States. Before this act had passed, Asian immigration to the United States amounted to a tiny fraction of today's numbers. In fact, the Korean population in the United States before 1969 only numbered 17,869. Yet in 1979, when the Immigration Reform Act had been in place for fourteen years, Koreans had numbered 233,090. By the next two decades, Koreans had increased their numbers from negligible sums to becoming the :”third largest immigrant group following Mexicans and Filipinos, with their peak immigration years in the late 1980s”.

Because 1965 signaled a tide of Korean American emigration into the United States, one may be tempted to label it as the year when African American and Korean American relations began. Indeed, one may think that the influx of Korean immigrants into the United States initiated social interactions between both races as Koreans would literally live down the street from African Americans as opposed to five thousand miles and an ocean away. Yet many Koreans were already exposed to a certain

image of African Americans – an image that would sour their intergroup relations when Koreans would later enter the United States. Thus in order to develop a better context of Korean and African American relations post 1965, one must first look back to the 1950s.

(Figure 1)

Chapter 1: From Korea to America: Negative Perceptions of African Americans Among Korean Natives

Hines Ward

On April 4th, 2006 Hines Ward - the half Korean and half African American superbowl Most Valuable Player – arrived in Seoul, Korea for the first time in over twenty years. He was received with adulation and approbation only reserved for a national hero – even given the rare and coveted honorary Korean citizenship by Korean President Roh Moo Hyung. Yet although Ward was treated like a demigod upon his return to the nation of his birth, he did not always feel an affinity to his Korean nationality and ethnicity. In fact, Ward actually claimed that he had always been considered an outcast in the Korean American community – claiming that he had to “overcome a lot, being teased a lot by American kids about [his] being 50 percent Korean, being 50 percent African American.” Moreover, he claimed that his new acceptance into the Korean community was a very recent phenomenon, for he said that the “Korean community has supported my mother and I for the first time in my life” after his winning the Superbowl MVP.

Hines Ward serves as a perfect allegory to the Korean-African American conflict. Born into a mixed marriage between a Korean mother and an African American General Infantryman father, his mother was “subjected to harsh intolerance.” Ward recounted how his mother felt that “[mixed blood children] were treated like dogs.” Yet when his mother tried to escape the prejudices of Korea by emigrating to the United States, Ward only found more prejudice – making him shun his Korean heritage and Korean identity. In order to better understand the trajectory of the Korean-African American conflict, one

must begin by studying the birthplace of the conflict – which is incidentally the same birthplace as the 2006 Superbowl MVP – the Republic of Korea.

Media Portrayal of African Americans

Visual and audio media leave indelible impressions on young children. Indeed, when children are exposed to a reality presented on television or audio, they oftentimes internalize that reality – thinking that it is an accurate reflection of the real world. The effect of this is even greater when a dominant culture or nation-state has exclusive power of media representation over a subjugated power. Indeed, scholarship in this arena has recently emerged – calling this phenomenon “media hegemony.” Media hegemony asserts that a presenter from a dominant society (such as the United States in the Korean War) would effectively spread its prevalent values and social realities through its presentation of reality to the subjugated state (such a South Korea in the Korean War). Because the Korean War was such a critical part in repelling the communist sphere of influence beyond the Soviet Union and China, the United States made it a priority to convince as many Koreans to join its cause through an extensive propaganda campaign during and after the Korean War. Thus the United States in 1950 embarked on an extensive project designed to spread positive information about capitalism and democracy through print and visual media. Moreover, the United States saw the economic weakness within Korea as a conduit for rapid and effective propaganda dissemination. In other words, the material deprivation suffered by Koreans meant that America was able to assert itself as the hegemonic power in this two-state relations and easily impress its desired culture upon Korean denizens. According to Charles Armstrong of the Journal of Asians Studies, American State and Defense Department officials saw

Korea as “society with a large and unsophisticated agrarian population” which was “unusually susceptible [to communist propaganda] and which had to be countered with a vigorous indoctrination and education campaign on the American side ”

Part of this propaganda campaign to show positive features of American life was to showcase the archetypal American family. Shows like “Leave it To Beaver” and “Ozzie and Harriet”, which were broadcasted in Korea through the American Foreign Korean Network, showed a caucasian nuclear family that showcased an idealization of American family life. According to the “Journal of Marriage and Family,” these images were especially effective for children, for children post Korean War were shocked and devastated from a war that had destroyed their livelihoods – often taking family members and friends. Moreover, children, with their limited life experiences, were much more malleable and impressionable than adults – giving television and radio a wide demographic in which to impress ideals. Thus these images of family stability and relative material wealth effectively showed children a lifestyle that would have been unreachable, yet nonetheless desirable. Indeed, in an article published by the “Journal of Marriage and Family,” a white American nuclear family – similar to the ones shown in Leave it to Beaver and Ozzie and Harriet became the projection of America itself. Contemporaneous interviews with Koreans during the running of the popular American series “Leave it to Beaver” suggested that Korean children internalized images from the show and made them congruent with being an American. For instance, in an interview with a Korean child named Hoa, “who previously contrasted his family with the one depicted on Leave it to Beaver” said that he loved his dad but lamented the fact that they “never got a chance to play catch [...] all the stuff a normal dad does for their kids”.

If one can see the power that projecting positive American stereotypes of normalcy had on Korean children, one can similarly see the power of projecting deleterious stereotypes of abnormal or undesirable behavior. Undesirable elements of material poverty and ignorance – elements that an impoverished and war-torn country so desperately tried to distance itself from – were tied to African Americans through media outlets. Indeed, Amos and Andy shamelessly presented the African American as crude, inept, and subservient to whites. This radio program featured two white voice actors playing Amos and Andy who changed their voices to imitate an African American tone of voice. They oftentimes presented plots that would show their African American characters to be utterly antisocial – finding themselves in situations which would have presented them to be out of touch with mainstream American life. Moreover, these actors showed themselves to be grammatically incompetent, short-tempered, and violent. For example, in a dialogue between both characters discussing their romantic relationships, Amos and Andy discussed in a grammatically inept fashion the value of physically assaulting a recalcitrant lover :

Andy: You can't just walk up to a gal an' sock her in de nose. You gotta know how to do it.

Amos: How do yo' it?

Andy: Well – yo' see a gal an' yo' stand her up in front of yo' den you say Sock! Right in de nose – den you say “Wait a minute, baby, wait a minute – don't git mad now – pap loves yo' – but don't mess wid papa

In fact, the NAACP found this portrayal of African Americans to be so repugnant that they launched a publicity protest in 1952 denouncing its continued dissemination., in a memo produced by future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP saw the portrayal of African Americans on the radio program to be so deleterious to the African American public perception that it stated, “we [the NAACP] should stick to our guns that ‘Amos and Andy’ and everything like it has to go” Yet in spite of this protest, the American Forces Korean Network, which was primarily responsible for disseminating American television and radio programs into the Republic of Korea during the Korean War included racially insensitive shows like Amos and Andy into its lineup. In fact, according to a 1952 broadcast schedule from the Far East Division of the American Forces Network, Amos and Andy occupied a spot between the 8:00PM broadcast of Steve Allen and the 9:00PM news.

SUNDAY – 6 JAN, 1952

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE UNIT # 541

* 11:15 ORGAN REVERIES SEGUE . * 8:00 STEVE ALLEN 10

* 11:30 PIANO PLAYHOUSE 62 . * 8:25 ONE FOR THE BOOK 199

* 12:00 THE AIR FORCE HOUR 127 . * 8:30 AMOS AND ANDY 201

* 12:30 NEWS LIVE . (8:30 TURKISH NEWS on JKI) S/W(BBC)

* 12:45 AT EASE 1628-A . (8:45 JUST BETWEEN US on JKI) 125

* 1:00 SYMPHONETTE 45 . * 9:00 NEWS LIVE

(Figure 2)

The negative stereotypes shown by radio programs like Amos and Andy had

perhaps far-reaching effects on the Korean perception of African Americans. In 1995 thirty first generation Korean American immigrants were randomly selected to take place in a survey meant to find out their “recollections or impressions [of African-Americans] at the time of arrival in the United States.” The mean age of participants was 46 years – meaning that this survey was centered on adults who were small children at the time of the Korean War. According to the results of this survey, 66% expressed negative feelings towards African Americans – with the most popular sentiments being the African American’s presumed “dangerousness and criminality.” Moreover many of the Koreans surveyed attributed their “adverse reference to skin color” to media images disseminated to them before they arrived in the United States. As one participant recounts, “Before I got to know them like this (through daily interactions), I thought they were dangerous people. The only things I knew about them came from the media.”

The internalization of these stereotypes were not only present in recently arrived immigrants to the United States, but can also be seen amongst South Koreans today. In a project designed to improve the South Korean public’s perception of African Americans, Boston University Professor Myung Ja Kim attempted to teach her students African American literature when she was a visiting professor in Korea. She reasoned that exposing her students to the canon of African American literature – such as Toni Morrison and W.E.B Dubois would enlighten her students on the nuances causing racial conflict in America as well as give them a more dignified view of African Americans. Yet before she began teaching her course, Kim knew that she would be facing nearly the nearly insurmountable obstacle of dispelling preconceived notions of African American life. Indeed, according to a survey conducted in 1999, “racial and national preferences of

Korean college students show that Africans and African Americans are the least preferred groups for Koreans either as friends or as marriage partners.” Kim attributed this phenomenon to the “images and representations in global media” that put African Americans in a pejorative light.

(Figure 3 – Two black-faced Caucasian actors playing Amos and Andy)

Chapter 2: The Causes of Black – Korean Tension in American Inner Cities

Communication Breakdown Between African Americans and Korean Americans

Upon entering the United States many different obstacles stood in the way of Koreans fully integrating into the American mainstream. One of the main impediments standing in the way between African Americans and Korean Americans was the language barrier. In fact, in 1986, the United States Civil Rights Commission – which was tasked to evaluate contributing factors to Korean and black conflict in major American inner cities – stated that “much of the tension has been because of the language barrier between residents and the Korean immigrants.” Indeed, the inability to speak English was the main reason why Koreans came to impoverished inner city neighborhoods, for even Koreans who were well educated in their motherland oftentimes could not secure a job that would pay enough to escape low cost living conditions. When Koreans entered the United States during the most prominent immigration wave of the 1970s, fewer than 18.6% of all Koreans identified themselves as “fluent” or “near fluent” speakers of English while the remainder considered themselves “about half,” “somewhat,” or “not at all” proficient in the English language. This number improved very little in the following 20 years as a 1990 survey reprising the same questions found only 24% of Koreans spoke English very well while 96% confessed to only speaking Korean in lieu of English at home.

Yet the language barrier was not the only way in which effective communication between Koreans and African Americans broke down. Through comparing the pedagogical and parenting methods of Korea versus the United States and Great Britain, I postulate that it was the practices of the Korean education system and family structure

that contributed to their behavior in the United States – and their inability to communicate effectively with African Americans. Before Korean immigrants came to America, they were forced to internalize the cultural mores and norms of their homeland. In homes and schools in Korea, children and students were indoctrinated with the ideals of introspectiveness versus sociability. Yet in the United States, children were taught the importance of sociability in being successful. Indeed, these differences can be seen in a sociological survey contrasting educational practices in Korea versus practices in the Anglophone world. According to Young Ihm Kwon of the journal “Comparative Education,” a major difference that she saw when comparing students from the Anglophone world versus Korea was the role of the instructor in school. While Britain and the United States had an archetypal teacher who is “less authoritative, a facilitator who respects individual children’s interests and differences,” Korea has an archetypal teacher who is “more authoritative, an instructor rather than facilitator who puts less emphasis on individual children’s needs and interests.” Thus the Anglophone teacher would have been more sensitive a child’s emotional development over Koreans – who apparently thought it far more important to instill a good work ethic early on. Furthermore, this key difference in pedagogical methods made Korean teachers less likely than their Anglophone counterparts to use child-directed group project activities in the preschool and primary school educational setting. While 54.9% of teachers in Anglophone countries used child-directed activities “very frequently,” only 29.8% of Korean teachers did. Moreover, while only 8.8% of teachers from Anglophone countries used adult directed whole class activities “very frequently,” 40.% of Korean teachers did. Finally, Korean teachers were far more likely than their counterparts in Anglophone

countries in instilling a competitive rather than cooperative environment of learning. While 51.2% of Korean teachers strongly agreed with the belief that it was important to use competition amongst students to motivate their pupils, only 6.6% of teachers from Anglophone nations believed so – favoring instilling cooperation instead. Not only did Koreans show their cultural differences with Americans in the classroom, but they also did so at home. In Korean culture, the parent is much more authoritative and strict than in American culture. This was attributed to Confucianism's imprimatur on Korean culture as it dictated that the "father was to be somewhat emotionally distant from their offspring." As a result, Korean children were discouraged from interacting informally with their parents – in fact even eye contact between parent and child was discouraged in Korea. While these cultural differences may seem insignificant, they actually contributed to a chasm between Koreans and African Americans in the United States as Koreans carried these cultural norms into their adulthood in America. According to Young Key Kim-Renaud who was in charge of Korean studies at George Washington, Koreans were perceived by African Americans as emotionally detached, overly competitive, and seemingly insincere – a direct reflection of the cultural values that they were taught in the classroom back in the motherland. Indeed, Kim Renaud said, in accounting for the myriad of cultural differences between America and Korea, that "according to Confucian rules of behavior, to show one's emotions readily trivializes them [...], and aiming one's eyes down is a means of showing respect."

Another factor that lead to significant communication breakdown between Koreans and African Americans was the psychological distress that Koreans faced when conducting their day to day affairs. This distress arose primarily from their long work

hours. In order to make a living in the United States, Koreans were forced to work long hours in harsh conditions. Even though Koreans oftentimes achieved a high level of education before they emigrated to the United States –70% of Korean immigrants to America had a college degree or higher – the language barrier meant that they were relegated to self employment in Laundromats and liquor stores rather than white collar jobs. Moreover, Korean merchants, who had very often had less risk capital than what would be necessary to purchase land on their own, were renters in communities with steep commercial monthly rent. Thus Koreans on average worked at least 60 hours a week in order to support their families and cover the rents – depriving them of leisure opportunities while relegating them to constant high stress levels. Another contributor to stress for Koreans was the constant threat of physical violence that they faced. They were more predisposed to incidences of racial hatred. In fact, according to a criminology survey referenced by the Harvard Law Review, Asians in major cities such as Philadelphia and Boston, “suffered a higher per capita rate of hate crimes than any other race.” As a result of stressors such as long working hours and incessant paranoia over being victims to physical violence, Koreans “scored highest among four asian groups on a depression scale”. These incidences of physical stress not only took their toll on Korean American merchants and their families, but they also inhibit healthy interaction between the Korean merchants and their predominantly African American patrons. Indeed, in a study published in the “Annual Review of Sociology,” the direct relationship between social interaction and stress were “reciprocal relationships: causal influence goes from (social) support to mental health and vice versa.” In other words, in addition to the finding that the less one engaged in healthy social relationships, the more physical stress

one would experience, the study asserted that the more physical stress one had, the less sociable he would become.

Newspapers and surveys corroborated the notion that the language barrier, differences in educational practices, and psychological stress amongst Korean Americans were largely to blame for acrimony between Koreans and African Americans in the United States. Although there were undeniably feelings of racism amongst blacks and Korean Americans, incidences of conflict between members of both the African Americans and Korean American show that it was the three abovementioned factors that most contributed to the communication breakdown between both ethnic groups – fueling mutual animosity. First, many African Americans expressed their opinion that Korean Americans were cold and resistant towards making interpersonal relationships with others – reflecting the lack of sociability in the Korean cultural value system. According to a Washington Post article, one African American patron was stunned when a Korean store owner said “thank you” to him – declaring it to be a “relatively new” development. Second African Americans found Korean’s lack of English to be irksome when completing business transactions – an alderman from Washington DC lamented that “most problems (of racial violence between Koreans and African Americans) stem from the inability of Korean Americans to understand English. Third, blacks complained about the lack of eye contact between Korean store owners and African American patrons when making transactions – taking it as a lack of respect and a sign of arrogance while not understanding the deep cultural mores dictating such a practice. While Dr. Kim-Renaud asserted that such a practice actually indicated respect, some black patrons saw it as simply “just rude.” Finally, African Americans found Korean’s incessant paranoia over

potential thefts from blacks to be distressing. This was best manifested in an incident between an African American consumer and a Korean shop owner of Red Apple convenience store in Bronx, New York. The Korean – Pong Ok Jong had accused the Haitian immigrant named Gisleaine Felissainte of stealing products from the store. Yet instead of fixing the problem through dialogue, Jong grabbed Felissainte’s purse while Felissainte threw a red pepper at the owner. A fight ensued – leading to assault charges on Jong. Not only were these disparate voices and incidents evidence of the deleterious consequences of a communication breakdown between Koreans and African Americans, but surveys conducted within the African American community confirmed black aversion to communicating with Koreans. According to a survey conducted in June 1988 by Byron O Jackson, 65% of African Americans were less likely to interact with Korean Americans because they felt that Koreans did not treat African Americans with respect while 74% thought that Koreans cared more about profits than people, and 53% felt that Koreans cared more for their goods than do owners of other small businesses. In another survey asking African Americans about their opinion of how racial animosity arose within Korean and black communities, the option of “(lack of) communication and culture” scored the plurality of the votes – trumping Korean attitudes, customer-merchant relations, exploitation and discrimination, and even the notorious Latasha Harlin’s murder. Finally, in a survey asking 58 African Americans and 21 Korean American whether there was a “communication problem between Korean Americans and African Americans,” 56 of the former responded “yes” while 18 of the latter claimed the same.

Economics and the Korean-Black Conflict

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, America was undergoing a catastrophic

economic recession where millions struggled to find stable jobs that would accommodate a living wage. Unemployment skyrocketed while total wages fell as America remained mired in double digit inflation between 1979 and 1981. Yet African Americans as a group suffered disproportionately compared to their white counterpart in this environment. This was most true in major cities across America – especially in Los Angeles and New York. In a survey detailing the disparity between African American and white male adults in inner city Los Angeles, blacks on average made \$15,700 while their white counterparts made \$23,000 on average – a total income disparity of 32%. Even worst was the unemployment rate. To cut costs, many large firms in the United States – especially in the manufacturing sector – cut jobs in South Los Angeles and New York City. In doing so, they were hurting African American and Latin Americans the worst. South Los Angeles lost 70,000 high-wage, stable jobs between 1978 and 1982.” Indeed, “major companies such as General Motors, Goodyear, Firestone and Bethlehem Steel closed plants in and around the area” – resulting in a loss of a total of 321 plants or industries in about a 15 year period. As a result of this mass exodus of employment from South Los Angeles, unemployment amongst African American adults aged 20-64 numbered a monstrous 41 percent at its peak.

Amid this depression, African Americans had negative perceptions of Koreans. Perhaps because they were stunned at the relative wealth of recent newcomers to America – especially compared to the desperate living conditions of their own communities – African Americans had an exaggerated view of Korean wealth in the United States. One African newspaper claimed that “many [Korean-owned] businesses grossed in excess of 1 million dollars annually, with some of them reaching the 2 million

dollar mark on an annual basis.” Yet these exaggerations were so detached from reality that one may even declare them to be completely apocryphal. In fact, Koreans were considered to be the poorest of the East Asians who immigrated to the United States – in a 1990 US Census, Koreans on average made 33,909 dollars and had a poverty rate of 13.7%. Yet the median income of whites was 4000 dollars higher at 37,630 while the white poverty rate was 10% lower.

Even though Koreans were clearly not wealthy, they nonetheless were able to fare much better in the American economy than African Americans for a myriad of reasons. First, Koreans had a cost efficient way of acquiring loans from within their own communities. While African Americans largely relied on banks for loans – succumbing to their high interest rates in the process, Koreans were able to rely on a system called the “Kye” or rotating credit. A wealthy individual or a group of creditors would loan a large sum of money to group of eight to eleven individuals in need of credit – usually friends or extended family members. The group of debtors would all collectively benefit from the monies accrued if they made profits, and would all share in the liability of business failures. Moreover, there would usually be no collateral necessary for receiving the payments, for the creditors would simply rely on his creditor financial resources, steadiness of income, and reputation for meeting his obligations.” Yet because creditors were “usually neighbors, relatives, or business associates,” the incentive to default was low as one would not want to lose his social standing in the community and become a pariah. Second, Koreans already had risk capital before entering the United States – making them much more likely to be able to put a down payment on a home or a storefront. Although immigration reform in 1965 sought to make America’s immigration

policy more racially equitable, it nonetheless did not eradicate monetary discrimination. Koreans who were better educated, who had higher earning potential, and who had greater savings were much more likely to gain entry visas in the United States as opposed to those who were lesser educated and wealthy. In a study conducted by RJ Harrison, the “high educational attainment (and relatively high socio-economic status) could have been attributed to the result of Asian immigration selectivity” as “most Asians enter (the United States) under high educational selectivity.” Finally Koreans suffered less than blacks from the economic recession because they occupied a business niche that was not as affected by the recession. While African Americans were employed in the manufacturing sector the economy – primarily building heavy machinery such as autoparts, Korean Americans were self employed in the entrepreneurial sector the economy – occupying small storefront businesses. During the late 1970s, large overseas companies such as Toyota and Honda were producing vehicles through a much more cost-efficient method. As a result, American consumers were much more likely to purchase foreign-made vehicles and thus forced cuts on domestic auto production companies. In addition to foreign competition forcing cuts on major American firms, undocumented and legal aliens were able to find themselves employed in the remaining jobs at a significantly lower cost to the owner. Indeed, while foreign born Hispanics composed 5% of the manufacturing workforce in Los Angeles in 1970, they increased their share of this niche to 20% in 1990! Thus African Americans who were employed in these jobs often bore the brunt of layoffs and jobs cuts. This was best evidenced by the transition of African Americans out of the heavy manufacturing industry in only 20 years. While they composed 6.0% of manufacturing in 1970, they only composed 4.8% of the

industry in 1990. Yet Koreans were largely self-employed in their own businesses – in fact by 1990, an astronomical 35% of Koreans were self-employed in Los Angeles – two times higher than the next highest ethnic group, Indians. This was beneficial to the Korean-American community's economic health because the self-employed retail sector of “mom and pop stores” survived the economic recession of the 1980s relatively intact. Indeed “incorporated self employment experienced the highest growth of any industrial class in the twenty year period” between 1970-1990.

Because Koreans were growing economically while Blacks were suffering, and because they both occupied the same urban spaces, Koreans and African Americans were bound for conflict. Koreans and blacks were angry at each other because they were competing for scarce resources. As mentioned, African American unemployment was extremely high during the early 1980s, yet at the same time, Koreans were purchasing stores in areas where African American businesses had once thrived. These practices meant that African Americans were literally being pushed out of their communities if Koreans so desired to move in. According to Moon H Jo, the segregation under pre-Civil Rights America was actually beneficial to some African American entrepreneurs as it gave African American merchants an “essentially captive black customer base.” Thus black small business owners were able to maintain “various businesses, such as small hotels, funeral parlors, beauty salons, grocery stores, and other small scale businesses.” Yet one must note that they were not able to generate large amounts of profit because they were oftentimes operating only marginally above the shutdown price or the level at the marginal costs were greater than the marginal revenue. However, when Korean businesses arose in African American communities, they were willing to work for

seventy hours per week while saving costs by employing their own family members. As a consequence, Koreans were able to thrive off of formerly owned African American businesses. According to an NAACP estimate conducted in 1988, Koreans owned 70% of the gas stations in South Central Los Angeles and 33% of the liquor stores. As African Americans were unable to compete with the low prices offered by their Korean counterparts, and because they saw the monetary value of their stores in South Los Angeles decline precipitously due to the surrounding economic recession, many African Americans were “forced to find other forms of employment” or “leave their communities in order to seek professional or other economic opportunities elsewhere.”

Yet competition over scarce resources is insufficient for accounting for all the frustrations amongst African Americans towards Koreans. Koreans bore the brunt of resentment from African Americans as they occupied the “middle-minority” socio-economic niche in urban areas such as Washington DC, New York City, and Los Angeles. Before one could fully understand the middleman minority role, he must define it and see how it functioned in creating ethnic instability in the past. It was coined in the 20th century as a way to define an ethnic group that neither occupied the lowest or highest rungs of a nation-state – almost exclusively focusing on “trade, commerce [...] labor contracting, rent collecting, and money lending.” Examples of middlemen minority groups in history where the “Chinese in Southeast Asia, Asians in East Africa, Armenians in Turkey, Syrians in West Africa, and the Parsis in India.”

Why were these groups relegated to their intermediary status in their societies? According to Edna Bonacich of the *American Sociology Review*, who helped coin the term in the 1970s, middlemen minorities all shared three different characteristics that

both protected them from the poverty of more impoverished ethnic group yet inhibited them from joining the highest earning ethnic groups in a society or nation-state. First, middlemen minority groups were socially isolated from the mainstream society and traditionally “had no desire for full participation in the community life of his adopted land.” Indeed, “middlemen minorities typically evinced the following traits: a resistance to out-marriage, residential segregation, the establishment of language and cultural schools for their children, and the maintenance of distinctive cultural traits.” Second, because they were not “hung up” on the social status of the surrounding society, they were free to “trade or deal with anyone” – making them effective buffers of the socio-economic elite as they were “bearing the brunt of mass hostility” from lower social classes. Finally, middlemen minorities had an affinity towards hiring extended family members or family friends over strangers. Thus in exchange for room and board, these employees worked “excessively long hours with little wages” and were “loyal to the owners [as they anticipated becoming profit sharing] partners in the future.” While this policy often protected against misfortunes in the marketplace – for it guaranteed a loyal clan of employees, it also made future economic growth unlikely as one would be hesitant towards hiring employees outside of his family or his social group.

However, Ms. Bonacich also warned of the potential problems for racial tensions when one occupied the middleman minority niche. First, the middleman minority group oftentimes had conflict with its clientele group. Many times, the middleman minority did not actually provoke conflicts with more economically impoverished ethnic groups, however, their close proximity to the work and residential communities of opposing ethnic groups made them attractive “scapegoats for the real villains.” In a telling

example from South Africa, Bonacich explains how its middleman minority group – the Indians – were victims of much resentment from the black majority. Because apartheid meant that nonwhites would occupy outside townships as opposed to urban areas, blacks had very little interaction with whites. Thus they took out their frustrations against the Indians who were marginally better off than them. Second, middlemen minority groups had conflicts with existing businesses in areas they were occupying. The minority group that had occupied an area would have more than likely built strong ties with the surrounding community. Yet if an oppositional ethnic group would move in, it would oftentimes buy existing businesses at a lower cost and thus sever ties between merchants and community members. Finally, middlemen minority groups had conflicts with the labor pool in the areas that they were occupying. While the middleman minority employer was accustomed to a cheap and loyal labor force, the surrounding community of employees found this relationship to be unsavory and “paternalistic” as they were unwilling to “work long hours at low pay” for an employer whom they were not related to.

Ms. Bonacich’s article on the Middleman Minority, which was published in 1973, was written before the genesis of mass Korean immigration into the United States. In fact, it never actually mentioned Korean and African American hostility. Yet it was remarkably prescient in accounting for the socio-economic conflicts between African Americans and Koreans Americans in major urban areas. Both African Americans and Koreans were in conflict for precisely the same reason that Ms. Bonacich laid out. Korean Americans fit Bonacich’s three prerequisites for being classified as a middleman minority group – they were culturally isolated from mainstream American society as

evidenced by their inability to speak English fluently, they were despondent towards developing relationships with the majority ethnic group as only 21% of Koreans confessed to having white friends, and they had a strong propensity to only hire and conduct business within their own ethnic enclave as shown by a poll which stated that Koreans overwhelmingly preferred to have other Koreans working for them. Thus because Koreans were clearly middlemen minorities, they also were also susceptible to the hardships that faced this socio-economic group in the past. This animosity over Koreans' middleman minority role was exhibited in a series of interviews conducted by Ronald Weitzer of George Washington University - who published his findings in the *Sociological Quarterly* magazine in 1997. Dr. Weitzer began his article by reiterating Dr. Bonacich's belief that "immigrant middlemen typically had poor relations with the host population because of economic competition, cultural differences, and in-group solidarity." Yet he went even further in detailing the acrimony between both groups by polling 240 Korean and black merchants and discovering a wide social distance between both groups. In fact, he discovered that 72% of Korean merchants "said they felt not very close and African Americans and 52% of black merchants said the same of Koreans." Next, he randomly sampled thirty different Korean American immigrants and asked them about their opinions of African Americans and why they felt such negative feelings – exposing the inherent scorn towards the minority middleman role in the process. In one interview, a Korean merchant expressed his disbelief at the level of resentment amongst black merchants who did not appreciate the influx of Korean immigrants moving into a South Los Angeles community. He lamented on how some African American merchants would assert their own integration into the American community and juxtapose it with

the Korean merchant's inherent foreignness by expressing that some African Americans claimed, "I am an American, and you are not." In another set of two interviews with Korean grocery store owners, Weitzer was able to discover the both the ambivalence and the outright refusal of Koreans to live in predominantly African American areas. One grocery store owner claimed that:

In my neighborhood there are a couple of blacks. They are decent people, but I am concerned that my house value may drop.

Another grocery store owner claimed that:

If the (African American) neighbors are middle class, it seems all right. But still, I think there is a big cultural gap between blacks and Koreans. No matter what class they are, blacks seem to be wild and noisy. I wouldn't want them to be the majority of the neighbors.

Finally, Weitzer exposed the problems with the Korean's propensity to only hire other Koreans. In an interview of African Americans in New York City, 73% felt that it was important for Koreans to contribute economically to the community while only 14% of Koreans thought so. Even more troubling was the main impediment blocking Koreans from monetarily contributing to their place of work and residence – their reluctance to hire African Americans in their stores. One merchant claimed:

I hired a black and I trusted him enough to let him handle the register. He got into drugs and started stealing money.

Finally, he ran away with the money.

While another merchants defended his practice of exclusively hiring Korean American family members by saying:

Somehow, blacks are not so smart. It takes a long time for them to understand how the machine works, and they make too many mistakes. And they are slow. They need twice as much time as a Korean would need for the same work... when I hire them, they really appreciate it, but it doesn't last long. They start complaining and steal things.

The Korea Times Versus the The Los Angeles Sentinel

Because Koreans were not fully assimilated to American culture, they did not rely on mainstream American media when informing themselves about national and international events. Instead, they turned to local newspapers written in their native tongue. In fact, according to a 1977 survey done regarding the media habits of Korean Americans, 61.9% of recent immigrant never read American newspapers while 76.2% always read Korean-language newspapers. Yet while nationally syndicated newspapers were beholden to journalistic standards that would dissuade sensationalized reporting, local newspapers that catered to specific ethnic groups within cities and communities were inflammatory. Published editorials would oftentimes voice racially insensitive opinions about opposing cultures and ethnicities. Within both the Korean and African American community in major cities such as Los Angeles, some of the most biased press coverage came with the Korea Times and the Los Angeles Sentinel. Thus local, ethnic print press was largely to blame for exacerbating tensions between Korean Americans

and African Americans.

In 1983 – nine years before the commencement of the Los Angeles riots, Executive Editor James Cleaver from the Los Angeles Sentinel – the largest African American periodical in the country – wrote a four-part story where he interviewed African American merchants in order to better gauge the state of affairs between Korean American merchants and African American consumers. Yet instead of acquiring opinions from Korean Americans, the Sentinel merely interviewed African Americans who were angry at Korean American merchants. Moreover, the editors at the Sentinel chose to report the conflict by exclusively relying on personal stories from African American citizens who felt wronged by Asian American businesses – eschewing statistics or concrete data in the process. Indeed, one of the articles nearly focused entirely on a single episode where an African American woman expressed her grievances against the Korean American owners at a gas station in the Crenshaw area. The articles were entitled with the racist titles of “Citizens Air Gripes About Asians,” “Asian Businesses in Black Community Cause Stir,” “Asian Attitudes Toward Blacks Cause Raised Eyebrows,” and “Residents Complain About Alleged Asian ‘Problem.’” These opinions were not only disseminated to the Sentinel’s normal viewership of African Americans, but they were also disseminated to Korean Americans as “the Korea Times, a major Asian newspaper in Los Angeles, had asked for permission to reprint the series of articles which have appeared in the Los Angeles Sentinel.” This irked some members of the Korean American community as corroborated by a public hearing conducted by the Los Angeles County Human Relations commission. Tong Soo Chung, the president of the Korean American Coalition, “criticized the Sentinel series and blamed ‘misconceptions and lack

of understanding' as contributing to criticisms of Koreans.'" He further claimed that the Sentinel "failed to present both sides of the story and that the articles 'ignored completely the value of services rendered by these hardworking merchants in neighborhoods where they are largely unserved by large supermarket chains which dot the Southland.'"

The Sentinel's four part series was not simply a random vignette in the historiography of conflict between these two groups. Rather, all four exploited two motifs in order to illustrate the culpability of Koreans in the Korean-black conflict. First they showed Koreans as being racist towards African Americans in everyday personal discourse. The Sentinel did this by interviewing several African Americans of all ages and both genders about their interactions with Korean American store owners and managers. One interview highlighted the cynicism of Korean merchants in thinking that all African American patrons to his store were more likely to steal merchandise. The Sentinel published a story of a young African American woman who claimed that she had not received the proper amount of petroleum when she went to a Korean-owned gas station - saying that the gas station proprietor merely thought that she was extorting money from him because she was black. In fact, Cleaver mentions that "it is virtually impossible to keep track of the telephone calls coming to the Sentinel, complaining about the treatment of Blacks at the hands of Asian business persons in the Black community." Not only did the Sentinel show Korean racism through personal client-merchant interactions, but they also showed how Koreans practiced racism in the manner in which they ran their businesses. Editor James Cleaver lamented on how Korean businesses were using racially discriminatory practices when hiring new employees - saying that "community members are incensed by the fact that these stores do not hire blacks, even though almost all of their revenue

comes from the black community.” In addition to showing how Koreans were unwilling to hire African American employees, Cleaver showed how Koreans exercised workplace discrimination against African Americans as soon as they would acquire a new store. He told of how Koreans oftentimes did not hesitate to fire all black employees when he recounted an episode at one particular store. He reported that “the black clerks who had worked in the store for years, were all dismissed. They were given no reason for their terminations. They were just fired.”

Another motif that the articles all shared was the propensity to insinuate that Korean Americans were unethical in business practices. The August 18th article entitled “Asian Attitudes Towards Blacks Cause Raised Eyebrows” accused the Korean American community of collectively cartelizing all of their firms in order to create a monopoly – thereby destroying other businesses dominated by other ethnic groups. As a result, Cleaver concluded that Koreans were artificially raising the prices of their goods at the expense of the African American consumers who were forced to pay these higher prices. Cleaver expresses these sentiments by stating that “there is indeed a problem with the Asians operating businesses in the black community” because they have become “wealthy in a relatively short period of time, by operating at usurious prices in the black community.” Even more insulting to the Korean community was the implication that Koreans were perhaps engaging in under the table deals in order to obtain preferential treatment in gaining loans at a much lower interest rate than their black counterparts. Cleaver mused that because of “reasons that have not been determined, the banks will not lend them (African Americans) money at anywhere near the same rate as the Asians.” He further recounted how “one black liquor store owner cited that fact that he had to pay in

excess of 20 percent interest on a loan to remodel his store, while an asian, buying a liquor store just two blocks away, was able to obtain a federally guaranteed loan at an interest rate of three percent”

The black media was not the only culpable agent in exacerbating Korean and African American tensions in inner cities. On September 15th 1991 (only 8 months before the Los Angeles riots) the editors at the Korea Times, the largest Korean newspaper in Los Angeles, chose to publish an editorial where a first generation Korean immigrant named Jinah Kim expounded upon the divisive nature of interracial conflict between Koreans and blacks in South Los Angeles. She began her story by placing some of the blame for interracial conflict on the Korean American community – castigating Korean merchants for “not hir[ing] members of the [black] community or sponsor[ing] community events (amongst African Americans)” when moving into predominantly African American neighborhoods. Moreover, she sided with the late Latasha Harlins – an African American victim of a shooting by a Korean store owner named Soon Ja Du – when she claimed that “according to a police viewing of the store’s security video tape [during the killing of Harlins], it was entirely Du’s fault.” Yet her admonishments of the Korean American community ended there. When Ms. Kim framed the black-Korean conflict, she squarely placed the majority of the blame on African American customers whom she felt were unfairly harassing and terrorizing Korean American merchants. Immediately after criticizing Soon Ja Du for killing Latasha Harlins, Ms. Kim portrayed Korean American merchants as victims in their interracial conflict with African Americans – claiming that “Koreans first came to the United States with the American Dream of making money, buying a nice house, car, and sending the kids off to good

colleges (for instance UCLA). But because of their insufficient English skills, immigrants have difficulty finding a job.” Yet she labeled African Americans as perpetrators for interracial conflict between both ethnic groups - choosing to categorize African Americans as a stereotype by bluntly saying that [African Americans] “threaten them (Koreans) and steal things as a way of venting their anger against them. It even goes as far as murder.”

Rap Music and Ice Cube’s “Death Certificate”

Although community, local, and national news media outlets had inflamed passions with their biased coverage of the African-American and Korean-American conflict, they were not the most incendiary platform where one race was able to express violent sentiments about the other. Rather, that distinction belonged to hip-hop music. During the late 1980s, several rap artists exploited the stale relations between Koreans and blacks. Indeed, according to sociologist Edward T. Chang, “rap sometimes served as a forum for young urban blacks to express their feelings on tensions related to Asian Americans.” Yet this social commentary was primarily restricted to lesser known artists such as Special Ed, Chubb rock, or Queen Mother Rage – the third who notoriously stated that the “Orientals [were] were hungry for each piece of our prize” when referring to Korean Americans in New York City. Hip Hop, however, would soon play a prominent role in the Korean-African American.

Ever since its genesis in 1979, Hip Hop music due controversy to its inflammatory lyrics. Politicians and community figures denounced hip hop lyrics – labeling them misogynistic, violent, and even racist. Yet it would be a rapper named Ice Cube who would entangle this genre into the Korean-African American conflict. During

the late 1980s, Ice Cube – who was born O’Shea Jackson – was a rising star in hip hop who had an affinity for exposing urban poverty in his songs. Yet he achieved nationwide success with his 1991 album “Death Certificate,” which meteorically rose to number two on the billboard charts and number one in the hop hop charts. In a minute long track entitled Black Korea, Ice Cube rapped about the cynicism of Korean merchants in assuming that African American patrons were about to rob their stores. He frustratingly stated how Koreans “hope I don’t pull out a gat and try to rob they funky little store” because he asserts that “[he] got a job.” Moreover, Ice Cube threatened Koreans who didn’t “pay respect to the black fist” that he would start a conflagration that would burn their stores “to a crisp.” Black Korea was not the only racist track on the album. In a song entitled “Horny Li’l Devil,” Ice Cube violently criticized asians when he said “go down to the corner store and beat the jap up, clean all the crap up out my city [...] put his dick on a wooden block.”

These two songs not only entertained those who purchased Ice Cube’s album, but they incited fear amongst Korean Americans – especially amongst merchants who perceived Ice Cube’s concluding line of “we’ll burn your store” as a direct threat of violence against Korean-owned businesses. In fact, the lyrics were so controversial that Edward Chang claimed that “Death Certificate’s” release “represent[ed] a moment where issues of interracial conflict and political empowerment crystallized in a clash of [...] ‘strategies of survival’ for Asian Americans and African Americans.” One can could have seen this when the largest civic organization and labor organization amongst Korean Americans each had its executive leadership denounce Death Certificate. The Korean American Coalition’s Jerry Yu wondered whether “ some people might take it that [Ice

Cube] is encouraging or advocating violence against Korean store-owners.” The head of the Korean American Grocers’ Association even went further in his analysis on the effect of Death Certificate in worsening Korean and African American relations – calling its release the catalyst for a “life and death situation” and musing the possibility of a listener “set[ting] fire to a (Korean owned) store.” In addition to political organizations within the Los Angeles Korean community, Korean individuals also expressed their concerns that the number two record in the nation would incite rebuke and riot against Korean businesses and homes. Michael Park of the Korea Times lambasted Ice Cube – calling him a racist for negatively stereotyping Koreans. A fan of rap music and a former admirer of Ice Cube, Mr. Park stated in his editorial that he admired rap music’s aptitude in describing the struggles and hardships of urban poverty – calling rap music “CNN for young black America.” Yet Park nonetheless chastised Ice Cube for his “irresponsible, [...] untutored and malicious depiction of Korean people” with his sentiments of wanting “Korean-owned grocery stores to be ‘burned to a crisp.’” Ultimately, organized Korean protest against Ice Cube took the form of a nationwide boycott as Korean businesses across America “protested with their economic muscle in at least a dozen cities by refusing to sell the malt beer, St. Ides, for which Ice Cube is the celebrity promoter.” These protests proved to be successful as the beer’s parent company, the Mckenzie River Corp. finally “agreed to pull promotional and advertising materials featuring Ice Cube until the dispute is resolved.”

Chapter 3: Violence Between African Americans and Koreans

The Los Angeles Riots: a Summary of Events

On April 9th, 1992 a jury in Los Angeles acquitted four police officers accused of beating Rodney King, an African American motorist who had been involved in a high-speed pursuit with the arresting officers. King, who was unarmed at the time of the beating, was forcibly taken from his automobile, pushed to the ground by the arresting officers, and was savagely beaten with 56 baton swings in “in of the most visible uses of force by police in this country’s history.” Immediately, outrage spewed across the African American community as they felt that justice had not been effectively served, for King was “never charged in connection with the traffic stop” yet nonetheless received “multiple cuts and fractures” because of the beating that he had received.

Only one of the principle characters in the case was Asian American – the jury was made up of ten whites, and only one asian and one Hispanic, and none of the four police officers who had delivered the blows were Korean. Yet in the events that would transpire over the next four days in what would collectively be known as the Los Angeles Riots, Korean Americans bore much of the violence from angry African American mobs. Ultimately, the damage was overwhelming. Korean merchants had absorbed property damages estimated at 350 million dollars as they had been victims of 45% of total damages incurred in the riot. Upon first glance, this appears to be an anomaly as Koreans had no clear reason to be the target of retaliation. Indeed, the previous chapter’s blame on a communication breakdown and economic disparity between Koreans and African Americans appear to be insufficient in explaining for this spontaneous orgy of violence that plagued Los Angeles for a better part of a week. However, if one is to look at the

history of black and Korean relations, and contextualize them in the urban setting, he can see that the Los Angeles Riot's victimization of Korean businesses was not actually as surprising as it initially seemed.

Predictable?: Previous Incidences of Violence Between African Americans and Korean Americans

The Los Angeles riots were not the first incidences of violence in the conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans. In fact, there have been a myriad of confrontations between both groups. But perhaps the most visible precursor to future conflict was the Soon Ja Du incident that occurred a year earlier. On March 16th 1991, a black teenager named Latasha Harlins entered a liquor store in South Los Angeles. Seconds later she was dead. What exactly transpired between Harlins' entry and her death is unclear, for there was no way to capture the audio of the fight that led to Harlins' death. Yet the security cameras installed in the store captured the preliminary argument between both parties, Harlins subsequently slapping Du, Du responding by throwing a stool at Latasha Harlins, and the final sequence where Soon Ja Du pulled a handgun from underneath the store counter and pulled the trigger while Harlins was walking away from the store – her back turned completely. During the inquiry later conducted by the Los Angeles Police Department and the District Attorney's office, Du claimed that she and the Harlins had argued about Harlins's stealing a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice, yet LAPD Commander Michael J. Bostic claimed that "the videotape from a security camera showed that the girl had money in her hand and was not trying to steal the juice."

During the subsequent trial, for which Du was indicted for second-degree murder,

Du inferred that she had a moment of temporary insanity because she “never before held a handgun and did not know how to fire it. She said she did not know why she had seized the gun or remember the moment of the shooting.” Moreover, she claimed self-defense by claiming that she had felt threatened by Harlins. The jury found her not guilty of second-degree murder, yet nonetheless found her guilty of the slightly lesser crime of voluntary manslaughter – recommending that Du serve over 16 years in a state jail in the process. But Judge Joyce Karlins rebuffed calls from the jury for a harsh sentence and instead gave Du “five years probation, 400 hours of community service, fined her 500 dollars, and ordered her to pay for Miss Harlins’s funeral.”

Reaction against Du’s verdict was swift in the African American community. United States Representative Maxine Waters, a Democrat who represented the 29th district of California, said that the verdict “implied that black lives are worth less than others.” Joseph H. Duff president of the Los Angeles chapter of the NAACP – perhaps citing the fact that “out of 715 people convicted of voluntary manslaughter in California in 1990, only six received probation – called the sentence “a sign of institutional racism at work.” Immediately, an urban African American rights group that called themselves “the brotherhood crusade” urged a boycott on Korean businesses and very swiftly pressured the Empire Liquor Market – where Latasha Harlins was killed – to close its doors. In the subsequent six months after the verdict, two Korean shop owners had been killed while Korean merchants killed three different black customers.

Another controversial incident of violence occurred a year before the Harlins case. While the Felissaint case did not end in a death as the Harlins case had, it nonetheless provoked an outcry in the African American community and distanced the

Korean and African American communities further apart from each other. As I previously mentioned in Chapter two, a Korean merchant named Pong Ok Gap allegedly assaulted Haitian immigrant Giesaline Felissaint after a dispute over whether Felissaint stole peppers. While the evidence against Pong Ok Gap was circumstantial – there was no video camera proving that he had assaulted the Haitian woman – and while the case only involved a misdemeanor, the case set a national firestorm against Korean American businesses from black civic organizations. Indeed, the New York Times reported that the protest against Flatbush grocery store in Brooklyn New York, where the incident was said to have taken place, “drew national attention” and led to “intense soul searching about relations between blacks and Asian Americans.” Yet once the jury found Mr. Gap not guilty, African Americans across the country joined those boycotting Flatbush in lambasting Korean American businesses.

More African American citizens responded angrily to the boycott by picketing outside of Mr. Gap’s store after the verdict. Yet perhaps none was as radical as the charismatic yet controversial Robert Sonny Carson. Carson, who had received nationwide attention for his role in leading boycotts against racially discriminatory businesses, took advantage of the Gap assault to express his views about Korean Americans. He told the audience picketing the store to “boycott all Korean stores” and claimed that if Koreans were to commit a similar offense in the future, “there’ll be funerals not boycotts.” Indeed, Mr. Carson’s dream to have African Americans boycott all Korean stores and not just Pong Ok Gap’s was successful as radical black civic leaders lead a four-month boycott of “Korean owned grocery stores in Brooklyn.” Indeed, the boycott drew so much attention that it provoked responses from incumbent

Mayor David Dinkins who said that a “large mountain had been created by a small molehill,” and former Mayor Ed Koch who on a morning television show called Mr. Carson “an extortionist [and] a thug.”

The Aftermath: Strained Relations Between Korean and African Americans

Rather than serving as a cathartic release of emotions from both the Korean and African American communities, the Los Angeles Riots only furthered tensions and made the future more precarious for both ethnic groups. Indeed, a survey conducted a few months after the end of the riots exposed the deep tensions that helped further separate both communities. Yet it was not only general feelings of discontent that arose from the Los Angeles riots. Koreans developed views that African Americans were not only responsible for the riots, but were actually racially inferior. In fact, the Los Angeles County Social Survey found that the “percentage of Asians who rated blacks as more intelligent was 11.3% before the Los Angeles riots but fell to just 2.9% after the rebellion and the percentage rating blacks as lower in intelligence increased from 59.2% to 64.9%.” These findings differed from findings about other ethnic groups as the survey found “almost no evidence of change in racial stereotyping in Los Angeles among any [other] groups following the verdict and the rebellion.” Furthermore, the survey exposed that reconciliation became increasingly more difficult after the rebellion as “20.8% of Asians found that blacks were more likely to be easy to get along with prior to the rebellion” while “this figure was cut roughly in half after the rebellion, falling to 9.5%.” negative perceptions of the opposing ethnic group was not just restricted to Korean Americans. In fact, another survey conducted by Ella Stewart found that out of 58 randomly selected African Americans living in South Los Angeles, zero out of 58 had

“very negative” views of Korean Americans before the Los Angeles Riots. Yet after the riots, this number shot up to 9 out of 58.

Even more disturbing than the increase of racist views was the willingness to exact violence upon the opposing race. For Korean Americans, who were increasingly distrustful of African Americans, gun ownership figures skyrocketed after the Los Angeles Riots. Perhaps Mr. Sung Noh, a Shell petroleum station owner, succinctly described the post-riot emotions of the Korean American community when he said that had he “had a machine gun [while his store was being ransacked], he would have shot the rioters.” Further explaining, “why not? I worked 16 hours a day to build my business, what for?” A study conducted by the New York Times corroborated these findings. Although the Times was not able to acquire exact figures on Korean gun ownership compared to other ethnicities, it nonetheless observed that gun sales amongst Korean Americans in response to the Los Angeles Riots had been “two times better than normal. Maybe three times.”

Chapter 4: A prescription for Change: The Potential For Reconciliation Between African Americans and Korean Americans

Ameliorating Differences: The Potential Role of the Christian Church in Conflict Resolution Between Korean and African American Communities

After the Los Angeles Riots ended, Koreans and African Americans maintained an uneasy relationship. Yet through the outlets of Churches and Civic Organizations, some of the rift between both groups has effectively receded.

Both African Americans and Korean Americans developed a strong level of devotion to Christianity through a similar history. Both groups saw Christianity as a liberating force from oppression. For Koreans, Christianity emerged amid an international power struggle. In 1884 Dr. Horace N. Allen, a missionary, entered Korea with the intent of converting others towards the faith. During this time, Korea was in severe economic

deprivation as the contemporaneous superpowers – the United States, France, Russia, Germany, Japan, and China “all struggled for their imperial interests over the occupation of the Korean peninsula.” The ultimate consequences of the power struggle was the Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War where the rising Imperial State of Japan was able to “monopolize the occupation of the Korean peninsula” in 1904. After Japan asserted its dominance, it engaged in exploitive policies that crippled the Korean economy and led to widespread misery. Indeed, historian Spencer J. Palmer observed that “famine and epidemics were ever-present threats to human life” while the Korean people “were caught up in a spirit of despondency and decline.” Amid this oppression the then nascent faith that had been introduced twenty six years earlier by Allen gained traction in 1910 when Japan finally claimed Korea an official colony. Koreans blamed the social and political institutions that had guided it for centuries as they saw them as contributing to its ultimate decline. They saw that the elitist system of (yang ban) or noble role had ultimately failed them while they noticed that their beliefs in the divinity of ancestor worship did not help them when they needed assistance the most. Thus the then nascent Christian missionary movement created by Allen – which Koreans perceived to be much more egalitarian and which offered a different deity to worship – seemed quite attractive to many Koreans. Eventually, a government reform act “abolished the rigid Confucian social stratification system and moral imperatives, paving the way for liberating the traditionally oppressed Koreans such as servants and small-scale traders.” In addition to making South Korea a more egalitarian society (and probably making it more amenable to democracy in the post-World War II era), Christianity served as a primary conduit for resistance against Japan as Korean Christians

would use church groups as “both a haven from brutal Japanese oppression and at the same time a place for independence movements.” In fact, a record of the delegates participating in the 1919 independence declaration found that “16 (48%) were protestants.”

Today, Korean American Christians claim to be Christians in order to escape a different kind of oppression from the hegemonic power that conquered them over a half century ago – the stress that accompanied living in a culturally strange environment and working long hours of the day. In fact, a unique practice of prayer and worship emerged in the Korean American community in the mid 1960s – when they first entered the United States. A ceremony known as “Tong Sung Ki Do” or literally translated “praying together out loud,” offered Korean American congregants a cathartic release from emotional stress. According to Su Yon Park, the Associate Dean of Student Life at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, congregants would “kneel, and rock back and forth” in Tong Sung Ki Do in order to alleviate hardships of “the trauma of immigrant life, which consisted of long and hard hours, social dislocation, discrimination, cultural and language barriers, racism and anti-immigrant sentiments.” The Korean American exploitation of faith as a means to liberate them from stress is further corroborated by a survey conducted in 1984, where 173 out of 354 respondents claimed that the most attractive reason for attending church was the respite that it provided from the stress of their daily lives. This answer beat the other answer options of “meeting people” and “listening to sermons” combined.

African Americans also saw Christianity as a conduit for liberation. While Koreans were being subjugated by the Japanese by being deprived of their autonomy

through a colonial system, blacks were not even considered human but rather property for the first 250 years of their residence in the Western hemisphere. Thus liberation for African Americans literally meant an assertion of their humanity. Christianity played a large role in attempts to liberate African Americans from bondage during the 19th century. In fact, when law enforcement authorities found the confession from the leader of one of the most successful slave rebellions in American history, they found that Nat Turner had heavily infused Christianity into his manuscript – claiming that freedom was divinely guaranteed in the process. In an excerpt, Turner claimed:

And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

Ques. Do you not find yourself mistaken now? Ans. Was not Christ crucified? And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work - and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men - And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons

Nearly a century and a half after Nat Turner's rebellion, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led another movement for liberation in the segregated South. As the moral leader of the American Civil Rights Movement, Dr. King ceaselessly practiced nonviolent resistance while citing Christ as the apotheosis of such a movement. Yet he also cited the bible

when promising liberation from segregation. In his final address before being gunned down by an assassin's bullet a day later, Martin Luther King cited the Jews' liberation from slavery in Egypt – and paralleled it to the African American's liberation from segregation and racial hatred. In this famous “I see the Promised Land” speech delivered on April 3rd, 1968, King claimed that he would “take [his] mental flight by Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness toward the promised land.”

Yet the inextricable link between Christianity and liberation did not end with the Civil Rights Movement and slavery for African Americans. Much like Korean Americans experience, African Americans also see the Church as a liberating force in the present day. According to Dr. Cornel West of Princeton University, who spent years studying sermons in African American communities, much of black theology today decidedly focuses on liberating African Americans from a systemically racist society through sermons that demand economic and political equality. While the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s guaranteed de jure equality and protection against racism, Dr. West notes the “high rates of black unemployment, the heavy black concentration in low-paying jobs, and inferior housing, education, police protection, and health care.” According to West, contemporary sermons in black churches strive to liberate African Americans from a hegemonic power structure that continues de facto discrimination. He claims that black churches today cohesively preach a message of liberation from material deprivation and poverty by using the gospel. Moreover, West celebrates the “indispensible contribution the Black Churches have made toward the survival, dignity, and self worth of Black people” in the post segregation era. Finally, Dr. West, along with William R. Jones describe the work of their colleague James Cone, who had been

perceived by many to be the most prominent black theologians of the post Civil Rights era and who had interpreted the gospel as guaranteeing a liberation to the suffering of African Americans. Although West and Jones both repudiated the dichotomy that Cone presented when saying “[God] cannot be for us and for the white oppressors at the same time,” they nonetheless acknowledged his role in successfully exploiting Christianity in demanding economic and political equality to blacks. In fact, according to Dr. West’s interpretation of Cone’s work, he claims that Cone successfully used the gospel to surmount the “assumed class divisions” in order to criticize the inequalities of “mainstream liberal capitalist America.”

Not only do Koreans and African Americans share a mutual history of experiencing the Church as a liberating force, but they also share a high level of devoutness. While only 40% of Koreans living in the motherland professed to being to being Christians, a full 80% of Korean Americans claimed Christian faith. In addition to prolificacy in numbers, Korean Christians also exhibited a high level of devoutness to Christianity through the manner in which they practiced their faith. Over 80% of Korean Americans attended Church every week while 73% of Korean Americans claimed to have studied scriptures “regularly.” A 2009 survey by the Pew Research Foundation showed a similiarly high level of devoutness within the African American community. According to the findings, “compared with other racial and ethnic groups, African Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with fully 87% of African Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another. Of this supermajority, 83% declared themselves to be Christians while 78% were Protestants and 5% were Christians. Finally, 53% of African Americans claimed to have attended church

regularly, 76% said that they prayed at least on a daily basis and 88% were “absolutely certain that God exists.” The African American community, much like the Korean community, distinguished themselves from other ethnic groups as the survey exposed that on “each of [the abovementioned measures] African Americans stood out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation.”

Considering the similar history and level of devoutness that Korean Americans and African Americans had with regards to Christianity, I postulate that Christianity can act as a conduit for building mutual understanding between Koreans and African Americans. In fact, there is precedent for the Church acting as an agent of reconciliation between the African American community and the Korean American community. In 1982, a Korean shopkeeper named Chung Lee hosted a party for 400 African Americans and 19 other Koreans at the Greater New Unity Baptist Church in Watts – “Praying and singing in Korean and English.” This was not just a disparate act of public relations aptitude, but was only a single episode in a life aimed at reconciling racial differences through the Church. Mr. Lee, who had migrated to the United States only 8 years earlier, had always exploited the Korean and African American community’s mutual devoutness in order to better community relations – even remarking in the invitations that he had sent out for his party, “Let’s get to know our neighbors and friends closer and better than ever [...] after all, we are all brothers and sisters under God.” Indeed, community leaders from both racial groups respected him so much for his compassion that Dr. Huey Rachal, one of the most prominent African American pastors in South Los Angeles at the time, remarked on Mr. Chung’s ability to “break down aggravating stereotypes [of Korean Americans]”:

He is the Korean man who came into the black community and was accepted. He came in with the desire to get along with the black community. He didn't come in with the attitude, 'I'm coming in to get your dollar' but rather, 'I want to be part of your community'

Mr. Chung was not the only person who successfully used faith to reconcile schisms between the African American and Korean American communities. Huey Rachal himself was instrumental in using faith to advance a better understanding of the Korean community amongst his predominantly black Church. Pastor Rachal, who was also the president of the Black Ecumenical Fellowship in Los Angeles, sought to better understand the Korean relationship to Christianity by leading several black pastors on a trip to Korea in 1985. After a prayer breakfast with a congregation in Korea, Pastor Huey, in cooperation with the Koreatown Development Organization, started the sister-church program between 20 Korean and 20 black congregations. As a result, a Korean sister Church participant donated 5000 dollars of scholarship money to four black students – which prompted Pastor Rachel to claim that he had “lightened some tensions.”

In an interview with Father Aiden Koh of St. James Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, CA, I found out firsthand how the Church could reconcile differences between traditionally oppositional ethnic groups. Although St. James is located in the heart of Koreatown in Los Angeles, it nonetheless has a multiethnic clergy and congregation representing nearly every zip code in the greater Los Angeles area. When I asked Father Koh about the specific demographics of his congregation, he claimed that it was almost evenly divided between Koreans, African Americans, Caucasians, and Hispanics. I asked

him about how the Church has been able to overlook that large ethnic schisms that defined inner-city Los Angeles life and he informed me:

“It is not only the shared dedication to the same God that binds the Korean and African American communities, but it is also service activities that help create mutual understanding between both ethnic groups. People from different backgrounds are able to see each other more humanly when they participate in helping the least fortunate members of the community. I also see Koreans, African Americans, Hispanics, and whites overlook their socioeconomic differences and cultural divisions during the social opportunities that the Church creates. When we meet for coffee or when we have a luncheon as we did during Korean Sunday – it seems as if the color of one’s skin melts away.

The Role of Secular Organizations in Conflict Mediation Between Koreans and African Americans

Faith based organizations were not the only groups that attempted to mediate conflicts between Korean Americans and African Americans. In fact, secular civic organizations sought to bridge the gap between Koreans and African Americans by exploiting mutual interests within both communities. Many of the organizations that sought to create a better understanding between Koreans and African Americans were unsurprisingly business oriented as all communities would have an entrenched interest in their fiscal health. In 1986, at the behest of the Los Angeles Human Relations Commission, the Black Korean Alliance was formed in order to alleviate conflict

between both ethnic groups. Members of this group were primarily drawn from the business community as they used their political and monetary influence in order to develop concrete initiatives “for better understanding between the two groups.” If one is to look at the administration of this alliance, he could see how its policies worked to diminish interracial conflicts between Koreans and blacks. For example, in a meeting conducted at the Greater New Unity Baptist Church in Los Angeles, members of the alliance invited many different Korean and African American interest groups - including the most controversial groups of both communities – in order to evaluate how the Korean and African American communities could better get along. As expected, the coexistence of extremist black organizations with ethnocentric Korean organizations begat disputes at the meeting. In fact, Danny Bakewell of the Brotherhood Crusade, who had successfully lead a boycott against Korean-owned businesses in response to the Latasha Harlins killing, stormed out when he heard that Yang Il Ki – president of the national Korean American Grocers association – claim that he could not afford to hire black employees. Yet over the next year, the alliance worked on joint economic ventures with both the Korean and African American community and created a jobs program in the process. Thus by June of 1992, when Los Angeles was only a few months removed from the riots, the organization successfully “entered peace talks with black gangs” in order to stop urban terrorism against Korean businesses.

Epilogue:

If you remembered my introduction, I never actually told you what happened to Sonny and Kim amid the angry mob. They were spared from their predominantly black neighbors as Sonny pleaded for them not to harm him. He claimed, “me black, you black, we same.” In saving Sonny and Kim, perhaps Spike Lee is implying that the Korean and African American communities are not so irreconcilable after all. Indeed, they were occupying a modest store front, serving the African American community, and living amongst blacks. In a final act of solidarity with the black community, Sonny runs alongside a police car of a slain young man who was the victim of police brutality and pounds on the hood to express his displeasure.

On Election Day, 2008, one could have seen a glimmer of hope in the future of Korean and African relations. For a majority of Koreans voted for Barack Obama – an African American who was attempting to become the leader of the free world. This cannot be ignored or trivialized as less than two decades before, Korean Americans were overwhelmingly expressing cynicism and negative sentiments towards African Americans. Yet on the same day, a lesser known political figure named Sukhee Kang became the first Korean mayor of a city with over 100,000 inhabitants in American history. In assessing the days events, Mayor Sukhee Kang claimed that election day that year was a victory for not only one ethnic group, but for all minority groups – claiming

that:

Irvine is a very conservative town, but Obama carried 57 percent of the vote; McCain, 40 percent. It was a big surprise. But he really encouraged young people to get out the vote. That's another reason why I won — because of the students. In Korea, they call me "Irvine's Obama." My election is the pinnacle of my American experience. Americans voted for me — as mayor, as the first non-Caucasian mayor in the history of Irvine.

In calling himself the "Korean Obama," Mayor Kang could be writing a new rubric for Korean American/African American relations for the future. Both groups could realize that just because one ethnic group wins does not mean that the other necessarily loses. If all Koreans and African Americans can cease to hate each other – to see ethnic progress as a zero sum gain – then there will be many different Korean Obamas or black Kangs that could lift the African American and Korean American communities away from petty differences and racism and towards a new era of peace and mutual understanding.

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