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Introduction

The Los Angeles riots began on April 29, 1992, shortly after the acquittal of four police officers who had been caught on video beating unarmed Rodney King. The incident created uproar among the Los Angeles community as well as across the nation, and focused attention on police brutality. Over a period of five days, rioters looted, burned, and damaged property across the South Central and Koreatown communities in Los Angeles. The property damage was estimated to be almost $1 billion, with $400 million attributed to Korean-American owned businesses[1]. Although the verdict of the trial served to ignite the riots, emerging racial and class divisions in the L.A. area ultimately set the stage for the public insurrections. In this paper, I discuss the involvement of Korean-Americans in these divisions, their experiences and portrayal in the media during the riots, as well as how they were affected in the aftermath. Using race, class, and culture as the primary categories of analysis, this essay argues that although black-Korean tensions existed, they were not the main driving force of the riots. Korean-Americans were instead misunderstood in popular discourse and the media to fit the agenda of the white ruling class and shift blame as they saw fit.

Class Tensions as a Driving Force

[1] Edward T. Chang, "Special Address: Los Angeles Riots and Korean-African American Conflict," *American Studies* 25, (2002), 306.

Despite the popular media narratives involving black-white and black-Korean racial tensions, the L.A. riots can also be framed as a class uprising. The widespread looting and rioting were grievances and protests against the worsening of social and economic conditions for poor minorities in South Central Los Angeles[2]. During the 1960s and 1970s, deindustrialization was a key factor that contributed to the widening of class inequalities. Corporations that pursued cheaper labor wages and production costs overseas and the implementation of "runaway shops," plants that were relocated to avoid unionization, led to the displacement and unemployment of millions of lower-middle and middle-class Americans[3]. This process of deindustrialization as well as the emergence of high tech sectors led to the erosion of the middle-class and subsequently worsened class inequality. In Los Angeles, over 70,000 jobs disappeared between 1978 and 1982, and thousands more in prior years[4].

Reagan-era neoconservative policies also worked against the economic and social conditions of minorities. These policies maintained the military budget while enacting cuts to spending for social programs like Food Stamps, Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), as well as unemployment and housing aid[5]. The cuts to government transfers led to a weakening of the social spending net that was designed to aid families vulnerable to poverty due to increased restrictions in eligibility for these programs. This disproportionately affected African-Americans and Latinos who had the highest poverty rates compared to other racial groups.

The consequences of deindustrialization and neoconservative policies further harmed the infrastructure of African American communities in South Central Los Angeles, where poverty

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[2] Chang, 314.
[3] Chang, 315.
[4] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present*. (University of California Press, 2003), 181.
[5] Sheldon Danziger and Robert Haveman, "The Reagan Budget: A Sharp Break with the Past," *Challenge* 24 (1981), 5.

was already endemic. Rising unemployment rates for African American males also led to increased crime rates as they seeked financial opportunities outside the legitimate labor force[6]. Thus, the deterioration of former middle-class neighborhoods like Watts and Compton set the stage for the L.A. riots many years later.

Black-Korean Conflict as a Driving Force

The killing of Latasha Harlins was a pivotal moment in the development of black-Korean tensions prior to the riots. On March 16, 1991, 15 year old Latasha Harlins walked into Empire Liquor store, run by Korean-American immigrants Soon Ja Du and Billy Du. An altercation broke out between Harlins and Soon Ja which ended up with the latter shooting Harlins in the back of the head. Du claimed self-defense but surveillance footage of the incident showed Harlins walking away to leave when Du shot her from behind. Although the verdict found her guilty of involuntary manslaughter, she was not sentenced to jail time, instead given probation, community service, and fines. The African American community in South Central responded to the outcome of the trial with backlash and protest[7]. Leaders in the Korean-American business community also condemned the shooting and offered no support for the Dus[8].

The shooting of Latasha Harlins was not the only violent incident between Korean American shopkeepers and African Americans, but one that was prominently covered by the media. To understand why these tensions arose, middleman theory offers an explanation. One part of the theory suggests that minority entrepreneurs like Korean merchants will come into conflict with their clientele. Because of their intermediate economic position within society,

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[6] Sides, 182.
[7] Brenda E. Stevenson, *The Contested Murder of Latasha Harlins: Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 238.
[8] Stevenson, 116.

below whites and above their poor black customers, they may be scapegoated. Chang further notes that African American complaints against Korean merchants were often of an economic nature. These sentiments were that Korean merchants did not hire African Americans, they overcharged them for inferior products, and they did not contribute back to the community[9]. Thus, some African Americans viewed them as economically exploiting their communities.

Another major reason for tensions could be attributed to cultural misunderstandings. Koreans, coming from a very homogenous culture, may not be best suited for business in a multicultural society like the United States[10]. Furthermore, there were differences in what was considered appropriate behavior and communication between the two groups. African Americans frequently complained of Korean merchants' ignoring and surveillance of customers, while Korean merchants cited loudness, bad language, and shoplifting as inappropriate behaviors.[11] While these specific instances may have exacerbated tensions or escalated conflict, Chang emphasizes that they were not the root cause of the riots[12].

Media Portrayal of the Riots

Although black-Korean tensions existed as previously discussed, media portrayals of both groups served to drive a wedge and shift blame. Popular media representation of Korean Americans painted them as hard-working, prosperous entrepreneurs[13]. This model minority narrative neglected class differences and idealized Korean Americans. In contrast, African Americans were positioned as the urban underclass in U.S. policy and media discourse during

[9] Chang, 308.
[10] Chang, 309.
[11] Chang, 310.
[12] Chang, 309.
[13] Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 108.

the 1980s[14]. This dichotomy denoted more blame to the African American community during the riots. One L.A. Times article stated during the riots, "Many of perpetrators of the attacks were African-Americans; some victims were white and Asian."[15] The article framed the riots through a racialized narrative to its audience without mention of the systemic reasons for the riots.

The media also repeatedly displayed the shooting of Latasha Harlins during the riots to further advance a racialized agenda. Oh and Hudson mention, "…right after the acquittal of officers involved with the King beating, KABC, the local TV network in the Los Angeles Area, showed the year-old footage of Harlins being shot by Du more than ten times alongside the Rodney King video, aiding the arousal of anger among the African Americans."[16] In doing so, the media also attributed blame to Korean Americans. Media coverage of Korean shopkeepers who armed themselves to protect their stores during the riots also depicted them in a negative light in conjunction with the repeated airing of Latasha Harlins' death. Stevenson writes, "The spectacle of armed Korean shopkeepers dominated the news coverage of events in Koreatown[17]. The racialized images of gun-toting, violent, Korean-American merchants were a sharp contrast to the model minority and negatively depicted them in light of the shooting of Latasha Harlins. Without historical and political context, these racialized media portrayals may have led viewers and readers to mainly associate the violence of the riots with race instead of the underlying systemic reasons. In another article by the L.A. Times, a Korean American stated, "It's just like war, I'll shoot and worry about the law later."[18] Another described the black and latino looters as

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[14] Abelmann and Lie, 171.
[15] Marc Lacey and Shawn Hubler, "Rioters Set Fires, Loot Stores; 4 Reported Dead: Rampage: 106 Are Wounded or Injured and More than 150 Blazes Are Ignited. Bradley Considers a Curfew," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-30-mn-1893-story.html
[16] Soo-Kwang Oh and Justin Hudson, "Framing and Reframing the 1992 LA Riots: A Study of Minority Issues Framing by the Los Angeles Times and Its Readers," Revista De Comunicación, July 8, 2017, 128.
[17] Stevenson, 304.
[18] Ashley Dunn, "KING CASE AFTERMATH: A CITY IN CRISIS: Looters, merchants put Koreatown under the gun: Violence: Lacking confidence in the police, employees and others armed themselves to protect mini-mall," *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-05-02-mn-1281-story.html

"beasts."[19] The inclusion of these statements in the article further presented Korean American shopkeepers as trigger-happy vigilantes who did not treat looters with humanity.

However, the racialized narratives that pitted minority groups against each other as conveyed by the L.A. Times were not shared by all other publications. Jung Min Choi, a writer for the Korea Times, acknowledged in a July 1992 article, "the processes that maintain dominant control of Whites over non-whites are built into the major institutions. These institutions either exclude or restrict the full participation of minorities by rules, laws and/or popular convention."[20] A Los Angeles Sentinel (a black newspaper) article from May 13, 1992 also describes the riots as an "international, multi-racial, equal opportunity riot."[21] These articles did not single out and blame one minority group, but considered the institutional power structures that discriminately affected these groups. It is also important to consider that both publications were minority newspapers as opposed to the white and mainstream L.A. Times. These differences in positionality account for the differing narratives presented.

Sa-I-Gu: Korean-Americans Post-Riots

The riots impacted the Korean American community in a variety of different ways. Sa-I-Gu, Korean for April 29, was a traumatizing event for the collective consciousness of Korean Americans. Korean Americans felt scapegoated by the mass media, who blamed them for the riots through the interethnic conflict with African Americans[22]. Korean merchants also felt abandoned by the police who failed to protect their businesses during the riots[23]. Victimized by the white mass media, Kim argues that the Korean American identity shifted from a national

[19] Ibid.
[20] Jung Min Choi, "The L.A. Story: The Product of Institutional Racism," *The Korea Times*, July 1992.
[21] Betty Pleasant, "A Tale of Two Riots," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 13, 1992.
[22] Rose M. Kim, "Violence and Trauma As Constitutive Elements in Korean American Racial Identity Formation: The 1992 L.A. Riots/Insurrection/Saigu," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 11 (2012), 2015.
[23] Stevenson, 300.

one towards a more racialized one in the aftermath of the riots[24]. It was an event that gave Korean Americans a first-hand experience in the systemic oppression of minority groups by the white ruling class.

The riots also mobilized Korean Americans into pursuing political rights and representation. Korean American organizations like the Korean American Democratic Committee and the Korean American Inter-Agency Council emerged to vocalize the needs of the community and establish links to the mainstream political foreground[25]. In elections held after the riots, four Korean American candidates also emerged victorious[26]. Furthermore, almost a week after the riots on May 2, almost 30,000 Korean Americans walked the streets of L.A.'s Koreatown to call for peace and protest against police brutality[27]. This was significant in that the community collectively expressed to the public their thoughts and sentiments in the wake of the riots that portrayed them as villains.

Another effect of the riots was the Korean American flight to suburban Orange County neighborhoods like Buena Park, Garden Grove, and Fullerton. The Korean American population in Orange County grew to more than 55,753 in 2000, which was 48% higher than the decade prior[28]. By 2005, there were more than 75,000 Korean Americans in the county[29]. The safety of suburban neighborhoods attracted both Korean Americans who had lost their businesses in the riots and those who felt unsafe staying in Koreatown and South Central L.A. after the violence of the riots.

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[24] Kim, 2001.
[25] Chang, 324-325.
[26] Chang, 323.
[27] Kim, 2012.
[28] Ellyn Pak, "L.A. Riots: Goodbye Los Angeles, Hello Orange County," *Character Media*, January 25, 2019. https://charactermedia.com/l-a-riots-goodbye-los-angeles-hello-orange-county/
[29] Ibid.

Conclusion

The L.A. riots were a complex, multifaceted, and multi-racial event that has led to numerous discussions, scholarly or otherwise, on the nature of the economic, racial, and social fabrics that construct the United States. The decade spanning systemic racism of the economic policies and actions that disproportionately affected low-income minority communities in the Los Angeles area were the primary reason for the riots. Yet, the white media's attempts at the time to mainly frame the riots through racialized narratives of interethnic conflict between the black and Korean communities conveyed what it meant to be a minority in a racially stratified country like America. Korean Americans were misrepresented and manipulated to fit whatever agenda was needed and shift blame towards them. Although these interracial tensions existed, the generalization of the conflicts between Korean merchants and their black customers to black-Korean relations as a whole were wrong. In the end, Korean Americans were still deeply impacted by the riots. By contextualizing and shedding light to the experiences of minority groups during events like the riots in this paper and in works by others, relevant parallels to racial and class issues in modern society can hopefully be identified and analyzed to aid in resolving those issues.

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