

## 6.

### **Changing the Business Plan:**

#### **Korean Merchants Try to Reintegrate into the South LA Community**

Mainstream media often portrayed the 1992 crisis as an “ethnic” conflict between African American and Korean Americans, but it was, and is, so much more complex. From the long standing racial economic oppression and social discrimination experienced in African American communities, to the exclusion and exploitation of Korean and Latino immigrant workers and their families, to the economic conditions requiring struggling immigrant storeowners to work 70- and 80-hour weeks, to failed planning investment policies in our cities, to the failure to convict the police officers who beat Rodney King, to the LAPD’s decision to protect Beverly Hills while Koreatown, Central L.A., and South L.A. burned-Sa-I-Gu was a moment of convergence of so many of our city’s and our country’s social, political, and economic ills. The violence and pain of those days was a distillation of the violence and pain of our times.

-Alexander Suh, Executive Director, Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance

Unfortunately the above quote by Suh didn’t make the dominant discourse on the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest. The film *Menace II Society* is a perfect reflection of the dominant discourse: it frames the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest as the result of “Black–Korean tension.” However, Latinos were the largest segment of the population to be arrested during the unrest. It is not possible to discuss the unrest without considering either Latinos or Latino–Korean relations. Chapters 6 through 9 (also Chapter 5) aim to

discuss the presence of Latinos in South LA and Latino-Korean relations, and then to demystify the oversimplified narrative of racial and ethnic relations. These chapters will offer a new understanding of the way Korean immigrant merchants developed new business practices in the aftermath of the unrest, and how this reflected a broader understanding of race relations that go beyond the Black-White binary.

The unrest raised fundamental questions about the current and future state of race relations in Los Angeles, the nation's most diverse metropolis (Bobo et al. 1994). Unfortunately, even after the unrest, the dominant discourse defined race narrowly and failed to go beyond the conventional "Black-White" racial framework. A debate between John Hope Franklin and Angela Oh illustrates this binary racial framework. Franklin, a distinguished Black historian, was chair of the Advisory Board of President Bill Clinton's Initiative on Race and Reconciliation. Oh, a Korean American criminal lawyer was a fellow member of this Board. Oh called on the U.S. to go beyond a "Black-White paradigm" and was rebuked by Franklin, who repeated his belief that "this country cut its eyeteeth on racism with Black-White relations" (*New York Post*, September 30, 1997). Franklin declined to broaden the panel's focus to include all races and claimed that the primary issue was still between Blacks and Whites. To believe, as Franklin did, that Asian Americans and Latinos do not really count is to miss how race relations have been evolving for decades; the unrest, with its multiracial cast of characters, illustrated this fact.<sup>1</sup>

The Franklin-Oh debate reflects a larger debate on racism. Traditional narratives tend to reinforce the idea that racism is "singular and monolithic" and will last forever without changing (Goldberg 1990, xii). This prevailing, reductionist approach takes

racism to be sexually or economically determined or the result of an “authoritarian psychotic-group personality type” (Goldberg 1990, xxii). However, manifestations of racism have evolved and are multiple, instead of remaining static and singular. Decades of scholarship, beginning with Omi and Winant’s important intervention (1994), have argued that race is not fixed, but is rather a contested and negotiated process. However, researchers thus far have focused primarily on majority–minority relations, particularly White–Black relations. Scholars have also ignored the structural processes in which racial ideology and practice are constantly being rearticulated. Paying attention to power relations and the structural process allows for a non-positivist approach to understanding the relationships among ethnicity, ideology, and other social constructions. As Frederik Barth (1969) insisted, ethnicity can only be understood as a process. This understanding must come from a close examination of the history of intergroup relations and the ways in which ethnic boundaries arise historically from these relations. Moreover, there is much to be gained from John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff’s idea that ethnic genesis is always rooted in simultaneously structural and cultural–historical forces, and that ethnicity cannot be understood unless the social and historical situations for its persistence are also revealed (1992, 50).

Although ethnicity came to assume a new meaning in anthropology with the publication of Barth’s *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), its structural functionalist limitation must be noted. Barth (1969) rejected the idea that ethnic groups are definable by some total inventory of cultural traits that their members share. Rather, the group is always in the process of creating itself, with “criteria of membership” that it produces in order to mark its boundaries (38). Jenkins (2001) criticized Barth for discussing the fluid

nature of ethnicity but not “taking on board the more difficult questions about the nature of collective social forms in which [he] is interested” (2001, 4825). Indeed, Barth’s analysis has proven inadequate for understanding the ethnic confrontations, conflicts, and violence that have become so common in the late twentieth century (Wolf 1994).

Whereas the persistence of ethnic identity was interpreted some time ago as atavistic, ethnicity has become a much more significant factor in social relations since the emergence of the nation-state (Williams 1989). In addition, as explained in Chapter 2, various state agents play a critical role in the development of inter-ethnic tension.

An ethnographic perspective on the processes through which racial ideologies are contested and re-articulated can contribute to our understanding of race (Gregory 1994, 25). This chapter examines the articulation of race and ethnicity in the context of both ideology and practice through an examination of Korean immigrant merchants who were directly affected by the “first multi-ethnic unrest” in 20th century urban America, and Korean-Latino relations. My interviews also touch upon social and historical information that helps define the shift in racial perception. My observations are based on in-depth interviews with 71 Korean American merchants that were completed during 1992 and 1994 (19 before and 52 after the 1992 unrest).

### **Rodney King Beating and the 1992 Los Angeles Civil unrest**

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King and two passengers were driving west on the Foothill Freeway (I-210) through the Lake View Terrace neighborhood of Los Angeles. The California Highway Patrol (CHP) attempted to initiate a traffic stop. A high-speed pursuit ensued with speeds estimated at up to 115 mph first over freeways, and then through

residential neighborhoods. When King came to a stop, CHP Officers ordered the occupants under arrest. King was tasered, struck with side-handled batons, then tackled to the ground and cuffed. In the videotape, King continues to try to stand up as the police officers hit his joints, wrists, elbows, knees, and ankles. Officers attempted numerous baton strikes on King, with 33-50 blows hitting King, plus six kicks.<sup>2</sup> The officers claimed that King was under the influence of the dissociative drug phencyclidine (PCP) at the time of arrest, which caused him to be aggressive and violent.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, a subsequent test for the presence of PCP in King's system several days later turned up negative.

The footage of an unarmed Black man being mercilessly beaten by White officers resurrected “the long, black memory of whippings, lynchings, dismemberment, rapes, and burnings,” and became a rallying point for activists in Los Angeles and around the country (Stevenson 2013, 287). The verdict epitomized “the systematic bias of American legal and political structures against Black people,” against the backdrop of decades of socioeconomic decline, disenfranchisement, and despair in Black communities (*Economic and Political Weekly* July 25, 1992). The LA District Attorney subsequently charged four police officers with assault and use of excessive force (*NYT* March 6, 1992).

A year later, on April 29, 1992, on the seventh day of deliberations, the jury acquitted all four officers of assault and acquitted three of the four of using excessive force. The verdicts were based in part on the first three seconds of a blurry, 13-second segment of the video tape that was edited out by television news stations in their broadcasts. During the first two seconds of videotape, the video showed King attempting to flee past one of the police offers. During the next minute and 19 seconds, King was

beaten continuously by the officers. The officers testified that they tried to restrain King prior to the starting point of the videotape but that King was able to fend them.<sup>4</sup>

The unrest started the same day of the acquittal in South LA and then spread to other areas in LA over a six-day period. By 3:45 on April 29, a crowd of more than 300 people had appeared at the Los Angeles County Courthouse protesting the verdicts passed down a half hour earlier. The first recorded attack involved theft and assault on Korean property. About an hour after the acquittals were announced, mostly older teenagers (“most likely gang members, judging from their style of dress and the constant ‘throwing’ of gang signs during the evening”), went to the Pay-Less Liquor and Deli on Florence just west of Normandie (Hayes-Bautista et al. 1993, 441). They were stopped at the door, and at that point, the storeowner’s son was hit in the head with a bottle of beer. Two other youths threw beer bottles at the store’s glass front door, shattering it. “This is for Rodney King,” one of them yelled.<sup>5</sup>

There was another disturbance at Florence and Halldale, a block to the east. A young Black man, cheered on by several others, used an aluminum baseball bat to break the windshield of a Cadillac with two White men inside. The man with the bat was arrested, but police officers who responded to the call came under a barrage of rocks, bottles, and anything else that could be picked up and thrown. After handcuffing the rock thrower, the officers confronted a group of gang members who attempted to wrest him away from their custody. Lieutenant Michael Moulin was at the scene and, seeing that his officers were greatly outnumbered and that most were not wearing helmets to protect them against the objects being hurled at them, ordered them to leave the area in the apparent hope that the situation would de-escalate on its own.<sup>6</sup> The crowd did not

disperse, but instead grew larger and more violent. The absence of the police for nearly three hours allowed the crowd to grow and culminated in the looting of stores and the arson of various buildings (Hayes-Bautista et al. 1993, 442).

By mid-morning on the second day, the violence appeared to be widespread and unchecked as heavy looting and fires were witnessed across LA County. Stores owned by Koreans were widely targeted.<sup>7</sup> Of the 4,500 stores destroyed during the unrest, more than 2,300 were Korean-owned, and nearly every building in Koreatown was damaged. Korean Americans, who made up only 1.6 percent of the city's population at the time, were disproportionately affected: approximately half the businesses destroyed belonged to Korean immigrants, and another one-third of those damaged were Korean-owned. According to several sources (the FBI, newspaper accounts, and interviews), Black people deliberately targeted Korean-owned stores (Kim 2007).

A dusk-to-dawn curfew was established in some areas. The Southern California Rapid Transit District (now Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority) suspended all bus service throughout the LA area, and some major freeways were closed down. In addition, hundreds of thousands of residents lost electric, water, and phone service. All local schools, including some colleges, and LAX were closed (Stevenson 2013, 280). In addition, widespread looting, assault, arson, and killings occurred during the riots. Approximately 3,600 fires were set, destroying 1,100 buildings (*Christian Science Monitor* April 29, 2002).

A total of 53 people died during the riots (*LA Weekly* April 24, 2002). Black people constituted 44% of those killed in all related deaths, while Latinos made up 31%, Whites made up 22%, and only one Korean American was among the victims (Stevenson

2013, 288). As many as 2,383 people were reported injured and more than 12,000 people were arrested (Stevenson 2013, 280). The rioters were comprised of “an assortment of people—mostly young and male, some who were petty criminals and gang affiliated, and protesters” (Stevenson 2013, 298). Estimates of material losses vary between about \$800 million and \$1 billion (*Time* April 25, 2007). Of these losses, damage to Korean-owned property was between \$350 and \$400 million. The establishments affected were diverse, including grocery stores, swap meet shops, clothing shops, liquor stores, dry cleaners, electronics shops, gas stations, jewelry shops, restaurants, beauty salons, auto shops, furniture shops, and video shops. Mayor Bradley lifted the curfew on May 4, signaling the official end of the riots. By then, the rioting had extended across the nation to New York, Chicago, and Atlanta. Korean business owners faced a daunting, and for many impossible, recovery. Most received very little, if any, aid or protection from the authorities. Police Chief Daryl Gates left police headquarters to attend a political fundraising event in West LA, even though at that very time rioting and arson were escalating. He attempted to justify his action, stating, “There are going to be situations where people are going to go without assistance... That’s just the facts of life. There are not enough of us to be everywhere” (*LAT* May 5, 1992). Sensing that the police had abandoned Koreatown and realizing they were being targeted; a number of Koreans took security into their own hands, taking up arms and improvising security forces. Storeowners called in to Radio Korea, a local Korean-language radio station, and reported that they were being attacked and called for help from other Korean immigrants. The community organized the Korean American Young Adult Team, squads of ten men each who would be deployed to protect Korean properties from looters, armed with a



variety of improvised weapons, shotguns, and semi-automatic rifles. Jong Min Kang, President of the Korean American Business Association and Leader of Korean Young Adult Team, was proud that Korean American community was able to rebuild:

When the police were missing in action, the young Adult Team that I mobilized helped to defend the storeowners and our community. The lack of assistance was again true when the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) came into LA. Victims could not get the help of elected officials to access these funds. However, through advocacy, we were able to negotiate with (Now a defunct) Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles (CRA), FEMA, RED CROSS, The Employment Development Department (EDD), and Los Angeles County Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) – altogether about 12 governmental organizations. I was also part of advocating to President Bush for establishment of CRA to help victims.

Armed confrontations involving Korean merchants were televised, as in one well-publicized incident where shopkeepers armed with M1 carbines, pump action shotguns, and handguns exchanged gunfire with a group of armed looters, forcing them to retreat. One of the most iconic television images of the riots involved Korean merchants firing pistols repeatedly at roving looters. These merchants—jewelry store and gun shop owner Richard Park and his gun store manager, David Joo—were reacting to the shooting of the owner's wife and her sister by looters who had converged on the shopping center where the shops were located. David Joo said, “I want to make it clear that we didn't open fire first. At that time, four police cars were there. Somebody started to shoot at us. The LAPD ran away in half a second. I never saw such a fast escape. I was pretty

disappointed”(NYT May 3, 1992). Carl Rhyu, a participant in the Korean immigrants’ armed response to the rioting, was in the same situation: “When our shops were burning we called the police every five minutes; no response” (NYT May 3, 1992).

After the acquittals and the riots, the United States Department of Justice sought indictments against police officers who violated King's civil rights. Before a verdict was issued, Korean shop owners again prepared for the worst; as fear ran rampant throughout the city, gun sales went up. Some merchants at flea markets removed their merchandise from their shelves, and storefronts were fortified with extra Plexiglas and bars. The media reported that once again Korean Americans were arming themselves to prepare for the worst, noting that a licensed gun seller in Koreatown, Western Guns, was selling a dozen or more weapons a day. As John Lee, then Los Angeles Times reporter, pointed out, however, the media failed to note that a gun shop on the Westside was selling more than 150 weapons a day.<sup>8</sup>

The media applied a double standard, scrutinizing Korean merchants’ gun purchasing, but not White Americans’ fanatical gun purchasing that occurred simultaneously. Lee, deployed to Koreatown during the unrest, also noted that the media coverage was distorted: “They [Korean merchants] had itchy trigger fingers and would shoot those who trespassed...however, rioters would drive up to Korean American stores and open fire with automatic weapons...There were Koreans who laid down their weapons, locked up their stores, and tried to avoid violence” (LA Weekly April 26, 2012).

In 1993, the shock of the unrest was still fresh in the minds of the Korean American community. The average financial loss for storekeepers was \$179,045, with

individual losses ranging from \$2,000 to \$1,750,000 (Kim-Goh et al. 1995, 141). Only 35 percent of Korean American owners had been insured, and of those, many policies offered limited to no riot coverage. The Korean American Inter-Agency Council (KAIAC) reported that 75 percent of Korean American victims had not recovered from the unrest one year later. Of the affected businesses, only 27.8 percent reopened within a year. Some turned to high-interest loans to pay for their expenses and subsequently fell behind in their mortgages, leading to the loss of their homes. The KAIAC report also indicated that 15 percent of college-age Korean American youth whose families owned stores in the areas of the riots dropped out of school because the stores were unable to recuperate. According to a Los Angeles Times survey conducted eleven months after the riots; almost 40% of Korean Americans said they were thinking of leaving LA (*LAT* March 19, 1993). A second study about the psychological impact of the unrest on a sample of 202 Korean American victims who sustained financial loss or physical injury indicated that the majority of victims suffered from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. It was not surprising, then, that following the riots, the Asian Pacific Counseling and Treatment Center in LA treated 730 Korean American victims for severe anxiety and depression, somatic complaints, and psychotic symptoms (Kim-Goh et al., 1995, 139).

The unrest left a deep impression on the Korean American community, particularly with regards to the way they viewed and interacted with the Black community. This chapter will examine Korean storeowners' perceptions of Black and Latino customers, who, despite common narratives about the unrest, were just as involved as African Americans. Since Korean-Latino relations have received little

attention compared to Korean-Black relations, the following section hones in on Korean-Latino encounters (see also Chapter 8).

### **Korean-Latino Encounters**

Despite the media's primary focus on the Black-Korean conflict, the 1992 unrest was a multi-ethnic event. It initially began as a political expression of pent-up frustration and anger by African Americans, but both its nature and demographic profile shifted as the protest at Parker Center, located in downtown, led to the fulfillment of socioeconomic needs, especially by low-income Latinos. The violence and looting shifted from South LA north toward the racially mixed neighborhoods of West Adams, between the Santa Monica Freeway and Pico Boulevard; by second day, rioters had invaded stores in Koreatown as far north as Santa Monica Boulevard (Morrison and Lowry 1994).

Although the Latino population had risen to about half of South L.A., few Latino elected officials represented the riot-torn areas in the early 1990s. There were also sharp class distinctions among Latinos: those who lived around Koreatown were mostly poor, recent immigrants who did not speak English. Of these, a good proportion of Mexicans were undocumented, while those from war-torn El Salvador and Nicaragua were legal immigrants who possessed only temporary status (Kwong 1992, 89).

Koreans referred to Latinos in many different ways, including "Seupaeniswi" (Korean pronunciation of "Spanish"); "Seobaneoin" (meaning Spanish speakers in Korean, and used only among older people), "Hispanic" (the most popular term), "Latino," "Mexican," "Maekjak" (meaning Mexican worker; this alluded to the perception of Latinos as steady and loyal workers for Korean employers), "Amigo"

(friend in Spanish), “Hermano” (brother in Spanish), and “JJanggu” (meaning blockhead or someone with tunnel vision, but in an affectionately teasing way). The shift away from a more functionalist term, “Maekjak,” to a friendlier term, “JJanggu,” indicated a closer relationship between these two groups, at least from the Korean immigrants’ perspectives. While these terms were used among Korean immigrants to refer to Latinos, the terms “amigo” and “hermano” were often used to address them. One interviewee reported that when he wanted to hire 10 Latino workers, he said, “I need Amigo 10,” calling Latinos “friends” for instrumental reasons. “Hermano” was used in more informal settings. The use of Spanish terms reflected the fact that Latinos were the majority of the workforce at Korean business establishments.

In terms of the ways Latinos referred to Korean immigrant merchants, the most common terms were “chino” (Spanish for Chinese) “coreano” (Spanish for Korean) “cochino” (Spanish for dirty), or “ppali ppali people” (literally, those who ask you to work as fast as possible). “Chino” implied a certain amount of contempt, reflecting Latin Americans’ first contact with Chinese merchants in the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> Just as Korean immigrants were somewhat ignorant about the heterogeneity within the Latino community, Latinos often failed to distinguish Koreans from other East Asian immigrants; thus, the common use of “chino.” Nonetheless, some Latinos did recognize a specific Korean ethnicity, and used “coreano.” “Ppali ppali people” connoted Koreans’ fast-paced work ethic, middle class position, employer status, and frequent commands to hurry up.

While Black–Korean tensions were primarily based on a merchant/customer relationship, Latino and Korean immigrants related to each other in myriad ways,

including employer/employee relations, fellow worker relations, landlord/tenant relations, neighbors, or merchant/customers. Even before the unrest, Korean-Latino relations were sometimes antagonistic, though such tensions often went unarticulated. In the 2000 Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates (KIWA) survey of restaurant workers, 30 out of the 52 Latino workers had specific complaints about their treatment by Korean owners, including low wages, unreasonable hours, no lunch breaks, and insults from their supervisors.<sup>10</sup> Korean employers tend to believe they treat Latino employees with respect and fairness, but they often “reproduce[e] the subordination of Latinos,” and safeguard Korean advantage in workplaces, albeit to a lesser extent than White and Latino agricultural employers (Maldonado 2009, 1032). They also use race/ethnicity, citizenship, or legal status as proxies for worker quality and as markers for the desirability of workers. This racialized assessment reflects their hiring and recruitment practices of targeting Latino worker networks to fill low-wage jobs. The invocation of ethnic/cultural difference by Korean employers tends to normalize and fails to problematize the ethnic segmentation of jobs and racial hierarchies at Korean-owned business establishments.

Therefore, while African Americans encountered Koreans primarily as merchants, Latino–Korean encounters took place in a wider range of situations, partly because of the predominantly Latino employees at Korean business establishments. The situations were “not a blatant conflict like Blacks and Koreans. [Latinos and Koreans] are both immigrant, politically marginalized communities” (*LAT*, September 21, 1998). I was surprised when I heard a Korean customer complimenting Latino employees’ Korean language skills at a Korean-run supermarket in Gardena. In another case, a Nicaraguan

church minister was invited to an after-lunch service for a Korean employer as well as other Nicaraguan and Latino employees. At the service, the minister asked Latino garment workers to express thanks for the chance to work in the U.S. Specifically, he reminded his fellow Nicaraguans of the nearly 80 percent unemployment rate back home. Despite a certain degree of inter-ethnic tension, young Latinos and Korean Americans seemed to socialize in increasing numbers during my period of research. Miguel, a 33-year-old Salvadoran car mechanic who worked for a Korean employer for more than a decade, told me, “I would like to marry a Korean woman. That would be nice. You know anybody you can introduce to me?” Both the *Los Angeles Times* and *Korea Times* featured stories of interracial marriages between Latinos and Koreans, which partially reflects an overall rise in interracial marriage more broadly in the U.S. Koreatown youth were also influenced by other inner-city youth, including Latinos, in their conception of gender and sexuality. I observed young Korean American women applying makeup or wearing clothing in similar ways to Latinas, and some Latinas frequented Korean cosmetics stores. Some U.S.-born Korean American children also complained that their parents speak Korean and Spanish to them, but not English. On the other hand, some Korean immigrant parents complain that their children speak Spanish, Portuguese, and English but not Korean. Despite a certain degree of interethnic harmony, I found that language barriers, cultural differences, and prejudices still prevented many Korean and Latino workers, employers, and schoolmates from developing close relationships.

#### **Four Korean Perspectives on Blacks and Latinos**

After the unrest, the Korean immigrant small business proprietors I interviewed articulated four different constructions of race and ethnicity concerning African Americans and Latinos. In the first, Latinos were thought of more positively than African Americans, a view that developed before the 1992 riots. The second contradicts the first one, in that African Americans were viewed more positively than Latinos. The third construction portrayed both Latinos and African Americans negatively. Finally, there were the interviewees who adopted a “big picture” perspective: the participation of both African Americans and Latinos in the rioting made them more cognizant of the class-based nature of the unrest, and they tended to blame the “system.” I now discuss these four perspectives in detail.

### **More positive views toward Latinos than African Americans**

The 1992 LA unrest reinforced some Korean interviewees’ notions of African Americans as poor, uneducated, violent criminals, partly because media coverage focused on Black mobs burning down Korean stores (Cho 1993). Many Koreans accused Blacks of exploiting their more “authentic” Americanness and greater political power to hurt Korean economic interests. One-third of interviewees (N=52) held this view. Perhaps it was because “although at times [Koreans] have not helped to improve the situation of Blacks in this country, they certainly didn’t create the inequality either” (Lee, cited in Choi 1992, 95). However, while Korean merchants did have a choice and contributed to the inequality that Black customers faced, and it was that perpetuation of inequality that African Americans were protesting when they targeted Korean businesses.



A positive view of Latinos and negative view of African Americans was articulated by the owner of Jean's Liquor Store (1992). Upon first immigrating to the U.S., he wanted to work in the field of computer manufacturing. He had received his engineering degree in Korea, but the credentials did not transfer to the U.S. Limited by his financial resources, he bought a business in South LA. In justifying his negative view of African Americans, he said that unlike Koreans, they lacked concern for their children:

For instance, once they receive their welfare checks, selfish mothers tend to buy beer for themselves instead of things needed for their children. I know that I have no right to judge others. Look at Mexicans living in this neighborhood. They always work very hard, and yet they are often robbed by Blacks.

It was not apparent whether this merchant believed that the class of "selfish mothers" was limited to inner-city Black women, but his observation spoke to interracial crime in the neighborhood. He asserted that after *Sa-I-Gu*,<sup>11</sup> his view of African Americans deteriorated, while his view of "Mexicans" (a term he used to refer to Salvadorans as well) remained positive. When I mentioned that the looters were not only African Americans, he responded: "In the middle of *Sa-I-Gu*, once Blacks unlocked the stores, then other people such as Latinos joined the looting. Well, the reason why more Latinos than Blacks were arrested was due to the fact that police arrested them, not Blacks."<sup>12</sup> It was not possible to verify whether his statement was true.

The owner of Right on Market on Arlington Blvd. (1993), whose entire store was looted, lost \$60,000 worth of property during the unrest. He also expressed a deeper affinity with Latinos than with African Americans.

“Spanish,” like the African Americans, are very naive. However, because they think a little bit more like Asians, it is easier to understand and befriend them.

Blacks are very naive and simple-minded. They have no sense of right and wrong, so I do not blame them and I have no hatred for them.

He’s clearly reinforcing racist notions about Blacks, but also infantilizing them. It’s not the same as what previous person said.

Similarly, the son of Moon’s Market’s owner (1993), a 26-year-old 1.5 generation immigrant, spoke positively about Latinos: “‘Spanish’ are more afraid of going to jail. They are more family oriented. They are not real Americans. They came here for a better life like us.” My interviewees repeatedly commented on how similar immigrant experiences and mentalities of Koreans and Latinos contributes to a greater affinity for each other, i.e., a greater degree of shared work ethic, both don’t have as much historical baggage in the U.S. as African-Americans, etc. (though Latinos have a much longer history than Koreans).

On the other hand, he stated of African Americans:

Blacks are the most racist people alive. Why do they pick on the Korean community because Rodney King got beat up? Why didn’t they burn down Beverly Hills first! If Koreans were to be picked on, then this whole thing should have blown up after the Soon Ja Du incident, but it did not. Of course, we can’t forget that media had a lot to do with venting hatred among Blacks and Koreans, but they didn’t make up something that was never there.

He seemingly disagreed with the parallels made by the African American community with regards to the acquittal of four LAPD officers in the Rodney King trial and the

aftermath of the Soon Ja Du trial. In other words, for Blacks, both incidents indicated the devaluing of Black lives by the judicial system, and justified the anger directed at Koreans during the unrest (Stevenson 2013). Finally, the owner of B&W Market (1993), whose store was also looted and destroyed, expressed his affinity for Mexican immigrants, while noting diversity within the Latino community: “There are indeed so many different nationalities within the Hispanics, so it is hard to generalize about them. But the Mexicans are much nicer, and I feel that they are culturally similar to Koreans. For example, look at their food...they eat spicy things just like we do.”

What is apparent within this first perspective is that Korean immigrant shopkeepers seemed oblivious to African Americans’ long history of struggle for equality, including the Civil Rights movement, and the histories of the neighborhood in which they had established businesses. This is in line with common views before the unrest, reflecting Korean immigrant merchants’ defensiveness in the wake of much-publicized Black boycotts of Korean stores. It is also relevant that these interviewees, as direct victims of the unrest, were still traumatized from the violent racial conflicts, and considered their Black customers a potential threat. Finally, this view perceived Black and Latino participation in the unrest in contrasting ways, believing that while African Americans instigated looting and burning out of racial antagonism, Latinos joined the rioting passively, due to poverty and mob psychology. It is worth noting that this view corresponded to the dominant public discourse on the subject.

### **More positive views toward African Americans than Latinos**

The second perspective viewed African Americans positively and Latinos negatively. Many interviewees seemed shocked by the large number of Latinos who participated in the looting, because they had held positive views of Latinos before the unrest. Mrs. Yu (1993), a 50-year-old widowed mother of four, immigrated to the States in 1971, and had run a market in Compton for the past 13 years. Her market was completely destroyed during the unrest, and she lost nearly \$500,000 in addition to experiencing emotional trauma. However, her view of African Americans was positive:

Those Blacks who are educated are wonderful. The good ones always say “thank you” and “please.” The nice Blacks are very nice. When I went back to my store, several of my customers came, hugged me, and asked why something like this should happen to such nice people like us. They were genuinely sorry for what happened to us and I know that they meant it...The Blacks are more honest and say sorry for what happened to us.

Helen (1993), a 33-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S. in 1960, owned New Star Market on Normandie Avenue and had similarly positive experiences with Black customers. On the first night of the riots, she got a call from her Black neighbor telling her not to go to the store because the rioters would kill her. Her Black neighbors also saved her store from burning down. When asked how and why she thought the unrest happened, she responded:

The main reason why this happened is [because] there was an [explosion] of feelings of hopelessness among the Black community members. The verdict was an excuse for the rioting. The primary reason for the riot was poverty and low standards of living...Elderly Black customers came into the store after the riots,

crying and asking how something like this could have happened. In America, there is no fear of God. People need to come back to a real relationship with God in order to get their lives straight.

Her view of African Americans was atypical among Koreans:

I don't have any difficulty with Blacks. When I was younger, my mother and father ran a grocery store in South Central LA and all of their Black customers used to call my mother "mama" or "umma." Blacks are warmer people who show gratitude willingly. I really like them. I miss many of my customers. They do treat me well. They saw me pregnant with both of my boys and always ask about them. Whenever I go into the store, I hug and greet them. I realize that other Koreans cannot do this because they are not as physically affectionate. I can relate better with some Blacks than Koreans. There are bad Blacks just like there are bad Koreans. I try to see people as individuals and I firmly believe that with most people, if you are nice to them, they will respond.

Deborah (1993) was a 1.5-generation, 38-year-old lawyer and mother of two children who had a law office on Wilshire Blvd. She witnessed the fires and chaos breaking out from her office window. While her view of African Americans did not change after the riots, her view of Latinos deteriorated:

I used to think positively about Latinos and their contributions to this city. I was happy to have them in LA and saw them as hard workers. However, after I saw them looting the stores and trying to justify their actions by saying that it is OK to steal, I [had] a big change in my attitude about illegal immigration. I am now

totally against it and believe that we need to monitor the immigration system more thoroughly. I am against them crossing the border.

She assumed the looters were undocumented and not here legally or citizens. Her views of Latinos resonated with studies showing that Mexican immigrants are stereotypically identified as undocumented and dangerous criminals (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010, 301).

Joyce (1993), a 36-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S. in 1985, owned a music store located within an indoor swap meet on Slauson Avenue that was looted and burned. For many days, she could not sleep because of nightmares and held tremendous anger against both African Americans and Mexicans. However, she seemed to justify African Americans behavior, but did not attempt to understand Latinos:

Before, I thought that the majority of Blacks were lazy and undisciplined. Now, I see that there may be other outside forces, which shape their attitudes and actions. They [Latinos] don't have a sense of wrong or right. I think they have low morals. I heard that Mexican men are very girl crazy and cheat on their wives. They whistle [at] another woman when their wives are standing right next to them.

Finally, the owner of King's Market (1994), a business that suffered \$150,000 in damage, held more negative views about Latinos than Blacks, especially those in Latino gangs:

They [Mexicans and other Latinos] are equally wicked like Blacks. Whereas Blacks do robbery only, Mexicans are crueller to the extent that they just shoot at you even after taking money and other things.

Compared with the first, more positive view of Latinos, this more negative perspective was not widespread: it corresponded to only 25% of interviewees.

### **Negative perspectives on both African Americans and Latinos**

A substantial number of interviewees expressed negative views of both African Americans and Latinos, with feelings corresponding more to fear than resentment and anger. One of my students whose family's shoe store had burned down in 1992 recollected:

As my parents were coming home, they heard on the radio that a shoe store on Olympic and Alvarado was being looted. They were not on the freeway for more than a few minutes so they turned around and went back to the store. As they drove up to the parking lot, they could see people running out of the store with our shoes. According to the shopping center security guard, 15 to 20 African Americans armed with shotguns, pipes, hammers, and other threatening objects came and broke into the store...Instead of going to school the next day, and our whole family went to see our shoe store. Nothing was left. The whole complex was burned down. All we could see was the shell of the building and a little fire still burning in the back. That was my birthday.

Having experienced the ordeal first hand and hearing about the experiences of other Koreans, she became very angry: "I hated all Blacks and Mexicans. These are not politically correct terms but that is how I felt. I felt the Korean community was targeted by the black community." Although she personally thought the Korean merchant Soon Ja Du had gotten off too easily and the verdict in the Rodney King case was unexpected, she was upset that racial tensions led minorities to destroy their own community.

A 51-year-old Korean immigrant, owner of Park's Super Market (1993), lost \$450,000. He had owned his business since 1985 and all of his employees were African Americans. His view of African Americans and Latinos deteriorated in the aftermath:

There is racial preference in the U.S. After the riots, our perception of African Americans changed drastically. Initially, we wanted to be friends with them. But both parties have built up now the wall between us even higher. The Hispanics looted even more than the Blacks. Out of the 700 people that looted our store, more than half of them were Hispanics. We also grew to hate Whites, even more so than before. They are selfish and concerned solely with their own agendas.

After the interview ended, this man's wife explained how she and her husband had tried to live peacefully in South LA: "We did all we could. We got along really well with our customers. In fact, we thought they were our friends." She broke down in tears as she explained the situation: "During the riots, even our friends joined in the free-for-all. If God grants us, we will pack up and leave the second we can...But I can't because I'd be buried in debt."

A similar perspective was offered by the owner of L.A. Frank's Liquor store (1993). When I interviewed him he was seated in an oversized director's chair elevated a foot off the ground and encircled by a large counter, looking more like a sheriff in a Western film than a merchant in his fifties from South LA. In April 1992, he suffered not only economic losses of \$100,000, but also physical, psychological, and emotional damage. He expressed disappointment in Latinos as well as African Americans:

These [Black] people are generally good...but ignorant. They need to work, instead of relying on welfare. To the contrary, the Hispanics work, and still they



looted! Their history is actually longer than African Americans. Therefore, they live better than African Americans. But they are still the same [as Blacks]!

Wealthy property owners who owned numerous commercial buildings had similar views on African Americans and Latinos. Young-ah (1993), a 51-year-old woman, and her husband own five commercial buildings, including one in Inglewood. One-third of a building they own in Long Beach was burned, and all of their stores were looted. She experienced stress and insomnia, expressing fear of African Americans, and a stereotyped view of Latinos:

I have an intense fear of Blacks. After the riots, I have been trying extra hard to be nicer to them so that they will not destroy our stores again. When I am nice to them, I hope I am giving them a good impression of Korean people. Although I am nice to them outwardly I am truly scared and do not like them deep inside. I feel very sorry for [Latinos]. They have to take all of the menial jobs such as janitors and house cleaners. They are below everyone else. They are probably the lowest status group in America, below Blacks. It's because they are illegal aliens and can't speak English.

Similarly, Myung-ja (1993), a 49-year-old woman who has lived in the States since 1980, was the owner of Young's Fashion, a women's clothing store at an indoor swap meet in South Gate. She described how worried she was during the unrest:

I cried every day whenever I thought about what happened. I would be driving and when I [thought] about it, I [started] weeping. When I [watched] TV or when anyone talked about it, I cried. My eyes were filled with tears. I felt that under my

skin was just water waiting to spill forth gallons of tears. I have an intense fear of Black people now. I felt like I was going crazy and I had extreme paranoia.

When three Hispanic men walk in together into the swap meet, I get incredible fear and panic. I am very suspicious of everyone. Everyone seems like a thief or criminal to me these days. I fear Blacks a lot but there aren't too many around where I do business. So I am more afraid of Mexican cholos [Mexican gangsters].

She generalized negatively about her Black customers as well:

I don't hate Blacks. I feel sorry for them because they have no education.

They are lazy and dirty and there is nothing that the government can really do about that. In Korea, the poor people raise their children better than the rich people. So, the Blacks have no excuse as to why their children are so corrupt and without any morals. You cannot blame everything on poverty...When Blacks come into my store; all they think about is stealing. When I see a Black girl in my store, I tell my employee to keep an eye on her. 100 percent of the time, they are caught stealing-100 percent. Even when I am nice to them, they steal. So whether I am polite or suspicious, they steal. They also come into my store and make a big scene. They are so loud. When I see them like this, I feel very sorry for them. They seem so ignorant and uneducated. I know [Latinos] well because they worked for me for so long...When they are amongst themselves they make fun of us Koreans. They gossip about us a lot. I know this because my employee tells me. They look docile but they are tougher and stronger than us. I noticed that they help each other out a lot. They are what we Koreans were 30 years ago in Korea.

The above quote is fairly extreme as it reinforces racist stereotypes. Nonetheless, she tends to racialize a significant amount of work-related stress, which is caused by high levels of criminal victimization, a variety of face-to-face interactions with culturally unfamiliar and heterogeneous customers, and the financial precariousness of small business ownership, as riot victim.

The owner of Century Liquor store (1992) also perpetuated racist stereotypes: In a way, [Latinos] are similar to Blacks. From our perspective, they are mostly thieves...I wonder whether they [Latinos] have any conscience at all. The only difference is the fact that they do not file lawsuits against the storeowners after shoplifting or robbery and that their leaders do not demand *t'ose*, site tax [claims on a certain territory], particularly toward newcomers.

Even a decade after the unrest, there remained a general tendency in our dominant discourse to view Latinos close to African Americans in a new racial hierarchy that placed Whites (and to a lesser extent Asians) at the top. The negative feelings expressed by Korean storeowners coincided with this tendency of the dominant discourse.

### **Class-based perceptions of African Americans and Latinos**

Nopper (2006) noted a striking similarity of the criticism lobbied at both Black rioters and public officials in the 1960s to that expressed by various Korean/Asian American commentators toward the police and government regarding their responses to the 1992 L.A. Riots. Nopper asserts that perhaps the criticism lobbied at the police and public officials is a structural perspective dictated not just by one's racial position, but also by one's economic relationship to African American consumers (Nopper 2006, 84).

Some Korean interviewees recognized the importance of class as a way of distinguishing people of different races and ethnicities in U.S. society, even if it was not a fully developed analysis or they did not attribute the situation directly to class. For instance, a substantial number of interviewees seemed to distinguish between local Black customers and Black community leaders, indicating their awareness of class status differences within the African American community.

The interviewees also identified outside gang members (who were a class of their own) as instigators of the looting and arson during the 1992 unrest, and differentiated them from their local customers. In this way, the interviewees justified continuing to conduct business with local customers, deliberately trying to forget the fact that they witnessed their looting. In the aftermath of the unrest, Korean immigrant merchants seemed to be more aware of class differentiation, in particular different levels of education, and age differences within the Black community.

The Latinos who looted also challenged most Korean merchants' construction of race and ethnicity. Korean Americans interpreted African Americans' participation in looting as connected to their lack of family ties or a "culture of poverty," but could not attribute similar causes to Latinos. In their opinion, Latinos, like Korean immigrants, worked hard and were family-oriented; and yet, they still participated in the looting. Some merchants blamed Latino looting on other Korean merchants' bad treatment of Latino employees. Others distinguished between different kinds of Latinos in terms of ethnicity, national origin, legal status, and/or class position.

Despite the overall perceptions of class as related to African Americans, some merchants recognized that it was Black customers who saved their businesses during the

riots. The owner of Benji Liquor Market on Vermont Ave (1993), a 54-year-old man, immigrated to the U.S. in 1977. He incurred \$100,000 in damages, although he was able to put out the fire just in time, due to his Black customers' warning. When he was asked how and why the riots happened, he responded: "It was not a racial issue; it was more an excuse for what I believe to have been a class issue." He continued:

I have no special feelings for them [Blacks], they are just like everyone else...It was an African American who helped salvage my store. Before the riots began he warned me so I was able to get prepared. When I asked him why he did that, he told me that it was because I was so nice to his kids. This person has a son that is very cute, so I used to give him candy and tell him that I would like to make him my own son. By simply being nice, I was able to build a friendship that helped save my store.

Some Korean merchants attributed the unrest to systematic inequality, and not to individual Black or Latino customers. A 52-year-old man (1993), the owner of B+W Market on Vermont Ave., immigrated to the U.S. in 1989. He lost about \$25,000 in merchandise and planned on leaving at the end of that year. However, he did not blame African Americans: "It's the U.S. political system's fault. The Whites are suppressing the Blacks from going up. It's the top people trying to keep down those on the bottom. Cultural differences are here and will be here always. But that is not the cause." Similarly, some Korean store owners like the owner of Western Grocery (1992), rationalized African Americans' behaviors by citing poverty and drug abuse in the Black community:

I do not think I ever discriminated toward any other people, including Blacks. In my opinion, Black problems are due to their extreme poverty, something like moon village, *taldongne*, in Korea.<sup>13</sup> They are poverty-stricken beyond our imagination. I have seen three African American households living in a one bedroom apartment upstairs.

The owner of ABIC Liquor Store (1992) also focused on the poverty of his customers:

In principle, Blacks are simple and good-natured, but need education. During the riot, I have seen Black gang members from outside our community, *kkeomdungyi*, [“dark-faced Black folk”] load my stuff onto their truck and set fire to my store, which was put out by my customers. Nevertheless, I interpret that they [the gang members] did it not because of their hatred toward Korean Americans, but because they wanted to express their dissatisfaction with the current system that keeps them poor. According to our Korean proverb, “Without food for three days, anybody can climb the wall in search of food.”

The owner of Pay-Less Liquor Store (1992) felt discouraged about the possibility of improving relations with African Americans. Despite his negative perceptions, he stated that during the riots, he shouted out “We are also Blacks,” a line from the acclaimed Spike Lee movie *Do the Right Thing*. He thought his store would be saved from destruction if he pretended it was Black-owned. When I asked him about Latinos, he likened them to his Black customers:

Sometimes they [Latinos] bring fake checks to cash. They seem to be a neighbor to Blacks. Despite their Catholic tradition, they were involved in [the] looting and

destruction. From their participation, I could understand that this riot originated from poverty. This reminded me of the Korean War [1950-1953], *Yuk-I-O*.<sup>14</sup> We all starved those days.

Indeed, older Korean immigrants who had experienced the Korean War were more able to sympathize with poor people of other races or ethnicities, indicating the role of intertextual memory in forming opinions and class-based sympathies toward other ethnic groups.

Mrs. Koh (1993), a 50-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S. in 1980, had been running a One Hour Photo Shop on Crenshaw Blvd since 1990. All the machines and camera equipment were damaged and the front windows smashed during the unrest. Nonetheless, although she and her husband were also physically attacked, she was able to differentiate looters from her own customers, stating:

Our customers are nice people. I don't think of them as necessarily bad. But some Blacks lack education (of life, of manners) and behave in less sophisticated ways...the [Rodney] King verdict may have started this, but when we look at the whole scheme of things, the Blacks have been ignored by White society and the tension from that; Koreans got caught in the middle.

Mrs. Kim (1993), a 56-year-old mother of three, immigrated to the States in 1979, and had run a book and gift store since 1987. She felt that Koreans had mistreated African Americans, and that was why they were targeted. Immediately after the riots, she felt fear and suspicion about every Black person she saw. However, as a Christian, she tried to practice generosity:

Many Blacks come into our store to ask for money. Oftentimes, I try to smile at them and give them either money or small gifts. At least once a day, a Black person comes into our store. I find myself trying to prepare something to give them every day. If they come during lunchtime I usually share my lunch with them.

Mrs. Lee (1993), a 54-year-old mother of one, immigrated to the States in 1971, and had run a gas station in Compton since 1979. The looters came to their store with a pick-up truck and took everything. However, the looting did not affect the way she felt about African Americans and Latinos:

I really like Blacks. Although there are many who deal in drugs, I love them too. I feel very sorry for them. I have been working in the Black community for so many years now that I feel very close to them. Whenever my regular customers meet me they always say, “Hi, Mom.” I really feel that people are much nicer after the riots. I really appreciate the Black people making an extra effort to be more polite and nice to me. If we were in [the Latinos’] situation, we would have done the same thing. If we could understand the misery and poverty that they live in, we cannot point fingers and judge them.

Like Mrs. Lee, a former nurse had nothing but compliments for African Americans and Latinos in the aftermath of the unrest. Mrs. Han (1993), 53 years old and widowed, immigrated to the U.S. in 1969. She has run a liquor and deli store on Vernon for the past 4 years. She lost nearly half a million dollars’ in damages, as her business was burned and destroyed; she was left with almost nothing after over 20 years in America.<sup>15</sup> In spite of this, her positive perception of other minorities didn’t change in



the aftermath: “I felt no animosity towards Blacks before or after the riots...I have worked with a lot of blacks as a nurse and as a business owner. I was very comfortable with them. I didn’t have any troubles with them...I like Latinos, especially Mexicans. I have nothing against them.”

The following exchange is excerpted from a discussion about Latinos among three Korean immigrants (1994)—a painter with his own firm (P), a pharmacist and drug store owner (Ph), (and a missionary)—who were taking Spanish lessons from a teacher (T) at the Koreatown YMCA. They came to feel sympathetic towards Latinos, as they realized that they racialized and ethnicized Latino working class lives, overlooking the effects of poverty: .

Ph: We tend to look down upon them for various reasons—lack of education, having many children, particularly teenage pregnancy, dependency on welfare, etc. However, their close family ties seem to be similar to ours.

P: Yes, you are right. Their lifestyle is strikingly similar to us. For instance, when I offered Korean hot and spicy food such as *Kimch’i-kuk* [soup made of *kimch’i*], *sundae-kuk* [soup made of Korean sausages], and fish stew, they were able to enjoy it so well.

Ph: They seem to care about *jeong* [a Korean concept meaning warmth, affection, or love] like us. Friendship seems to matter a lot to them even in business transactions.

P: I have hired many of them for my painting business. They work well and their wage is inexpensive....I would give orders to my Hispanic employees in Korean in my painting work....They often ask for workers’ compensation or sue Korean

employers for that reason. Nevertheless, I say that they work better than Koreans. They are handy men. Once they start to work, they work hard. They know how to fix various things, even automobiles.

Ph: I also see them work hard when they need money. Otherwise they would like to have fun without work. They often come late for work, as they often stay late drinking beers.

T: Now, our generations know how to fix only one thing, not everything, but our parents used to do that, didn't they? [All agreed.] Why do you think that they often drink a lot?

P: Perhaps they are lonely as they left their family members in Mexico.

Ph: There is a great heterogeneity within their community. For instance, Mexicans living in Northridge belong to the middle class, unlike those living around Olvera Street. One day a job candidate for my drug store told me that her father doesn't want her to work in dangerous places like Koreatown. I was surprised to hear that.

P: Yeah, I find people from Peru to be responsible and to have close ties to each other. I also like people from El Salvador, toward whom I feel friendly.

Ph: I was really impressed with the fact that they really help each other. Once, one of my Latino employees asked me to sponsor him in purchasing the house. He bought it based on ten or twelve of his family members collectively. He reminded me of the extended big family in Korea.

Early in the discussion, these Korean immigrant small business owners and professionals presented somewhat negative perceptions of Latino immigrants. As they discussed their everyday experiences with Latinos at their workplaces, however, they

came to realize that poverty was prevalent among Latinos. They were also able to distinguish between different Latinos, speaking about Latino culture and some similarities to Korean culture. As a result, they began to feel sympathetic towards Latinos, affirming the influence of perceptions of poverty in cultural processes.

### **Post-Unrest Hiring Practices in South Central**

How did the traumatic effects of the unrest affect Korean immigrant merchants' conception of race and ethnicity in their everyday lives? Hiring practices are one angle through which to understand this issue. Before the unrest Many Korean storeowners utilized a family and wage labor system, using both Korean and non-Korean labor for the latter. Since the African American community demanded the hiring of local residents before the unrest, I wanted to explore whether there were any changes in the hiring practices of Korean immigrant merchants after the 1992 unrest. Before the unrest, 39 percent of paid non-family employees (N=64) in Korean-owned stores were Mexicans/Latinos and 31 percent were Black employees, showing a slight preference for Latinos rather than African Americans (see Table 7.1). In contrast, after the unrest, 52 percent of paid non-family employees (N=52) were Black employees and 21 percent, Latino employees.<sup>16</sup>

As Jennifer Lee (2002) found, Jewish and Korean merchants in New York and Philadelphia hired Black employees and managers to act as “cultural brokers” between Korean storeowners and their predominantly Black clientele in order to minimize arguments with their customers. Similarly, in my study, the newly built C+ C Market on Vermont Ave hired an African American man from the neighborhood as a guard. He did

not wear a uniform or carry any kind of weapon; his only task was to follow the customers who came in and make sure no one caused any trouble. Because he was Black, African American customers took it much better when they were told certain things. For example, in one incident, the Korean business owner said something in English to a customer, and they claimed not to understand. However, when the Black employee stepped in and translated what she had said, the customer could no longer accuse the merchant of being unintelligible. Essentially, the guard was there to deter shoplifters and to intervene in any possible dispute between customers and the merchant. Nonetheless, the use of Black security guards remains controversial among African American customers, and this guard at C+ C Market was harassed and called a traitor so often that he quit. Just like Black residents don't appreciate Black cops restricting their freedom of movement, I doubt they would look kindly upon security guards following them around. After all, the guard is just another surveillance technique.

Although the hiring of Black employees requires a more in-depth investigation, it should be noted that in South LA, Korean immigrant merchants began to hire African Americans in significant numbers only after the 1992 unrest, perhaps because the community demanded such change. They were unconsciously trying to appease Black customers. This wasn't completely successful as it wasn't really addressing the underlying issue: Black disempowerment, poverty, racism, etc. However, if they employed Black employees before the unrest, it could have reduced the tension.<sup>17</sup>

The racial make-up of employees changed as employers halved the number of Mexicans and Latinos they had hired, while increasing the number of Blacks employees from 31 percent to 52 percent.

Table 7.1: Racial Makeup of Non-Family Employees at Korean Stores in South LA  
before April 29, 1992

No. of employees per store	Latino	Korean	Black	Other*	
0 (2 stores)					
1 (2)	1	1	1		
2 (3)	3	0	3		
3 (3)	1	4	4		
4 (4)	7	2	5	2	
5 (2)	1	4	5		
6 (2)	5	3	2	2	
7					
8 (1)	7	0	0	1	
total	25	13	20	6*	64**
%	39.1	20.3	31.3	9.4	100

\* Includes non-Korean Asian Americans, such as Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans.

\*\* 64 non-family employees for 19 stores (median number of employees: 3.4)

Table 7.2: Racial Makeup of Non-Family Employees at Korean Stores in South LA after April 29, 1992\*

No. of employees per store	Latino	Korean	Black	Other	
0 (4 stores)					
1 (2)			2		
2 (3)	1	1	4		
3 (3)	2	1	6		
4 (4)	1	6	8	1	
5 (1)			5		
6 (1)	3	2	1		
7 (0)					
8 (1)	4	3	1		
total	11	13	27	1**	52***
%	21.2	25.0	51.9	1.9	100

\* Represents a different set of businesses than those present in Table 1, since not all merchants re-opened their businesses after April 29, 1992.

\*\* One was a Chinese American.

\*\*\* 52 non-family employees at 19 stores (median number of employees: 2.7)

Thus, the specific attitudes held by merchants on race and ethnicity conflicted with their hiring practices. Hiring more African Americans did not fully translate into new perceptions of African Americans.

As we saw in the previous sections, in the aftermath of the unrest, Korean immigrant merchants' constructions of race and ethnicity reflected varied feelings not only towards Latinos and African Americans, but also towards Whites, indicating victimhood and a sense of betrayal.

### **Post-Unrest Korean Immigrant Merchants' Constructions of Race and Ethnicity**

As I discussed in previous chapters, the state's response to Korean-Black tensions in the 1980s was ad hoc and used stopgap measures rather than broader policies. Before the unrest, the state only intervened to manage interracial relations. Their policy included efforts to incorporate and mobilize the leaders of each community, and focused on interpersonal conflicts rather than assessing the structural causes (Ong, Park, and Tong 1994, 282). The 1992 unrest instantly transformed the political climate and actions of local government, raising new concerns about urban poverty and racial injustice. However, the LA mayor's solution relied on the privatization of rebuilding efforts,<sup>18</sup> and new policies placed Korean merchants at a disadvantage with little consideration or compensation. For example, the policy favored a campaign to "rebuild LA" without liquor stores, barring Korean Americans' efforts to rebuild many of their businesses (see Chapter 7).

In the mainstream, state-connected media, armed Korean men were portrayed as lawless vigilantes shooting at looters randomly, while women were shown screaming

hysterically or begging and crying in front of their ruined stores (Choy et al. 1993). The tape showing Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins, discussed in Chapter 2, was the second most played video during the week of the 1992 riots. African Americans were criticized for blaming others for their poverty, while Korean storeowners were reprimanded for neither investing in the Black community nor treating customers with respect.

Right-wing commentators denied that anti-Black racism played any role in either the unrest or the King verdict. President George H. W. Bush addressed the country on May 1, 1992, denouncing “random terror and lawlessness,” summarizing his discussions with Mayor Bradley and Governor Wilson, and outlining the federal assistance he was making available to local authorities. Citing the “urgent need to restore order,” he warned that the “brutality of a mob” would not be tolerated, and that he would “use whatever force is necessary.” Furthermore, Bush and other commentators indicted the programs of the Great Society for creating the conditions that led to the unrest.<sup>19</sup> Thus, they argued for even more militarization and policing in the daily lives of poor minorities deemed threatening to the public welfare, not to mention of shedding “the pathologies of the decimated Black family” (*National Review* June 8, 1992).

Left-wing commentators, in contrast, interpreted the 1992 riots as an uprising and massive protest, and not a random, senseless outbreak of mob violence. As discussed in Chapter 1, South LA’s longtime major employers in heavy industry had been leaving the area since the 1960s and were virtually wiped out during the economic recession of 1979-1982. Furthermore, the War on Poverty and its programs, which had been lifelines in this community, had been either curtailed or eliminated, with devastating social and economic



effects. By the 1980s, Los Angeles embodied a remarkable paradox in which an “accumulation of misery” existed alongside “spectacular displays of wealth” (*Economic and Political Weekly* July 25, 1992).

Sociologist Rose Kim aptly wrote that it was the overarching society’s neglect of the Black community and urban poverty that created the social environment in which Korean Americans could be scapegoated for the riots (1996, 348). Angela Oh, in her interview with *The New York Times* (May 2, 1993), expressed similar sentiments:

The place of Koreans in American society is lonely and precarious and has served as a convenient buffer between the racism of the White majority and the anger of the Black minority. Just as Korean-owned businesses, which suffered nearly half the looting and vandalism in last year’s violence, became an outlet for the rage of many rioters, Korean Americans here now view themselves as “human shields” in a complicated racial hierarchy... We are perceived as being, as a people, greedy, selfish, insulated and unwilling to become a part of America.

Worse, Korean Americans lacked political clout to appeal to the public, especially since, for the most part; their perspective had been shut out of local and national media coverage of the unrest. Within hours of the King verdict, most media coverage had shifted their focus to rudimentary depictions of the “Black/Korean” or “Black/Asian” conflict. What was missing from media coverage was in-depth analysis of why. While describing Korean merchants as “vigilantes” and as running businesses that exploited the Black community, the popular ABC news show *Nightline* invited prominent Black leaders to air their views on Black–Korean tensions, but initially did not invite their

Korean American counterparts. Prompted by protests from Korean Americans, *Nightline* host Ted Koppel later invited Angela Oh to provide another perspective.

Television screens also bombarded viewers with images of desperate merchants firing from the rooftops of their shops, but failed to show that these store owners, abandoned by police and other law enforcement authorities, were returning gunfire initiated by others (Park 1999, 51). K. W. Lee (1996), then editor of the *Korea Times* English Edition, wrote of the 1992 riots: “It was our Warsaw. Of all places on earth, we have met our own latter-day pogrom in the City of Los Angeles....<sup>20</sup> It’s a textbook case history of media scapegoating in these hard times, pitting a politically powerful but economically frustrated minority against a seemingly thriving tribe of strangers.” Similarly, film maker Kim Gibson (2003) commented: “I was angry, furious and enraged by the way mainstream media covered the losses of Korean American victims...it appeared as if we were the issue, we were the problem. We were never represented as if we were...human beings.” The Korean American community also complained that the media spotlight focused on poor African Americans who deserved pity and excluded the impoverished Korean merchants who seldom had the insurance necessary to rebuild their businesses; in other words, the media had reduced them to voiceless foreigners, and greedy, vigilante storekeepers. Korean Americans also contested the way mainstream media framed the riots as an event played out among minority groups—Blacks, Latinos, and Asians. Instead, they stressed the role of the dominant White society plagued by racism and stratification and reflected in the various state apparatus: the politicians who ignored them, the police who failed to protect them. Other Korean Americans blamed themselves, as if they somehow deserved what they got.

Based on this new critical understanding of American society, many in the Korean American community learned the importance of participation in political and social processes. Political empowerment became an urgent and immediate goal. A number of U.S.-educated 1.5- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-generation Korean Americans recognized this gap and began to pursue representation in mainstream politics. It was no coincidence that six Korean Americans were elected to local, state and federal political offices during the 1992 November elections.<sup>21</sup> In addition to attributing the predicament of Korean Americans during the unrest to political exclusion, progressive political leaders also linked the events to Republican neglect of the inner cities and racial inequality in mainstream political institutions, including the criminal justice system. Some sought to build interracial coalitions (Regalado 1994), such as the Multicultural Collaborative (MCC), Asian Pacific Americans for a New Los Angeles (APANLA), and the Asian Pacific Planning Council (APPCON). These organizations demanded interracial and inter-ethnic coalition-building in exchange for their participation in the rebuilding process.<sup>22</sup>

To a certain extent, the unrest made Korean immigrants aware of institutional racism, social and economic injustice, and the myth of the American dream of meritocracy and hard work. Nopper (2010) urged readers to acknowledge the suffering endured by Korean American merchants should be framed in the context of relative privilege:

The collective experience of loss, both materially and psychically, involves the mourning of conservative ideological commitments and the divestment of ill-gotten (as the realization of value under capitalism is premised on exploitation)

value. It is, moreover, the resentment of frustrated bourgeois aspirations by the relative loss of status and working proximity to...the most despised classes of the most despised racial group in the USA. (98).

As part of the immigrant bourgeoisie, Korean merchants' racial discourse reflected dominant American views. For instance, Kapson Yim Lee (1997), an editor of the English edition of the *Korea Times*, asserted that Sa-I-Gu was a riot, not a "civil unrest," arguing that those who looted and burned down Korean immigrants' livelihoods were hoodlums and vandals, not average citizens rebelling against social injustice.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, Korean merchants' reconstructions of race and ethnicity also conveyed aspects of oppositional ideologies, particularly as they recognized the structural causes and the multiracial dimensions of the 1992 unrest. On May 2, nearly a week after the violence erupted, about 30,000 mostly Korean Americans rallied in Koreatown to offer a unified demonstration of support to those who had been victimized, calling for peace and denouncing police violence. The protest turned out to be the largest Asian American demonstration ever held in the city. Notably, the Korean American leadership did not blame Black and Latino communities writ large for the looting and burning, although a few demanded an apology from Black community leaders. Instead, they critiqued American institutions—the media, police, and government— "for inciting tensions, reinforcing economic and political inequalities, and indirectly instigating urban violence" (Gold 2010, 146). Jin H. Lee, owner of a Compton store that burned down to the ground, stated: "I do not hate the people who burned my store. I hate the government that did not do its job because we are a minority" (LAT 10/27/1992). Moreover, many Koreans attributed the causes of this urban violence to oppressive federal and state

policies (Park 1999, 48- 49). What we can observe in my interviewees' responses is the co-existence of both race-based, rather prejudiced interpretations—perspectives that view African Americans and Latinos as racialized others—and class-based explanations for the unrest.

Korean immigrant merchants' four different perspectives about other minorities, as discussed above, illustrate how social inequality is often viewed in terms of race or ethnicity instead of class. Steinberg (1989) rejected the prevailing notion that cultural values and ethnic traits are the primary determinants of the economic states of racial and ethnic groups in America. He argued that locality, class conflict, selective migration, and other historical and economic factors play a far larger role not only in producing inequality but in maintaining it as well. Comaroff and Comaroff (1992) are also correct when they invoke Marx's image of the camera obscura and write: "once objectified as a 'principle' by which the division of labor is organized, ethnicity assumes the autonomous character of a prime mover in the unequal destinies of persons and populations" (59). One can see this in the aftermath of the unrest, as Koreans initiated new hiring practices and took on more Black employees (Park 1995/1996). However, this strategy had other consequences, such as the pitting of African American workers against Latino workers. The identification of African American workers as an alternative to Latino labor points to "how the positioning of ethno-racial groups within the US labor queue is relational and dynamic" and responds to historically specific articulations of race, gender, class and state formation processes (Maldonado 2009, 1033). As the ethno-racial composition of jobs change, we might expect the ideological terrain to change as well, though.

It seems that the Korean American community at large was not fully aware of the implications of their post-unrest hiring and business practices. A Korean television news crew who accompanied me to South LA Korean-immigrant businesses in the aftermath appeared to be uncomfortable with the racial makeup of the new business scene: they did not know how to make sense of Korean woman merchants continually complimenting their new Black female employees on their hairstyles and work ethic. Korean merchants also changed other business practices following the unrest, such as attempting to treat their customers with more respect and kindness to show that “the customer is king”; it should be noted that this was partly in response to the fact that many Black customers treated the merchants with apologetic politeness in the aftermath. These attempts to rethink their behavior demonstrate that these merchants did not rely exclusively on prejudice to interpret questions of race and ethnicity. Moreover, seeing Black–Korean tension as a matter of Korean prejudice toward African Americans or vice versa does not explain the shift in hiring practices. But merchants made a calculated decision to make hiring changes, but this doesn’t necessarily mean they’ve abandoned their prejudices.

Korean immigrants’ reconstruction of race and ethnicity raises several important issues.<sup>24</sup> First, there is a disparity between ideology/culture and practice/experience (i.e., political, economic, and social realities), although both factors influence each other. We have seen contradictions between Korean immigrants’ racialized business practices and their perceptions of other ethnicities, contradictions that neither ideology nor materialism alone can explain. For example, hiring more African Americans did not fully translate into new perceptions of African Americans. The trends reported and witnessed in the aftermath of the riots lasted for several years. However, by the late 1990s, Korean

business owners had reverted to relying on Latino employees, reflecting the increasing dominance of the Latino population in South LA. Nonetheless, Korean immigrants learned a valuable lesson from the unrest: hire local people. Before the unrest, their employees were mostly Latinos, who were not necessarily local residents, supplemented by African Americans and Koreans. In the aftermath, partially as a response to the demands made by Black community leaders and partially as a reaction to Latino participation in looting, Korean merchants increased the number of Black employees and decreased the number of Latinos, which led some Korean merchants to actively pursue hiring local people. However, as increasing numbers of African Americans moved out of South LA, Korean merchants continued to hire local people, this time Latinos.

This analysis of racial/ethnic perspectives by Korean merchants reveals the circularity of the discourse surrounding the ethnically segmented labor market. Some Koreans blamed the unrest on Latinos, suspecting their Latino employees had helped Latino looters target stores. Others failed to see the systematic racism and classism at the root of the 1992 unrest. Still others saw class as the most fundamental factor in the social and cultural construction of race and ethnicity. Race scholars often think of Black-Korean or Latino-Korean relations as always polarized; however, they are much more complex. Perhaps the best we can say is that prejudices are not deep-seated, and that with personal interaction, people's attitudes towards other races and ethnicities may change over time. The next chapter takes us into the streets of South LA and examines how immigrants and native minorities interacted with each other and with mainstream institutions in the aftermath of the unrest.

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, as many Ethnic Studies scholars have pointed out, there are places in the country where it's never simply been about black and white. California is a prime example – where primary tensions always involved Chinese/Asians and Latinos.

<sup>2</sup> "LAPPL - Los Angeles Police Protective League: Controversy over Rodney King beating and L.A. riots reignites"

[http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy\\_over\\_rodney\\_king\\_beating\\_and\\_la\\_riots\\_reignites/](http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy_over_rodney_king_beating_and_la_riots_reignites/)  
lapd.com. Accessed 10-02-2015.

<sup>3</sup> King knew that an arrest for a DUI would violate the terms of his parole.

<sup>4</sup> The National Geographic Channel "The Final Report: The L.A. Riots" aired on October 4, 2006 10 pm EDT.

<sup>5</sup> "LAPPL - Los Angeles Police Protective League: Controversy over Rodney King beating and L.A. riots reignites"

[http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy\\_over\\_rodney\\_king\\_beating\\_and\\_la\\_riots\\_reignites/](http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy_over_rodney_king_beating_and_la_riots_reignites/)  
lapd.com. Accessed 10-02-2015.

<sup>6</sup> "LAPPL - Los Angeles Police Protective League: Controversy over Rodney King beating and L.A. riots reignites"

[http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy\\_over\\_rodney\\_king\\_beating\\_and\\_la\\_riots\\_reignites/](http://lapd.com/news/headlines/controversy_over_rodney_king_beating_and_la_riots_reignites/)  
lapd.com. Accessed 10-02-2015.

<sup>7</sup> In 1990, two years before the Unrest, Koreans owned 1,600 out of a total 2,411, or two-thirds of all businesses in South Central.

<sup>8</sup> The Westside or West LA is known for its affluent neighborhood, the majority population being White Americans. Koreatown is centrally located between East and West LA.  
and in relation to Koreatown and who lives there?

<sup>9</sup> It's generally ignorance about the differences between Asian ethnicities. It doesn't always imply contempt though.

<sup>10</sup> Please refer to the "Survey of working conditions in Koreatown Restaurants" at [www.kiwa.org](http://www.kiwa.org).

<sup>11</sup> Koreans call what happened in 1992 in Los Angeles "Sa-I-Gu," literally April 29, following the Korean tradition of using a date to refer to major political and/or violent events in their history.

<sup>12</sup> During the Unrest, the LAPD shifted its longstanding policy of apprehending undocumented immigrants and turning them over to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)—which is now Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE—for possible deportation. According to INS officials, undocumented immigrants accounted for more than 1,200 of the 15,000 people arrested. Many came from Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Jamaica (Navarro 1993, 73).

<sup>13</sup> Squatter settlements on hills are somewhat romantically called moon villages in Korea. They are often populated with poor people from rural areas who migrated to urban ones in 70s and 80s, and are notorious for low-quality living conditions.

<sup>14</sup> For the best study on the Korean War, see Cumings (1981).

<sup>15</sup> She became a sort of spokesperson for the Korean merchant community, talking to the media on behalf of victims of the Unrest.

<sup>16</sup> Although 71 businesses owners were interviewed, for the purpose of the data on hiring practices, I included the same number of businesses that were present before the Unrest.

<sup>17</sup> It is just a hypothesis.

<sup>18</sup> See *Rebuilding L.A.'s Urban Communities: A Final Report from RLA*, published by Milken Institute (1997): "Business, government, and the community (a 'three-legged stool') together would bring prosperity to neglected communities by securing substantial outside private-and public-sector investments in large part by major corporations; by cutting red tape; and through volunteerism (1997, 11).

<sup>19</sup> The Great Society refers to a set of domestic programs in the United States launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964–65. The new major spending programs that addressed education, medical care, urban problems, rural poverty, and transportation were launched during this period.

<sup>20</sup> Pogroms were tactics of state-sponsored repression of a minority group; this situation is not analogous to that.

<sup>21</sup> I was unable to verify how many Korean American candidates ran.



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<sup>22</sup>Angela Oh and Bong Hwan Kim played integral roles in the formation of MCC and APANLA. Cindy Choi was the founding director of MCC. In addition, the Los Angeles Times hired K. Connie Kang as a writer and the Department of Commerce hired T.S. Chung. They did this specifically to address lack of Korean representation.

<sup>23</sup> Korean immigrant merchant interviewees used the term “riot” interchangeably with “Sa-I-Gu,” but their explanation of what happened indicated their understanding of the structural causes of the unrest.

<sup>24</sup>I am not suggesting they had a complete change of heart about this.