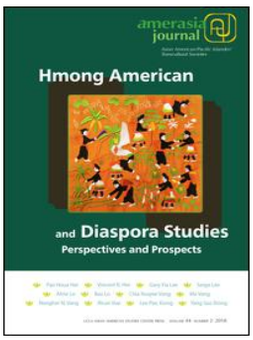

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commentary

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Commentary

Black-Korean American Relations: **An Insider's Viewpoint**

LARRY AUBRY

Death and Violence: Unfortunate Equalizers

For months, tension and violence grew between African Americans and Korean merchants throughout South Central Los Angeles. The killing of fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins by a Korean merchant in March of 1991 highlighted the unmistakable distrust and animosity between the two groups. The posture on the part of many in the African American community was outrage and anger with little indication of a willingness to reconcile differences.

In June, the killing of Lee Arthur Mitchell by an immigrant Korean merchant, ruled justifiable by the district attorney, seemed to solidify frustration and negative resolve. The most publicized position within the African American community was the boycott of the liquor store, whose owner shot Mitchell following an alleged robbery attempt.

In addition to these widely-known cases, there were other less publicized killings, including that of an African American robbery suspect by a Korean auto parts store owner and two Korean liquor store employees by an African American robber. There were also reported instances of arson, vandalism and extortion against Korean merchants. All the while, African American residents continued to report incidents of disrespect by Korean merchants. Even with the negotiated settlement of the liquor store boycott in early October 1991, communication between Blacks and Koreans did not appear appreciably better.

During the early morning of October 1991 at a gas station on Century

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This article was originally written before the Los Angeles civil uprising.

Boulevard and Broadway in South Central Los Angeles, a nine-year-old Korean girl was shot by an African American male robber as she crouched on a cot in a small back room. This horrible act brought immediate expressions of outrage from both the African American and Korean communities.

Danny Bakewell, president of the Brotherhood Crusade, who led the boycott of the Korean liquor store, denounced the shooting and said the black gunman must be brought to justice. "This is very, very serious in our community. . . . It speaks to the fact that we have to take a stern position on this senseless violence. It is intolerable and we in the African American community will not accept it. . . . We don't care who's doing it. We don't care who it's happening to. . . . It's wrong and we cannot allow it to continue in our community."

In proposing that the city offer a $5000 reward for the gunman, Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas stated, "This reward sends a message that we abhor the violence taking place in our city and must take action to stop it. More important, we must take a strong stand against violence against children." John Mack, president of the Los Angeles Urban League, Councilman Nate Holden and other African American leaders also strongly denounced the shooting and violence or injustice of any kind.

The Korean community's response to the nine-year-old girl's shooting was stronger than in the past. Korean leaders also called for an end to the violence and wondered out loud if their previous reactions to the killings of Koreans had been too weak. They also pointed out that many more Koreans had died at the hands of African Americans than the other way around. There is anger and frustration in both the African American and Korean communities, and comparing body counts serves no constructive purpose.

The so-called Black-Korean problem reflects the pent-up frustration of both communities. And, it is a problem that goes well beyond Blacks and Koreans *per se*; its genesis is the racist history and structure of the country which fosters social economic inequality and leaves it to the victims to fashion solutions.

In the context of South Central Los Angeles, all small merchants have difficulty. "Outside" merchants catch particular hell because of the *prima facie* resentment by local residents who often perceive these merchants as opportunistic and successful at the community's expense. It is especially important the "outside" merchants—in this case, Koreans—be responsive and sensitive to the needs of their customers. It is the right thing to do and makes good business sense as well.

The Latasha Harlins killing and the shooting of the nine-year-old Korean girl both focused public attention on the horrible price of wanton violence. (Similar cries of outrage are warranted over the senseless killing

and pain which occurs regularly throughout the Los Angeles area, but especially in South Central Los Angeles.) No community can afford a "norm" in which the loss of human life is reduced to nothing more than a conversation piece for adults and children who are so conditioned to the death and violence of their daily lives.

The focus of Blacks and Koreans must shift from mutual blame to concentration on do-able objectives based upon mutual self-interest. Fortunately, the scene may be changing—slightly, but significantly.

The boycott of the Korean liquor store ended and efforts were undertaken to bring closure to the agreement. Councilman Mark Ridley-Thomas, together with Councilman Michael Woo, convened representatives from the African American and Korean communities to assess the situation. Participants decided to meet again in order to submit specific suggestions and recommendations for improving economic conditions; African American and Korean churches have taken up the challenge anew. Their obvious potential for assisting and improving Black-Korean relations should not be minimized.

Emotion is a powerful motivator. The killing of an African American teenager and wounding of a nine-year-old Korean girl may be the events which galvanize the Black and Korean communities toward new strategies and new behavior. Neither community can tolerate the senseless devaluation of life represented in the shooting of these two young people.

Judicial Aggravation

The sentencing of Korean merchant, Soon Ja Du, caused anger, disbelief and outrage throughout the African American community. People simply could not believe that Mrs. Du received no time in jail for killing fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins in a dispute over a bottle of orange juice.

Superior Court Judge Joyce A. Karlin disallowed a charge of first-degree murder and the jury convicted Mrs. Du of voluntary manslaughter; more serious second-degree murder and less serious involuntary manslaughter convictions were also possible.

It is tempting, but usually pointless, to "second guess" controversial court decisions. And, the losing side often has the right to appeal. But legal options, notwithstanding, the scope and intensity of adverse reaction in the Soon Ja Du case warrant a closer examination of events surrounding the trial, as well as the implications of Judge Karlin's decision for Latasha Harlins' family and the broader community as well.

Immediately following the shooting of Latasha, the media incorrectly and unjustly described her as a possible runaway and truant. This was not true but helped create a negative impression in the public's mind. The universality of the negative reaction to Soon Ja Du's sentence is based

in part on a feeling that justice continues to elude African Americans and that an African American life, even in 1991, is less revered and of less value than that of any other racial or ethnic group.

Rodney King's beating by the Los Angeles Police Department, which occurred some thirteen days earlier, diverted attention from Latasha's killing. African Americans were, to some extent, emotionally preoccupied with the Rodney King matter, and their overall reaction to Latasha's killing was somewhat muted. The Harlins' family sensed this keenly—to the point of feeling alone and almost abandoned.

The objectivity of the judicial system was called into question early in the Soon Ja Du case. Initially heard in Los Angeles, then assigned to Compton, the case was sent back to Los Angeles because a judge (White) in Compton determined that Compton lacked adequate courthouse security to deal with the potential tension between Blacks and Koreans over Latasha's killing. However, the judge also stated that jurors and witnesses might be fearful of having to go into the Compton area, which is, of course, predominantly Black and Latino.

The prosecution did not comment on the judge's remarks, but Compton's City Council did. In no uncertain terms, the Council protested that the judge had unjustly defamed the city and in doing so set back race relations in the area.

This judicial travesty exemplifies institutional racism: the judge's statement was low-key and matter-of-fact, but it reinforced prevailing stereotypes about the propensity of Blacks and Latinos to engage in indiscriminate violent crime. (Similar stereotypical elements seem to have been at work in the sentencing of Mrs. Du.)

During the trial, members of the Harlins family were sometimes denied entry into the courtroom. At times, they were treated like mere observers and not accorded the dignity and consideration due a family under the circumstances. One or more members of the immediate family might leave the courtroom during a recess, only to be refused entry upon their return because their seats had been given to others.

This, too, is a subtle manifestation of racism. It may not have been intentional, but the impact was no less real and no less hurtful and degrading to the Harlins family.

Judge Karlin, prior to sentencing Soon Ja Du, talked about the need for "healing" and appealed for peace between Blacks and Koreans. Ironically, the sentence she handed down had the opposite effect. The healing process was made immeasurably more difficult by Judge Karlin's insensitive and shortsighted ruling. Black-Korean relations are tenuous, at best, and the immediate effect of the sentencing was to inflame feelings, thereby increasing the possibility of Koreans becoming

the targets of widespread anger.

Judges are charged with weighing all the facts and rendering a just decision. In the Soon Ja Du case, the probation officer recommended the maximum sentence, sixteen years, in part because Mrs. Du displayed no remorse for her behavior. Judge Karlin believed otherwise. She stated that the issue of sentencing boiled down to two questions. ". . .Did Mrs. Du act inappropriately? Absolutely. But was that action understandable? I think it was."

Mrs. Du not only acted inappropriately, but criminally. She took a teenager's life and was convicted by the jury of voluntary manslaughter. For a judge to characterize her behavior as merely "inappropriate" is highly unique, and indeed, almost beyond belief.

The widespread anger, frustration and outrage in the black community has been directed toward Judge Karlin and not Korean merchants. Credit for this must go to African American leaders who have called meetings and press conferences, and issued statements counseling the community to channel its outrage into constructive activities.

Judge Karlin had the audacity to lecture Blacks and Koreans on their responsibility to one another. She stated, "Latasha Harlins' death should be remembered as a catalyst that must force members of the African American and Korean communities to confront an intolerable situation by creating constructive solutions so that a similar tragedy can never be repeated again."

It is Judge Karlin's decision which will be remembered as the catalyst that enraged African Americans, forcing them to address the perceived racist implications in her sentencing of Soon Ja Du.

Learning from the Death of a Teenager

The broader context within which Latasha's death occurred should be kept uppermost in everyone's mind. South Central Los Angeles is an economic graveyard, ravaged by time and neglect. Government services are inadequate, public education is a failure, and housing and employment are worse than in 1965, at the time of the Watts riots. Drastic demographic changes compound and aggravate the area's problems; new Latino arrivals further diminish scarce resources. In addition, African Americans fear a shift in political power.

This scenario is increasingly common in core urban areas throughout the U.S. Not surprisingly, in this depressed and oppressive environment, crime and violence are disproportionately high. Conditions seem to stun the mind, affecting people's sensitivity to physical and psychological violence. African American youth, especially, appear increasingly unconcerned or unaware of the implications of violent behavior.

However, South Central residents are also extremely concerned about

crime and violence, and agonize over the fact that both are escalating. They have come to accept these things as an unwelcome, unfair aspect of their lives.

Even though South Central's citizens are disproportionately assaulted, robbed and murdered, there is rarely a significant or prolonged outcry from the community. Gang behavior is feared but tolerated. And while the needless loss of human life is always tragic, conditions in South Central cause tempers to flare quickly. Pervasive fear, hopelessness and rage too often result in the loss of lives with little provocation.

These killings created a volatile, emotional overlay, which made sober thinking and reasoning all the more difficult. Some people were "thinking" with their emotions, and, in so doing, minimized and even disregarded known facts. Their feelings are genuine and the emotions understandable. However, they make for a dangerous situation, which can cause needless aggravation of race relations in South Central Los Angeles.

A major factor in all of this is the African American community's historical distrust of the police, which was reinforced by the flagrant police brutality against Rodney King. Another factor is the already uneasy coexistence of Korean merchants and African American residents in South Central Los Angeles. Very little is done systematically to improve communication and dialogue between the groups; both Korean merchants and local residents are left largely to their own devices to resolve mutual problems. Efforts of individuals and groups, such as the Black-Korean Alliance, are necessary and commendable, but woefully inadequate. Thus far, such attempts to deal with Black-Korean problems have not generated the broad-based support and/or political clout necessary to make a difference.

Another problem is the media, which regularly skews and sensationalizes stories about Blacks and Koreans who are easy targets and apparently make "good copy." The fact is, violent crime between Blacks and Koreans constitutes an extremely small percentage of total crime in the inner-city. Obviously, the media helps to form and/or influence attitudes and opinions. It follows that balanced, responsible reporting is especially important when dealing with a potentially explosive situation such as that in South Central Los Angeles.

Highlighting violence between African and Koreans Americans, as the media often does, with no reference to other areas of conflict and crime in South Central, distorts reality and does a disservice to both communities. Selective reporting clearly exacerbates Black-Korean problems while at the same time diverting attention from other, more serious problems that beset the African American community.

A small number of residents, churches and community organizations were so upset over killings of African Americans that they boycotted the liquor store where Lee Arthur Mitchell was killed. Their feelings were understandable, but the soundness and timing of such action must be seriously questioned. It is doubtful that the community's best interest was served by aggravating an already charged situation without sufficient regard for the consequences to the community itself.

And, there are civil rights implications. Should any store be closed without documented evidence of law violation or other significant wrong doing? Overall conditions in the area, including the long-standing problems between Korean merchants and African Americans, make the former easy targets. African Americans must guard against what appears to be a growing callousness for the civil rights of other people of color, including Korean merchants.

The present climate in South Central Los Angeles lends itself to precipitous, unthinking behavior. Residents are tired of being put upon by continuing social and economic inequities, and many are increasingly receptive to lashing out at the most visible and convenient targets. In this atmosphere, it is all too easy for Korean merchants to become scapegoats for the many ills facing the African American community.

Merchants, including African Americans who are disrespectful, or otherwise abusive, should be dealt with accordingly. Such behavior cannot be tolerated. But residents should not blindly target all of their pent-up frustration and anger against "Koreans." It would be tragic if African Americans, a people with such a long and continuing history of oppression, were to become "Korean bashers," with little or no regard for these people's civil or human rights.

Those with long-time grievances against Korean merchants have a responsibility to separate those concerns from recent killings. Indiscriminate coupling of unrelated existing problems to the community's emotional response to the recent killings is dangerous.

In the absence of a well-conceived overall plan for addressing Black-Korean problems, emotion-driven action will predictably result in further inflaming the community. Except for immediate ventilation by relatively few people, nothing constructive will result from such behavior.

A more effective approach would be to clearly identify the major problems, then develop plans and strategies to achieve sought-after objectives. This requires a unified, concerted effort involving community organizations, churches and elected officials, each assuming responsibility for specific aspects of the plan.

The economic infrastructure, poor education, and housing and unem-

ployment all contribute heavily to crime and substandard conditions in South Central Los Angeles. These areas, too, should be targeted for protest and constructive action, along with the perceived problem of Koreans "taking over" businesses in the area. There would be no "take-over" if African Americans reinvested time, money and people resources in the South Central community. A broader, more inclusive attack on the major problems should be launched as a matter of survival for all the peoples who must live together in Los Angeles.