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## Race, Class, Conflict and Empowerment: **On Ice Cube's "Black Korea"**

JEFF CHANG

### I. Locating the Spaces of Struggle

Amidst the tempest between Du Soon Ja's conviction and sentencing in late 1991, Los Angeles rap artist Ice Cube issued a brutally terse fictional judgment of his own on a song called "Black Korea." With an audio snippet from Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, he placed himself as a customer in a Korean American-owned corner store trying to purchase a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor. What should have been a simple transaction was about to become another aggravating experience.

As the music bursts forth, the scene is set for an ugly confrontation. Ice Cube confronts two prejudiced, "Oriental, one penny counting" proprietors. They follow him suspiciously as he walks through their store. Their close scrutiny infuriates the rapper, who turns and leers at the woman storekeeper, "Bitch, I got a job." At the song's bridge, the shop erupts into argument when his friends raise their voices in his support.

By now the original Spike Lee scene has been transformed, fully stripped of all its irony and humor, left with only the raw racial conflict. Then the heavy bass surges back and the song rushes along to its pitched conclusion. First Ice Cube issues an economic threat, "Don't follow me up and down your crazy little market, or your little chop suey ass will be the target of a nationwide boycott." In a final defiant

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gesture, he raises the prospect of a racially vengeful conflagration. “Pay respect to the black fist,” he yells, “or we’ll burn your store right down to a crisp, and then we’ll see ya because you can’t turn the ghetto into Black Korea.” The Korean store-owner has the last word: “Mother fuck you!”

Tension between African Americans and Asian Americans is a subtext running throughout the album, entitled *Death Certificate*, which finds Ice Cube partially repudiating his previous street gangster pose and replacing it with an emerging nationalist perspective. But his new embrace of blackness comes with an antipathy for Asians. On “Horny Lil’ Devil,” a track about black male emasculation, he gets so energized from wiping out the “devils” (variously seen as white sexual harassers of black women, racists, and “fags”) that he runs around to the corner store to beat up the “Jap” owner. On “Us,” he fumes at “sellouts” and calls for black racial solidarity when he sees “Japs grabbing every vacant lot in my ‘hood to build a store and sell they goods.”

Ice Cube’s comments on Asians were not a new development in hip hop music. Dating to the 1990 Red Apple Grocery boycott in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, rap sometimes served as a forum for young urban blacks to express their feelings on tensions related to Asian Americans. Queen Mother Rage, a rapper affiliated with Sonny Carson’s Blackwatch Movement, denounced “the Orientals hungry for each piece of our prize.” On a single called “To Be Real,” she cautioned, “Check the incidents and the innocence. Ignorance is no defense.” Special Ed’s teen rewrite of a James Bond fantasy, “The Mission,” found the young rapper traveling to Japan to confront a Chinese nemesis. When he discovers that his enemy not only possesses amazing “black belt karate” skills but also catches bullets in his teeth, Ed gets down and defeats his opponent “Flatbush style.” (Conflation of very different Asian American cultural identities into a new myth of a threatening, as opposed to a model, minority was a recurrent theme.) And during the hot, tense summer months, Chubb Rock led a New York concert crowd in chants of “Fuck you, eggroll.”

These created musical spaces of struggle arose from real urban spaces of increasing racial strife. In South Central Los Angeles, for example, a number of large plant closings contributed to a black male jobless rate of about fifty percent in some areas.<sup>1</sup> The poverty rate of Asians in Los Angeles County grew to twice that of whites, while the poverty rates for Blacks and Latinos each swelled past three times that of whites.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the succession of Korean immigrants into small businesses in the South Central Los Angeles area created a new ethnic petit bourgeoisie or a “middleman minority.”<sup>3</sup> The convergence of

these factors set the context for new conflict and tensions between Korean and African Americans that were only beginning to peak at the start of the nineties. In 1991, three firebombings of Korean American stores took place during the month of August alone. By 1992, a survey of racial attitudes in Los Angeles conducted before and just after the April uprising showed that more than 41 percent of Blacks and 48 percent of Asians felt that it was difficult to get along with the other group. Blacks felt *worse* about Asians after the riots. Asians, too, saw Blacks more negatively.<sup>4</sup>

Ice Cube's one-minute long rap was a highly concentrated summation and evocation of interracial conflict in a environment of deteriorating opportunities. But it was also an artifact of popular culture. The *Death Certificate* album went to number two on the *Billboard* charts a week after it was released and went on to sell over one and a half million copies. The album's explosive content ignited a searing debate in the mass media. Feeling substantially and materially targeted, Korean American community leaders and grocers initiated economic boycotts against Ice Cube's album and the St. Ides malt liquor that he endorsed. Thus a musical work was transformed into a political cause.

The impact of "Black Korea," in particular, represents a moment where issues of interracial conflict and political empowerment crystallized in a clash of what Edward Chang calls "strategies of survival" for Asian Americans and African Americans.<sup>5</sup> The struggle for group power, the power to shape and influence given situations to maximal outcomes, was waged on two fronts: on the media front for social-political power and the market front for economic-political power. African and Asian Americans employed tactics and strategies consistent with their resources, and consonant to their objectives. This article looks at how the hierarchy of racial power in the media and in the marketplace shaped the dynamics of the conflicts.

For African and Asian Americans, power shifted slightly in different contexts. The media debate reveals how "Black Korea" was received by various audiences. Interpretations of the song varied widely because of the positions of its different audiences by class, generation, and social power. Yet not all interpretations were equally covered. While whites and blacks held a one-sided debate over the merits of Ice Cube's work, the marginality of Korean American opinion reflected Asian American social-political disempowerment. Racial groups also acted and reacted upon material readings of the song. Korean Americans saw the boycotts as strategies for political empowerment. At the same time, the success of the grocers' boycott success was not received well by some members of the African American community. They saw such success as proof of African

Americans' economic-political disempowerment. But neither African nor Asian American tactics and strategies yielded substantial gains to their respective groups.

On spaces of struggle such as South Central Los Angeles, political organizing to expand minority access and power has become increasingly complex and movements seem increasingly and inevitably to be drawn into collision courses with each other. Community organizations attempting to empower communities of color have drawn on two coexisting and sometimes compatible, but basically divergent approaches to organizing. Both an anti-colonial approach, which seeks a unity of racially colonized peoples against a white ruling class, and a nationalist approach, which seeks racial solidarity for collective group advancement, appear as problematic here. I suggest utilizing a recognition of "differential disempowerment" as a way of reducing opposition between disempowered racial groups and creating new space for those groups to move towards full access and participation.

## **II. But You Don't Hear Me Though:**

### **RACIAL POWER IN CRITICAL INTERPRETATION**

Mass culture theorists have criticized audiences for popular culture as an ignorant horde brought together by their low tolerance for style, subtlety and significance, their need for instant gratification, their blind submission to commodification and their passive acceptance of demagoguery masquerading as culture. Theodor Adorno called popular music "a social cement" which strips listeners of their individuality and binds them by their psychological needs. Youth are seen as particularly prone to becoming literal "slaves to the rhythm."<sup>6</sup>

Yet this analysis is inadequate to understanding the impact "Black Korea" had on its well over one-and-a-half-million listeners. Many scholars see audiences not as passive subjects but as creators of their own political meanings.<sup>7</sup> Dick Hebdige, for example, explains punk music and style as a calculated subcultural act of "noise," which he defines as "interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media."<sup>8</sup> Rather than support authoritarian power, he concludes, punks use their subculture to actively resist it. By exploring punk music from its audience's perspective, Hebdige is able to dissect power and ideology. Such an approach highlights who shapes discourse about popular culture, how that discourse is shaped and what that discourse says.

Rap music's appeal has grown to include white suburban, Latina/o, and female audiences. The focus here is confined to three distinct (if not completely homogenous) audiences: the black rap music audience, the

mainstream white media, and the Asian American audience. I look at how these audiences reacted critically to "Black Korea" and also to other audiences' reactions. I also examine where these audiences voiced their opinions. By looking at ideology and representation, it is possible to arrive at a hierarchy of social-political power.

*Hip hop* is an American subculture developed by marginalized African American and Puerto Rican youth in New York ghettos during the seventies. The subculture encompasses spray can art and street dancing, and rapping is part of its musical branch. As David Toop has shown, rapping fits into a cultural line that can be traced back through the African American historical experience to the pre-slavery West African oral tradition.<sup>9</sup> Thus one of rap music's many functions is to continue the long rich line of African American social protest and commentary. The modern popularization and commodification of African American music has transformed but not significantly altered this basic cultural function.

African American audiences for rap music, overwhelmingly young audiences, played the central role in the legitimization of Ice Cube from his early days as a "gangsta" hero to his rise to a kind of modern-day *riot* status. They formed his core audience when he was rhyming, "To a kid looking up to me, life ain't nothing but bitches and money."<sup>10</sup> Later in his career, after two platinum albums and success among white "crossover" audiences, they stood by him strongly during the controversy over "Death Certificate." Many fended off criticism of his work by claiming his work as representative of their own experiences and by suggesting his detractors were motivated by racism.

Angela Griffin wrote in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, "Since Cube is trying to kick it on the positive side, trying to wake us up to the conspiracy against Blacks, and how the White man is both brainwashing and using us so we can ruin each other, someone wants to cause an uproar. Why? Because they're getting scared. They don't want us to realize what they're trying to do—capture us in a mental slavery."<sup>11</sup>

James Bernard, senior editor of hip hop magazine *The Source*, defended Ice Cube against calls for boycotts, "Yes, Ice Cube is very angry, and he expresses that anger in harsh, blunt, and unmistakable terms. But the source of his rage is very real. Many in the black community, particularly Los Angeles, Cube's home, feel as if it's open season on blacks with the Rodney King assault and the recent murder of a young black girl by a Korean merchant."<sup>12</sup>

For many disenfranchised youth of all colors, but primarily African Americans, hip hop subculture is a stylistic revolt against limited economic opportunities and racial prejudice. At the same time, it

sometimes converts peer group competition into violent metaphor. Real or invented enemies are routinely and mercilessly slaughtered in the record grooves. "Gangsta" rap can be compared to the highly popular film genre of action-adventure movies. As Gina Marchetti writes,

Particular genres tend to be popular at certain points in time because they somehow embody and work through those social contradictions the culture needs to come to grips with and may not be able to deal with except in the realm of fantasy. As such, popular genres often function the way myth functions-to work through social contradictions in the form of a narrative so that very real problems can be transposed to the realm of fantasy and apparently solved there.<sup>13</sup>

In a context of limited social opportunity for African American youth, the popularity of "gangsta" rap and the iconization of "hardcore" gangsta rappers makes sense, even if one thinks musical "gangsta"-ism is not sensible. "Gangsta" rappers argue that their poetry mirrors their reality. But these raps function as more than mirrors, they are also self-myth-making.

In "Black Korea," Ice Cube's attempts to move from 'hood hero to "race man" by taking the "us" versus "them" dialectic into the realm of interracial relations. He has stated that the song "holds the tone of the neighborhood and the feelings of the people."<sup>14</sup> He has also remarked:

. . . it's inspired by everyday life in the black community with the Koreans. Blacks don't like them and it's vice versa. The Koreans have a lot of businesses in the black community. The (Harlins) shooting is just proof of the problem, just another example of their disrespect for black people. You go in their stores and they think you're going to steal something. They follow you around the store like you're a criminal. They say, "Buy something or get out." If it hasn't happened to you, you can't know how bad it feels for somebody to make you feel like a criminal when you're in their store and you haven't done anything.<sup>15</sup>

The fiery conclusion of "Black Korea" is understood by many of Cube's African American fans in the 'hood for its mythical, metaphorical resolution of the very real social problems of economic disenfranchisement, Korean American prejudice, and interracial conflict. Although rappers often claim their rhymes are a form of poetic journalism, this is beside the point. The music's liberation comes in its transposing of the real-life problems into terms that can be controlled.

When the debate over the merits of Ice Cube's record erupted, African American music critics quickly rose to his defense in black newspapers across the country, as well as in the large urban network of

hip hop magazines. African American audiences also represented themselves in response to mainstream editorials. Chuck D of the rap group Public Enemy and Bernard were given prominent space in *Billboard Magazine* to challenge the apparent anti-black media bias.<sup>16</sup> Hip hop music itself, a space where culture and subculture converge and assert, functions as representation, as what Hebdige calls "noise."<sup>17</sup> Ice Cube devoted the lead cut of his next album *The Predator* to answering *Billboard's* charges.<sup>18</sup> Yet whites still ultimately shaped the parameters within which African Americans could respond. As Coco Fusco cautioned, one could not "confuse the appearance of access created by the commodification of ethnicity...with the decentralization of wealth and democratization of political power that have yet to take place in this country."<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Asian American listeners were left largely muted in the debate. They found their voices largely limited to the ethnic press, especially the *Korea Times* of Los Angeles, *Asian Week* and the alternative music press. Korean Americans were not quoted in any kind of mainstream news coverage until after the grocers' boycott concluded. Young Koreans, in particular, expressed strong but conflicting and contradictory emotions. Michael Park, an Asian American rapper and a community activist in Seattle, was a good example. He had been a victim, along with his brother and two black friends, in a celebrated incident of police brutality at the campus of the University of Washington.<sup>20</sup> A devotee of Ice Cube's earlier records, he nonetheless reacted strongly to "Black Korea."

"Not only is Cube offensive to Koreans and Korean Americans," Park wrote in the *Korea Times* of Los Angeles, "he has attacked Asian people as a whole."<sup>21</sup> He went on to ask the Korean community to use the incident to reflect on its own prejudices towards African Americans and expressed support for the boycotts. High school student Henry Yun argued that "Black Korea" was "a death threat to all Korean American merchants in this country," but also reported that most of his friends felt Ice Cube should not be banned.<sup>22</sup> In an attempt to "move away from the issue of censorship and the stereotyping of rap as violent and move toward addressing the core problem," Dong Suh, the son of a grocer, contributed a deeply emotional and articulate analysis of the tensions between Korean and African Americans.<sup>23</sup> Suh stated at the beginning of his piece,

Several years ago, a prominent radio personality in Philadelphia, where my family operates a small corner store in a predominantly African American neighborhod, expressed a similar sentiment. I clearly remember his warning that if Koreans did not respect Blacks, firebombings were likely. Although it's hard not to react personally

to such statements, the problem lies neither with that radio personality nor with Ice Cube. His statement is merely a symptom of a more systematic problem that goes beyond the tension between African and Korean Americans.<sup>24</sup>

Suh also discussed the realities of social-political power in the hood, "When compared to Korean Americans, African Americans are a numerical and political majority. (Ice Cube) does not realize that as a member of the majority, he wields real power against Koreans."<sup>25</sup> He cut to the central issue for Asian American audiences when he tried to square "Black Korea"'s implied threat to material reality with the real issue of interracial conflict.

Korean American community leaders struggled with this quandary as well. Jerry Yu, executive director of the Korean American Coalition (KAC), stated, "Ice Cube kept saying that this is social commentary. And I think it's true, he's expressing a certain sentiment that's out there. But . . . not everybody might understand; some people might take it that he's encouraging or advocating violence against Korean store-owners."<sup>26</sup>

They also recognized that tensions were increasing in October and November of 1991, as they waited for the Du sentencing and tried to complete negotiations with African American activists who were boycotting another liquor store where an African American had been shot by a store owner. Eventually they were moved to action by what they perceived to be the political and material issues at stake. Yu felt it was irrelevant to discuss Ice Cube's free speech rights. Rather he stated, "We're talking about a moral obligation. When there's people in a position to affect a nationwide audience, they have a higher standard of responsibility to be fair, not to be discriminatory, or racist, or inflammatory, or to incite riots."<sup>27</sup> Yumi Jhang-Park, then the executive director of the Korean American Grocers' Association (KAGRO), publicly stated, "This is a life-and-death situation. What if someone listened to the song and set fire to a store?"<sup>28</sup>

But Korean American activists were unable to reach the mainstream press with their message. When *Entertainment Tonight* interviewed Yu regarding the boycott, they videotaped him for over thirty minutes. But the subsequent airing only featured him briefly, reading lyric excerpts from "Black Korea." On the other hand, Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Los Angeles-based Jewish human-rights group, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, was shown explaining the boycott for most of the segment.<sup>29</sup> Again, the white mainstream media shaped the debate over "Black Korea."

Most mainstream media coverage took place on the music pages, but two political magazines also commented on rap on their news

pages. White males created a defining perspective: they examined "Black Korea" in terms of whether its content required censorship.<sup>30</sup> *Los Angeles Times* rock critic Robert Hilburn set the stage in *Death Certificate*'s first review, stating, "Ice Cube. . .continues to make albums that spark debates over just how far pop music should go in chronicling frustration and rage."<sup>31</sup> The debate became greatly sharpened three weeks later in a controversial *Billboard Magazine* editorial. In calling for record store chains to consider boycotting the record, editor Timothy White wrote, "His unabashed espousal of violence against Koreans, Jews, and other whites crosses the line that divides art from the advocacy of crime."<sup>32</sup> In an industry magazine which usually ignored issues of artistic merit or lyrical content in its editorials, the editorial was extraordinary. *Death Certificate* remains the only album ever singled out for condemnation in *Billboard* history.

"Black Korea" even inspired political magazines not usually known for comment on "low" popular culture to comment on the apparent threat of rap music to society. An article in *The Economist* recalled Adorno's criticism of popular music, evoking "rhythmically obedient" but uncritical fans. "In rap as in rock, rebellion sells," the editorial read. "Sadly, too few fans distinguish between the rebellious and the reactionary."<sup>33</sup>

David Samuels, writing in *The New Republic*, also depicted rap fans as passive, mindless consumers, "This kind of consumption—of racist stereotypes, of brutality toward women, or even of uplifting tributes to Dr. Martin Luther King—is of a particularly corrupting kind. The values it instills find their ultimate expression in the ease in which we watch young black men killing each other: in movies, on records, and on streets of cities and towns across the country."<sup>34</sup> Thus, the other defining perspective in the "Black Korea" debate was whether or not being a rap fan constituted socially acceptable behavior.

Ideology and representation in the media reflected the hierarchy of social-political power, placing whites on top, African Americans far below, and Asian Americans still below them. Mainstream media focused coverage and commentary on "Black Korea" around themes of censorship and rebellion. Yet these themes were phrased in terms of a white-black racial axis; Koreans were useful to the discussion only insofar as they represented non-black targets of black rage. No one bothered to ask how Korean Americans might feel about the record. While Jewish boycott leaders were widely quoted, only two journalists felt obliged to quote a Korean American and they did so only after the grocers' boycott had ended.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, many liberal music critics felt they had to qualify their criticism of the record to African Americans by addressing their status position as white males.<sup>36</sup> White

males shaped the ideological parameters for discussion. From there, they marginalized African American views by allowing response rather than representation and they marginalized Asian American views by largely denying representation.

### **III. Paying Respect to the Black Fist?:**

#### **THE "BLACK KOREA" BOYCOTTS AS A STRATEGY FOR EMPOWERMENT**

Upon its release on October 31, 1991, *Death Certificate* had advance orders of over a million copies, making it an instant national hit. Yet the controversy around the album's content transformed the musical piece into a political issue. The rap which had threatened, "Don't follow me up and down your crazy little market or your lil' chop suey ass will be a target," became the central reason to target the rapper.

On November 1, the associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center called upon four major retail record chains to boycott the album, calling it a "a cultural Molotov cocktail" and "a real threat."<sup>37</sup> Guardian Angels began pickets in New York and Los Angeles at record stores carrying the album. Two days later, the Korean American Coalition (KAC) held its own press conference, issuing a joint statement signed by the Japanese American Citizens League, the Los Angeles Urban League, the NAACP, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Some Korean swap meet vendors and the Camelot Music chain also honored the boycott.<sup>38</sup>

The core of the KAC boycott was to challenge the representational problems. Yu said, "In the minds of Korean Americans, this is all part of the oppression or unfairness we face. We're constantly trampled on, nobody listens to us, we're constantly seen through distorted images in the media. . .We're not really battling against Ice Cube, all we're trying to do is get him to understand our concerns, get him to respond to our issues."<sup>39</sup> The boycott was in line with KAC's ongoing campaign against media stereotyping, which had included a boycott of the motion picture, *The Year of the Dragon*, and protests over racist coverage in *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *Rolling Stone*. But while the KAC boycott unleashed a flood of mail on the Priority Records offices, the record still went on to sell well over a million and a half records.

However, actions were also moving on a very different front. On November 7, the Korean American Grocers' Association (KAGRO) reached an impasse in negotiations with McKenzie River Corporation of San Francisco, the maker of the St. Ides Premium Malt Liquor for which Ice Cube was a prominent endorser. KAGRO had asked McKenzie River to withdraw all promotional materials and commercials featuring Ice Cube and to sever its relationship with him. McKenzie River

responded that meeting these demands would financially damage their small company and declined. KAGRO then initiated a campaign among its stores to return deliveries and cease orders for the malt liquor. Yang Il Kim, the national president of KAGRO, told the *Korea Times* that he had sympathy for McKenzie River's business worries, but he remained resolute on the boycott, noting that they picked the wrong rapper to endorse their beer.<sup>40</sup>

At its peak, between five and six thousand stores in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Richmond and Washington D.C. joined the campaign.<sup>41</sup> On November 16, McKenzie River broke down and conceded to KAGRO's demands, ending the use of all ads which featured Ice Cube and claiming it would not use him for new promotions. They also agreed to create a scholarship fund for black youths and a jobs program for black youth and adults from sales of St. Ides. KAGRO officially ended its boycott on November 20, only three weeks after the release of *Death Certificate*.<sup>42</sup>

Conciliation took place three months later. In early February, McKenzie River held a joint meeting between Ice Cube and the KAGRO leadership. Ice Cube apologized to the merchants and pledged to discourage violence against store owners and to continue "working to bring our communities closer together." In his letter to Kim, he wrote of the meeting:

I explained some of the feelings and attitudes of black people today, and the problems and frustrations that we confront. And I clarified the intent of my album *Death Certificate*. It was not intended to offend anyone or to incite violence of any kind. It was not directed at all Korean Americans or at all Korean American store owners. I respect Korean Americans. It was directed at a few stores where my friends and I have had actual problems. Working together we can help solve these problems and build a bridge between our communities.<sup>43</sup>

KAGRO leaders expressed their pleasure with the meeting, conceding that Ice Cube had made some legitimate complaints and expressing hope that Blacks and Koreans would "help each other and learn to understand each other's cultures."<sup>44</sup>

Why was one economic boycott a failure and the other so successful? In the KAC boycott, Korean Americans lacked the social-political power to sustain a lasting impact. When asked about whether it might have been possible to mount the kind of protest that the police associations had against rapper Ice-T's song "Cop Killer," Yu argued, "There was no way we could organize that kind of impact."<sup>45</sup> He pointed out that the community's small size, the large number of recent immigrants, lack of voting strength, and economic self-interest prevented them from wielding

a strong united front on this issue. KAC sought to gain legitimacy by working in concert with other civil rights organizations, incorporating the NAACP, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Simon Wiesenthal Center into the boycott. Yet as Lillian Matulic, Ice Cube's publicist, noted, "We received a lot of form letters. But in my opinion, the boycott would only affect the people who wouldn't listen to Ice Cube anyway."<sup>46</sup> The *Entertainment Tonight* fiasco was symbolic. KAC's boycott against media stereotypes failed partially because of a lack of media coverage. Asian American social-political power could not leverage the market.

However, KAGRO's use of market clout in its boycott of St. Ides was stunningly successful. Here the hierarchy of power changed, reversing the positions of African Americans and Asian Americans. If Korean Americans had been relatively disempowered in a social-political sense, they were, at least in this case, empowered in an economic-political sense. According to Executive Director Ryan Song, KAGRO represented over 3500 stores in Southern California alone, had over 20,000 members who generated \$2 billion in annual sales, and controlled roughly 7% of the national market.<sup>47</sup> African American activists noted that McKenzie River Corporation was targeting a young, urban African American male audience by using rappers such as Ice Cube to sell their malt liquor.<sup>48</sup> The prospect of thousands of Korean grocers in their target areas returning their orders was clearly too much for the small company to bear. Yu argues that this shows race had little to do with the boycott, "It's not that the Korean American merchants are so much more powerful. St. Ides did not respond because they were Korean Americans, but because of the economic threat."<sup>49</sup> However, through the KAGRO boycott, Korean Americans were able to translate their status as small store-owners into ethnic economic-political empowerment.

Although the controversy over the song had ended, what Dong Suh called the core issues that created it had not gone away. Looking back a year later, Ice Cube told an interviewer:

I live in the black community so I wanted to let the Korean community know the tension that we feel. You're in our neighborhoods, which is perfectly fine with me. I have no problem with that. But when we come into your store, you have to treat us with respect because we are putting your kids through college, we are putting food on your table and we deserve the same kind of respect of anybody that's going to the store. A lot of black people didn't feel that respect had been given or when the riots jumped off, Korean shops wouldn't have been a target.<sup>50</sup>

Many African Americans were outraged at the 1991 resolution of KAGRO's St. Ides boycott, tying it to the light sentencing of Soon Ja Du

in the murder of Latasha Harlins, which had taken place only five days before. Sonny Carson, the leader of New York-based Blackwatch Movement and an organizer of previous boycotts against Korean stores, called for a one-day moratorium on the purchase of Korean-sold goods and services on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, telling the *New York Amsterdam News*,

We buy fruits, leather, jewelry, they sell us vegetables, repair our shoes, dry clean our clothes but they have no respect for us. We should spend money with people who respect us, not those who shoot us down...we will not tolerate their endorsement of murder in L.A. or anyplace else because that is what their boycott infers.<sup>51</sup>

If this seemed to be an extreme position from an activist thought by many to be opportunistic in engaging confrontation with Asian Americans, it was nonetheless an opinion shared by many other progressive African Americans. Sheena Lester of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* wrote an editorial angrily excoriating McKenzie River Corporation and KAGRO:

Mind you, this is the same beer company...who shrugged off Black folks' complaints about those offensive St. Ides radio ads. . .These are the same weasels who now are bowing to the demands of insensitive, poison-pushing merchants, who are apparently more outraged about being called names than they are about a dead Black child. . .As for KAGRO, I s'pose it's business as usual for them, too—back to following us 'county recip's<sup>52</sup> around their respective stores, awaiting the opportunity to catch us being the untamed, non-civilized mongrels we are, right?<sup>53</sup>

Lester brought together the Du sentencing, the issue of alcoholism in the African American community, and the lack of black-owned stores in a diatribe against Korean American prejudice and their relative economic empowerment. For her, the resolution of the boycott was yet another example of African Americans being stepped upon by everyone.<sup>54</sup>

Even noted Berkeley professor and columnist Julianne Malveaux told a conference of black scholars in December of 1991,

(Ice Cube) is saying what we all feel. Where is there space for us in this economy? Where is there space for us in this society? Can you value my life? A Korean woman—and this is not race-bashing—got off with five-hundred hours of community service for killing a fifteen-year-old black girl. Community service! Give me a break. And Los Angeles is about to pop right now.<sup>55</sup>

Whether or not Malveaux was indeed race-baiting, Los Angeles finally "popped" on April 29, 1992, leaving the charred shells of Korean liquor stores as proof of the currency of her sentiments for certain South Central residents.

The boycotts were seen by its leaders as a method of empowering the Korean American community. Yu stated, "By expressing how we feel, we are making constant progress towards being equals in this society."<sup>56</sup> However, these goals were complicated by the role that class played in Korean American ethnic interests. KAGRO national president Kim recognized such problems when he told the *Korea Times* during the boycott, "We're trying to negotiate not to expand tensions."<sup>57</sup> Even after the boycott was over, the *Washington Post* portrayed Kim as sincerely trying to avoid further conflict. He was quoted as conceding that the rapper was not condemning the entire Korean American community, but only a few merchants, and was shown pleading with the writer, "I personally ask you to make a good article, a good comment between the communities."<sup>58</sup>

The question of where to place inner-city Korean American grocers in a class framework is difficult to adequately answer. The prevalent view is that Korean American grocers represent a "middleman minority," a small, distinct cultural group located between the wealthy elites and the subordinate majority. As the providers of goods and services, Korean Americans constitute a petit bourgeoisie. As recent immigrants, they inevitably come to feel their marginal social status when the poor majority comes to target them for social and economic complaints in political discourse and individual acts of hostility.<sup>59</sup> Edna Bonacich argues that immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurs are actually "cheap labor," exploited by capitalists just as workers are.<sup>60</sup> Most Korean small business owners do not make large profits and face a grueling host of difficulties, not the least of which is the constant threat of violent crime. Yet Bonacich and Light find that, as a "petit bourgeoisie," Korean Americans are likely to act like "quintessential capitalists with respect to their clients" who will "provide whatever service or commodity will sell" and who would take little interest in the "impact of their businesses on that community."<sup>61</sup> They find that the nature of their exploitation is much different from the exploitation of "local workers and the "local poor."<sup>62</sup>

As many have noted, Asian Americans in this position maintain ethnic and class solidarities that are difficult to separate.<sup>63</sup> While organizing around representational issues, organizers may not have taken into account the important class issues. KAC saw "Black Korea" as part of a line of racist, stereotypical portrayals of Korean Americans. Yu stated,

What I'm trying to say is that what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong. So if someone is spouting hate and violence or something, and I'm not saying that Ice Cube necessarily did that, but if someone is calling for violence against a certain group, then it's wrong. No matter

who that person is, whether that person is black, white, Asian, Korean, whoever, it's wrong.<sup>64</sup>

Korean American attorney T.S. Chung was quoted in the *Korea Times* as saying that *Death Certificate* "reflects an attitude urging blacks to take the law into their own hands by burning down stores if they don't like the store owners. I don't think that is the kind of society we want to have."<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, these statements could be read as suggesting that "Black Korea" represented the threat of racial conflict and not of class conflict, a "spin" on Black-Korean tensions used often by the white mainstream media. This cultural cul-de-sac of an argument appears only to open into a downward spiral into violence, flattening the complexities of the situation by painting African Americans the racial aggressor and Korean Americans the racial victim, covering over real economic issues with inflammatory racial overtones.

In the same press conference, Chung went on to say that although there was "some justifiable anger...Koreans didn't have anything to do with the creation of that situation."<sup>66</sup> Undeniably, in the zero-sum game of racial struggle in the ghetto, neither Korean Americans nor African Americans were successful in empowering themselves. They found themselves on an isolated space, thrown into battle, fighting for no real prize. Yu characterized the boycotts' end in this manner, "No way do I see it as a victory. If there was a victory, it would have been that he wouldn't have released the album in the first place."<sup>67</sup>

#### **IV. Finding and Defining Common Ground**

Professor Manning Marable, writing for the *Korea Times of New York*, called for African American self-criticism in regards to Ice Cube and boycotts of Korean stores. In doing so, he also eloquently summed up the difficulty of finding a common ground amidst shrinking resources. He stated:

Certainly, Ice Cube reflects much of the righteous anger and hostility of our people...But to target our anger against Asian Americans does not, in the long run, resolve the crisis of poverty, economic oppression and a lack of Black ownership, which is the consequence of a racist, corporate system. Attacking petty entrepreneurs who are also people of color only permits those who directly benefit from the oppression of both groups to get away unscathed. The second problem presented by Ice Cube's lyrics involves the promise of a truly progressive Rainbow Coalition. People of color must transcend the terrible tendency to blame each other, to emphasize their differences, to trash one another.<sup>68</sup>

How are we to transcend? We may need first to revisit our primary assumptions on political organizing.

An anti-colonial approach has guided progressive people of color for three decades. This approach is rooted in the idea that racial minorities in America are, and have historically been, colonized peoples who share a similar situation of oppression and because of which have a common natural unity against the white colonizers.<sup>69</sup> Yet this approach has been made problematic by immigration policy and demographic shifts. Within Asian American communities, class stratification and ethnic difference appear to have increased since the 1965 Immigration Act. In inner-city spaces like South Central Los Angeles, race and class work together in creating a situation of tension and unrest between Asian Americans and African Americans.<sup>70</sup>

Korean and other Asian Americans may form a petit bourgeoisie able to exploit an African American and Latino poor. In Donald Noel's conception, this situation meets two of the three criteria to establish ethnic stratification: ethnocentrism and competition over scarce resources. The third criteria is the establishment of power by one group over another. Until this occurs, Noel argues there will be a destabilizing conflict.<sup>71</sup> Edward Chang argues similarly, "In the Korean-black relationship, the dominant-subordinate position has not been established between the two groups. When the perceived or real power of two groups is equal, or if each group believes that it is superior over the other group, there is a high probability for violent and direct confrontation."<sup>72</sup>

Political empowerment must therefore be examined closely. If Asian Americans extend their economic power to include social-political power over African Americans, the situation in South Central Los Angeles may stabilize at the cost of ethnic stratification. At the same time, Asian American marginality in the "rebuild Los Angeles" process demonstrate that the costs of disempowerment are far too serious.<sup>73</sup> But if a simple white-nonwhite axis of the anticolonial approach is increasingly difficult to apply in a multiracial environment, a purely nationalist approach is also problematic. This approach depends upon an ethnic-nonethnic axis, calling for empowerment through organizing for a limited ethnic solidarity.

The Blackwatch Movement's one-day moratorium on Korean goods hoped to symbolically demonstrate to African Americans that their interests can only be served by their own. But such tactics beg the question of whether resources might be better spent in starting up black-owned businesses and from where the capital to start up such businesses would come. On the other hand, KAGRO's nationalism provided a different set of problems. Yang Il Kim's dilemma was how to prevent a possible backlash from African Americans. By downplaying the resolution of the boycott (the meeting with Ice Cube was not reported for three months and then only as a balance to the traumatic riot headline "Cry Koreatown"), he was forced to snatch defeat from the jaws of a pyrrhic victory.

Especially on spaces abandoned and left to communities of color, it is not realistic to hope to promote the interests of one group without the other. Binary oppositions of white and nonwhite or ethnic and nonethnic must be recast in more complex approaches to understanding power. Michael Omi argues for an understanding of "differential racialization" to help explain how class affects a diverse Asian American experience.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, a notion of "differential forms of disempowerment" amongst communities of color might help organizers and public policy analysts grapple with complex interracial conflicts. Growing multiplicities of race and culture, further complicated by class, argue for a focus on where and for whom power lies and where and for whom it does not. This analysis must also be situational; it would be an obvious mistake to assume the hierarchies found in South Central Los Angeles apply everywhere. History, space, and context shape power relations and the attempts to redistribute power.

For Asian Americans, it is no longer (if it ever was) enough to claim similarity and solidarity with African Americans, difference and divergence must be acknowledged. In discussing alternative jurisprudential methods, Mari Matsuda argues:

Our various experiences are not co-extensive. I cannot pretend that I, as a Japanese American, truly know the pain of, say, my Native American sister. But I can pledge to educate myself so that I do not receive her pain in ignorance.<sup>75</sup>

Matsuda warns Asian Americans against allowing themselves to "be used" by whites against other groups of color.<sup>76</sup> Asian Americans must work with other communities to mitigate points of difference and minimize points of tension.

Calls for multiracial unity and cross-cultural understanding without an understanding of the specific ways in which relative power is manifested and used can become pointless exercises. Claims to empowerment can become tools to maintain historical forms of subordination. We cannot move forward until we are more aware in our movements of the different paths that have brought each of us to this common space. Only then can we take the steps we must take to shaping and sharing our spaces in common.

## Notes

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