



## Critical Reflections on 4/29/1992 and Beyond

A UCLA School of Law Roundtable

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# i. reflections





Crenshaw Square,  
site of the Holiday  
Bowl where African  
American and  
Japanese American  
bowling leagues  
shared the lanes in  
the 1950s-1960s.

This photograph was  
taken on the second  
or third day of the  
1992 uprising.

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## Critical Reflections on 4/29/1992 and Beyond

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Jerry Kang (JK): It's hard to believe that it's been almost twenty years since what Koreans call Sa-I-Gu—4/29—when Los Angeles burned, and I'm excited about being able to have a conversation with some of my closest colleagues on the two decades having passed. Let me introduce my guests and then we'll start the conversation. We have Devon Carbado, who's a Professor of Law at UCLA. We have Cheryl Harris, who's also Professor of Law, and the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Professor of Civil Liberties and Civil Rights.

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DEVON CARBADO is Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law where he recently served as Vice Dean of the Faculty. Former director of the Critical Race Studies Program at UCLA Law, Professor Carbado has published in critical race theory, employment discrimination, criminal procedure, constitutional law, and identity, and is co-editor of *Race Law Stories*.

CHERYL I. HARRIS is Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Professor of Civil Liberties and Civil Rights at the UCLA School of Law. Teaching in the areas of constitutional law, civil rights, employment discrimination, and critical race theory, Professor Harris is well known for her influential writings in Critical Race Theory, particularly the widely cited piece "Whiteness as Property."

JERRY KANG is Professor of Law at the UCLA School of Law and holds the inaugural *Korea Times/Hankook Ilbo* Chair in Korean American Studies in the UCLA Asian American Studies Department. Professor Kang specializes in civil procedure, critical race studies, and communications law. He is the author of numerous influential articles on various subjects, including implicit bias and Asian American Jurisprudence. He is the author of *Communications Law and Policy: Cases and Materials* (4th ed., 2012) and co-author of *Race, Rights, and Reparation: The Law and the Japanese American Internment* (2001).

SAÚL SARABIA focuses on community-based social justice advocacy, strategizing with community residents to include their voice in law-making and public policy reform. He served as the Director of the Critical Race Studies Program at the UCLA School of Law from 2005-12, teaching Critical Race Theory and Latinos/as and the Law.

We have Saúl Sarabia, who is the program director of the Critical Race Studies (CRS) concentration at UCLA and also a lecturer in law. I'm Jerry Kang, Professor of Law, and I have a courtesy appointment in the department of Asian American Studies. I am also the inaugural chair of the *Korea Times / Hankook Ilbo* Chair in Korean American Studies.

We're all good friends and scholars working on race, and the goal here is to think hard about what we remember about Sa-I-Gu and what has happened in the past twenty years. I think it would be interesting to start off just by remembering where we were. There are certain moments in American history about which you can ask people, "Where were you?"—for example, when JFK was shot, when Lennon died, maybe when Michael Jackson passed away. So what happened to you and your life when Los Angeles burned on April 29th 1992? What do you remember of it, if anything? Devon, tell us your story to begin.

Devon Carbado (DC): I was in law school at the time, my first year of law school, so I actually remember the moment quite well and [how] it felt from a distance; I was back east. But in some ways, it also felt near because I had lived in the area where all this occurred, which is to say, the West Adams district of Los Angeles on 23rd Street—so think of where Arlington intersects with Adams and that's basically where I had lived prior to attending law school. And for people who don't know Los Angeles, that's probably five or six blocks south of Koreatown, I think.

So in some sense I was far. In another sense, it was near because I was about to return literally to that scene three weeks later, and in fact did and remember that it felt kind of like a war zone, or at least how I imagine a war zone might feel, since I've never been in one. I don't mean to suggest that it was therefore a race war, but the scene, the aftermath, felt like something really big had happened—and physical destruction was everywhere.

The only other thing I would say is that it happened at the time that I was taking criminal law. As you might imagine, then, the event figured prominently in our discussions and provided a very concrete way for the class to explore the intersection of race and policing, particularly in the context of urban space.

JK: Let's go around and just get a sense of where we were geographically and what was our psyche at the time. Then we can probe deeper. Cheryl?

Cheryl Harris (CH): I was living in Chicago and I had just started teaching law two years before. So I guess I would say that it did feel very distant. I had no connections to Los Angeles at the time really. I had family here, but had not visited them in a long time and didn't really have an understanding of Los Angeles as a space.

But I will say that from the vantage point of what I could see, there was just a huge sort of [what] I would call double disjuncture. So the first thing was that I could not understand how the jury had acquitted the LAPD officers who beat Rodney King. What I had seen leading up to the trial was simply the tape of his beating and the fact that the jury had acquitted them seemed to just be a radical disjuncture, a sort of complete mismatch between the picture and the story. Right? . . . Speaking of criminal law, you think about evidence; the evidence of the tape itself was evidence of a crime and the fact that these police officers had been acquitted, I mean, I wasn't naïve. I'd certainly been around long enough to see police officers be acquitted before in circumstances where the evidence dictated otherwise, but this seemed to have been just a complete sort of disjuncture between the picture and the story.

When the unrest started, the other thing that was sort of a complete shock to me was another kind of disjuncture between the picture and the story. So the picture was basically of a multiracial civil unrest. Meaning, I was looking at pictures of Latino people, of black people sort of pouring in and out of neighborhoods. They were on fire and the story was all about a sort of black-Korean race war. So it was a very confusing moment for me trying to understand how this picture that was actually up on the screen was mapping on to the story. It was clear to me that there was a lot more going on than the story that was being told, but I couldn't make sense of it from where I was. I didn't actually come to Los Angeles until two years later when some of the debris had been cleared away and there was indeed this narrative of a black-Korean race war that had sort of mapped on to what I have subsequently come to learn was a far more complicated picture.

JK: Sure, and just that topic, the way you framed it—about the picture we see mediated through video cameras, through broadcast versus the underlying reality—and when it matches and when it doesn't is something that we definitely will talk about more.

CH: Yeah, and just to mention the other thing was I remember in particular there was one juror from the trial that was interviewed who kept saying race had nothing to do with it. This was all about whether or not the police are able to use reasonable force. Race has nothing to do with it. So it was again just a sort of complete mismatch between the picture and the story.

JK: It was surreal in all kinds of ways and the war zone aspect of it made it seem surreal. I think we're, without intention, moving geographically from the east to the west. . .

Saúl Sarabia (SS): That's right. I was actually here at UCLA, where we are doing this [roundtable]. I was a student in my fourth year and it is actually interesting to hear the story of someone who was as far east as Devon and in the middle of the country [as Cheryl] say they felt distant yet close, because I was in West L.A. and felt like I could've been on the east coast when it all happened. And really, it's such an L.A. story, because the images that I have of the immediate aftermath once it became obvious that there was some civil unrest happening are the images mediated by cars and television. TV and cars, they're the things I remember the most of that first evening.

The campus was shut down early and people were asked to make their way home and, at that time, the initial flash-point was Florence and Normandie, which was obviously south of Koreatown and closer to the heart of South L.A., but not quite as south as Watts. It kept creating enough anxiety that the university issued this notice to people to go home. I was at that time a staff member for one of the minority student publications on campus, which actually meant that the space in which I was engaging as a student was this multiracial, progressive, youthful space, working alongside the future leaders from various communities. We were watching this happen, also not surprised entirely by the larger dynamic of the legal system declaring the innocence of police officers accused of brutality against a

person of color, but certainly by the extremity of the verdict and the extremity of what was happening on the streets to know something big was happening.

By the time I made it through central campus to the central parking lot, all the cars were stuck; they couldn't go anywhere because so many people were trying to leave at the same time. So I was happy to be on foot because the talking heads that were on the campus televisions suggested that there was this imminent threat that was spreading everywhere and this was why people needed to go home. Of course, I lived in the apartments not too far from the campus. By the time I made it there, dark had come down on the city and it was clear that we were not going to be allowed to move around freely. There was talk already about bringing in the National Guard. That didn't happen until the next day. I don't remember if classes were cancelled, but I do remember that we moved freely on the campus the next day and, by dusk the second day, there were tanks here in Westwood.

JK: Really. . .

SS: Primarily around the shops in Westwood, obviously prepared for any kind of potential move westward. And the thing that struck me the most about my experience at that point of what was happening in the city in which I grew up was that if I wanted to be with my people or go further east. . . I couldn't. I was being locked into the Westside. For folks who are not from L.A., UCLA is in West L.A., basically between Bel Air and Beverly Hills, and that's where I was, ironically, watching all this happen.

What I remember staying with me the most that second night was the image of the tanks in Westwood, which was cleared out and where there was nothing going on. If anyone was going to dare to threaten those shops, they were going to have no luck. But then coming home and watching all these Korean American merchants and their children and their neighbors having to protect themselves from what was happening with the fires and the looting, I was wondering, "How could it be that there's nothing going on here and we have full protection and these people are unprotected by the state?"

I also remember the image of having students who are not from L.A. huddled in their living rooms, literally locked

down by what the news was telling them was this imminent threat, people with maps mapping out the next fire that was being reported. This was not just a multiracial unrest, but also that it was actually [happening in] multiple locations. It quickly spread out of Florence and Normandie, and yet the story on the news was still this narrative of “this is some version of Watts and the rest of the city.” Yet people were sitting there with maps wondering whether the fires were getting close enough to them to be scared.

JK: I’m struck by, as you describe it, how different the underlying communication technologies were back then, right? So as you’re walking to the parking lot, you’re not checking your smart phone then. . .

SS: No.

JK: That’s not what we had at the time. People now would be mashing up Google maps with news reports trying to figure out where the fires are. . .

DC: No tweets.

JK: No tweets, which raises interesting questions, like how information travels and the rise of social media. Consider their impact, if it happened all over again. Would people have a different account of it from different kinds of first-person perspectives?

As for me, I wasn’t even teaching here, so I’m with Devon out in Cambridge on the east coast. So this is what I remember—and I have generally a poor memory, but certain things stand out very, very powerfully. I was in Cambridge. I remember distinctly I was working in the *Harvard Law Review* office. It’s in a separate building, Gannett House, and in that building there was a small black-and-white television set in the lounge for the editors. I remember my eyes being glued to the TV set, seeing what I thought was completely surreal? So it’s a war zone. I can’t believe this is happening—how can you see the cops beating the hell out of this guy no matter what he did, how could you go that medieval on a person, and then not be held accountable? And then to witness the reaction, what was in some ways predictable, and then to see that there were no police or no security to help them.

I was transfixed. I want to share, I guess, something a little bit more personal. Because in many ways all I could think

was the saying “There but for the grace of God go I.” My parents. . . I’m an immigrant, my parents are immigrants, my parents don’t have any education, and even if they did, they would have suffered the economic dislocation upon immigration that could have led them to be merchants. My dad is self-employed. They fit exactly the economic class of the people who were running those shops. If we had settled in Los Angeles instead of Chicago and Skokie, I would have been right there. I didn’t know L.A., I didn’t even know that I would end up clerking here afterwards, but I knew that I could have had exactly that life.

Then to see what was happening, and to see first-hand what the pain could be, because I know what my parents are like, I know how hard they work, I know what they would have been feeling to see everything that they had built up burned down. I also know the imperfections of my parents and that generation, and I know how racism and prejudice and fear and anxiety, all of that, work. There’s no one who’s innocent and no one who’s perfect and no one’s who’s guiltless. But as I saw people who looked like me, people who looked like my parents basically being put out to what looked like essentially a “state of nature,” into a conflagration they had no chance of getting out. I just remember tears welling up in, of all places, this very elite bastion back at the Harvard Law School.

The other thing I want to share is that about a year earlier, the Asian American Law Students Association, AALSA, and the Black Law Students Association had actually held an event where we actually tried to deal with some of the conflict between African American customers and Korean merchants, and we had a little conference, at a time when things were crazy. . .

CH: So had the Latasha Harlins [shooting happened]. . .

JK: Yes, it had just happened a month earlier. It had just happened, but before that, there had been enough of the boycotts with angry consumers both in New York as well as L.A. going after Korean merchants, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes not. There were politics everywhere. Almost as an act of building up goodwill, we jointly created a venue where we invited people from the Black-Korean Alliance—we got people out from L.A., we got people from

New York, to talk about how we can deal with this problem and to what extent it's a genuine problem, to what extent it was media-fueled, all those things. Latasha Harlins had been shot just a month before, and we were talking about those [issues] and we were trying to figure out what, if anything, we could do—all the while recognizing how supercilious it was to think that a bunch of Harvard law students could do anything from that kind of distance. And yet, we had that conference, so I knew what the build-up was. And when I saw Los Angeles burning, I have to admit it was very hard to keep back the tears, and it was deeply emotional.

Yet again, it was the Koreans or the Asians who were getting run over. No people are perfect—certainly Korean immigrants of that first generation are far from a perfect people, and yet again they're being screwed over. That's what I thought—screwed over by circumstances, by politicians, by white power sources, including the police and the national guard who had them very low on any list to protect. I was thinking "riots" not "civil unrest." I was thinking "riots" not "rebellion," and the politics of naming are obviously difficult. I'm describing how I felt then, not necessarily thinking about what name is the best in the contemporary context. At some point, we should talk about the difficulties of even naming and why Koreans are most comfortable calling it Sa-I-Gu as a unique name. And it wasn't as if I was clueless about structural problems; I understood what happened with Watts in '65.

And yet what enraged me was the fact that Koreans weren't given voice, outside of maybe Angela Oh on *Nightline* and a few people. It was almost always white people or African Americans—even Latinos had almost no voices, it seemed to me, on mainstream mass media, and certainly not Koreans. I have told my friends that I was not necessarily meant to be a race scholar, but it was an event like Sa-I-Gu that changed me much more as I went through law school and thought about what it meant and what obligations I had as a Korean American, as an immigrant, who thought about race, who might have a venue later on, such as this one, to talk about these things.

So I wanted to share my emotional affect. It was very much about rage, rage against impotency, right? Not hav-

ing the power to say anything and to be heard anywhere. And I wonder if it would be different if people could blog now, or if there were tweets that would catch on. But the consolidation of media power and what that allowed—because I know how the black-Korean merchant conflict was being constructed. How they were playing the Latasha Harlins shooting video over and over again in saturation coverage, intentionally cutting off the first ten, fifteen seconds of the video that showed her being shot. Nothing excuses someone shooting a child, but the full video shows how the escalation happened, the physical punching that happened before, and one could see the craziness that could have happened at the moment. But what the media showed constantly was the last few seconds of the clip where you saw an innocent child being shot from the back. That just made the stakes higher. So I was just angry.

- DC: Well, I guess I would just start where you ended in a way, because it's interesting to think about the disjunction that you describe, Cheryl, which is the fact of this video, on the one hand, and the jury's response to it, on the other. Because one could say that, to some extent, from a mass media perspective, there was a story about why perhaps we should have paid less attention to what we saw, given that we don't know what preceded it, right? In this respect, there's some continuity between the controversy surrounding the King beating and the controversy surrounding the shooting of Latasha Harlins. With respect to the latter, remember that many people raised questions about what had transpired before the shooting, just as people were raising questions about what had transpired before the Rodney King beating. My own sense of that is it's difficult to think about this moment and not think about the extent to which anger was a part of the emotional reaction. Indeed, if I go back to my criminal law class for a minute, I remember black students, one after the other, expressing what that moment meant for them in terms of what it said about police violence and the extent to which the police can engage in it with a certain kind of impunity or at least with no obvious accountability. On the other hand, there was another kind of disconnect, I mean, a disconnect having do with how one manages that anger on a individual and community level. Because as a

foreigner myself, I wondered about whether directing that violence within the community, including against Koreans and Korean Americans, made sense. So that response—which included but was certainly not limited to mass destruction of property, looting, and violence—engendered a kind of disconnect for me as well, notwithstanding that I obviously understood the history of quote-unquote race riots in the U.S. more generally. I couldn't quite understand that moment emotionally, even as I could understand it intellectually and politically, and presumably we'll talk about that in a minute. Emotionally, the moment was hard.

CH: Yeah, so I think, emotionally, I guess, the word I would feel is frustrated. I was both angry and frustrated, angry because I had been somewhat aware more from the east coast narrative than from a west coast one, one regarding the sort of black-Korean tensions which had already manifested themselves in Ice Cube's "Black Korea," and had already manifested itself in the boycotts in Brooklyn.

And just to sort of bring it all around here, I was actually just scrolling through some clips of things before this meeting just to remind myself of some of those media images that I was telling you about, that I was seeing. I ran across a clip of an interview with Tupac Shakur, who was being asked about his reactions to this, and one of the things he said was, "You know, I hate to say it, but I told you so." "I told you so," and I was seeing he had a very conflicted reaction. He said on the one hand [he] was seeing a kind of beautiful energy coming out—he didn't use the word energy—but he referred to the youth as beautiful. But at the same time, he's saying [he] was anxious because [he] was worried we were going to lose a lot of people. So the interviewer asked him well, what does this say about how Hollywood portrays people of different races and is it a time for Hollywood to sort of assess itself? Tupac said it's time for America to ask itself how it views different people of different races, because we're in a country where you live or die by the stereotype.

I thought in a way that that really captured some of my frustration, that is to say, the stereotype of black criminality which was inscribed onto Rodney King, meant that as he was lying on the ground—he still represented a mortal threat, such that it justified, as you said, Jerry, going medieval on you. By

the same token, the stereotype of the sort of insular, unassimilable model minority Korean meant that they weren't even on the radar screen to be cared about. Nor were Latinos seen as subjects in any of this in any way, they were just nameless bodies moving across the screen and so . . .

JK: Ambient.

CH: Yeah, ambient, exactly. So the point of it all was our frustration regarding the inability, it seemed, to break out of a particular narrative, and actually understand what was happening or talk about what was happening. And fast forwarding to Katrina—[it] reminded me of the way the media constructs or narrates a particular event. Here, one could sense that there was both an aspect of revolt against a kind of systemic police violence, as well as the way complete economic dislocation was fueling things. But that story got retold as a kind of simple competition between blacks and Koreans. Because, you know, I'm old enough. . .

DC: . . .the law-and-order narrative. . .

CH: And the law-and-order narrative comes back into play to take back control. The analogy to Katrina that I would draw is that you have this moment where racial subordination is revealed by Katrina—why it is that all these black and poor people are homeless, with nowhere to go and literally left to drown? This moment, the national gaze is transfixed and everyone is forced to look at something that is for the most part kept underground. Quickly, in a matter of days, [it] gets transformed into a story about black animality and disorder and chaos that has to be controlled by the state. So it was just incredibly frustrating to me to look at the situation and realize that there was something important happening, but that the story was somehow just completely submerged. I honestly, when I think about it, did not think about the Korean merchants in a way much different than I had seen the merchant class in these kinds of civil unrest before, and you could go back. . .

JK: Like the Jews in the '60s.

CH: You could go back to even Caribbean merchants in certain places, or in places like Detroit, Arab merchants. So I'm saying there's a certain kind of circularity—what I mean by this is to say that civil unrest, when it expresses itself in

this way, is always the ethnic merchant class that is structurally located in that place for a particular set of reasons that becomes the first target. And the question that you put on the table, though, is why are they left defenseless and why are they left voiceless. And that, I have to honestly say, that didn't come into my consciousness until I actually came here, right? I mean, I understood that they were targeted in a particular way, but the absence of police protection for them was just not visible for me until I actually got here and saw some of the devastation that Devon talked about, which was still around by the time I arrived two years later.

SS: So I can share some of the same feelings and emotions, but I am thinking through what exactly was going through my mind or what was the main emotion then. I have to say I was outraged about a lot of the pieces that were unfolding, the obvious larger story of the role and complicity of a legal system where the race problem was already embedded in conversations about colorblindness, which insists racial oppression is not part of what this country is about. And yet, we all knew otherwise, we being everyone on the planet that was looking at the images for a year because the police beating video had circulated internationally for a long time before this happened. Wherever you went—my relatives in Mexico, wherever you were—people got that there is something about an authority that is unmistakably white and that's embedded with structural power being exposed in that moment in its injustice against communities of color. I think that there was outrage obviously about the verdict at the beginning, but then there was—once you had that filter of an injustice that mapped on to the stratification in the hierarchies that we all recognize, but were locked into a national discourse that insists they don't really exist when the news is presenting all these images—it was incredibly frustrating.

I remember the shift in frames by the newscasters, who were first talking the folks who were arriving and burning stuff down almost sympathetically, at first saying, "you know, people are pissed off for a reason, look at these images and we don't know what else to say about it," but this is the frame. But then you kept seeing all these brown, not black, looters and you kept seeing places that were not South L.A., and they finally had to figure out a way to describe a

multiracial experience. This quote from Shakur is so telling because I remember when a newscaster finally shifted the frame by commenting about an image that was on the screen of Latinos taking property out of a shop, saying “many of these people look to me to be undocumented. . .”

JK: By racial inspection.

SS: Yes, by racial inspection and it was just another moment in which the frustration of knowing that he or she who controlled the media [took] this position of white authority to filter where our sympathies are supposed to lie. I felt outraged when I saw Reginald Denny, the white trucker pulled out of his truck and beat up, just in the way that I felt in the moment that I realized these Korean merchants and folks who probably weren’t even store owners were just there trying to defend what was going on, as much as I felt for Rodney King. I mean, all these questions around racial innocence, right, once it started to come together around the lens of the type of authority that the legal system, that the media, have to say what is really a claim to innocence or an infraction and what is not, all started to come together in this way. But that was also partnered with this sense that nothing was going to be the same again. That the invisibility would not go unchallenged and that there was going to be a moment in which the obvious invisibility of certain groups, and its consequences, would have to be addressed.

So for Latinos, there were a lot of Central American neighborhoods and it was obvious that they couldn’t find a Central American authoritative voice to put on camera. They just kept calling in people to try to provide analysis, deportations started, or arrests started to happen, martial law started to happen and all of these questions exposed that there was far more complexity to all the various groups in the city. It basically pushed back on the liberal racial sensibility that we had of ourselves in this multiracial city, and that it brought to the foreground fault lines around which there were long grievances with no name and that called for more voices. Certainly, this is something that happened afterwards. But at that moment, it was just that not having a voice, as you [Jerry] were just describing, I think, which was pissing me and other people of color off the most.

JK: Yes.

CH: You know it's interesting you should say that, Saúl, because I was thinking about the fact that, in a way, the appearance of Latinos as sort of central in this, as central but voiceless figures in the story, really confounded things. To put this simplistically, sometimes it seemed as though the newscasters were struggling with, well, what were they mad about?

SS: Yes, they were.

CH: Right. It's kind of like we get why the black people might be mad because Rodney King got beaten, but what are they mad about? Not that I'm saying that it was an effort to justify black rage, but I'm saying. . . It's like [the Latinos] are just sort of cruising or maybe even piggy backing or free riding or something—it was a strange kind of narrative.

DC: And what's particularly ironic about the newscaster who says, for example, that they looked like they were undocumented, is that they were actually articulating a legal standard—"Mexican appearance" can, as a matter of law, function as a basis for undocumented status, or to put it the way courts do, as a basis for determining whether a person is an "illegal alien."

JK: So we've talked about lots of different topics. In addition to discussing where we were and how we felt, we've talked about lots of things that dance around causation. It might be crazy for us to even ask about what caused the riots in any deep sense. But as critical scholars, what we want to do is to make that which is invisible visible, right? The easiest explanations are at a one-to-one, individual level. They are the easiest explanations because they are the most transparent, thinking there are bad people who overresponded or overreacted and did so for self-interested reasons. And that in many ways reflects the most conservative law-and-order perspective. You need law and order because you have a culture of poverty or undocumented people who are lawless to begin with, by their essential nature. In some sense, they are here just taking an opportunity to express their bad values because law-and-order, the pressure that usually keeps them at bay, was suddenly lifted for whatever reasons. Thus, you get anarchy, you have a state of nature, and you have the crazies going crazy. That is, in some ways, the simplest explanation, and it is at the level of individual bad actors. It essentializes an

individual as good or bad with good values or bad values, and they do what they do.

But there are deeper explanations that are harder to describe and therefore get less traction within sound bites or media discourse. I'm going to trot out a couple of causes, different ways to think about causes. One idea that is often times emphasized is the *cultural* one, that the reason why there was tension between blacks and Koreans is that there were cultural misunderstandings. If we all had more cultural sensitivity—and understood why Koreans might not beam or smile at you and look at you eye-to-eye, or not leave change in your hand, or why their speech might sound staccato if they are not fluent English speakers—that if we had just greater cultural sensitivity, then none of this would have happened. It's a cultural story.

A second set of explanations are much more *economic*, which is about what's going on in places like South Central. Who's got jobs, what kind of hope is there, and what kind of life is there? And when you've got that much depression, economic and psychological, it is a powder keg that will explode in all kinds of ways. And as Cheryl described, there is always a middleman layer that's usually an ethnic minority that comes in a particular way, jumps the queue, in some sense, over a longstanding population of African Americans. And this layer acts as almost the sponge that soaks up the anger and the resentment of people who are at the bottom of this hierarchy, and that structure won't change. So there is a cultural explanation, and there's an economic explanation. I know this list is overly stylized, but I wanted to put them out there.

A third set of reasons is *ideological*. It's about values, and one can tell an ideological story that is, I think, a nationalist one. Like from a black nationalist's perspective: "This is our space. Who the hell are you, foreigner, to come in? I don't know where you are getting the money. I want to start up a shop. I can't start up a shop. You are getting money from some place, starting up a shop, selling to our people, not hiring us, disrespecting us constantly, right, maybe shooting one of us. Who are you to invade our territory, our space, our turf, and treat us like that? What do you expect to happen?" And we can also tell a Korean nationalist story,

the Korean story about what it means to survive and come over here and to be desperately concerned about maintaining something like a Korean identity for their children, to survive in a place that they didn't really expect to see?

So the ideological story could be a nationalist story, but then again, it could be a straight-up racism or prejudice story, right? Koreans received racial stereotypes through American media, through military bases that have been in Korea for quite some time after the Korean War, about the hierarchy of white over black. Let's also not forget how Asians are depicted as constantly unfair competitors, who are inscrutable, inassimilable? This started way back from the late 1800s, the early 1900s, that constant refrain of the Asian as the sojourner who never wants to actually set up roots. So it could be racism, right? And everyone is potentially both the target and the holder of racist beliefs.

And the fourth cause that I want to put out there is the media gone wild. It's completely expected that you want to get hot video that's always playing, and you show it because people want to see it, and it just appeals to their interest. As K.W. Lee, a famous Korean American journalist, described it, he calls what happened to Los Angeles the first media-inspired pogrom, and he blames white mainstream media for it, full stop. And so I want to hear your views about the causes of Sa-I-gu. Was it a cultural thing? Was it pure economics? Was it ideological? Was it media? Of course, it's all these things and none of these things, but is there something that you want to point out as being really important to describe what really happened, why it happened?

SS: I'm not sure if this is one of the four or one dimension that contains elements of each, but I think of Sa-I-Gu, ultimately, as a political failure. It's important to capture the big picture of what was circulating at the time. The political discourse and structures that were supposed to hold together a burgeoning city in a moment of deep demographic change and deep economic change in which the middle class infrastructure had fallen out simply failed.

The central actor, in this explanation, is the police force, which is supposed to maintain order in that context and how it engages all of these various communities. It was being indicted, targeted as the on-the-ground representative of

the legal and political institutions that had failed, the same system and the same dynamics that produce the disjuncture between that image and the verdict. Its paradigmatic face was Daryl Gates, a man who had been unapologetic about the use of chokeholds that had killed black people over and over in South L.A., a man who led an institution that understood itself to protect the rest of the city from the brown east side and black south side of the city, particularly from black and brown male youth. And at that time, we had an African American mayor who was also a former LAPD police officer, who, in the narrow constraints of the liberal discourse of the time, didn't have something like the citizen's commission that came afterwards to regulate and have as a tool to handle what by all accounts, from a racial perspective, was a renegade and oppressive white law enforcement agency. It was largely perceived to be the responsible agent in poor communities of, not all the things that you describe, but certainly of the indignity that comes with being pulled over by the police for not being able to afford registration tags, of being presumed of being a criminal because of the way that you dress, and a whole host of aggressions not recognizable to the rest of the city.

So I think, first and foremost, the political infrastructure that was in place to mediate and to make sense to the people around the city of its new economic dynamics, these multiracial dynamics, had failed. I have to say that in addition to outrage, there was a widespread feeling of, "finally, it happened." There was a collective sense that a legitimate expression against the way in which we are being asked to insert ourselves as people with group identities, whether we like it or not, into a project that is by definition built on competition, built on racialized hierarchy, that has failed. A new solution to that, a new set of discourses had to emerge after that.

I [can] tell one story that I wouldn't have known then, but I learned later when I went to work in South Central as a community organizer after law school. For a year before the unrest, residents in South Los Angeles were trying to do something about the crack epidemic, which scholars had studied—I think one of the most brilliant pieces around what happened was Melvin Oliver's piece on the character of the

unrest, describing [how] you had the '80s divestment of public money for things like high schools in South L.A., you had the falling of the price of crack, and you had mass unemployment. Jobs were taken by corporations out of neighborhoods like that to other countries. And then you had a moment in which the crack epidemic emerges and, again, a whole set of public policies that are about criminalizing people who became addicts and about using the carceral system. . .not to fix those problems but making them worse. And so what happens in neighborhoods like South L.A., you had the limited opportunities for economic self-actualization, whether it's a Korean immigrant or local African American or even Mexican American U.S.-born folks, in that context.

The group I ended up working for years after the unrest, the Community Coalition, had convened community residents during the year before the verdict and unrest to look at the issue of the crack epidemic, from the perspective of its root causes, and the residents insisted on studying the question of how do you get so many liquor outlets in a place like South L.A. Many of them [were] run by this merchant class—but somebody, some state agency, has to issue the permit to have three liquor stores on four corners, right? And what these residents learned was that there were more liquor outlets in South Central L.A. than in eleven states, that per capita there was more liquor in that community than any other part of the city. So, they began to engage this African American mayor about the possibility of doing something to reduce the number of liquor outlets, one year before this happened.

The day before the verdict, there was a community town hall with the mayor in which the response of the city, which is what any city does when disenfranchised residents point to structural inequities, [was] to create a blue ribbon commission with the task of figuring out how to solve this problem with other experts, whomever they are. The next day, the verdict happened and over the next three days, people burnt down half of those liquor stores, in three days. I'm not saying it was justified, and I'm not saying that people weren't harmed in the process, but structurally speaking, stepping back away from that political dynamic and thinking about what that says about how people felt, what the

injustice of the verdict created as an opening to speak back against. I think it tells volumes about the political failure that led up to this.

- JK: But just on that point about zoning—a huge number of Korean American stores and shops, a thousand or more, were harmed, destroyed, or burned. And when they tried to rebuild, and tried to get loans and the permits to rebuild the stores, it was difficult for them. Many organizations tried to stop the relicensing of liquor stores. Even if you think structurally and think that for this area, having that many liquor stores doesn't make sense, consider the perspective of the particular owner trying to rebuild, who doesn't know anything else to do. He says to himself, "Well, it's not as if I'm selling liquor just because I'm invested in selling liquor. It's because that's where you get the highest mark up." If they didn't sell liquor at these stores, then maybe they couldn't survive.

So many individuals couldn't rebuild. There was a huge exodus of Koreans, and we might think about what it means after a disaster whether or not the people can return, right? I'm thinking about Cheryl's great work on Katrina and what a right of return looks like. You might think from this disaster, something better should come for the entire community including the people who were victimized, right? But sometimes there's no easy answer. . .

- CH: What this has to do, I think, really both with the cause—and you ask about causation—and there's also something about looking in the aftermath, what we can see both about the cause and the consequence. I guess, for me, I very much agree with Saúl's analysis and would just add that it was both the political failure and the ideological retooling. What I mean by that is the fact that—and I'm borrowing here from David Roediger's idea—[there is a] way in which the economic and racial ideological structure always has to have a kind of management, racial management plan, if you will, just to simplify it. And it has to do with how both labor and capital are racially stratified. So the point that you make about the Korean merchant then, okay, so he or she is in a structural position where the easiest thing to get is the liquor license? From the aspect of the neighborhood, what might be needed is a grocery store. But that becomes structurally,

I guess I would say, off the table, because of the overall economics, right?

And so, from both sides of the fence, then it becomes a way in which a neighborhood is stripped both of infrastructure as well as access to the basic things that we think of as needed to live. A particular class is allowed to step into that breach, but only in a limited capacity, only in, because, of course, liquor is the most heavily regulated [product]. I guess I would say it's the easiest thing to lose, a liquor license.

JK: But those stores also had groceries. . .

CH: But that's what I'm saying. I'm saying that they then become the delivery mechanism for food into the communities. And still today, these communities look very much the same in terms of limited access to the things that we think of as being necessary to even constitute a livable space. And so my point is to say is that, in some ways 4/29 marked a crisis point. That is to say, that the old pressure cooker, the old management system having reached its limits in terms of what it could do, and so all these things then form a confluence in which it erupts. What consolidated afterwards, however, was a new narrative. Not so new, really, but a sort of retooled ideological narrative about the failure of multiculturalism. So it then doesn't become an analysis of any of the underlying causes, it just becomes the cultural story, a racism story, in which it's these people have embedded differences and it's just an unfortunate consequence. This then gets translated into a black-brown, or a black-Asian conflict.

JK: Right, which is in some ways much more salient now. . .

CH: It was the model for that, right? I mean, it was already in motion, but I'm saying it has been rolled out. It also got rolled out in the wake of Katrina. Embedded cultural differences. And now, I don't want to overstate the point, which is to say I don't want to ignore the fact that there are, in fact, cultural chasms that have to be bridged. But the point that I'm trying to make is that this is a political and ideological crisis, but it was retold in a particular way such that basic information even regarding what happened in the moment in 4/29 is still not easily accessible now today, right? But the images still are easily accessible. And that standard narrative is easily accessible, which is that it's all about the fact that we just can't get along.

JK: Devon, what do you think?

DC: I don't think I have much to add to that. I do think that all of the factors that you described can be expressed through a structural frame—deindustrialization, joblessness, police abuse—and the very fact that this quote-unquote merchant class can emerge in a particular space is itself structural. There's a reason we don't see a merchant class, or a kind of middle minority, on the Westside; we see it in a particular space. To put this another way, it's not simply a result of individual preferences why a merchant class would emerge in the inner city, it's a result of where the points of entries might be for a particular kind of market activity and how that itself becomes racialized in the way that Cheryl expressed via her points about race and capital coming together.

So it's not that I would diminish concerns about cultural differences, it's not that I would diminish agency, I would simply say that one has to start with the kind of political failing, the structural dynamics, including police abuse, and how people understand themselves in relation to those structural dynamics. I don't think it would be inaccurate to say, for example, that the way some black constituencies reacted reflected an iteration of the yellow peril threat. To say that that perceived racialized threat operated the way that it has historically *vis-à-vis*, for example, the internment of people of Japanese descent or Chinese exclusion, would be an overstatement, but clearly there were discourses about economic competition, about foreignness, about un-Americanism, that track historically antecedent discourses about a "yellow" menace.

But to talk about that in a way that completely elides the broader structural dynamics would be a mistake. As a parallel to the "yellow peril" threat that some African Americans perceived, some Koreans and Korean Americans perceived African Americans in terms of criminality, violence, and cultural pathology. Here, too, there are structural forces at play that at least partially explain why Korean and Korean Americans would trade on those ideas. The challenge, going forward, is to find a way to talk about the structures, pre-existing racial narratives, agency, and political accountability. Because I do think there's a political accountability piece that we cannot lose sight of, but we have to think about political accountability in relationship to structures.

Otherwise, it really just becomes “Can we all get along?,” and we all know that that can’t be the real question.

JK: So I’m going to try to look forward a little bit and try to figure out what have we learned in the past twenty years. We have identified a theme to remember that some things happen not simply because of chance or bad luck, but because the structures incline bad things to happen to particular types of people in particular ways. And that’s an important lesson to keep in mind, how these very factors interrelate in a particular structure that makes, again, certain bad things more likely than not to happen.

But what else have we learned in two decades—and I want to suggest that maybe we’ve learned nothing, right? I mean, we’re academics, and we could talk about these things in fancy ways, but arguably there is a huge historical amnesia. Even at ground zero. I don’t know what people have learned. I don’t know whether people who are walking through K-Town now—many parts of which look radically different, reconfigured into huge shopping malls—are we, including Korean Americans, struck with amnesia? Maybe we’ve just refused to talk about it, either out of depression or repression. What have we learned in the law about a conflagration like that? Did we learn anything from Sa-I-Gu that was used or useful for Katrina or other kinds of crises?

Maybe a sharp way to put this point is to ask could it happen again? So think about what is happening in Europe, think about what Occupy Wall Street means, think about unemployment, in certain areas, structural unemployment being unbelievably high for certain types of people, right? Think about anger, with the idea that there’s no hope for a better life. Could it happen again? And could it happen again along ethnic lines? Could Los Angeles burn again for three to four days, and if it can, what, if anything, have we learned? I want to know whether you’re optimistic or pessimistic. Where are you now on this?

DC: This is one of those questions that is difficult to answer except on a somewhat abstract level in the following sense. Can it happen again? Sure, it can happen again. Am I thinking that it’s going to happen again tomorrow, I don’t know? I guess as I think about it, it seems as though what we saw in the moment was a hard predicate, there has to

be a predicate, a trigger, something that taps into a pre-existing set of concerns. Some might be legitimate, some might not be. The key is that the predicate becomes the basis for some kind of social expression.

What will be the predicate today? That's one question. Do I think the kind of economic deprivation you mentioned, the protest about Wall Street greed? We could talk about the war on terror, the ongoing war—I mean, are those the necessary predicates? Could be, I'm not sure. . .

- JK: It could be someone shot on BART, right, or at the Metro.
- DC: Well, someone was shot on BART and so. . .
- JK: That's right, bring that possibility to L.A.
- DC: Well, we could just say bring it to some city, including where it occurred, San Francisco. And, to be clear, there were massive organizational efforts around this issue in northern California. But something like what we saw in Los Angeles. . .could that happen again? Presumably the answer is yes; Cheryl's and Saúl's comments about the ongoing structural problems help to explain why. But maybe part of the problem relates to community building. If I were to ask myself, do I think that the idea of political community among and between quote-unquote people of color is much more than an articulated idea? Much more than [that]? Maybe not much more than that, and so what does that mean if you don't have pre-existing political communities, on the one hand, that could manage something were it to happen again, on the other. And how do we talk about the structural dynamics which continue to shape how we experience our lives and our sense of our social and political connections with others? I mean, if it's the case, that it's always a story about agency and social responsibility, then I don't think we are any better situated today. . .
- JK: Think about the financial crisis. Can we talk about that structurally?
- DC: I don't know. . .
- CH: But you know, I would just say it's interesting to think about the picture of the city now and even that area now as compared to then, and what does that suggest. So the first thing I want to note is the fact that this remains a sort of completely unmarked historical event in many ways, in the context

of the city and the story of the city itself. In other words, the reconstruction that happened of Koreatown in the wake of this event is a reconstruction which leaves out the merchants that you are talking about, but allows for the expression of new shopping malls and very fancy places to emerge in Koreatown, which maps on to a story about the triumph of individual effort, capital, and all the rest.

It seems to me that, at this juncture, this really is the problem. That is, we haven't taken it seriously as an event that was an expression of a lot of things that are still very much in place in the city today. The difference that I would note—and I guess I would say, yes, of course it can happen again—but I think that the way in which it comes about is, for me, going to be more complex, because we also have the emergence of a kind of politics in which groups that have traditionally been on the outside now have symbolic membership. So we have, for example, Villaraigosa as mayor, we have a black president, we have a symbolic kind of access to political power and all of the attendant groups and official structures that they stand upon.

JK: But no Koreans?

CH: But no Koreans, right. And so the question is how then does that play out now, what are the triggers, and how does the system itself respond to the potential of this kind of unrest, given that now ostensibly there's a certain strata that has been given more of a stake in the structure? So there is no Daryl Gates is what I'm saying, sitting at the head of the police department. It's a much more, I would say, complex question. That said. . .

DC: West Adams is no longer, I don't think, predominantly black. . .

CH: Yeah, right, exactly, and very few areas of the city actually are predominantly black anymore. So one of the things that I think is an interesting question is if, in fact, 4/29 marked the emergence of a new form of civil unrest, meaning that it looked different than 1965, what would the form look like now, what would its expression be? I don't think it will be an exact replica of that.

JK: Yeah.

CH: But I do think it's possible.

- JK: Saúl, how are you feeling about this?
- SS: I'm optimistic. I feel like it is true that the racial project and the economic project of the country are inherently unstable and that some version of this, I think, has to happen in certain periods of time. I'm not saying we know what the particular manifestations of the outcry of subordinated groups will be or what groups will be positioned in what way, but we do know that vulnerability has been structured in the way that we've talked about in 1992. So, it will not be the same in 2015, 2030, but I do see it as a built-in part of how these unstable ideological projects, which are inherently racialized in a way that people experience them on the ground, that there is no reason to think it won't happen again. The structures that should be responsive are actually getting more exclusionary, such as the education system in this state, which has become more exclusionary in terms of the people from the poorest communities and certain racial groups being represented.

I want to point out for, example, in terms of the legal field, the American Bar Association, has a committee on racial diversity that was established after 4/29. Every institution that represents the elite structure of the country decided they needed to do something to respond to what happened, right? This was such an indictment of the status quo that how could you not? Our profession decides to survey communities of color across the country to see how they feel about the legal system. Overwhelmingly, all the communities of color they engaged said it does not represent us in any meaningful way and it's racist. This was basically the response that our profession got and what we did to try to speak to that was to create a sub-committee on diversity, that did, for example, some work to address the issues around Katrina, Cheryl was discussing, which is how I came to know of their work.

One can make an argument that more meaningful structural changes, putting lawyers in these communities where people could actually have solutions to the kinds of issues that they are facing, such as foreclosures during the economic crisis and all the things that people are living through right now—the profession did not do that, and it's not actually educating and producing more lawyers nec-

essarily in those communities. At the same time, and we know this to be true of any unstable project, this moment created openings, and like you [Jerry] described in your own trajectory, a rise of a consciousness so that individual agency resides everywhere.

And so you have individual Korean American leaders who are not necessarily symbolic leaders in the way that Mayor Villaraigosa or President Obama are having to be to shepherd in an obviously a new moment in the larger project, but who are out there doing community building and who've created a very self-conscious political awareness and discourse within the Korean American community that says "we need to understand what multiracial literacy is, we need to understand what multiracial coalition building looks like and how to make it happen, and we need to actually engage that work in a way that takes into account the particularities and the specificity of our immigrant experience, of our experience as a second generation or 1.5 generation people, and as people of color in an economically stratified and racially ordered society." And they are the actors that I think that have more promise than the symbolic agents because the political institutions and the larger structure that I am describing always give the same response to pressing community needs, as we saw in the liquor store example. And I think that is far more promising than anything else.

JK: You know, if I have a glimmer of hope, it is driven by really remarkable community NGOs [non-governmental organizations]. And they don't always agree, and again there's politics everywhere, there's competition for both recognition and funding, but there are organizations that were created in the crucible of the remains of Sa-I-Gu, like the Korean American Coalition. And if you think about the work that the KYCC, which is now the Koreatown Youth Community Center instead of the Korean Youth Community Center and...

SS: KIWA [Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance]. . .

JK: KIWA, right. If you think about these organizations and what they do, day in and day out. . .they serve a clientele, a base, a community that goes way beyond what it means to be just Korean.

SS: Right. . .

JK: It's about Koreatown, it's about the people there. Could be a huge Latino community. And when I see that work. . . which is the kind of work that does not fit into a model minority trajectory. Korean immigrants who come over, suffer social and economic dislocation, are not telling their kids to grow up to do that kind of work, right? Instead, they are telling their kids to become professionals, get a job, make sure you have money, take care of your kids. And yet I see lots of people who have options, who still go back into that kind of community building work. That's the kind of work I see and in many ways fundamentally admire. Those NGOs on the ground do make me think that something better could happen.

Then again, as much as we emphasize structure, we have to emphasize agency, and that's in each of us. I know each one of us—even as insignificant as academic life or ivory tower life might be—when we make choices, when our lives are hard, we intentionally make choices to build bridges across different communities, across different not only academic disciplines, but areas of focus and knowledge. When you [Devon] write about the Supreme Court case *Ozawa v. United States* (1922)], when we participate in events about post-9/11 racial profiling of South Asians, when I write about the Japanese Americans, we are all in some sense deciding to vote with our hours, with our hands, with our minds in a particular way to stand next to each other. Because when we break bread and cooperate with each other, even when things get awful, then we have a kind of reserve that we can draw upon that is so important. I guess that is something that makes me a little bit more optimistic.

I guess the final thing I want to emphasize, which is both agency as well as structure, is that there's a cadre of Korean American attorneys in L.A., like hundreds of them now who are bright—they might be working in corporate law firms, serving corporate clients, doing nothing especially connected with the community. But when push comes to shove, I mean, it would be a different voice out there. If *Nightline* needs desperately to find some Korean looking person who doesn't speak with an accent, they would have more options.

CH: Well, you know, I guess the only friendly amendment that I would offer is not to say that the work of academics is always relevant. But I do think that the work we do in aca-

democratic institutions around these questions is absolutely critical. You know, it is a space that is itself engaged in knowledge production. And in terms of both shaping future generations as well as shaping the body of knowledge around which we can then make interventions, it becomes crucial.

And so the very things that we struggle for in terms of access to the institution, access to its resources, who gets in the door, what kind of training they have—these are tremendous political questions and responsibilities that I think we have. I would never make the argument that everything that we do is important simply because we are doing it in an academic space. But my friendly amendment would be to say that it is not trivial at all. There is a reason why the doors that Saúl was talking about are hard to get into, and it is because of the recognition of what a place or what an academic institution does, what it is, what its job is. To the extent that we can in our own practices try to challenge ourselves around these issues, I think it becomes more than just symbolic or trivial.

DC: And indeed, I think one could say, in that respect, that academics have not completely done their part. I mean, one of the things that we talked a little bit about earlier is just the absence of a very thick, robust accounting of A., what happened; B., how it has shaped the city; and C., what that might mean for Los Angeles going forward. So whether you're thinking about that in sociological terms, whether you are you thinking about that in legalistic terms, it just seems to me that there is an awful lot of work that one can still do to better understand what that moment means for the city of Los Angeles and, indeed, for the nation at large.

JK: Well, Devon Carbado, Cheryl Harris, Saúl Sarabia, thank you very much for an honest and insightful conversation.