



The Fire Next Time?: Ten Haunting Questions Cry Out for Answers and Redress

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To cite this article: K.W. Lee (2012) The Fire Next Time?: Ten Haunting Questions Cry Out for Answers and Redress, *Amerasia Journal*, 38:1, 84-90, DOI: [10.17953/amer.38.1.952vt46142320xk7](https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.952vt46142320xk7)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.952vt46142320xk7>



Published online: 08 Feb 2019.



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K.W. Lee at the tenth anniversary commemoration
of Sa-I-Gu, Los Angeles Koreatown.

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. . . America is, and always has been, at any point in time, the sum of the tensions between its older and newer immigrants, whether they came from Europe or south of the border or across the Pacific. If it were not for this on-going experience, American ideals would long since have lost much of their relevance.

—Carey McWilliams, in his introduction in
Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart*.

With a twentieth anniversary just around the corner, it's that awful déjà vu time again when I, as one-time editor of the lone English voice of Koreatown, *Korea Times Weekly*, return to the fiery mob siege of the Los Angeles race riots.

I was literally born again in the ashes of the nation's first media-fanned minority vs. minority bogus race war. At a time of escalating drive-by gang wars, I got a donor's liver, a "perfect young liver" belonging to a local homicide victim.

Korean Americans call the conflagration Sa-I-Gu (4-2-9 in native pronunciation) to commemorate the three days and four nights of firebombing, looting, and mayhem during which they watched their elusive American Dream go up in smoke in the City of Angels.

Hear me out, the Children of Sa-I-Gu.

Where you were when South Central L. A. and the adjoining Koreatown burned, choked, and wailed?

Wherever you were, you are all children of 4/29, young or old, born here or there, all bound together by, and mocked by, our unacceptable *palja* (fate).

K. W. LEE has worked forty years as reporter, editor, and publisher of mainstream dailies and Asian weeklies. He founded and edited *Koreatown Weekly* (1979-1984) and *Korea Times Weekly* (1990-1993), and has lectured on investigative journalism at University of California system branches.

4/29 wrecked more than 2,300 Korean businesses and uprooted 10,000-plus immigrant lives, to the tune of almost half of the city's one-billion-dollar loss in property damage alone, a rush-job estimate by non-government service agencies for their immediate relief works. We were burned out, maimed, robbed, and—to add insult to the wounds—blamed, harassed, and punished for the firestorm as “mean, greedy, and gun-toting Korean merchants.”

If ever honestly computed, total damages to Korean Americans including human costs should easily reach a billion. It was but the latest reminder of recurring ethnic cleansings and scapegoatings that overseas Koreans have suffered in the century-old diaspora stretching north to Manchuria, Siberia, Tashkent, and the Sakhalin, and across the seas east to Hawai'i, the mainland U.S.A., Mexico's Yucatan Territory, and Cuba.

Come the next fire, your English-speaking generation is destined to become the first and last line of defense for your half-deaf and half-blind parent generation of silence and sacrifice, as your older brothers and sisters demonstrated in the last fire of Sa-I-Gu.

Meanwhile, your generational mission is to open up the hidden secrets of 4/29 and pursue the truth and redress movement to bring humanity and honor to our 4/29 victims, who number tens of thousands.

This daunting task should follow in the footsteps of the successful forty-year Japanese American drive to restore truth, honor, and compensation to their fellow JA Internment victims. A team of activist lawyers exposed a government cover-up of the fact that Japanese Americans were never engaged in subversive activities prior to Pearl Harbor attacks. Their truth quest led to the historic Civil Liberties Act of 1988 and the Japanese American National Museum.

Thus the Children of the Camps have accomplished their mission—an enduring legacy for succeeding generations.

Back to the Children of 4/29.

Sitting on the smoldering volcano for years, the power system (City Hall, LAPD, D.A. office, Los Angeles County, Courts, and the media) were utterly unprepared for the multiethnic, multicultural explosion that signaled a radical departure from the enduring black-white paradigm since the start of this republic.

Ditto the established leaders among the communities of color—black, brown, and yellow—failing to break out of their

own tribal boxes in the city's volatile there's-no-ethnic-majority chemistry.

Troublesome is this festering tribalism in the volatile inner cities, whether it is between the newly emerging majority minority Latinos and the declining African American minority at several flashpoints of conflict, or between Asian immigrant middlemen businesses (including Southeast and South Asian refugees) and Latino and African American underclasses. For decades, gang wars have been flaring up in school yards, neighborhoods, within and without prison walls, but these potent flashpoints have never been publicly acknowledged and addressed by the minority power elites, the ethnic media, and the mainstream media, and have therefore shunted aside and ignored.

Thus, overcoming this ethnocentric tribalism is the first step toward building a new fusion majority in this city of no majority. And it's time for honesty, candor, and courage for the minorities' leadership to confront and conquer these persistent fears:

- ☒ Fears of being singled out as the source of another ethnic group's woes and problems
- ☒ Fears of the media for fomenting racial issues out of isolated incidents in the impoverished districts
- ☒ Fears of routine economic disputes being manipulated into racial confrontations for expedient political agendas under the guise of civil rights causes

For the power structure, 4/29 was a knee-jerk divide-and-rule way of successfully diverting black anger, in the aftermath of acquittal of the four white cops from their Rodney King beating charges, to the "black-Korean conflict" in the most diverse metropolis of the world with 100 different language-ethnic groups.

Even before Koreans and African Americans had a chance to get to know each other with their common struggles and sorrows in the past, both groups watched themselves pitted against each other as unpaid players in the Roman arena in the shouting sound bites and screaming headlines on TV stations and in the almighty *Los Angeles Times*.

In the huge, cutthroat L.A. media market, a racial incident is tailor-made for TV ratings, especially when it involved Koreans.

As the editor of the English weekly, I lived through this nightmare scenario. I went through a three-year rollercoaster ride in a race-mongering marathon created by the triad of Hollywood, the TV outlets, and the only paper in town.

Every time the “black-Korean conflict” headlines in the newspaper and sound bites on TV screen coughed, the Korean storekeepers caught the deadly gunfire and firebombs.

As the media-fanned open season on Koreans escalated, so did hate crimes reported to local authorities. A University of Southern California study identified up to thirty hate crime cases where Koreans were the victims and suspect was black. The total number of cases peaked in 1991. “In no case could we locate any documentation of the reversed hate crime (black victim, Korean suspect),” the study said.

Twenty years later, the greatest urban upheaval in modern America—the man-made Katrina—has simply vanished from the local and national memory in the aftermath of the natural Katrina, the 9/11 jihad terrorist attacks, and the ongoing stubborn recession.

So many dire lessons and relief measures for the 4/29 victims have been forgotten or ignored at all government levels and private sectors even after the two great urban riots of the 1965 Watts and 1992 L.A. riots. Out of sight and sound of the authorities are tens of thousands of these hapless victims.

Today’s Koreatown movers and shakers are in utter denial.

What’s so ominous is the thundering disinterest, disengagement, and disconnect of the American-educated, first-generation elites secure in their professional fields when it comes to the gathering storm over the lives of the struggling fellow immigrant grunts in the tense urban trenches. To fill this void, only the painfully familiar faces of a splendid few professionals would share the burden of thankless community service and coalition efforts.

More unsettling is the state of mind of your 1.5 and second generations. Most of your peers don’t even know or care what 4/29 is or means. Little wonder the Koreans don’t count or matter to powers-that-be.

Since 4/29, I’ve been on the road, sharing the bitter lessons from our Made-in-America pogrom with thousands of students and activists in classrooms, summer retreats, conferences, and workshops. Hardly a surprise to me, I’ve run into only a handful of young people steadfastly engaged in coalition efforts in major Koreatowns across the continent.

I am proud to call them the magnificent “One Percents.” Their mission: obtain 4/29-related secret records under the Federal and State Freedom of Information Acts and address these ten hard questions:

1. At the time of the riots, L.A. County Sheriff Sherman Block (now deceased) and the local FBI chief publicly vowed to prosecute alleged massive civil rights violations against the Korean victims, but nothing happened. Why?
2. The LAPD refused to respond to desperate pleas for help from Korean merchants and residents under attack for the first crucial two days of the riots. Instead they chose to draw the line of defense along the back of Koreatown in affluent West Los Angeles. Why?
3. The LAPD knew through its extensive anti-gang task force sources—and it was open street talk—that several gangs were plotting to wreak havoc on Korean stores in South Central and Koreatown to exact revenge for the 1991 shooting death of customer Latasha Harlins by female grocer Soon Ja Du in panic during a scuffle. LAPD knew that the gangs would act out their violent plot of revenge if the officers accused of beating Rodney King were found “not guilty.” Why didn’t the LAPD pursue these intelligence reports on the targeting of Korean merchants?
4. The LAPD prepared contingency plans in case of the acquittal of the four cops in the King beating trial. What happened to those plans?
5. During the violent few days of 4/29, the LAPD herded rampaging mobs like stampeding cattle into Koreatown through Western, Normandie, and Vermont. LAPD guardians just watched the mob looting and shooting, but arrested armed Korean defenders who were under assault. Why and under whose orders?
6. Which party (the LAPD, city District Attorney’s office, or TV news outlets) altered the surveillance videotape from Empire Market (owned by the Du family) to show only the last few seconds of the tape, in which Du was seen shooting black teenager Harlins in the back, but not showing the previous three blows to the grocer by Harlins, who knocked the storeowner to the floor each time?
7. The chilling TV video of the store shooting rolled on in fits and spurts in tandem with the videotaped King beating right up to and during the riots. Who was responsible for showing only the shortened version? Many Korean storekeepers were killed in the previous years, but they were ignored in the local evening news.
8. Many Korean riot victims were insured by offshore firms, with no sufficient assets to pay and by non-admitted carriers not subject to the state Department of Insurance’s supervision. More than half of them were either underinsured or insured

by such off shore insurance firms. The department has done little to probe numerous complaints by the victimized or help recover claims. Why?

9. FEMA was a big joke among the victims. Only a fraction of the applicants were helped, and many victims lost their homes and businesses through foreclosures and repossessions. How did FEMA get away with helping so little?

10. Only a fraction of the looted or burned convenience stores were able to reopen their shops through the hearing process after the L.A. City Council imposed prohibitive conditions on re-applicants for licenses. What happened to those who couldn't reopen their stores?

Epilogue

Upon sobering reflection, I dare say that our 4/29 didn't explode on that date.

Since the 1980s, these impassive Korean mom-and-pop store-keepers, along with long-suffering, stoic neighbors, have been living dangerously every waking hour, seven days a week, all year round in America's own killing fields.

A year before the 4/29 eruption, according to LAPD, the Koreatown district recorded 2,500 robberies, 48 murders, 2,165 assaults, 6,270 auto thefts and burglaries, and 1,937 general thefts—one of the most violent police districts in California and probably the nation.

As the editor of *Koreatown Weekly*, 1979-1984, and *Korea Times Weekly*, 1990-1993, both based in Los Angeles, I've covered too many hourly shootings and robberies and attended too many funerals not to be outraged, awed, and, above all, renewed by these newcomers from Korea who seemed to thrive on adversity even in defeat or death.

Only God knows how many of these urban warriors have been mugged, robbed, maimed, or slain. The figures may easily run into thousands and those slain would reach hundreds.

And how many widows and children had to carry on with their existential days and nights and yonder?

In their darkest hours they have shown us the never-give-up spirit of Koreans in their dogged pursuit of an elusive dream in the new world.

As we silently grieve for our fallen urban warriors in our own killing fields on this twentieth anniversary of Sa-I-Gu, we die a little but carry on with our daily life the only way, we, the people of *Hahn* (the everlasting, unrequited woe), know by heart.