

## Sa-I-Gu, Twenty Years Later:

I *Still* Love L.A.

Rose M. Kim

This essay looks backward twenty years to the days of violence that erupted in Los Angeles, California, on April 29, 1992, following the acquittal of four white police officers charged with brutally assaulting Rodney King, a black motorist. On that day, I was working as a rookie reporter for the *Los Angeles Times'* Orange County Edition. In the following days, I was reassigned to the City Desk, and, a year later, was among the team of reporters and photographers awarded the Pulitzer Prize for spot news reporting. Far from the imaginary objective reporter, I was terrified to see my hometown erupting in violence and flames. My older sister, an assignment editor at the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*, far-along pregnant with her third child, had fled her office due to the threat of mob violence. My father could smell the burning buildings from his apartment and my brother-in-law lost his job when the store where he worked was burned down. In the following weeks, I attended political rallies held by Korean Americans, and interviewed depressed store owners seeking federal aid as well as emerging, young community leaders. The violence unleashed a flood of events, affects, and memories that has troubled me and, over the years, made me rethink my understanding of my hometown, my nation, and my ethnic and racial identity. The event has haunted me. More than a decade later, it became the subject of my doctoral dissertation in sociology. Twenty years later, it is the topic of this essay and this special issue. The haunting continues now.

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Even though I worked as a reporter covering this event, and then later spent years researching it for my dissertation, my memories of what happened are most powerfully shaped by select mass media images laden with well-worn narratives that I vividly, intuitively recall—i.e., the grainy, black-and-white videotape of the police assault on Rodney King; the live, televised beating of white truck driver Reginald Denny; and the still photograph of a bloodied Korean American Eddie Lee and his friends, splayed on the street. Thus, as so many, I am informed more by mass media images than by my own direct experiences. Art curator Claudine Ise rightly commented on the power of television in transmitting the experience of the civil upheaval: “(F)or many Angelenos, particularly those living in wealthier Westside communities, the uprisings were experienced more as televised spectacle than as an actual threat.”<sup>1</sup> Even if not an actual threat for viewers, the televised images still had a powerful, visceral impact on its audience; unfolding in real time, the media-event was a foreshadowing of future televised events, such as the frightful spectacle of September 11, 2001, which would traumatize and haunt a nation of captive viewers more than nine years later.

This paper emphasizes the role of the mass media, specifically print journalism and the discourses it circulated, because of its key role in transmitting and recording the experience to the society at large, thereby constructing a collective, visual, and narrative cultural memory.<sup>2</sup> Mass media, coupling still and moving images with narratives, is increasingly powerful in constructing our social—racialized, gendered, classist—reality / imaginary, especially as the culture cultivates a perpetual, electronic, digital hyper-connectivity: I would argue that we habitually remember the virtual mass-mediated experience before our own lived experience. The significant role of mass media in constructing the “racial imaginary” seems especially true today since many Americans, through a variety of push and pulls, are sorted into racially segregated communities.

The early 1990s represented a period of increasing teletech- nology. While there has been a theoretical focus emphasizing a divide between print media and television, it is also true that they work in concert. Newspaper accounts emerge in conjunc- tion with televised images, each echoing and repeating the other, and it is common for television broadcasters and print journalists to reference (or echo) each other to validate their own reporting. For example, other journalists and I learned about the beating of

Reginald Denny via live televised broadcasts in the Orange County newsroom. At the *Los Angeles Times*, the “end” is producing a daily newspaper, but the process of constructing that newspaper has depended increasingly on a multiplicity of technological processes, including old media, such as newspapers, but also new media such as television and a multiplicity of technologies, such as live video streaming, cell phones, and computer networks. This mix of media and technology creates a complex network of viral, socio-machinic interactions. Thus, I draw upon Patricia Clough’s observation of this significant cultural shift that took place in the late twentieth century, and continuing today. Clough describes teletechnology as a social field representing

the full interface of computer technology and television, promising globalized networks of information and communication whereby layers of electronic images, texts, and sounds flow in real time, so that the speeds of the territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization of social spaces, as well as adjustment to the vulnerabilities of exposure to media eventness, are beyond any users’ mere decision to turn it “on” or off. Teletechnology, therefore, refers to all matters of “knowledge objects” . . .<sup>3</sup>

The 1992 L.A. riots/civil disturbance represents such a complex, teletechnological media event because of how it unfolded on live television, buttressed by reporters and computer technology. It marks a unique moment in the history of broadcasting through its live, continuous coverage of a violently unfolding event. Ideally, a teletechnological analysis will open up possibilities for talking about psychic, unconscious dimensions and viral connections.

### Racialized Biopolitics and Traumatic Identifications

This paper represents multiple frameworks. At its core, it is a discursive theoretical analysis of racialization, especially its violent, traumatic origins, of cultural trauma and its influence on the collective identity of Korean Americans, and of the role of mass media discourses in constructing race. It builds upon Michel Foucault’s ideas on the role of racial discourse in fracturing a population for the purposes of biopolitical management; it also considers how the mass media circulated and disseminated racialized discourses during the 1992 civil upheaval, and how these discourses impacted racial conflicts and the racialization process, at large.

In his lectures at the College de France, from 1975 to 1976, Foucault noted that racialized discourse is a system for dividing a societal population into a hierarchy of groups, and for prioritizing their value or importance:

[Racism] is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls.<sup>4</sup>

In the lectures, Foucault further claimed that racism does not just subdivide the population, but that it also played a critical second function in determining who deserves to live more:

... racism makes it possible to establish a relationship between my life and the death of the other that is not a military or war-like relationship of confrontation, but a biological-type relationship: The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. . . .the death of the bad race, the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer.<sup>5</sup>

The police's abandonment of Korean storeowners during the violent outbreak and the scapegoating of Korean immigrants as the source of black rage conveyed the perception that Koreans were more expendable than the wealthy whites in Beverly Hills. This abandonment by the state had a profound impact on the identity of Korean Americans, shifting their identity from one based on nationality to one based on race, as noted by various scholars, including Edward Chang, Angie Y. Chung, and Pyong Gap Min.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the exclusion of Korean Americans from mass media coverage,<sup>7</sup> especially in the initial days, resulted in racist stereotypes of Koreans that fueled further violent assaults against the group. In a recently published article, I elaborate on how this collective identity shift emerged due to racist violence experienced during the 1992 civil unrest, and the trauma that ensued, thus belatedly creating a new, racialized identity for Koreans and Korean Americans.<sup>8</sup>

Trauma theory is also highly relevant to this paper. The study of trauma originated with the study of soldiers, and rape and incest victims in clinical psychology;<sup>9</sup> but in recent decades has been applied elsewhere in the social sciences. It has rightly been noted that trauma studies have not developed in a linear manner.<sup>10</sup> Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander defines a cultural trauma as occurring when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.<sup>11</sup> This paper applies Alexander's definition of "cultural trauma" to explain how Korean Americans perceived the assault upon their community.

To help cultivate an interracial analysis, the paper presents a content analysis of how the violent event was covered by three different media outlets: the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*. These media outlets represent different social standpoints, and, considered together, offer insights into how race is constructed and contested in the U.S. The *Los Angeles Times*, at the time, was the city's sole daily newspaper, with a circulation of about a million subscribers in a county totaling a little over nine million people. Since its founding in 1881, the newspaper had a long record of promoting white private capital and developing the city's expansion; at the same time, it had been anti-union, anti-public housing, and pro-police.<sup>12</sup>

The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a weekly black-owned newspaper, was founded by Col Leon H. Washington in 1933. Washington came to Los Angeles in 1930, and worked for the *California Eagle*, then the city's largest black newspaper for a few years before launching his own publication; he died in 1974. His wife, Ruth Washington, was publisher until her death in 1990. In 1983, Kenneth and Jennifer Thomas purchased the newspaper and owned it until 2004. The activist newspaper focused on stories impacting the black community, and had a readership of more than 100,000 subscribers concentrated in South Los Angeles, Inglewood, and Compton.

The *Korea Times Weekly English Edition* was founded in 1990 by Kyung Won (K.W.) Lee, the first Asian immigrant to work for a U.S. newspaper. In his early twenties, Lee came to the U.S. to study journalism at West Virginia University. In 1955, he was hired by the *Kingsport Times-News* in Tennessee. Lee had long yearned for an English-language Korean newspaper that would report on the travails and triumphs of Korean immigrants and their children, and to provide intergenerational insights, as well

as reach out to the larger American society. In 1979, Lee founded *Koreatown Weekly*, the first English-language Korean American newspaper, and published it for a few years. In 1990, he began the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*, in association with the daily Korean-language newspaper the *Korea Times*, which had a circulation of more than 50,000 subscribers. The differential status of these papers is reflected in their availability in my city of residence: the *Los Angeles Times* is on microfiche in the main branch of the New York Public Library (NYPL); the *Los Angeles Sentinel* is on microfiche at the NYPL's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and, meanwhile, the *Korea Times English Weekly* has a minimal online archive created by former staff members who have volunteered their time.

This paper focuses on the first two days (April 30 and May 1, 1992) of the *Los Angeles Times*' coverage; the May 7 issue of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the first issue after the acquittals of the officers involved in the Rodney King incident; and the May 11 issue of the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*. The focus is on the early days of the violent outbreak. While the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition* published an abbreviated issue on May 4 that did not mention the violent outbreak, the May 11 issue represented its first, comprehensive reaction to the violence. Unlike the other two more established newspapers, the *Korea Times Weekly Edition* was staffed mostly with high school and college students under the supervision of a small staff of professionals. At the time, the Editor-in-Chief K.W. Lee was suffering from liver failure and awaiting a transplant; still, he closely supervised the newspaper's coverage.

Finally, this paper incorporates my personal experiences as a witness of the event. In 1991, I became the first Korean American accepted into METPRO program at the *Los Angeles Times*. Following the Watts Riots of 1965, the newspaper began hiring a few minority reporters to diversify its staff, and, in 1984, the *Los Angeles Times* established the Minority Editorial Training Program (METPRO), a two-year reporter training program, to increase the number of minority reporters across the nation. I had grown up reading the newspaper since my father, formerly a journalist in Korea, got the *Los Angeles Times* almost daily. At 16, my first "Letter to the Editor," a critique of William F. Buckley's call for women to be barred from the battlefield, was published. I officially got involved in journalism through my undergraduate newspaper the *Chicago Maroon* (at the University of Chicago), and then, while still in college, freelanced for a number of pub-

lications, including the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*. K.W. Lee was one of my first and most important journalistic mentors. In sharing my experiences, I do not want to claim to produce an original, authoritative account. Rather, I hope to present an autoethnography,<sup>13</sup> describing what I experienced, yet also drawing upon experimental writing, to reveal the repressed stories and the productive, haunted possibilities of these experiences.

### Three Standpoints: *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Korea Times English Weekly Edition*

A review of the coverage by the three media venues reveals significant differences in their dominant narratives. Foremost, the *Los Angeles Times*' stories emphasize race as the salient factor; thus, the paper characterized the event as "race-related violence," evidenced by the opening paragraph of one of its lead stories, entitled "Rioters Set Fires, Loot Stores" (April 30, 1992): "Rioting mobs ignited fires, beat motorists and looted stores and offices Wednesday night throughout Los Angeles as fears of *race-related violence*<sup>14</sup> came to pass after the acquittal of four Los Angeles police officers in the beating of Rodney King." Later in the article, the writers spoke of "the city's long standing racial tensions" and identified victims and perpetrators by their race: "The city's longstanding racial tensions, which many leaders have said were exacerbated by the beating of King, reached their hottest point on the streets following the verdicts. Many of the perpetrators of the attacks were African Americans; some victims were white and Asian." It is interesting how Latinos are not mentioned, even though they constituted more than 37 percent of the city's population.

Also, note how African Americans are pitted against both whites and Asians in the passages. The inclusion of Asians, or specifically Korean immigrant storeowners, deflected attention from the larger, racist, white supremacist system. Through this narrative turn, Koreans were posited as the reason for black hostility, and whites were afforded the privilege of being outraged onlookers in a fight between minority groups. The alliance of whites and Asians was discursively constructed through the case of Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old African American girl who was fatally shot by Soon Ja Du, a Korean liquor store owner, about two weeks after the police assault on Rodney King. Later that year, a jury found Du guilty of manslaughter and recommended a 16-year prison sentence, but the presiding judge, Joyce Karlin, reduced the sentence to probation for five years, 400 hours of

community service, and a \$500 fine. Interestingly, both the assault on King and the shooting of Harlins were captured on videotape, and the powerful visual records were played repeatedly on television, inflaming passions in both cases.

The outcome of the Du case outraged many in the African American community and exemplified the historical injustices blacks have faced, and do face, in the U.S. legal system. On a page A-4 story, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* offered the following reasons for the 22 percent rise in "hate crimes" in the city in 1991: "the Persian Gulf War, which gave rise to anti-Arab sentiments, the murder of Latasha Harlins, further exacerbating the strife between the Black and Korean communities; the deepening recession and the trade imbalance with Japan." On the editorial page, *Sentinel* columnist Larry Aubry again evoked the case of Latasha Harlins: "For most African-Americans, Judge Joyce Karlin's decision in the Soon Ja Du case. . .also confirmed the inequity and injustice of the justice system for African Americans. Like the King case, the Du case involved blatant disregard for the rights and humanity of Black people." While aligning Koreans with the white legal system, Aubry claimed a common history of racialized oppression between Blacks and Latinos, writing, "There is little doubt that Blacks and Latinos share similar histories of oppression." A column by Sheila Rose also mentioned the Du case: "If the system can let (her) walk for murdering a Black teen, as well as these four cops, my question is this: 'How could things possibly get worse'?" The alignment of Koreans with whites is ironic since Asian immigrants were barred from U.S. citizenship until 1952, as well as restricted from property ownership via California's Alien Land Laws passed in 1913 and 1920 in addition to racially restrictive covenants. While Asian immigrants are held up today as a model minority, hard-working entrepreneurs achieving the American Dream, it was not so long ago that they were the objects of contempt and exclusion.

The *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*, meanwhile, critiqued the depiction of Du as the beneficiary of a racist, white-dominated legal system. In his front-page column, K.W. Lee wrote, "The mainstream media's ignorance and sensationalism in black-Korean coverage has had a life-threatening impact on many fearful Koreans, contributing to the Lebanonization of the City of Angels, polarizing the two misunderstood groups, rather than healing and calming tensions." While the dominant white and black media focused on how Du had fatally shot Harlins, who was unarmed, K.W. Lee spoke of the violence routinely inflicted

on Korean immigrant storeowners, but ignored by the dominant white and black media:

Long before the Latasha Harlins tragedy, dozens of small store keepers were robbed and terrorized by gang members and criminals. Shoplifting and racial threats and harassments are part of the daily life of almost every Korean American merchant in inner cities.

Perhaps it seems racially inflammatory to suggest inner-city blacks might have stolen goods from Korean grocers. Sociologist Pyong Gap Min found that Korean storeowners cited frequent shoplifting, the risk of armed robberies, and the lower spending capacity of customers as major disadvantages in running businesses in low-income areas.<sup>15</sup> To me, it seems reasonable that shoplifting is more prevalent in poor communities where money is scarce. In 1981, when I worked as a waitress in Santa Cruz, California, I stole one-quart buckets of diced, boiled potatoes and rolls of toilet paper to make it to my next paycheck. Thankfully, today, due to collective-bargaining rights, as a tenure-track professor at a public university, I earn a living wage that shields me from indignities, such as stealing to survive.

Rather than seeing Koreans or Asians as being aligned with the dominant white power structure, Lee offered a different dynamic: “(r)acism has come to wear a different garb called nativism, with an anti-foreigner, anti-immigrant undercurrent.” The dominant white and black media depicted Korean storeowners as voiceless foreigners, carrying and firing weapons like vigilantes, images vividly captured via moving and still photography. Min Hyoung Song described the image of Korean American small business owners, brandishing guns, as a spectacle without precedent,” thus “flexible signifiers for a wide variety of already entrenched and competing perspectives.”<sup>16</sup> Historically, and particularly in that particular moment, Asian Americans had been viewed as a model minority with high economic and educational achievement,<sup>17</sup> in stark contrast to blacks who were narrativized as economically and academically failing as the “underclass.”<sup>18</sup>

Whereas the *Los Angeles Times* emphasized the outburst of “race-related violence”, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* devoted the top fold of the front page to Rodney King’s appeal for peace. The contempt for the state and its allies was obvious: “(I)n just a few words, Rodney King said more than all the glib politicians, social scientists, and ‘community leaders’ had said in a million words about the multi-

racial rioting which made the so-called City of Angels universally notorious." The article quoted King, "People, I just want to say, you know, can we, can we all get along? . . . It's just not right. It's not right. And it's not going to change anything. We'll get justice. They've won the war. We'll have our day in court, and that's all we want. . . I love. . . you know, I'm neutral; I love everyone. . . I love people of color. I'm not like they're (making) me out to be." Although King was critical of the media's depiction of himself as having hostile feelings toward other racialized minorities, his plea of "Can we all get along?" became the focus of the dominant media's emphasis.

Whereas the *Los Angeles Times* premised "race" as a key explanatory point, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* emphasized the rioting as being "multiracial." In his column entitled "Shameful Decision, Prophetic Aftermath," Larry Aubry compared the 1965 Watts Riots to the 1992 event: "In 1965, they were exclusively black; last week, Anglos led violence-producing demonstrations in downtown Los Angeles, and there appeared to be as many Latino looters as African Americans. . ." The *Los Angeles Sentinel* further underscored that the event was not a simple opposition of black vs. white through its front-page article headlined "Black-Owned Businesses Not Spared," even as the article itself said, "Many Black-owned business escaped the firey (*sic.*) destruction that left hundreds of commercial and retail establishments with little more than burnt-out shells."

The story of the acquittal of the four police officers also revealed other different narratives. The *Los Angeles Times* characterized the outcome as evoking "outrage and disbelief," in its page 1 headline on April 30. Yet in its lead editorial, it emphasized that it was important to accept the outcome as an authorized institutional process: "'This is the way our system works,' commented a somber Terry White in reacting Wednesday to the astonishing jury judgment in the Rodney King beating case. . . . Like many people in Southern California, Deputy Dist. Atty. White, the lead prosecutor, was stunned, disappointed and pained." In addition, a page A-18 story (April 30) on the reaction of police officers to the acquittals described the officers as feeling "relief and elation," thus humanizing and validating them. In contrast, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* called the verdicts "shameful," which emphasized how the acquittal contradicted the nation's ideals of justice.

By emphasizing interracial violence, the *Los Angeles Times* deflected attention from the original, state-initiated violence of the assault on Rodney King, the event that eventually led to the ac-

quittal of the four officers and to the violent outburst. An editorial cartoon in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* powerfully expressed this point: the drawing showed two black silhouettes, a judge in a robe with a gavel, dripping blood, labeled “stupid justice” and a man carrying an axe, dripping blood, labeled “stupid violence.” “We’re both responsible and don’t you forget it,” the man tells the judge.

The racialized narrative—particularly the black vs. white nature of the violence—was further emphasized through references to the Watts Riots of 1965. In two of the three stories on the front page, the *Los Angeles Times* referenced the 1965 event, writing, “It was the largest rioting to erupt in Los Angeles since the Watts Riots of 1965.” While the Watts Riots was the most damaging, other racially-inspired violent episodes in the city’s history included the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, during which several thousand white sailors and marines assaulted young Latino males, and the Chinese Massacre of 1871, during which a mob of more than 500 white men killed and lynched at least 18 Chinese. The emphasis on riots in the post-Civil Rights era emphasize blacks as the source of violence, and obscures the fact that, for most of this country’s history, many race riots were instigated by whites against racialized minorities.

The focus on race also concealed the larger, more inclusive economic violence driving large mobs of people to act violently or to plunder. In reaction, some activists and scholars such as Edward Chang have referred to the violent episode as “bread riots,” i.e. an upheaval rooted in class, more than racial, inequalities.<sup>19</sup> Middleman minority theory helps to illuminate how the targeted attack on Korean small business owners reflected intergroup conflicts. Theoretically, middleman minorities serve an intermediary role between the ruling class and an oppressed population by distributing goods and services to the latter;<sup>20</sup> Korean storeowners in the U.S. played the role of a “middleman” merchant between low-income minority consumers and large, predominantly white-owned companies, suffering a high level of conflict with both minority customers and white suppliers. The literature on middleman minorities suggest that middleman merchants can be used as scapegoats to protect the dominant group, and scholars have claimed that Korean merchants were used as shields for black hostile social conditions beyond their control.<sup>21</sup>

The *Korea Times Weekly English Edition*, meanwhile, was unique in not mentioning the words “race” and “multiracial” in any of its front page stories. While the *Los Angeles Times* and the

*Los Angeles Sentinel* briefly mentioned Korean merchants, usually via the Soon Ja Du case, the *Korea Times Weekly English Edition* focused on the Korean immigrant storeowners as individuals, offering rich details of their subjects' lives and more nuanced portraits of their community interactions. The newspaper told of Chung Lee, a Watts grocer for 15 years who had been co-chair of the Black-Korean Alliance in the 1980s and who had employed local blacks, sponsored Little League baseball teams, and gone to his customers' funerals. It told of Steven Lee, 24, who had grown up with blacks in the Deep South. Recognized as one of the friendliest merchants in the Vermont-Manchester area, he had been elected by African American residents to sit on the 77<sup>th</sup> Street Area Community-Based Policing Council, edging out black candidates. Still, his two family businesses—a swap meet operation and a beauty supplies store—were looted and burned. Reporter Sophia Kim recorded what Lee told her: "America is not a fair place to live. It is not a land of opportunity."

On its tenth anniversary, the 1992 L.A. civil disturbance continued to be emphasized as the first multiracial riot. In a story in the *Christian Science Monitor* on April 29, 2002, staff writer David Wood revisited the event through the eyes of three young people of color: Mira Jang, a 24-year-old field representative for Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D), whose district included Koreatown; Randy Jurado, a 19-year-old Salvadorian American, then a student at Occidental College; and Todd Eskew, a somewhat older black part-time construction worker. The story of interracial conflict was echoed in the interviews. "Koreans became pawns in this game, as people of color fought for the crumbs rather than their due piece of the American pie," Jang said. Meanwhile, Eskew, who had changed his name to Najee Ali, said, "The riots were not riots at all, but a rebellion aimed at throwing off perceived economic and social oppression . . . We wanted to hurt [Koreans] physically, economically, raise their insurance rates—anything we could for payback."

While the dominant white mainstream press, such as the *Los Angeles Times* or *Christian Science Monitor*, emphasized interracial conflict, the *Korea Times English Weekly* repeatedly spoke of the role of a dominant white society stratified by racism, classism, and nativism, as reflected by the actions of the politicians who ignored Koreans, the police who failed to protect them, and the black and white mass media who made them scapegoats for social inequalities not in their control. Thus, the lead story for the May 11, 2002 issue of the *Korea Times English Weekly Edition* began: "Under a

blazing sun, college student Helen Kim cried out: "Where were the police when the Korean businesses were being looted?" The violence experienced directly by Korean American storeowners was additionally violent by its exclusions of Koreans in publically broadcast discussions, as well as in its stereotypical depiction of Koreans as armed, vigilante storekeepers in conflict with blacks. In his column, K.W. Lee quoted college student Soon Hyun Lim, who had recently written in a letter to the *Los Angeles Times*: "I fear for my father's safety and well-being because of the way that the media have perpetuated the problem existing in South Central L.A."

The three media narratives (or standpoints) offered by these newspapers illustrate competing racialized discourses and reveal insights into the nature of race in U.S. society. In the *Los Angeles Times*, the narrative depicted the event as race-based violence and emphasized blacks as the initiators of violence. While race is obviously an important concept to help interpret the event, by singling out this aspect, the *Los Angeles Times* worked toward essentializing race and making blacks the source of the violence; this strategy served to fracture its audience into racialized groups, and to assign blame or causality for the event to racialized groups.

As a result of its routine operations, the *Los Angeles Times*' narrative of a violent upheaval contrasted with a presumably normative state of non-violence, in this way deflecting attention from the everyday violence of the U.S. state against blacks and other oppressed minority and economic groups, as exemplified in the brutal attack on Rodney King. While the root of the violence originated in the criminal injustices and gross economic inequalities of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchal society,<sup>22</sup> the riots were depicted as originating from blacks in the central city. In this way, race was allowed to signify problems and to deflect understanding from the true problems at hand. Historian Howard Zinn spoke brilliantly of how journalism can obscure everyday violence by fixating on insignificant stories, such as the case of electoral politics:

In our election-obsessed culture, everything else going on in the world—war, hunger, official brutality, sickness, the violence of everyday life for huge numbers of people—is swept out of the way while the media covers every volley of the candidates. Thus, the superficial crowds out the meaningful, and this is very useful for those who do not want citizens to look beyond the surface of the system. Hidden by the contest of the candidates are the real issues of race, class, war, and peace, which the public is not supposed to think about.<sup>23</sup>

As it is with what Zinn writes of elections, so it is with racialized conflicts. In the case of the violent outbreak in Los Angeles, the racialized discourse fractured the audience into competing groups.

I remember well how the event made me rethink my ties to my hometown. I had always loved L.A., like the Randy Newman song, but without the irony. A May 1 headline in the *Los Angeles Times* echoed my heartbreak—"View of Model Multiethnic City Vanishes in Smoke." After the violent outbreak, I questioned all my ties to and feelings for the place. (*Three months later...*) Re-reading those last few sentences months after I first wrote them, I realize how imprecise, revisionist, and sentimental they were. As a teenager, I had loathed L.A. While I had loved the ocean and cruising on empty freeways with the radio blasting, I had regarded the city as a cultural wasteland and yearned to escape to New York. It was only, as the years passed, and I found myself exiled from the city for various reasons, that I learned to love L.A. I mythologized it as a place of rebel culture, worshipping writers such as Christopher Isherwood, Joan Didion, and Henry Miller, and artists such as Ed Ruscha and David Hockney, who had claimed California as a spiritual home. I became nostalgic for nights spent in divey clubs, listening to bands such as X, the Blasters, and the Deadbeats, and cherished movies such as *Gidget*, *The Long Goodbye*, and *Valley Girl* that fed my fantasies of the city. Such was my imaginary of the place—a privileged, elitist, predominantly white fantasy I constructed with personal and mass mediated experiences. This fantasy existed in a physical landscape that had actually been conquered with racist violence and then mythologized as a pristine wilderness via mass media accounts.<sup>24</sup>

Twenty years have passed, and the dominant media's coverage of systematic, structural social injustices is still lacking. On August 13, 2011, the *New York Times* featured on its National page a story on the Los Angeles Police Department, entitled, "A Troubled Police Force Has Been Transformed in Los Angeles." The story stated, "Twenty years after the police beating of Rodney King was caught on videotape. . .this has become a department transformed, offering itself up . . .as a model police agency for the United States." It is hard to swallow such a rosy assessment, considering how economic and political conditions have only worsened in the last twenty years. Today, the gap between the richest and poorest Americans is the greatest since the Great Depression of the 1930s, and compared by race, whites have 20 times the wealth of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households; the recent

economic downturn and the subprime mortgage fiasco have furthered these economic inequalities. The unemployment rate in Los Angeles County is approaching 12 percent, and that figure is estimated to be nearly double among blacks. Furthermore, from 1990 to 2005, the state's prison population has increased 73 percent, giving rise to a massive prison population disproportionately represented by racialized minorities. In light of all these dire problems, it is difficult to imagine that the L.A.P.D. is experiencing a renaissance in community policing. The September 5, 2010 shooting of Manuel Jamines, a day laborer of Guatemalan-Mayan descent, by the Los Angeles Police Department unleashed a flurry of protests and suggests that state/police brutality is alive and well in L.A. To what extent did Jamines's undocumented and indigenous status devalue his death and influence the lack of social outrage? If Jamines had been African or Asian or Mexican American, or a Spanish speaker, instead of an undocumented, indigenous Latin American lacking political representation, would the turn of events have been different? Who matters in this landscape?

#### Closing Thoughts, or, What Now, L.A.?

While the Korean American perspective was included in the *Los Angeles Times* through a handful of Korean American reporters, including myself and the sole Korean American photojournalist Hyungwon Kang, the plight of Korean Americans was a minor motif in a larger story about racialized violence, and Koreans were depicted ultimately as understandable villains, aligned with whites against blacks and Latinos. As I mentioned previously, I believe Koreans Americans were violently assaulted by the dominantly white mass media's coverage of the events that unfolded on April 29, 1992, and that this physical, verbal, epistemological violence traumatized them and belatedly produced a shift in their racial and ethnic identity. Such is the tragic essence of racialization. The enduring, lingering impact of Sa-I-Gu on Korean American identity has been observed by other scholars and writers, including Edward Chang, Angela Oh, and Min Hyoung Song.<sup>25</sup> In brief, I believe that the violence led to a slippage from a nation-based identity into a race-based one, especially via discursive comparisons to the violence experienced by Japanese Americans during the World War II internment and by Chinese Americans through exclusionary acts in the 1880s. Prior to the 1992 L.A. riots/uprising/Sa-I-Gu, many Korean immigrants were invested physically and psychically in the American Dream. After Sa-I-Gu, after be-

ing violently targeted in the racially charged American landscape, Korean Americans underwent a shift in collective identity. They felt stigmatized and set apart. They felt the self-blame that marks trauma victims. They were haunted by their memories.

K.W. Lee has written in *KoreAm Journal*, “Our Sa-ee-gu won’t go away. It’s a textbook case history of media scapegoating in these hard times, pitting a powerful, but economically frustrated minority against a seemingly thriving tribe of strangers.”<sup>26</sup> Long-time Korean American community activist Bong Hwan Kim echoed this sense of being manipulated or exploited by the larger society:

We can’t dismiss what happened to Korean Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a fluke or aberration in a social system that is otherwise basically working fine. Institutional neglect of urban poverty and lack of effective political leadership allowed the social environment to degenerate to the point where Korean Americans could be scapegoated for conditions that we neither created nor had any control over.<sup>27</sup>

Thankfully, Korean American scholars, artists, and activists have belatedly been reconstructing what happened in those days of violent upheaval. As Min Hyung Song observed, “the riots loom large as an important historical event, one to which many Korean American activists, artists, creative writers, and scholars have returned, and will return, in their works again and again—in addition to whatever might arrest their imagination.”<sup>28</sup>

It’s evocative that Korean Americans call this event Sa-I-Gu (4-2-9, or April 29). Rather than a word, it’s a date, a temporal marker beyond a singular, politically defined term.<sup>29</sup> Today, twenty years later, recalling the event, I feel/think how powerless I felt enmeshed in a gigantic, machinic assemblage beyond my control. While I was an official member of the team of reporters and photographers that won praise for its coverage of the event, it is striking how little control I ultimately felt over my subject matter. And I remain haunted and traumatized by the fear that I was “played” by the *Los Angeles Times* by being one of its few token Korean American reporters. Did my mere presence justify the media outlet’s claim of racial fairness and racial balance? Is cultural pluralism and inclusiveness the new racism? My uncertainty about my agency or structural intention speaks to the haunted nature of these reminiscences. I question my actions, my role, and even my purpose in covering this event. This constant questioning and nagging uncertainty suggests a haunted consciousness.

This helplessness and ambiguity suggest to me the inability of token representatives to singularly, temporally fill such a void in the face of a violent upheaval. The *Korea Times Weekly English Edition* produced more complex stories about its Korean and Korean American subjects because the reporters were deeply vested in the community and, most importantly, because the newspaper had developed intimate, personal connections between reporters and their subjects. This passionate involvement was cultivated by K.W. Lee. Lee has written about the indignities he suffered as an Asian in the Jim Crow South. He developed a passionate interest in his African American brothers and sisters, and their fight for social justice and equality. In 1960, he married Peggy Flowers, a white nurse he met on a story, and they had three children. His feelings for his fellow Korean immigrants ran as deep. He exhorted all his reporters to develop the “worm’s eye” view of these latest brave newcomers. He wanted Korean immigrants to be embraced as just the newest group to arrive on this country’s shores, instead of being stuck with the “forever foreigner” tag.<sup>30</sup> The root of good reporting, whether writing a news story, a novel, or a sociological ethnography, has to be in larger, deeper historical connections and intimate interactions between and within different communities. We need to provide equal time for documenting particular, individual experiences to construct our shared humanity.

What drives the process of the media’s construction of events? I believe affect is the interstitial force, as everywhere else, stitching together events and discursive objects, and occupying the space between concepts and histories; it is full of feelings, emotions, and memories, a dynamic, creative place of volatile connections and potentialities. It is a force produced through personal interactions and investments of time, caring, and commitment.

So that’s the past. Here’s now. In 1998 I left journalism and decided to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology, after *New York Newsday*, the newspaper where I worked, decimated its staff with waves of corporate downsizing. Today, I work as a sociology professor at a public community college. Meanwhile, since the 1992 violent upheaval, Koreans and African Americans have developed new relationships. Miliann Kang has written about the intimate, complex bonds that develop between Korean manicurists and their black and white customers.<sup>31</sup> Koreans have new cultural cache as they globally export K-pop, video games, and beloved TV soap operas. They seem less of an immediate problem these days, and Muslim or Arab Americans or undocumented immi-

grants loom as the racially suspect, groups which in my mind seem among the most politically and economically shaky and vulnerable in our midst. In the wake of Korean storefronts, there are shops owned by immigrants from countries in Africa and the Middle East and new big box stores to serve consumers' needs. The old feelings occasionally rear their head, though, as in 2006, when long-time civil rights activist Andrew Young drew controversy and lost his position as a Walmart spokesman after saying, "I think they've ripped off our communities enough. First it was Jews, then it was Koreans and now it's Arabs."

Meanwhile, as much as we need sensitive, informed community reporting, newspapers seem to be in their death throes as news media giants, such as the *Los Angeles Times*, transform themselves into a digital format and undergo globalized, corporatized consolidation, incredibly shrinking its staff, all the while asking reporters to produce more and to work in multiple platforms, encompassing, print, video, and blogging. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* continues to publish and claims a readership of more than 125,000. The *Korea Times English Weekly* has long ago stopped publishing. Today the *Los Angeles Times* is a shadow of its former self, which I find tragic. As problematic as its coverage of society may have been, despite all its shortcomings, the *Los Angeles Times* still managed to produce fascinating, socially-conscious, and politically important reporting that informed and educated me about the larger social world, especially growing up. I wonder what will happen to our city, if we don't even have the fantasy or desire for a unified community /subject. Today, will we just remember the scenes of violence? Or will we search for and cherish the often overlooked moments of caring and generosity that unite us?

What now? Whither, L.A.?

## Notes

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29. Koreans have used dates to signify violent events associated with social and political upheavals, such as the start of the Korean War on June 25, 1950, the civilian massacre by South Korean soldiers on Jeju Island on April 3, 1948, the popular uprising against the autocratic first Republic of South Korea and President Syngman Rhee on April 19, 1960, and the North-South Joint Declaration on June 15, 2000. Sociologist Hosu Kim theorizes that the so-named events implicate a rupture in the social fabric and a subsequent demarcation before and after the event.
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