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To Be Almost Like White: The Case of Soon Ja Du

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To Be Almost Like White:

The Case of Soon Ja Du

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Augustina Jhi-ho Chae

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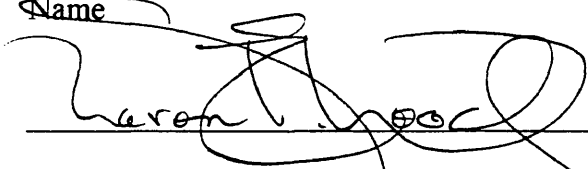

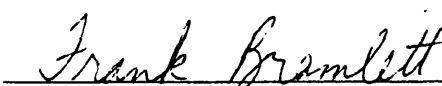


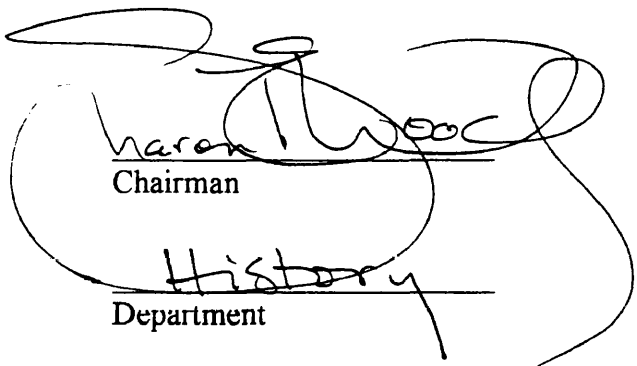
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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,
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TO BE ALMOST LIKE WHITE: THE CASE OF SOON JA DU

Augustina Jhi-ho Chae, MA

University of Nebraska, 2002

Advisor: Dr. Sharon E. Wood

This is a case study of Korean Americans' prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans. To discuss this attitudes, I chose to examine the case of *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du*. On the morning of March 16, 1991, Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American high school girl was shot in the back of the head by Soon Ja Du, a fifty-one-year-old Korean liquor and grocery store owner after a fight. This fight started by Soon Ja falsely accusing Latasha of shoplifting. In many ways, Soon Ja Du's negative attitudes represent a typical Korean American's prejudice.

Table of Contents

		Page
Preface		i
Chapter One	Introduction	1
Chapter Two	Fuzzy First Impressions	12
Chapter Three	A Bigger Apple	37
Chapter Four	Unthinking Choices	63
Chapter Five	The Fall From Grace	84
Chapter Six	Certain Untruth	131
Chapter Seven	Conclusion	166
List of Abbreviations		
Works Cited		

PREFACE

For my thesis I selected the topic of Korean Americans' prejudice toward African Americans in historical perspective. Although several people had attempted persuasively to discourage me from studying this topic, I decided to devote my time to understanding the origins of the Korean Americans' prejudice. In my more than half-a-century life span, I have never met any Korean American who sees the African Americans' skin tone as beauty, strength, or a desirable image. This has been a simple puzzlement to me. As a first-generation Korean-American immigrant, who has spent more than half of my life in the United States and who also has a beautiful, strong, and compassionate Afro-Korean-American daughter, I have been much interested in understanding this puzzle. I was and am quite sure that this study would help me grow intellectually as well as spiritually.

I have encountered many difficult, unpleasant, annoying, and saddening incidents with many Korean Americans—some are relatives or friends—who unconsciously displayed their prejudice in unthinking words and/or behaviors. I have also seen similar displays in many European Americans' words and/or behaviors. In supermarkets, meeting places, classrooms, and dinner tables, this type of words and behaviors have too frequently caught my eyes and ears. I can only imagine what African Americans in this country go through every time they encounter people who have prejudiced feelings against them.

One day, for example, a Korean friend called to compliment me on my daughter's beauty. She had seen my daughter in a shopping mall, and she was amazed how pretty my daughter looked. Then she said that her skin color had become much lighter, as if her

light skin tone made my friend think my daughter became very pretty. She, undoubtedly unconscious of what she was saying, sounded as if there is something wrong or undesirable with my daughter's dark skin.

It is these kinds of unconscious and unreflected suggestions, words, and actions of Koreans' negative attitudes toward African Americans that initially drew me to investigate the sources. Many Koreans with whom I grew up and with whom I have been acquainted in Korea and in the United States openly express their dislike and contempt toward African Americans. It is a rare case to meet a Korean American who is not racially prejudiced toward blacks.

I, however, would like to emphasize one important aspect of my study. My study is a very small piece in Korean-American culture. Hence, my study on Koreans' negative attitudes toward African Americans does not represent a complete evaluation of Korean culture.

I would like to thank Dr. Sharon E. Wood, the chairwoman of my thesis committee, for encouraging me to study this topic. She was the first professor who gave me hope for the possibility of my study. When I was not sure where I should be searching to substantiate my thesis, Dr. Wood guided me to pursue this research on Korean American's prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans through ethnic and other newspapers. She is one of those teachers who is not afraid of encouraging her students to learn more, guides them without putting them down, and constantly looks for a way to lead them to learn. I feel I am fortunate to have her guidance in doing my graduate research.

I would also like to express my thanks to Dr. Lorraine M. Gesick for her time and efforts in helping with this thesis. She has spent many hours in working with my paper and critically reviewing it in terms of historical frame of reference. I felt her sincere desire to help me—a non-native English speaker—write this paper less awkwardly.

Also, I would like to thank Dr. Frank Bramlett for bravely accepting to be on my thesis committee when I asked him to be at the last minute. I really appreciate his help with my research and his time in critically reading this thesis.

I would also like to thank University of Nebraska at Omaha Campus library staff, particularly the Interlibrary Loan staff, for always kindly helping me find the various resources I need for my research. They searched and found many books that would have been ordinarily unavailable for me.

Several people also read this paper and offered me very constructive criticisms along with many corrections on my clumsy English writing. I would really like to thank Lori Brdicko, Susan Janzen, and Jeanne Henry for their many hours of reading and correcting this paper.

Lastly, I would like to thank two Sogang University friends of mine for their friendship: Agatha Chey (Sun Ja Park) and Jhin Ja Chung.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This is a thesis about the treatment of African Americans by many first-generation Korean-American immigrants, particularly by Korean small shop owners in predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods. Korean Americans' prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans are neither infrequent nor simple. They are multifaceted. Nor do all Korean Americans show the same degree of intensity and depth in their aversion and contempt toward African Americans. Some scholars have attempted to explain the root causes of their prejudice, exploring Koreans' monocultural ethnic make-up, status obsession, class distinction, cultural difference, language problem, ignorance, overwork, fear, aggressive materialism, historic dislike of blackness, media racism, and U.S. military racism and U.S. economic and social structure. Depending upon their emphasis of one or several factors that contribute to the attitudes, they see, nonetheless, that the cause is complex.

In this paper, I argue that first-generation Korean-American immigrants have a propensity to be prejudiced toward African Americans because of Koreans' monocultural ethnic pride, status obsession, and ignorance toward other cultures. These characteristics manifest themselves in unsophisticated manners, unthinking behaviors, and unnecessary clashes in race relations of many Korean Americans. Although many factors contribute to Black-Korean conflict, much more important, however, is the decisive role that the prejudice of individuals contributes to the clash.

To discuss this point, I chose to examine the case of *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du*. On the morning of March 16, 1991, Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old

African American high school girl, went into Empire Liquor Market in South Central Los Angeles to get some orange juice. A Korean liquor and grocery store owner, Soon Ja Du, accused Latasha of shoplifting when Latasha stuck the \$1.79 bottle of orange juice in her backpack pocket. The fight between Latasha and Soon Ja followed. Soon Ja grabbed Latasha and pulled her bag, and Latasha punched her face at least three times. Soon Ja was knocked down on the floor and threw the chair to Latasha. Eventually, the fight ended when Soon Ja killed Latasha by shooting her in the back of the head with a .38 caliber revolver. One of the three Empire Liquor Market surveillance cameras videotaped the entire incident from the time Latasha walked into the store until the police entered the store. Soon Ja was arrested for the murder and tried in Superior Court of Los Angeles County from September 30, 1991 through October 2, 1991. On sentencing day, November 15, 1991, the presiding Judge Joyce Ann Karlin suspended a ten-year prison sentence of the jury's conviction of voluntary manslaughter and placed Soon Ja on five years probation.

In many ways, Mrs. Du's negative attitudes represent a typical Korean-American immigrant's prejudice. Although the prejudice stands out more frequently in clashes between Korean-American merchants and African-American customers, many non-merchant Korean Americans privately or publicly reveal their deep-seated contempt, fear, or suspicions regardless of their education, occupation, and wealth. Maintaining limited contacts, spreading, perpetuating, and rationalizing their stereotypical racial beliefs and discriminatory practices, many Korean Americans share Mrs. Du's attitudes toward African Americans, refusing to recognize African Americans' diversity. African Americans are not all alike, just as Korean Americans are not. Mrs. Du's presumption that all African

Americans are lazy and uneducated thieves and immoral drug-addicts and alcoholics is commonly talked about and believed among many Korean Americans. Some Korean Americans even sound like racists of the nineteenth-century U.S. South.

This thesis has seven chapters. Chapter one introduces my methods the primary and secondary sources I used for this study. Chapter two examines some scholars' work on the existence of Korean-American prejudice toward African Americans and attempts to trace the early Korean-Americans' attitudes toward African Americans in the written records. Chapter three looks at the background of Korean Americans' immigration history, and Confucian values that influenced Korean-Americans' prejudice. Chapter four explores Korean-American merchants' choice of business locations and the history of African Americans in South Central Los Angeles in relation to the Black-Korean conflict. Chapter five examines and evaluates Soon Ja Du's testimony and her prejudice. Chapter six focuses on the *Korea Times* articles on the Du murder incident and the Korean-American community's stance on the incident. Chapter seven presents some scholars' interpretations of the Black-Korean conflict and my conclusion.

To understand the details and meaning of the Du murder case and Korean Americans' prejudice, as primary sources, I examined the two transcripts of the Grand Jury proceedings and the Criminal Court Trial proceedings of *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du* and read most articles about the Du murder incident in the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and the *Los Angeles Times* from March 1991 through March 1992. *Korea Times* publishes two papers—one is daily in Korean and the other is weekly in English. Although there were two other Korean ethnic newspapers in Los Angeles, the

Oriental Daily (Dong a Ilbo) and the *Central Daily* (Joong-ang Ilbo), I was only able to read the *Korea Times*, because the other two did not make their old newspapers available to the public. I spent one month in the *Korea Times* office reading old worn out microfilm dating from January 1991 to April 1992—just before the Los Angeles riots. Also, I would like to make it clear that all quotes from the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) in this thesis were translated into English by me.

When I called the Los Angeles Discovery Unit on October 14, 1998, an officer in the unit informed me that the Empire Liquor Market surveillance camera videotape was destroyed five months after the trial in accordance with police procedure. I then tried to obtain it through ABC and other sources, but I could not get the tape until recently. Just by luck, although it was not the entire tape, I was able to see most of it in *Twilight Los Angeles* shown on PBS on April 22, 2001, in Omaha, Nebraska.¹ This tape resolved some questions I had on the incidents regarding Soon Ja Du's shooting capability, Latasha's backpack, Latasha's handing the orange juice bottle to Soon Ja Du, and Latasha's step toward the door.

Also, I found out that without Soon Ja Du's written permission, the court would not allow the public to see the probation officer's report, the photos, and diagrams of the crime scene. So I had to rely on the articles in the newspapers, supplemented with secondary sources, and conversations with the newspaper reporters who were assigned to the case, Deputy District Attorney Roxane Carvajal, and South Bureau homicide-investigating officer assigned to the case, Jerry C. Johnson. Except for Tae-gi Moon, the primary *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) reporter for the case, whom I met in the *Korea Times* conference room, I talked with the other reporters such as the *Los Angeles*

Times reporters on the case, Jesse Katz and John Lee, on the phone. They were very helpful. On the phone I also talked with Lou Cannon, the author of *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD*, and he too was very helpful.

On October 30, 1998, I took a No. 81 bus to Ninety-second and Figueroa St. and walked to the corner of Ninety-first Street where Empire Liquor Store used to be at the corner. There was a new Mexican-American grocery store, Numero Uno, with a “Grand Opening” sign. Its size, cleanliness, and well-stocked and moderately priced store inventories resembled a Baker’s grocery store in Omaha. According to the store manager, a very friendly but business-like Mexican man, after the murder the store had been vacant until its new owner recently remodeled and opened a new business three months previously.

Contrary to the pre-conceptions that my Korean friends had about the area, the area was clean and did not appear to be dangerous. It was actually much cleaner than Korea Town was. People I talked with around the area were friendly and asked me whether I wanted to buy a business there since I appeared to be a Korean.

While I stayed in Los Angeles from October 1 through November 1, 1998, I also saw a stage performance, “The Tragedy of the Bucket in a Closed Room.” The story is about a love relationship and human spirit between Koreans and African Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. It was performed at the Korean Community Cultural Center in Korea Town. The actors and actresses consisted of African Americans and Korean Americans, but the audience was predominantly Korean Americans.

In studying the early Korean Americans' feeling toward African Americans in America, I reviewed diaries, autobiographical novels, and autobiographies written in English. Also, I reviewed books, journals, and newspaper articles to find out when Koreans' initial contact with people of African descent in Korea occurred and how they felt about them. I also wrote letters and received two letters from the U.S. military, which showed the possible time frame of African Americans' presence in Korea through the military. However, because I was not very successful in locating any other written resource that explored Koreans' attitudes toward African Americans in a historical perspective, I reflected my own lived experiences in examining and evaluating the secondary sources I reviewed.

My secondary sources include books, dissertations, master's theses, newspaper articles, and journals that related Korean American's attitude toward African Americans. In discussing Koreans' predisposed characteristics that influence them to be anti-black, this paper focuses on several arguments presented by some scholars. In addition, I reviewed Korean history, Korean Americans' immigration history, and African-American history to understand further the current clash between Korean Americans and African Americans.

In this thesis, however, I attempted to explore neither the legal aspects of the Du murder incident nor the political aspects of the case. Nor did I include the prejudice of Judge Joyce Karlin and white racism. Nor did I include the African-American prejudice toward Korean Americans. As a result, this paper in regard to the case only deals with the Korean-American prejudice toward African Americans and the time frame of the incident from the day the incident first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, March 17,

1991, through November 15, 1991, the day Judge Joyce Karlin handed down the sentence on Soon Ja Du.

In this thesis, I am not saying that Koreans are the only ones with racial problems or that Koreans have more prejudices than other ethnic groups. Many ethnic groups have shown their racial prejudices toward people of African descent. Some people acquired the American racial prejudice after they immigrated to the United States, others came with the prejudice, and the others probably fell between the two groups. Although some immigrants had not originally had prejudiced attitudes toward African Americans, they developed such attitudes as they became acculturated to American racial prejudice. Others did not need American acculturation to strengthen their prejudiced attitudes that they brought from their homeland. The others who fell between the two had their prejudiced attitudes further reinforced by American acculturation when they moved to the United States.

For instance, James W. Loewen in *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* describes how some 1,200 Chinese in Mississippi made the transition from relatively unprejudiced racial attitudes to anti-African-American prejudice. According to Loewen, the 1,200 Chinese in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lived in an African-American neighborhood, and some twenty to twenty-five percent of them had either African-American wives or mistresses because they needed African Americans' aid in running their grocery stores in the community. But change from the relatively prejudice-free attitudes into American race prejudices took place when the Chinese could not get the privileges associated with white skin unless they ended their ties with African Americans. To send their children to white schools, to move into white areas, and to

move up to higher social status, the Chinese in Mississippi moved away from the African-American community, disassociated from them, and shunned those Chinese who were married to African Americans.²

Also, Noel Ignatiev in *How The Irish Became White* explains how the American value system of white skin made the Irish immigrants who, in their homeland, had objected to racial oppression become oppressors of African Americans in the United States. Ignatiev credits this transformation to the American acculturation—the overriding value of white skin. To obtain the white privileges, the Irish chose to discard their previous value and practiced the new value—the American racial order.³

As many other races have rationalized and legitimized their prejudices against African Americans based on this phenomenon, so have many Korean Americans defended their anti-African-American feelings and actions. They argue that there is nothing wrong with their prejudiced attitude because every other ethnic group took advantage of African Americans by using them as a stepping stone and treating them as inferior. But Koreans' persistently narrow worldview, compounded by their ignorance of other cultures and their cocky racial superiority, can make Koreans' prejudices against African Americans rise to a dangerous racial crisis.

Additionally, the Korean Americans that I am talking about are the first and older generation of Korean immigrants. The second and younger generation Korean Americans may have a different attitude toward African Americans that they meet in schools and in their professional fields, even though their parents, in forming their negative racial attitudes, may have influenced them. My study does not include them.

Many Korean Americans will undoubtedly disagree with many of my observations and interpretations. Although I did not intend to embarrass or hurt any Korean Americans, some may feel hurt or offended. Or perhaps some will agree with me and feel less defensive about what this thesis presents. Moreover, my analysis and findings are not final. As more research becomes available, I hope, someone can revise my thesis.

Most scholars and journalists agree that the Du murder incident played an important role in the 1992 Los Angeles riots, adding fuel to the destruction of many Korean-American owned stores. Many compare the Du incident with the Rodney King incident and see the Du incident as a prelude to the riots. About thirteen days prior to the Du murder incident, March 3, 1991, an unarmed African-American motorist, Rodney King, was brutally beaten 56 times by four white Los Angeles police officers. An amateur cameraman, George William Holliday, videotaped the King beating incident. Both incidents were videotaped, and both victims were unarmed. What is more significant is that the defendants in both incidents got off easy in the court system.⁴ Most African Americans perceived the “no-prison” sentence in the Du case and the “not guilty” verdict in the King case as a clear-cut example of an unjustifiable dual justice system and a manifestation of racism practiced against them. These two decisions frustrated, angered, and outraged them. This widespread distrust and resentment over the American justice system came to a crisis point on April 29, 1992, when the Simi Valley jurors acquitted the four white police officers who beat King on March 3, 1991. During the riots, ABC had replayed the Du store’s surveillance videotape along with the riot scenes. Some scholars argued that ABC-TV’s repeated showing of the videotapes of Du’s shooting

Latasha and the officers' beating King effectively stimulated rioters' looting and destroying of Korean-American stores.

The Du murder incident also marked a beginning of new awareness in race relations. It forced Korean-American merchants to be more aware of the need to have better relations with African Americans for their economic survival. Their fear of African Americans' boycotts, physical violence, demonstrations, and verbal attacks all required them to become more self-conscious about explicitly expressing anti-black prejudice. Although Korean American's awareness of their racial problem did not start with the Du murder incident, their much increased efforts to improve on the race relations with African Americans after the incident are clearly and publicly evidenced in newspaper articles, church programs, joint-agency meetings, scholarship fund drives, political campaign-fund donations, cultural exchange programs, athletic activities, and joint-town meetings.

Notes

- ¹ Anne Deavere Smith and Marc Levin, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Thirteen/WNET, Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 1999).
- ² James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).
- ³ Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- ⁴ See Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 20-50.

CHAPTER TWO

FUZZY FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Many Koreans show a great deal of pride in their monocultural ethnic make-up. Such a pride in their belief that they are an ethnically pure and homogeneous people quickens their expression of emotional protest when it is challenged. Faithfully tracing a common ancestral bloodline far into ancient times, the myth of Tan'gun, "ancestor of Koreans," they appear to be instinctively ready to defend their belief even before anyone actually challenges it. According to legend, Tan'gun was a son born of a union between a man who descended from heaven and a female bear who became a woman after eating twenty cloves of garlic and some sacred plants while avoiding the sunlight for one hundred days. This legend put the beginning of Korea, Old Choson—*Choson* means "morning calm"—that Tan'gun founded, in the third millennium B.C., some five thousand years ago.¹

As for understanding and dealing with other peoples, this pride of having one culture, one language, and one ethnicity limits Koreans from broadening their views about other peoples. Unfortunately, it also strengthens their prejudiced views, insensitivity, and defensiveness toward other peoples. Most detrimentally, this pride breeds conflicts with other peoples.

Some historians and others have observed this chin-up pride in the Korean nation's "pure and homogeneous" ethnic bloodline. For instance, Bruce Cumings in *Korea's Place in the Sun*, likened Koreans' ethnocentric attitudes to Europeans' ethnocentric superior attitudes discussed by J. M. Blaut in *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*.² In contrast to the common belief

that Korea is one of the most homogeneous nations in the world with a single culture, ethnicity, and language, Cumings contends that Koreans' homogeneity is not absolute and their bloodlines are not pure.³ This relative homogeneity means neither absolute purity of bloodlines nor superiority over people with mixed cultures, ethnicities, and multi-languages. Yet many Koreans not only erroneously believe in the myth of Tan'gun, but also ignorantly think that this relative homogeneity gives them some sort of advantage over less homogeneous peoples. Against this belief, Cumings argues that modern Koreans are mixtures of Japanese, Chinese, Manchu, Mongolians, Russians, Europeans, and many other East and Central Asian ethnicities.⁴

At the heart of the race conflict lies Koreans' belief that a homogeneous lineage gives them an advantage over multiethnic peoples. Jan Sunoo, a Korean-American mediator with the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service of the Los Angeles City Human Relations Commission, observes how "this relative homogeneity" incites the conflict. In his attempt to illuminate the causes of the current conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans, Sunoo explains that Koreans' national history limits them in understanding race relations in a multiethnic society. The belief in a homogeneous lineage from Tan'gun held by many Koreans sometimes arouses an air of superiority toward "less powerful peoples." In Sunoo's observation, this belief, combined with their inexperience of multi-ethnic peoples, compounds problems of race relations for Koreans in a multiethnic society. Depicting Koreans as "babes in the woods" of a multi-cultural society, Sunoo sees Koreans' lack of exposure to different cultures, particularly to African-American culture, as imprisoning them in their own prejudices. This prejudiced attitude in many ways provokes the conflicts.⁵

This prejudiced attitude among Koreans has recently attracted some scholarly discussion. Although some scholars observed Koreans' prejudiced tendency before the 1992 Los Angeles riot, many have ignored, hidden, or denied the existence of this inclination. Some have even tried to present it as unimportant. But the riot changed the trend among Korean scholars. For the first time, in many ways, it forced Korean Americans not only to acknowledge the existence of the prejudiced attitude but also to view it in the context of race relations in America.

Supporting evidence of Koreans' prejudiced attitude toward African Americans comes from some scholars like Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, Pyong Gap Min, Ella Stewart, and Edward Tea Chang. In *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*, Abelmann and Lie have pointed out Korean Americans' general tendency to see African Americans in "unflattering stereotypes."⁶ Quoting the founding statement of the Korean-American Research Center (KARC),⁷ Abelmann and Lie give evidence of Koreans' recognition of their own prejudiced attitude toward African Americans. Although the founding statement of the KARC blamed the American ruling class's racism for Koreans' attitudes, nonetheless, it acknowledged that Koreans already had a tradition of racism and recognized the problems arising from the conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans that were caused at least partially by this prejudiced tendency. The statement, moreover, defines what constitutes Koreans' problem of prejudice and pinpoints the origin of the problem. While the KARC defined the Korean Americans' prejudice as their cocky superiority to African Americans and Latinos despite a willing acceptance of inferiority to whites, it viewed Korean Americans' rejection of minority consciousness coming from their

feeling of racial or cultural superiority originating from their homogeneous ethnic pride.⁸

The Korean-American Sociologist, Pyong Gap Min, goes further in proving the existence of Korean's prejudice against African Americans. In examining the extent of Koreans' prejudice in *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities*, Min stated that the results of his 1992 New York City survey did not surprise him. The survey revealed that over sixty percent of Korean merchants in the survey not only viewed African Americans as less intelligent, generally lazier, less honest, and more criminally oriented than they did whites, but also admitted that they had been rude to African-American customers. From his survey data, Min suggested that the overwhelming majority of Korean merchants in African-American neighborhoods showed more prejudice against African Americans than whites did. Additionally, he stated that most Korean merchants viewed African Americans' poverty mainly caused by their own "cultural deficiencies."⁹

Similarly, Ella Stewart in her master's thesis, "Ethnic Cultural Diversity: An Interpretive Study of Cultural Differences and Communication Styles Between Korean Merchants/Employees and Black Patrons in South Los Angeles," confirms the negative attitudes of Korean-American merchants toward their African-American customers. In explaining their communication problems with their customers, eighty-five percent of Korean-American merchants put the blame on African-American customers' lack of sufficient education and "low intelligence level." Some Korean-American merchants even stated that "Lincoln should have never freed the slaves" or "they have small brains like alligators."¹⁰ Utilizing direct observations, survey questionnaires, and face-to-face

interviews, Stewart observed that most Korean-American merchants acknowledged Mexican Americans sooner after entrance into their stores and watched them less than they did African-American customers.¹¹ Furthermore, her observations revealed that most merchants followed their African-American customers around the store with their eyes or even physically, did not welcome them with smiles or greetings, and put the change on the counter rather than in the customer's hands.¹²

Another Korean-American Sociologist, Edward Tea Chang, recognized Koreans' tendency to look down on African Americans. In his doctoral dissertation, "New Urban Crisis: Korean Black Conflicts in Los Angeles," Chang argues that Korean Americans' "negative images" of African Americans was a learned perception reinforced by the Korean-American media and the Korean Americans' ignorance of African-American history. These images portrayed all African Americans as criminals, welfare recipients, drug addicts, lazy, and jobless individuals. According to Chang, prior to leaving Korea, Koreans got the images from American movies, television shows, and American Forces Korea Network in Korea. Then, in the United States, Korean Americans with these images became more afraid of African Americans. Their negative images were intensified, magnified, and reinforced by the Korean-American media, which frequently reported some African-American criminals' violent acts against Korean immigrants in a sensational manner. Since most first-generation Korean Americans get their information from Korean language newspapers, television programs, and radio broadcasts because of their language barriers, these media exert an overwhelming influence on the shaping of these images. Linking Koreans' reported fear of African-Americans' criminal violence to their physically stronger and more

powerful appearance, Chang points out the media's contribution to the deepening of Koreans' negative attitude toward African Americans.¹³

From an African-American point of view, Jonathan Rieder, a journalist with *The New Republic*, suggests that Koreans' racist attitudes, which are deeply embedded in Korean ethnocentrism, contribute to African Americans' frustration and anger. In his July 2, 1990, article, "Trouble In Store," Rieder illustrates how Koreans' ethnocentrism and racist attitudes contributed to the conflict between African Americans and Koreans. In this article, he interviewed a Korean man who was afraid to step outside the house because he feared African Americans. During the interview, the man described his first day in America as one that was filled with fear and contempt of African Americans. The man stated that he got an idea that all African Americans were dangerous and dirty from watching American films and from his experience with black soldiers in South Korea before he left the country.¹⁴ This interview further explains how much news media and films globally propagate negative prejudice against African Americans. Rieder gives examples of Koreans' "brusque," rude, and disrespectful behaviors—reluctant smiles, dropping change on the counter to avoid any physical contact, avoiding direct eye-contact, avoiding answering any questions, yelling, and presumptuous treatment of all blacks as shoplifters, lazy welfare recipients, alcoholics, and drug-addicts.¹⁵

Too many African Americans, especially ones in the poor inner city, have witnessed Korean Americans' disrespectful, rude, and arrogant gestures, looks, and voices that belittle their humanity. And they resented these behaviors of Korean Americans. Most of all, Korean Americans' intense suspicion and scrutiny aroused African

American customers' anger. Korean Americans' quick and erroneous presumption that all African Americans shoplift not only unmistakably displays an insult to African Americans' humanity but also raises a business question.

Why would Korean-Americans open stores where all customers are black if they believe that all African-American customers shoplift? Profit would be impossible, and their stores would not last more than few days. Yet many Korean-American merchants opened stores in South Central Los Angeles beginning in the 1970s. As a result, prejudices clashed more frequently, and often incited and magnified conflicts between Korean-American merchants and African-American customers.

Prejudice means different things to different people. In this thesis, however, it means exactly the same as the word "ethnocentrism" defined by Robert A LeVine and Donald T. Campbell in *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*. These two sociologists define ethnocentrism: "in the most naïve form a person unreflectively takes his own culture's values as objective reality and automatically uses them as the context within which he judges less familiar objects and events."¹⁶ So, too, are Koreans' prejudices against people of African descent viewed in this context. Have Koreans always had racial prejudice against those of African descent or those with black skin? Not all Koreans have shown prejudice against blacks, and it is arguable that the prejudiced tendency appears to be the product of recent times.

It is not an easy task, however, to trace Koreans' historical encounters with Africans. From ancient times until the late nineteenth century, written source materials are extremely hard to find, if they exist at all. Yet, during this period, some indirect evidence hints that a very few Koreans had probably met Africans or people with dark skin. These indirect

indications come from some Chinese written descriptions of meeting Africans as well as from stories in Korean legends and histories of Korean Buddhism and Korean trading activities in the South China Sea.

For many centuries, Korean people have been dominated and shaped by Chinese culture, which continued from ancient times until the early twentieth century. In particular, Koreans emulated the Chinese attitude of seeing all foreign people as “barbarians.” In this respect, although no written records were found to substantiate Koreans’ impressions of people of African descent in the pre-modern period, Chinese first impressions perhaps suggest some indication of what Koreans’ first impressions might have been.

Although Chinese thought all outsiders “barbarians,” some Chinese written records reveal that they treated Africans according to social status. As in many pre-modern societies, social status rather than skin color determined a person’s importance and worth, as it did in Chinese society during this period. Examining the meaning of the “Kunlun” slave in the Chinese literature, Philip Snow in *The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa*, argues that Chinese did not link skin color to the Kunlun slaves’ status. By the fourth century, according to Snow, the meaning of “kunlun” changed from first a primeval chaos, then to a frontier tribe, then to a magical western mountain to then the dusky seafaring peoples of Southeast Asia. By the T’ang (A.D. 618-907) and Song (A.D. 960-1279) dynasties, however, the meaning changed again to refer to the African slaves brought to China by the Arab traders. These changes suggest that “Kunlun” slave’s social status rather than skin color placed them to be inferior or

contemptible. According to Snow, most Chinese neither viewed all Africans as slaves nor connected skin color to a symbolic inferiority.¹⁷

Snow approximates China's first contact with Africans in the middle of the sixth century, although some Chinese scholars place a possible encounter much earlier in time, going all the way back to the Han dynasty (202 B.C. to A.D. 220).¹⁸ While an encounter between these two peoples in the Han dynasty was quite conceivable in view of the early trading relations through Arab traders who established a trading port in Canton as early as 300 A.D.,¹⁹ Snow marks the point of their contact in the middle of the sixth century based on Kosma's *Universal Christian Topography* (A.D. 545), in which Kosma talked about Ethiopian and Chinese traders in Ceylon, Buddhist Fa Xian's two years memoirs of Ceylon (A.D. 414), and Du Huan's *Record of My Travels*, which he wrote after he returned to China (A.D. 762).²⁰ Du's travel record, according to Snow, is the first written record of a Chinese and African encounter.²¹

By the ninth century, according to Snow, the educated Chinese knew much about the African continent—its wildlife, its products, its society, and its people. As Arab traders increased their energetic trading activities in the South China Sea, many Chinese writers became more interested in writing about Africa. They talked about many African trade products such as ivory, ambergris, rhinoceros horns, fragrant timber, and spices that were exchanged for Chinese silk and porcelain.²² Supporting this trading relationship between Africa and China with recent archaeological findings, Snow asserts that Chinese writers during the T'ang and Song dynasties drew African maps, described its landscapes and wild animals, and wrote about African society and people.²³ Chinese geographers and chroniclers between the tenth and fourteenth centuries had fairly good knowledge not only

of the “the northern regions of the Horn of Africa, but also the region south of Cape Quardafui and Ras Hafun.”²⁴ An African continent map drawn by the Chinese appeared in Korea in 1402.²⁵

Moreover, Snow traces Arab traders’ introduction of African slaves to the Song court in 977, based on the Chinese court records which described the African slaves with “deep-socketed eyes and black bodies” and called them “Kunlun” slaves.²⁶ From these records, he places the approximate time of African slaves’ presence between the eighth and tenth centuries.²⁷

Initially, the Chinese viewed African slaves with curiosity as people different from themselves and treated them as a novelty. In the short stories of the T’ang period, these African slaves appeared as “physically strong, unfailingly heroic, resourceful, magical, and mysterious.”²⁸ Despite this initial favorable description, by the early twelfth century the Chinese had changed their perception from “fictional glorification to realistic competition-driven name-calling,” although they were still “accomplished divers” who could “caulk ships under water” and work as “doorkeepers.” By the twelfth century, because many rich Arab and Chinese residents in Canton owned Kunlun slaves, they were seen daily in Canton and were no longer a novelty there. Seeing them daily and competing with them for the same jobs, many Chinese called them “savages” and “devil servants.”²⁹

Fortunately, the twelfth century-Cantonese negative perception of the African slaves neither spread to other parts of China nor encompassed all Africans in general. The African slave trade did not thrive in China. Most Chinese probably could not afford any African slaves nor could they make profits in the slave trading business venture, for China had plenty of its own inexpensive and efficient slaves.³⁰

Nor were all Africans in China in the twelfth century and after ill-treated. As was attested in the case of the emissaries of Zengdan, the status-oriented Confucian Chinese treated Africans according to their social status. For instance, the Song emperor treated the emissaries of Zengdan, a land of the blacks who had visited China in 1071 and 1081-83, with honor. "Their leader, Zengjiani, was accorded a Chinese title, Lord Guardian of Prosperity." During his second visit, the emperor arranged boats to facilitate his trip to the capital, and "lavished on him, in recognition of his long journey, gifts that included 2,000 ounces of white gold."³¹

Unlike the Chinese literature and court records of T'ang and Song dynasties, Korean records do not seem to reveal much of their encounters with African people. Despite their silence, however, it appears reasonable to think that the encounters did occur, or if not, some Koreans most certainly saw the Chinese-African encounters or just saw Africans from a distance before the pre-modern period. From legends, historical records of Buddhism, trading activities, emigration, and travel to China, a clue of Koreans' first impression of people of African descent can be drawn. Even the pervasive silence perhaps reveals Korean attitudes toward people with dark complexions.

Like the Chinese, Koreans in ancient and medieval times did not appear to think that a person's skin color determined that person's importance and value. Koreans' attitudes toward people with dark complexions were clearly delineated in some legends involving Indians. Though their histories are different, because Africans and Indians share dark skin, Koreans' impressions toward dark-complexioned Indians represent their attitudes toward people with dark complexion in general. In *Samguk Yusa*

(Legends and history of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea), Ilyon, a Buddhist monk in thirteenth century Korea,³² wrote about a legend of a Korean king's wedding to an Indian princess in the first century A.D. Connected to this legend, even today, the Indian princess' tomb and the stone pagoda that she supposedly brought to Korea survive in Kimhae in Korea.³³

In the pre-modern period, Koreans met people with much darker complexion than their own through Buddhism. Since Buddhism was first introduced into Korea in A.D. 372, they met Indian monks. Ki-baik Lee in *A New History of Korea* notes Buddhism's vital role in Korean history. In his explanation, he mentions that many eminent Korean monks made the journey to India to study Buddhism. From *Record of a Journey to the Five Indian Kingdoms*, Lee cites Hyech'o's trip to India.³⁴ Also, N. M. Pankaj in "Indo-Korean Cultural Relations: A Survey" points out that several Korean monks visited India and stayed there for a lengthy time to study Buddhist texts and to take pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist places, while some Indian monks came to Korea to teach Koreans Buddhism. Koreans' attitudes toward these "dark foreigners" appeared to be respectful.³⁵ Their skin color apparently did not create a negative impression.

In addition to Buddhism's role in Korean history in the pre-modern period, several historians remark upon Korea's trading activities in the South China Sea. Korea's trading relationship with Arab merchants goes back to the Three Kingdom period (37 B.C.-A.D. 669).³⁶ By the tenth century, Korea sent its trading ships to the South China Sea and exchanged Koryo dynasty (918-1392)'s leathers and furs with Arab spices and medicines.³⁷ In discussing increased Japanese piracy on the South China Sea as one of the possible

contributing causes of the Ming dynasty's declining interest in keeping up with the Song dynasty's naval power, C. R. Boxer, in *The Christian Century in Japan: 1549–1650*, mentions Korean sailors' activities in the South China Sea at the turn of the fifteenth century. During this time, the Portuguese had engaged in very active trade with China in the South China Sea. They were also known to have had black slaves working on their ships.³⁸ This indicates that Korean sailors must have seen or heard about the Portuguese black slaves. In addition, Hiroshi Wagatsuma in his article, "The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan," mentioned in a note that there is a document from the 1670s that made a reference to a black person of seven feet who was captured during the Korean war [Hideyoshi's invasion of 1590s] and brought over to Japan.³⁹

From 1650 until the end of the isolation policy in 1880, although Korea forbade foreigners to enter the country, Korean elites probably knew about the existence of the African continent. Through exchanging envoys, studying abroad, trading activities, and through emigration activities with China, some Koreans probably conversed with foreigners and obtained information on Africans and knowledge of maps of the continent.

The first written record of a Korean encounter with African Americans seemed to be found in *Yun Chi-ho's Diary*⁴⁰ written in the late nineteenth century. From 1888 to 1893, Yun Chi-ho studied at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, and at Emory College in Oxford, Georgia. While he was studying in these Southern colleges, he visited several African-American churches (both Baptist and Methodist),⁴¹ attended lectures given by African-American preachers and intellectuals, met some working African Americans such as a cobbler and waiter personally, and frequently visited what he called a pauper asylum. Yun Chi-ho's diary reveals that his attitude toward African Americans was

neither contempt nor fear. He was in fact sympathetic toward them and their sufferings. He not only hated to see the after-effects of slavery but also criticized the incongruity of American Christians' racial prejudice with the spirit of Christ and the inconsistency of American doctrine of the "inalienable right of man" applied to non-white persons.⁴²

Yun Chi-ho arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, on November 4, 1888. On his way to Nashville, he had experienced racism himself. In Kansas City he was refused a room in a hotel because he was an Asian ("a China man"); he slept at the railroad station.⁴³ At Vanderbilt University, he observed the white students' debate about colonization of all African Americans. It was not easy for him to understand how a large number of people in such a strong and powerful position felt threatened by such a small number of weak and powerless people. His first-hand observations of American racism soon after the end of Reconstruction in the South were broad as well as keen. He not only watched how some white Americans treated African Americans who worked around the campus, but also listened to their derogatory comments toward African Americans while he was traveling through many small towns in the South.

Yun's observation of African Americans seems to come from his personal involvement with them. His own feelings of powerlessness, isolation, and exclusion from American society perhaps made him feel at ease with and close to African Americans. In his diary, he complimented them for not using profanity⁴⁴ and for being warm. He even shook hands with the waiter's wife when he was invited in to George's house (waiter). He wrote that this was the first time he had shaken hands with a black lady, and commented that she had rather handsome features.⁴⁵ He and his friends also frequently visited the Newton County Poor Farm, a pauper asylum. During his visits, he noted that the asylum

was occupied predominantly by African-American inmates and their condition was miserable. Yun and his friends sang, talked, and prayed with the inmates.⁴⁶

Some autobiographies, autobiographical novels, novels, and oral history essays written by Koreans in the English language evidence similar sympathetic, friendly, and neighborly relationships between African Americans and Koreans in the early immigration period. These written records show that early Korean-American immigrants got along well with African Americans as neighbors and friends. According to these records, African Americans not only accepted Koreans into their neighborhoods, but also helped them to adjust to American life while most whites barred Koreans from living in their neighborhoods.

Younghill Kang, in his autobiographical novel *East Goes West*, depicts his experience of white rejection and African-American acceptance of Koreans in Harlem during the early twentieth century.⁴⁷ In her autobiography, *Quiet Odyssey*, Mary Paik Lee recalled growing up with and working with African-American friends in early twentieth-century California. She ended her story by saying that “I attend a church regularly where most of the members are black, because it is there I feel most comfortable.”⁴⁸ A novel, *Clay Walls*, also portrays a similarly friendly and neighborly relationship between African Americans and Korean Americans in the early immigration period. Describing many early Korean Americans’ experiences of the frustration and indignation caused by American racism against Asians (“Orientals”) in housing, schools, military, and jobs, the author, Ronyoung Kim delineates how the children of the principal character, Haesu, played with African-American children on the streets of their shared neighborhood. Her sons, Harold and John, “talked jive” and her daughter, Faye, became a good friend with an

African-American girl. Their relationship to one another was built neither on racial differences nor on color distinctions.⁴⁹

After World War II ended, the United States military occupied South Korea from 1945 to 1948. Several scholars thought that Koreans would not have seen African American servicemen before 1948 because there would have been no African-American servicemen stationed during this period. But the Directory and Station List of the Adjutant General's Office shows U.S. Army African-American units stationed in Korea beginning in 1945.⁵⁰ Although the exact number of African-American men stationed in Korea is not known, the Directory and Station List included in the letter dated September 21, 1999, from Joe Webb, Team Leader, Historical Support Branch of Department of the Army, do provide evidence for more than a small number of African Americans' presence in Korea. These records show that some Koreans possibly saw not only the African-American military units but also American segregation at work in Korea during this period since President Truman did not desegregate the military until 1948.

The Korean War (1950-1953), however, brought some changes not only in the silence of the written record but also in the Koreans' perception of African Americans. At the beginning of the war, the Koreans' perception of African Americans appeared to be friendly and appreciative. Lyle Rishell in his Korean War diary, *With a Black Platoon in Combat: a Year in Korea*, shows quite compassionate meetings with a boy, a woman, and Korean soldiers during the war. Rishell was an African-American soldier in Able Company, 24th Infantry Regiment. His diary did not indicate any trace of Koreans'

prejudice toward him because he was a black soldier fighting in Korea for Korean people.⁵¹

In spite of their friendly and compassionate encounters in the beginning of the war, however, Koreans' impression of African-American soldiers changed shortly after. The United States sent approximately three to four hundred thousand soldiers to Korea.⁵² Each year following the cease-fire in 1953, some 40,000 to 50,000 U.S. soldiers were stationed in South Korea. Some scholars estimate more than a million U.S. soldiers have been stationed in South Korea over the years since the Korean War began. This means that there have been over 150,000 African-American soldiers rotated in and out of South Korea from 1950 to the present.⁵³ As a result, quite a few African Americans married Korean women and produced many Afro-Korean children. Some estimate that African-American soldiers fathered over twenty percent of the several thousand biracial children born during this time.⁵⁴

Although the United States implemented a desegregation policy for its military for the first time in the Korean War, the actual practice was far from integration. Its racist view against African Americans, indeed, came with the troops. Koreans quickly learned the value of the dollar and status of white skin over yellow and, particularly over black skin. Quickly adapting to this racist view, in the U.S. military base area, Korea had segregated "all-black" and "all-white" bars in separate sections of towns and enforced a sort of segregated American Southern etiquette regarding women. If a prostitute dated or served an African-American soldier, she could not later serve white soldiers. Yet a prostitute who served white soldiers could later serve African-American soldiers. Following this racial

attitude, Korean residents and the prostitutes in the U.S. military base area developed their own status hierarchy in which “white” prostitutes looked down on “black” prostitutes.⁵⁵

The value of the dollar and status of white skin were essentially tied to the extreme poverty prevalent during the Korean War. During and after the war, most Koreans faced devastating poverty. Stealing, looting, shoplifting, pick pocketing, begging, and deceiving were not uncommon during this period. For many Koreans, these were a way of life and necessary for survival. Many foreigners who lived or visited Korea during this period thought that all Koreans were thieves.⁵⁶ Mark Gayn in *Japan Diary* talks about an incident in which his wife’s roommate in the hotel warned his wife that all Korean servants were stealing everything in sight to “support their relatives who had fled from the Red Terror in the Soviet zone.”⁵⁷

Nor were these desperate behaviors unique only to Koreans during the War. Nor were they reserved only to African-Americans in extreme poverty. Actually, stealing and looting behaviors for which many Korean-American merchants presumptuously condemned all African Americans have been commonly seen among all social and economic classes and ethnic groups. Paul Bullock in *Watts: The Aftermath: An Inside View of the Ghetto by the People of Watts* argues that the looting and stealing behaviors in the riots were not that much different from the behaviors of his middle-class white army buddies who looted, stole, and sometimes raped in Germany during World War II. The rules of morality become meaningless when people are desperate to survive or when people do not see “law and order” in the accepted sense applicable to them.⁵⁸

In Korea, both Korean spouses of African Americans and Afro-Korean children struggled to endure Koreans’ display of contempt. Many observed that Koreans treated

them as having the “lowest marginal social status” and “heaviest burden of multiple stigmas” in Korean society.⁵⁹ In fact, Harry Holt, Pearl S. Buck, and others acutely witnessed this fact. In *The Seed From the East*, in a letter dated June 24, 1955, Harry Holt recorded his observation that “the Koreans will never let the black children grow to the ages where they can reproduce.”⁶⁰ Edwin McDowell, *The Arizona Republic*’s staff writer, described them as “double outcast.”⁶¹ Pearl S. Buck, the famous novelist and the founder of the Pearl S. Buck Foundation in South Korea,⁶² in *Children for Adoption* confirms this problem. Their economic, academic, and social opportunities were restricted, and they were treated as the lowest social outcasts. The racist slur of calling an African American as “kkamdungi” (darky) has been widely accepted in Korean society. In children’s books, in schools, on television, or in cartoons, an African American’s skin color is used to symbolize “dirtiness” or “uncleanness.” It is often emphasized that not taking a bath or not washing means to be like an African American.

The 1992 Los Angeles riots eventually forced many first-generation Korean Americans to become more aware of their racial prejudices. Up until the riots, they commonly showed unthinking and unself-conscious stereotypical attitudes toward African Americans. Historically, Koreans before the Korean War did not appear to be color conscious. Like the Chinese, they treated people with dark complexions according to their social status. The early Korean Americans liked African Americans because whites rejected them while African Americans helped them. Although many scholars tie Koreans’ prejudice to their belief in the myth of “pure and homogeneous” ethnicity, some think that Koreans’ ignorance and inexperience of living in a multi-ethnic society contribute more to their narrow thinking and preconception against African Americans. On the other hand, the

American media and American soldiers helped Koreans' perception of African Americans grow and spread. American television programs, films, fashions, and advertisements all have transmitted American racist views to Korea and fostered anti-African-American views, tying them to the power of money. American soldiers stationed in Korea since the Korean War modeled racism for Koreans.

Unfortunately, before the riot Korean Americans' encounters with African Americans in America worsened. Since the 1970s, as more Korean immigrants became self-employed by setting up stores in predominantly poor African-American and Latino neighborhoods, they experienced more negative encounters with African-American customers in the store and overgeneralized their perceptions to all African Americans. Sadly, many Korean Americans have not realized that middle class African Americans hold work ethics and family values similar to their own. Undoubtedly, they spread their false impressions to their relatives, fellow church members, and friends in the Korean-American community. Fueled with this false information, Korean Americans' initial perceptions of African Americans took firm hold in their highly segregated and isolated social interactions.

Notes

¹ Peter H. Lee, ed., with Donald Baker, Yongho Ch'oe, Hugh H. W. Kang, and Han-Kyo Kim, *Source Book of Korean Civilization*, Vol. 1, *From Early Times to the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 4-7. Lee points out that there were several versions of the story, which probably had been spread by the totemic bear cult influence during this period. He said that the legend was also depicted in the stone slabs of the Wu family shrine in Shantung that was built in A.D. 147 and that it became the source of Ilyon's recording in *Samguk Yusa: Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea*, Trans. Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton K. Mintz (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972) in the late thirteenth century. See also Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 23-24. According to Cumings, South Koreans have called their country *Han'guk* (abbreviation of *Taehanmin'guk*), North Koreans have kept the name of *Choson*, and the Westerners have called it *Korea*, which originated from the Koryo dynasty (918-1392).

² Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 10. By quoting Blaut's assertion of Europeans' beliefs in their superiority, Cumings argues that many Koreans think the same way about themselves as many Europeans and Euro-Americans do. Perhaps, Cumings' observation seems stretched a little for it appears that most Koreans do not think themselves superior to Chinese, Japanese, Europeans, Russians, or Americans. Historically surrounded by more powerful nations like China, Japan, and Russia, Koreans may have learned to show off their readiness to defend themselves against more powerful peoples as a survival mechanism. See also J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993).

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵ Lynell George, *No Crystal Stair: African-Americans in the City of Angels* (London: Verso, 1992), 83.

⁶ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25. In response to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the Korean-American Research Center was formed to study Korean Americans' problems in race relations.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 119-21. In this survey, Min collected a total of 93 respondents which consisted of white and black residents and Korean merchants in the predominantly African American neighborhood.

¹⁰ Ella Stewart, "Ethnic Cultural Diversity: An Interpretive Study of Cultural Differences and Communication Styles between Korean Merchants/Employees and Black Patrons in South Los Angeles" (M.A. Thesis, California State University, 1989), 54-58. In her study of cultural effects on communication styles, Stewart examined a small sample group consisting of twenty-two African Americans and twenty Korean-American merchants interacting with a 99 percent of African American group of customers in South Central Los Angeles. All Korean Americans in this study group spoke and understood standard English (p. 86).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 85-86.

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- ¹² *Ibid.*, 102.
- ¹³ Edward Tea Chang, “New Urban Crisis: Korean Black Conflicts in Los Angeles” (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1990), 195-202. To educate Korean Americans on African-American history, Chang wrote a book titled, *Blacks: Who Are They?* in the Korean language after the riot.
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Rieder, “Trouble In Store,” *New Republic* (July 2, 1990): 17.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16-22.
- ¹⁶ Robert A. LeVine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1972), 1.
- ¹⁷ Philip Snow, *The Star Raft: China’s Encounter with Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Limited, 1988), 16-17. See also Hsing-lang Chang, “The Importation of Negro Slaves to China under the T’ang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907),” *Bulletin of the Catholic University of Peking* (1930), 7: 37-59.
- ¹⁸ According to Snow, “Star Raft” was the name of the 7th ship to Africa in the early fifteenth century. Snow explains that the Chinese sent their ships to the African East coast to win their allegiance for the emperor and never intended to conquer them. Fei Xin, who wrote a travel memoir of the fleet and published it three years after the end of the last expedition, also used “Star Raft” in the title of his memoir, *Triumphant Tour of the Star Raft*. Although he did not go to Africa, he based his memoir on the stories of his Chinese shipmates who went to East Africa. In his memoir, Fei describes the Somali coast.
- ¹⁹ Graham W. Irwin, *Africans Abroad: A Documentary History of the Black Diaspora in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean During the Age of Slavery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 168.
- ²⁰ Snow, *The Star Raft*, 3.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5. According to Snow, Du’s twelve years of observation of the people of Molin from the time of his capture in the battle to his return to China in 762 included customs and the easy-going life style of the local population. Du, an officer of the Tang dynasty (618-907), compared their carefree attitudes in sexuality and alcohol consumption to Confucian morality and saw them as barbarians. Most of this memoir was lost except for a passage preserved in an encyclopedia compiled by his cousin, which described a country called Molin, probably a coastal part of the Kingdom of Axum, and its people.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 8-11.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 5-14. Snow cites the 1974 uncovering of a ship that sank in the 1270s in the Quanzhou area. Its cargo apparently had included African tortoiseshell, frankincense, and ambergris. He also cites several discoveries of Tang and Song dynasties’ copper coins and porcelains along the coast of Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Mozambique. See also Teobaldo Filesi, *China and Africa in the Middle Ages* (London: Frank Class, 1972), 1. for an account of the uncovering of Chinese porcelains and coins on the East African coast.
- ²⁴ Filesi, *China and Africa*, 24.

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- ²⁵ Snow, *The Star Raft*, 9-11. I am wondering whether or not Cumings' "kangnido" is the same map Snow is talking about here. See Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, 9. Cumings said that a map of the known world, the kangnido, was drawn by Korean cartographers in 1402 whereas Snow said that a world map that contained an African continent drawn by two Chinese cartographers appeared in Korea in 1402.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 7.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* 17. See also Irwin, *Africans Abroad*, 170. Irwin warns against assuming that all "Kunluns" were Africans slaves. Arguing that the Chinese word, "Kunlun," originally applied to people with skin darker than their own, he asserts, therefore, unless other evidence supports it, a Kunlun could not automatically be assumed to be an African.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-18.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ³² Ilyon, *Samguk Yusa* (Legends and History of the Three Kingdoms of Ancient Korea), trans. by Tae-Hung Ha and Grafton K. Mintz (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1972). Ilyon (1206-1289) was a Buddhist monk. He compiled *Samguk Yusa* in the late thirteenth century. In Chinese, he recorded many folk beliefs and practices of thirteenth-century Korea.
- ³³ N. M. Pankaj, "Indo-Korean Cultural Relations: A Survey," *Korea Journal* (December 1988): 4-5.
- ³⁴ Ki-baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, trans. by Edward W. Wagner with Edward J. Shultz (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 81.
- ³⁵ Pankaj, "Indo-Korean Cultural Relations," 5-6.
- ³⁶ Lee, *A New History*, 73.
- ³⁷ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 42.
- ³⁸ C.R. Boxer, *The Christian Century in Japan: 1549-1650* (Berkeley: University of California, 1951), 8. See also Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search For Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 19-20.
- ³⁹ Hiroshi Wagatsuma, "The Social Perception of Skin Color in Japan" In John Hope Franklin, ed., *Color and Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 165. See his note No. 59.
- ⁴⁰ Ch'i-ho Yun, *Yun Ch'I-ho's Ilgi* [Yun Ch'I-ho's Diary], Volume 1-6, (Seoul: T'amgu-dang, 1975). Ch'i-ho Yun, *Yun Ch'I-ho's Diary*, Volume 7-11, (Seoul: National History Compilation Committee, 1986-1989). Yun wrote his diary for over sixty years in a series of three languages. From January 1, 1883, through November 23, 1887, it was written in Chinese; from November 24, 1887, through December 6, 1889, in Korean; and then, after December 7, 1889, in fluent English. Right after he was released from prison, however, for about four months from January 1, 1916, through April 30, 1916, he wrote his diary in a combination of Chinese, Korean, and English. While in prison from 1911 through 1915, he did not continue writing his diary.

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- ⁴¹ Yun, *Yun Chi-ho's Diary*, May 10, 1891.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, Feb. 14, 1890, and Jan. 4, 1890.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, November 2, 1888.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, March 27, 1891.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1891; June 3, 1892.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, March 26, 1892.
- ⁴⁷ Younghill Kang, *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 19-20.
- ⁴⁸ Mary Paik Lee, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Women in America*, edited and with an introduction by Sucheng Chan (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 130. See Cumings (1997), 98.
- ⁴⁹ Ronyoung Kim, *Clay Walls* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1987). Kim argues that a wall cannot always protect people within the wall from an outsider's invasion. A clay wall is particularly easy to crumble. When outside force is stronger than inside strengths although a wall is ordinarily built to protect people inside the wall by keeping outsiders' influence outside the wall, it cannot always stop outsiders' influence flowing through the cracked walls. But it does slow the flowing. In her novel, Kim depicts how Haesu, the principal character of the novel, adapted to the change of traditional Korean value of a "yangban" class woman in American society and how she tried to protect her daughter, Faye, from the American cultural influence by building a wall to slow its influence on her daughter. Although a wall is not a full proof of stopping invasions, it does provide some protection, even if it is made of clay. At the end of the novel, Kim alludes to a possibility that Faye may be getting married to a Korean yangban medical student from Connecticut, after all. See also Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 439-440 for his interpretation of the wall in this novel.
- ⁵⁰ Letter dated Sept. 21, 1999, from Joe Webb, Team Leader, Historical Support Branch of Department of the Army to the author.
- ⁵¹ See Lyle Rishell, *With a Black Platoon in Combat, A Year in Korea* (Texas: Texas A & M Press, 1993). Able Company was the single black regiment to fight in Korea that had not been integrated.
- ⁵² Young-Sun Ha, "American-Korean Military Relations: Continuity and Change," in *Korea and the United States: A Century of Cooperation*, eds. Youngnok Koo and Dae-Sook Suh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 122.
- ⁵³ Donald C. Hellmann, "The American Perception of Korea: 1945-1982," in *Korea and the United States: A Century of Cooperation*, eds. Youngnok Koo and Dae-Sook Suh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 83-84. Hellmann estimates that more than a million U.S. soldiers came in and out of Korea up to 1982. Based on the United States Armed Forces' policy which required that African-American soldiers make up at least fifteen percent of all troops, 150,000 is a reasonable figure for all African-American soldiers stationed in Korea. See Morris MacGregor and B. Nalty, eds., *Blacks in the United States Armed Forces: Basic Documents*. Vol. IX: The Fahy Committee (Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc.), 1977.
- ⁵⁴ Erna I. Moen, "The Tragedy of Korea's Mixed-race War Babies," *Sepia* (June 1975): 52.
- ⁵⁵ Katharine H. S. Moon, *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 85.

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- ⁵⁶ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 444.
- ⁵⁷ Mark Gayn, *Japan Diary* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc. Publishers, 1948), 350.
- ⁵⁸ Paul Bullock, ed., *Watts: The Aftermath: An Inside View of the Ghetto by The People of Watts* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), 34-35.
- ⁵⁹ Won Moo Hurh, "Marginal Children of War: An Exploratory Study of American-Korean Children," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* Volume 2 (1972): 17-18. See also Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 201, Note 26.
- ⁶⁰ Bertha Holt (Mrs. Harry Holt) as told to David Wisner, *The Seed From the East* (Los Angeles: Oxford Press, 1956), 119.
- ⁶¹ Edwin McDowell, "Amerasian Children, Korean Outcasts," *The Arizona Republic*, July 25, 1966, p. 1.
- ⁶² Pearl S. Buck, *Children for Adoption* (New York: Random house, 1964), 90. She adopted a half-black child from Germany.

CHAPTER THREE

A BIGGER APPLE

Since the early 1970s, most encounters between Korean Americans and African Americans have taken place in metropolitan areas. Many African and Korean Americans meet each other for the first time in Korean-owned stores located in predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods. Their meeting places quite frequently are in “the most desolated, deserted, and dangerous inner cities.”¹ This sets up the initial contact as a disaster for both of them. They face each other unprepared. Overwhelmingly influenced by misconceived stereotypes and puzzled by the different physical features, lifestyles, and languages of the other, they show fear and animosity toward each other. They do not understand what each side expects from the other. Consequently, their incompatible expectations create an encounter full of conflict and hostility—a conflict that sometimes turns deadly. Their expectations set the stage for Black-Korean conflicts.

Recently, conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans have attracted extensive scholarly and media attention. Major U.S. newspapers, magazines, and television networks, including the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, CBS, and ABC, have often covered the conflicts.² In addition, stories of strikes, boycotts, and complaints by the African-American community against Korean-owned stores have abounded in Korean-language newspapers.³ Although the conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans rose to the highest point during the Los Angeles riots, they have not been limited to Los Angeles. Other cities like New York, Baltimore, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and Washington⁴ have experienced African-American protests and

boycotts against Korean-American merchants. Nor have they been limited to only these two ethnic groups. A similar conflict broke out in Detroit between African-American customers and Arab-American merchants,⁵ in Miami with Cuban merchants and in Mississippi with Chinese merchants. Nor are they limited to African-American customers. Korean-American merchants have also encountered conflicts with European Americans as well as Latino Americans.⁶ Nevertheless, the degree of conflict between Korean-American merchants and African-American customers is far above the norm for conflicts between other ethnic groups.⁷ Why is this so? Perhaps, the influx of Korean-American immigrants into major metropolitan areas after 1970, Korean Americans' prolific entrepreneurship in small businesses and their choice of business locations, and Korean Americans' negative prejudice toward African Americans partly contribute to the degree of animosity between them and African-American community in which they operate.

Three coincidentally interacting forces stimulated the inrush of Korean immigrants to this country after 1965. The globalization of the economy, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, and Korea's economic, social, and political conditions all propelled Koreans' mass migration to the United States. While Korea's internal conditions made the exodus ripe and the 1965 Act made it possible, the globalization of capitalism acted as the driving force behind the two preceding causes.

The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act functioned as a catalyst for the sudden and dramatic influx of Korean immigrants to the United States. Following the adoption of the Act, the Korean-American population rose rapidly from about 45,000 in 1965 to 798,849 in 1990.⁸ This is an almost seventeenfold increase. The annual number of

Korean immigrants was 30,000 in 1976 and reached its peak at 35,397 in 1987 before it gradually declined to 18,000 in 1993.⁹ The annual number of 30,000 to 35,000 Koreans entering the United States between 1976 and 1990 resulted in Koreans being ranked as the seventh largest immigrant group behind Mexicans, Salvadorans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Dominicans, and Guatemalans in 1990.¹⁰ The 1990 Korean immigration represented two percent (32,301) of the total U.S. immigrants (1,536,483), making it almost equal to the total number of immigrants from the entire continent of Africa. Furthermore, although this 798,849 represented only a 3.21 percent of the total 1990 United States population (248,709,873), by 1990, Korean Americans rapidly closed the gap with the Chinese (1,645,472) and Japanese (847,562) populations in the United States.¹¹ In addition, they settled in major metropolitan areas: Los Angeles City and County (218,401), New York (61,491), New Jersey (25,695), Chicago (17,517), Washington D.C. (17,147), Atlanta and Houston (25,085), Baltimore (15,231), Philadelphia (14,285) and others.¹² Despite this relatively small number in the total U.S. population, the rapidity of their immigration in the last two decades and their concentration in a few larger urban areas have made them stand out in the communities in which they have settled.

Korean-American immigration originated as a part of a global migration forced by European expansionism. By the nineteenth century, as European colonists encroached into China, Japan, and Korea in search of cheap Asian laborers, natural resources,¹³ and open markets, Koreans began their emigration to the United States, following in the footsteps of their Chinese and Japanese predecessors. Facilitated by American missionaries and entrepreneurs, Koreans' journeys to the United States and Hawaii

commenced in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Just like many peoples who came to the United States from all over the world, Koreans wanted to escape from poverty, instability, and oppression in their homeland.¹⁴ Consequently, after the signing of the Korean-American Treaty on May 22, 1882, Koreans came to the United States as students, diplomats, merchants, laborers, picture-brides, political refugees, war-orphans, war brides, professionals, and relatives of earlier immigrants.

Nevertheless, Korean-American immigration proceeded slowly and sparsely. When the Koreans' Hawaiian emigration began in December 1902, fewer than 50 Koreans lived in the United States, while the Chinese population numbered 118,746 and Japanese, 85,716 by 1900.¹⁵ During this period, the Hawaiian sugar plantation owners were faced with an acute labor shortage. With an increased demand for sugar production in Hawaii and aggressive mainland recruitment of Japanese laborers from Hawaii, sugar growers faced Japanese laborers' strikes for higher wages and better working conditions. Since Chinese were excluded from new immigration (the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act), and Japanese were seen by employers as too demanding, Koreans became the natural alternative to their labor problems. In other words, because Koreans were not subject to the Chinese Exclusion Act, Hawaiian planters turned to Koreans to keep Japanese wages low and to break their monopoly in Hawaii's sugar plantation labor market.¹⁶ Between 1902 and 1905, about seven thousand Korean laborers took the opportunity opened to them. They left for Hawaii beginning on Dec. 22, 1902, with prepaid passage to Honolulu, "fifty-dollar" show money in their pockets, and three-year "work agreements" on the plantations.¹⁷

In 1905, Korea became a Japanese protectorate; Japan controlled all Korea's foreign affairs. Not so surprisingly, Korean emigration to Hawaii was stopped by the Japanese government in 1905. According to Wayne Patterson in *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910*, the Japanese government eliminated Korean emigration to Hawaii to avoid Japanese exclusion in the United States.¹⁸

By 1905, about a thousand Japanese, mostly from Hawaii, arrived in California each month. The Japanese government was worried about a possible outcome of this influx: a Japanese exclusion act. It feared that Californians might deal with this influx similarly to the way they dealt with the Chinese influx by passing the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Japanese government considered any Japanese exclusion act to be defamatory to its international reputation.¹⁹

To discourage the Japanese influx to California from Hawaii, the Japanese government had to make the wages and working conditions in Hawaii more competitive with those in California. This meant removing Koreans' presence in Hawaii. As strikebreakers, Korean workers in Hawaii had prevented the Japanese workers from gaining their demands for higher wages and better working conditions. So, when the Japanese government was quite sure that it would win the Russo-Japanese War by February 1905, it forced the Korean government to ban all emigration to Hawaii.²⁰

Until 1965, Korean-American immigration continued in small numbers. While the primary restriction on Korean immigration to the United States came from U.S. immigration laws, Japan's tight controls over Korea during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) further limited migration. Anti-Asian immigration laws and policies like the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement negotiated with Japan, the 1917 Immigration Act that

created the Asia-Pacific Triangle, and the 1924 Oriental Exclusion Act all restricted the annual numbers of Koreans allowed to immigrate.²¹

Despite all these restrictions, between 1907 and 1945, about 950 picture brides,²² 300 students with Japanese-issued passports, 541 political refugees, and 200 students sponsored by American missionaries in Korea entered the United States.²³ While by 1940 Chinese immigrants numbered over 106,334 and Japanese over 285,115, Korean immigrants totaled only 8,568, and of this small number, the majority lived in Hawaii.²⁴ Even after 1945, the number of immigrants to America remained small. In spite of the United States' military occupation of Korea from 1945 to 1948 and the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion laws in 1943, only 128 Koreans came to the United States between 1948 to 1951. The 1924 Act continuously governed Korean-American immigration until 1952.²⁵ Koreans did not receive any minimum immigration quotas nor could they be naturalized until 1952.²⁶

Between 1950 and 1964, the overwhelming presence of U.S. soldiers in Korea and their increased contacts with Koreans, together with the socio-economic and political turmoil and instability of wartime, the threat of renewed war, and the close economic ties with the United States all brought about 15,000 Korean immigrants to the United States.²⁷ The majority of this 15,000 consisted of 6,423 Korean wives of U.S. servicemen and 5,348 adopted Korean orphans.²⁸ In addition, the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act allowed a steady annual flow of 100 Koreans to enter the United States after 1952.²⁹ According to the 1965 U.S. Census Report, war brides, adopted orphan children, and the second generation of Korean immigrants altogether increased the total Korean-American population to about 45,000.³⁰

The history of immigration and naturalization laws in the United States explains how the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act caused the influx of Koreans to the United States. On March 26, 1790, the U.S. Congress passed the first U.S. naturalization law. The 1790 naturalization law allowed citizenship only to free white immigrants who had resided within the United States for two years.³¹ Although immigration and naturalization laws are not the same things, they are, for the most part, interrelated. On the one hand, immigration law predetermines the naturalization laws by restricting the size and race of the citizenship applicants who can be admitted to the United States. On the other hand, naturalization law gives direction to whom should be admitted to this country. In this context, since 1790, the United States continued to enact immigration laws and policies that reflected its desire to maintain the intention of the 1790 naturalization law: allowing only whites,³² while it compromised its desire with the demand of America's labor needs. Balancing its desire for European white purity against the demand for labor, amid nativists' threats and panics, U.S. immigration laws gradually changed the 1790 racial restriction to encompass non-white persons.

Eventually, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act "eliminated national origin, race, or ancestry as basis for immigration to the United States."³³ By striking out the national origins quota that set the limit in the total number of immigrants allowed from any particular nation at two percent of their nationality in 1890,³⁴ the 1965 immigration law dramatically increased immigration from Asia. Additionally, the law preferred professionals and skilled workers in short supply, relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents,³⁵ and investors in the U.S. economy.³⁶ The preference for relatives meant 87.9 percent of all Korean immigrants who entered the United States between

1966 and 1981 came as relatives.³⁷ Consequently, by 1974 the Asian immigration rate grew from seven percent in 1965 to thirty-three percent of all new immigrants to the United States.³⁸

Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, in *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982*, explain why the immigration law completely abolished its racial preference in 1965. They cite at least three components that contributed to the change: the emergence of the United States as the world's leader, the domestic civil rights movement, and the expansion of the global economic market. After World War II, the United States emerged as the world's leading power and the champion of democracy against communism in the Cold War rivalry. As the world's leading power, as well as the champion of democracy, domestic racism and the racist principles embedded in immigration laws and policies not only occasioned embarrassing worldwide criticism, but also tarnished the American image. During the Vietnam War, for example, the incongruity between America's democratic principles and racist practices became the object of Hanoi's propaganda attacks, adding fuel to the fire of change.³⁹

The civil rights movement in the early 1960s also pushed the change. On the one hand, the movement domestically heightened European Americans' awareness of their racial prejudices and persuaded them to eliminate racially determined quotas in immigration laws and policies.⁴⁰ It also took the issue of American racism to the world. By making world headlines, the movement intensified the need to change immigration laws to counteract the ill reputation of United States abroad.⁴¹

The expansion of the global economic market also favored change. The 1960s and 1970s saw the world economy becoming increasingly integrated,⁴² both by importing

cheap overseas products and by setting up plants overseas, as well as by moving cheap labor to the United States through immigration. Traditionally, manufacturing had been carried out in the developed Western countries like England, Germany, or the United States with raw materials supplied by less-developed countries in Africa, South America, and East Asia. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, manufacturing moved to the less-developed countries as companies sought cheap labor. A typical example is the case of South Korea. Low wages in South Korea attracted U.S. investment; consequently, some U.S. companies moved to South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴³

Another aspect of Korean labor attracted the international capitalists' attention. It was not only cheap but also highly-educated skilled labor. Between 1953 and 1963, South Korea's literacy rate grew from thirty percent to over eighty percent of the population. By the late 1960s and the early 1970s, it reached about ninety percent of the population.⁴⁴ Compared to many other Third World countries' mostly cheap unskilled labor, South Korea's highly educated cheap labor drew U.S. capitalists' investments into Korea as a site for manufacturing goods. South Korea emerged as a major exporter of manufactured goods to developed countries.⁴⁵

In the 1960s and 1970s, although U.S. companies were creating more jobs in Korea, low wages in Korea persuaded many Koreans to immigrate to the United States. While low wages attracted U.S. companies in the international labor market, it, in turn, dissuaded individual Korean workers from staying in Korea. Korean wages during this period were equivalent to about one-tenth of U.S. wages. Koreans believed that they could make more money in the United States. As the early Korean immigration before 1965 mirrored the nineteenth-century European colonists' expansionism, the post-1965

Koreans' mass exit to the United States reflected the twentieth-century international capitalists' globalization of world economy.⁴⁶

In addition to this shift in manufacturing trends, the number of European immigrants to the United States dwindled. The United States faced shortages of skilled labor in technical fields. The competition-driven global economy demanded cheap skilled labor. This demand for cheap skilled labor also encouraged the change in the 1965 Immigration Act by giving preference to professionals and highly skilled workers.⁴⁷

The third force that propelled Koreans' mass migration to the United States after 1965 came from Korea's economic, social, and political conditions. Unemployment and congestion following urban population growth, depressed wages, decreasing opportunities in higher education and in the professional fields pushed Koreans who could afford to leave to cross the Pacific ocean seeking a higher standard of living and a better opportunity for their children.⁴⁸ Although the prospect of earning more money was their driving force, undoubtedly American culture and the close military, political, and economic connections with the United States influenced many Koreans' choice of where to immigrate.⁴⁹ Since the cease-fire of the Korean War (1950-1953), an estimated one million U.S. service men and women have spent time in South Korea.⁵⁰ This overwhelming U.S. presence not only generated interracial marriages and a lasting longing for things American, but also brought many Koreans to the United States. The U.S. presence produced about 28,000 South Korean women's marriages to Americans by 1972 and 50,000 by 1980. From 1965 to 1981, half of the Koreans naturalized were spouses of U.S. citizens.⁵¹

Korea in the 1960s was not a stable and secure country. Under the constant threat of renewed war, it was a poverty-stricken, politically and socially unstable country. Its unemployment rate was high, and its standard of living was low. Between 1949 and 1975, Korea's population grew by seventy-two percent, making it, by 1975, one of the most densely populated countries of the world. Overcrowding and high unemployment became the most urgent and crucial urban problems. To alleviate the unemployment problem caused by the overpopulation, the South Korean government encouraged emigration.⁵²

In the 1970s and 1980s, Korea's education growth rate exceeded its economic growth rate. The number of educated Koreans exceeded the number of jobs available for the persons graduating from the colleges, resulting in widespread unemployment and underemployment among college graduates. The annual 12.1 percent increase in enrollment in colleges and universities⁵³ perhaps reflects the lack of employment opportunities for high school graduates and lack of professional employment for college graduates. During this period, one-fifth of college graduates could not find a job commensurate with their college education. This difficulty also contributed to their mass migration to the United States.⁵⁴

Memories of the Korean War still linger in the minds of many Koreans. The threat of renewed warfare in Korea constantly disquiets many Koreans, particularly North Korean refugees who fled to the South during the war and who now make up about fourteen percent of the South Korean population.⁵⁵ A persistent fear brought by memories of the Korean War and disruption of middle-class security heavily influenced many people's decisions to leave the country.⁵⁶

The growth of the South Korean middle class during the Park (1961-1979) and Chun (1980-1987) dictatorships also provided another reason for the mass exodus. The newly emerged South Korean middle class not only dissented from Park's and Chun's authoritarian military control, but also wanted both personal and political freedoms. Under Park's and Chun's political leaderships, professionals, students, Christian church leaders, other middle-class independent businessmen and women suffered greatly. Curfews, constant police and military surveillance, imprisonments and suppression, and censorship all limited freedom.⁵⁷ Some scholars argue that the coincidence of the peak period (1985-1987) of Korean immigration with the end of the military dictatorship reflected the attitude of the Korean middle class toward Park's and Chun's dictatorships.⁵⁸

South Korea's "entrance examination hell"⁵⁹ for high schools and colleges also prompted many Koreans to leave their homeland for better opportunities for their children. In 1969, the South Korean government abolished the middle school entrance examination.⁶⁰ Since then, most students are still required to take entrance examinations for education beyond middle school. But the rapid population growth has made competition to pass the high school and college entrance examinations increasingly brutal and fiercely competitive. The shortage of good jobs in South Korea's job market for high school graduates vigorously pushes many high school graduates into college, since higher education is perceived as the only possible way to get a decent job and thereby to advance into a higher social status. So, to prepare for the nightmarish examinations, many parents hire special tutors and send their children to entrance-exam preparation schools before and after school hours. Furthermore, increasingly high tuition and other

school-related expenses compound the parents' financial problems. Consequently, the fierce competition to get into these schools often produces economic strain, social embarrassments, and psychological breakdowns for the parents as well as in their children. So, many South Korean parents avoid the cruel entrance examinations either by emigrating or by sending their children to the United States for high school and college educations.⁶¹

Another push for immigration came from South Korean Vietnam War veterans. From October 1965 to March 1973, South Korea sent troops to Vietnam. A significant number of Vietnam veterans immigrated to the United States, either directly from Vietnam or later from South Korea.⁶²

Christianity also encouraged Koreans' immigration to the United States. Historically, most Korean immigrants to the United States came from an urban Christian background. Prior to 1965, they were mostly poor laborers in the urban areas, and over forty percent of them were Christians when they left Korea. Thirty to forty percent of non-Christian Korean immigrants eventually became Christians in the United States.⁶³ Korean immigrants' urban Christian characteristics continued after 1965. Although only fewer than one-fourth of the Korean population was considered Christian, about forty to fifty-four percent of Korean immigrants belonged to a Christian church. Since the Korean War, most Christians in South Korea came from the urban middle-class, especially from Seoul.⁶⁴ In 1976, although only twenty-two percent of South Koreans were Christian, about fifty to eighty percent of Korean Americans were Christian.⁶⁵ This high percentage of Christian immigrants reflects American missionaries' involvement in Korea's immigration history since its beginning.

Additionally, like other Asian immigrants after 1965, the majority arrived not only with high educational backgrounds and professional work experience, but also with some money—usually between \$60,000 and \$250,000.⁶⁶ Although only five percent of the Korean general population had college educations,⁶⁷ according to the 1990 Census Report, thirty-four percent of all Korean immigrants over the age of twenty-five had a college degree.⁶⁸ This is higher than the U.S. general population—about twenty-five percent of the U.S. general population had a college degree in 1990. Moreover, sixty-two percent of Korean men in Los Angeles were graduates of four-year colleges whereas only fifteen percent of American-born men of European ancestry in Los Angeles had completed that much education.⁶⁹ Again, compared with only eight percent of the Korean general population in white-collar occupations, thirty-three percent of all Korean-American immigrants had white-collar occupational work experience back home, and eighty percent of them came from middle or lower-middle class backgrounds.⁷⁰

From the beginning of their immigration, Los Angeles attracted Korean immigrants at a higher rate than any other U.S. city. Although the census underreported Koreans during these years, it showed that Los Angeles had 14 Koreans in 1910, 84 in 1920, 345 in 1930, 482 in 1940,⁷¹ and 800 in 1945.⁷² Light and Bonacich explain the Koreans' historical preference for the city in terms of chain migration effect and a prosperous Korean-American economy. According to them, in addition to mild weather and a good school system, Los Angeles's "thriving Korean economy" brought an additional one-third to the total chain migration of Koreans to Los Angeles. Since Los Angeles had the largest Korean-speaking economy in the United States, it became the most economically attractive place for a new Korean immigrant to settle. Its Korean-speaking economy

could offer a new immigrant a job either in a store owned by a relative or employment in a Korean store where he or she did not have to speak English.⁷³ Consequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Korean population in Los Angeles County grew rapidly from 8,881 in 1970⁷⁴ to 60,618 in 1980⁷⁵ and 145,431 in 1990.⁷⁶ Los Angeles became the largest Korean-American community in the United States with a Koreatown located three miles west of downtown.⁷⁷

Many Korean-American immigrants saw Koreatown in Los Angeles as an extension of Seoul, Korea. Numerous Korean ethnic restaurants, grocery stores, beauty salons, bookstores, and social agencies in Koreatown have not only signs written in the Korean alphabet, but also storekeepers who speak Korean. Hence, Koreatown makes Korean immigrants who cannot speak English feel at home. Koreatown on one hand supplies the feeling of being safe and at home for new immigrants who feel helpless and inferior because of cultural and language barriers. On the other hand, it also fosters their isolation from American society.⁷⁸ This isolation deepens further when the Korean-American entrepreneurs isolate themselves in small shops. Spending long working hours in the store, family members usually do not have much contact with others except for their customers. This separates them further from the mainstream of American society and encourages them to maintain the attitudes and values they brought from Korea.⁷⁹

Moreover, many first-generation Korean-American immigrants continue to keep very close personal, political, cultural, and economic ties with South Korea.⁸⁰ Over eighty percent of Korean Americans in Southern California read at least one Korean-language newspaper.⁸¹ Because of the English language barrier, unfamiliarity with American

culture, and their “fierce and settled sense of national identity,”⁸² Korean immigrants tend to show more interest and participate in more South Korean affairs than in American mainstream concerns. Many do not give up their Korean citizenship and consider themselves Koreans rather than Korean Americans. Even if they identify themselves as Korean Americans, they do not think it makes that much difference in the way they live their lives.

Along with this sense of intense Korean ethnic identification, they bring Confucian values of filial piety and status. To the present day, Confucian values, deeply embedded in Korean culture, have had a profound and lasting influence on Koreans’ interpersonal relationships and have affected Korean Americans’ adaptation to life in the United States. These values have been used to set the standard of all proper human behaviors. The virtue of filial piety, the very core of Confucian values, is woven through three bonds and the five moral rules. The three bonds are between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. The five rules are faithful submission to ruler by subject; respectful obedience to father by son; absolute surrender to husband by wife; proper regard to elder brother by younger brothers; and trustfulness between friends.⁸³

Some scholars have remarked about the continuation of Confucian values as well as their depth of penetration in the daily lives of Korean people. Making some keen observations of Korean culture, the 1940s anthropologist Cornelius Osgood, in *The Koreans and Their Culture*, noted that even uneducated farmers in the village recited and followed these rules quite well.⁸⁴ Martina Deuchler also points out their continuing practice to the present time. In *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*, she argues that these five rules of proper ritual behavior in the

hierarchy of three bonds thoroughly and forcibly indoctrinated all Koreans from very early childhood through the socialization process. According to her, while the three bonds legitimized the hierarchy of human relationships, the five moral rules stressed importance of proper ritual behaviors in terms of duties and obligations.⁸⁵ Jong Sam Park in his dissertation, “A Three Generational Study: Traditional Korean Value Systems and Psychosocial Adjustment of Korean Immigrants in Los Angeles,” found that Korean-American families still hand down traditional cultural values and behavioral norms from the past through the primary socialization of the family.⁸⁶

What is more, filial piety, anchored by the three bonds and the five moral rules, strengthened Koreans’ “idiosyncratic” obsession with status. Deuchler argues how Confucian teachings and pre-Confucian traditions of Korean culture have created and strengthened Koreans’ status consciousness which has lasted until recent times.⁸⁷ Historically, Korean culture has been profoundly grounded on strictly enforced hereditary status and class. During the Yi dynasty (1392-1910), visual distinctions set apart different classes. Different styles of dress, speech patterns, household possessions, roof materials, housing locations, and way of life all separated the yangban class—probably only ten percent of the total population—from commoners, and commoners from a lower class of “base people.”⁸⁸ Observing a Korean farming village on the island of Kanghwa in 1947, Osgood remarked upon the yangbans’ behaviors of ordering the commoners around at whim by using low forms of speech and demanding respect in return in high forms of speech and manners. Commoners needed permission from the yangbans to sit or smoke a pipe.⁸⁹

Although the symbols that marked status and class changed from seventeenth century-Korea to twentieth-century Korea, many Koreans attempted to possess the status symbols blindly. Many have striven to obtain a high status by possessing material goods, often using extreme measures to gain wealth. While getting a government office position through civil service examinations symbolized status and prestige among Confucian-educated yangbans (scholar-official class) in “traditional Korean society,”⁹⁰ many contemporary Koreans think that possessing material goods like a Mercedes, a Stanford MBA, an MD, a law school degree, or a mansion on a hill will give them high class and status. Some recent Korean immigrants drive around in a Mercedes in predominantly African- and Latino-American neighborhoods, and some flaunt their wealth in unflattering ways, revealing an overambitious desire to make their children succeed. Many Korean American parents overbearingly brag about their children’s going to Ivy League schools as if nothing else matters in their children’s lives.⁹¹ This extreme status consciousness makes them look down on people who do not have what they have.

These status-oriented behaviors are not peculiar to Koreans. Confucianism has pervasively ruled many East Asian countries for many centuries, particularly in China. Yet, in Korea, Confucianism bolstered Koreans’ historically rigid class system, making Koreans’ obsession with status and class appear more frequently and intensely than the norm. Although Koreans share similar Confucian cultures with Chinese, some scholars observed Koreans’ more concentrated use of Confucianism to strengthen their pre-Confucian traditions of hereditary status and class-consciousness than the Chinese effort of using it to support the Chinese status and class. For instance, comparing with Chinese experience of Confucianism, in *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The*

Opening of Korea, 1875-1885, Deuchler points out that the Koreans' status obsession and class consciousness were more hierarchical and rigid than the Chinese experience of status and class. She argues that the ruling class in traditional Korean society successfully enforced a fundamentally inflexible Confucian creed to prevent the commoners from sharing the power. By narrowly interpreting and thoroughly applying more rigid Confucianism through a highly centralized government structure, the ruling class controlled the status and power. Unlike China, Korea was a small country. The smallness of the country, she asserts, made highly centralized and strictly enforced Confucianism possible and, in turn, allowed more inflexible Confucianism to be practiced in Korea than in China.⁹²

These lingering Confucian attitudes perhaps bring about certain detrimental repercussions. In his study, Osgood makes some keen observations on the repressions that these moral behavior rules possibly cause to the subordinated persons, such as subject, wife, son, and younger brother in the relationship. He argues that these strictly enforced rules create long lasting frustration, anger, and rebellion. By watching many Koreans "at times break into uncontrolled fury" when they lost control of themselves, Osgood was convinced that these behavior rules promote cruelty because these repressions often times induced "sadistic furies" and "inconsolable turmoil of unconscious guilt."⁹³ He also correctly observed another lingering Confucian behavioral norm that relates to eye contact. In the rules, a subordinate person could not look at a superior. The rule requires looking down or avoiding eye contact to show respect for the hierarchical order of rank and age. Osgood writes that Koreans look into each other's eyes only when they are angry at each other.⁹⁴

Quite often, this unthinking mode of proper ritual behavior puts Korean Americans in a precarious position, and unless they become aware of the socialization process, they may respond by reflex to an apparent violation of the rules. In many Koreans' interpersonal relationships, the rules frame Koreans' expectations of what others' proper behavior should be. Although they might fail to apply these rules to themselves, they demand from others a proper behavior based on these rules.

Thus, it can be expected that Koreans' preconditioned expectations of proper behavior from their inner-city customers could trigger tense and stressful contact between Korean business owners and African-American customers. These tensions would certainly heighten interracial conflicts and racial prejudice against each other, leading to bumps and collisions, further exacerbating the problems already created by Korean Americans' language barriers, rude manners, and negative attitudes toward African Americans. While African Americans' persistent joblessness and poverty in the inner cities further reinforces Korean Americans' prejudice and suspicion against them, Korean Americans' ignorance of African Americans' historical experience in the United States and their preconditioned expectation of proper behaviors rooted in the three bonds and the five moral rules put the finishing touch on their problems with African Americans.

Notes

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- ¹ Regina Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict" in *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*, ed. Mark Baldassare (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 176. See Pyong Gap Min, "Korean Immigrants' Small Business Activities and Korean-Black Interracial Conflicts," in *The Korean-American Community: Present and Future*, eds. Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seong Hyong Lee (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1991), 20.
- ² Min, "Korean Immigrants' Small Business," 13-14.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ⁴ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 2.
- ⁵ Regina Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 176-7.
- ⁶ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 115.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁸ Bill Ong Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America Through Immigration Policy, 1850-1990* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 66-67. See Table 2 on p. 4. Hing's figures come from 1990 U.S. Census Data. However, some Korean-American scholars argue that the U.S. census underreported the total number of Korean Americans living in the United States. Kwak and Lee, *The Korean-American Community* (p. 1), estimate the total number of Korean Americans in 1990 about 1.3 million.
- ⁹ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 28-30.
- ¹⁰ See Immigration and Naturalization Service (1990), *Statistical Year Book*, 40.
- ¹¹ Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 4. See Table 2.
- ¹² Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 33-34.
- ¹³ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 3-4. See also Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 1-2.
- ¹⁴ Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 113.
- ¹⁵ Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 48 and 54.
- ¹⁶ Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America*, 15.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49. See also Chan, *Asian Americans*, 36-37. In 1900, when the Organic Act became applicable to Hawaii after becoming the territory of the United States in 1898, the entry of contract laborers became illegal. This meant that Koreans could not enter Hawaii as contract laborer. See also Chan, *Asian Americans*, 12 and Bong-young Choy, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, Inc., 1979), 275. Between 1894 and 1908, about 142,000 Japanese went to Hawaii and by 1902, Japanese workers composed 74 percent of the entire plantation work force (42,242) in Hawaii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 128-135.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 128-135.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 130-4. See also Choy, *Koreans in America*, 73. According to Choy, Japanese workers had thirty-four strikes between 1900 and 1905. See also Chong-sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 70-71 for the Russo-Japanese War. On February 10, 1904, Japan went war with Russia to stop Russia's attempt to occupy Manchuria and northern Korea. Japan won the war and established a firm world power position by the Treaty of Portsmouth on September 5, 1905. In November, the Korean government was forced to sign a protectorate decree, thereby losing its control of foreign relations to Japan. A Japanese regent-general was stationed in Seoul, replacing the Korean Foreign Affairs Ministry.

²¹ Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 66. Hing explains that this Act established the national origins quota system based on the annual quota of any nationality at two percent of the number of foreign-born persons in 1890. This Act, which applied to all immigrants until 1952, disallowed anyone ineligible to become a citizen to enter the United States. See also Immigration and Naturalization Service (1990), *Statistical Year Book*, Appendix 1, A. 1-9. According to the *Statistical Year Book*, this provision was primarily aimed at Japanese.

²² Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 20. See also Choy, *Koreans in America*, 88-89, for picture brides. Choy explains how most Korean-American bachelors chose their mates during the period. The majority of Korean-American single men—almost 80 percent—sent their pictures to prospective brides in their hometowns and let the girls choose their mates from the pictures they received. Choy points out that many men deliberately sent young pictures of themselves, causing many would-be brides' disappointment when they first met. Most of the picture brides eventually accepted their marriage. The picture brides, according to Choy, had better education than their husbands, which contributed to their husbands' successes.

²³ Choy, *Koreans in America*, 78. Choy cites Warren Y. Kim's estimation of the total number of Korean students from 1882 to 1940 in America at 891. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 438.

²⁴ Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 48, 54, and 66.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁶ Chan, *Asian Americans*, 122.

²⁷ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 28.

²⁸ Eui-Young Yu, "Korean American Women: Demographic Profiles and Family Roles," in *Korean Women in Transition: At Home and Abroad*, eds. Eui-Young Yu and Earl H. Phillips (Los Angeles: California State University, 1987), 185.

²⁹ This Act granted Asian immigrants the right to naturalization and allowed an annual minimum of 100 immigrants from all countries, even though it retained national origin quotas.

³⁰ Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 67.

³¹ U.S. Congress, House and Senate. Chapter III, An Act to establish an uniform Rule of Naturalization (March 26, 1790). Statutes at Large, Vol. 1. 1789-1799, Card 4, Roll 4122. Microcard Editions, Washington, D.C. Publishing Division of the Micro Card Corporation.

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- ³² Several scholars argue that the 1790 naturalization law was discriminatory because it was based on the belief of “racial superiority of Anglo-Saxons.” Dr. Sharon Wood, however, points out that in 1790, the United States was open to European immigrants who were not “Anglo-Saxon.” According to Professor Wood, the focus on Southern Great Britain only (to exclude Celts) as the sources of racially superior stock dates from a century later. In 1790, the United States was a multi-lingual group of peoples from all over Western Europe. See also Bill Ong Hing, *To Be an American: Cultural Pluralism and Rhetoric of Assimilation* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 23, and Ellis Cose, *A Nation of Strangers: Prejudice, Politics, and the Populating of America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992), 11.
- ³³ Immigration and Naturalization Service (1990), *Statistical Year Book*, Appendix 1, A. 1-14.
- ³⁴ Hing, *To Be an American*, 23.
- ³⁵ Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 108-9.
- ³⁶ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 442.
- ³⁷ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 145.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 133-5.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.
- ⁴⁰ Cose, *A Nation of Strangers*, 105.
- ⁴¹ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 133.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 425. 331.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 331, and 32-33.
- ⁴⁴ See Eui-Young Yu, “Korean Communities in the United States,” in *Korea and United States: A Century of Cooperation*, eds. Youngnok Koo and Dae-Sook Shu (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 290.
- ⁴⁵ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 31-32.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-30.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 108 and 133.
- ⁴⁸ Regina Freer, “Black-Korean Conflict,” 180. Freer summarizes rather nicely Light’s and Bonacich’s work on this subject.
- ⁴⁹ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 28.
- ⁵⁰ Donald C. Hellman, “The American Perception of Korea: 1945-1982,” in *Korea and United States: A Century of Cooperation*, eds. Youngnok and Dae-Sook Suh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 83-84.
- ⁵¹ See Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 58.

- ⁵² Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 110-1. The South Korean government passed an Overseas Emigration Law in 1962.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87-88. Also, see Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 73. They put the unemployment rate at over 30 percent.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.
- ⁵⁶ Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 68-69.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-69.
- ⁵⁸ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 442.
- ⁵⁹ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 87.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 87-88.
- ⁶¹ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 442. According to Cumings, universities in the United States often become "an outlet for the sons and daughters of wealthy Koreans who were not doing so well in South Korea's tough and demanding educational system. [The phenomenon of the Korean-American princess, or KAP, is now a fixture on American campuses]." I, however, noticed that this phenomenon is not limited to the wealthy. Some lower middle class parents do the same.
- ⁶² Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 65-66.
- ⁶³ Choy, *Koreans in America*, 77. See also Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America*, 103-4.
- ⁶⁴ Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 69. See also Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 31.
- ⁶⁵ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 114.
- ⁶⁶ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 181. See also David Treadwell, "Hard Road for Black Businesses," *Los Angeles Times*, September 20, 1991, sec. A1. In this article, Treadwell interviewed Ivan Light, who told him that "more than half of the Korean immigrant entrepreneurs arrive with assets ranging anywhere from about \$60,000 to \$250,000."
- ⁶⁷ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 32.
- ⁶⁸ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 30.
- ⁶⁹ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 288.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 121-2. See also Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 77 on the 1986 survey.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 131.
- ⁷² Hing, *Making and Remaking Asian America*, 68.
- ⁷³ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 154-5.

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- ⁷⁴ Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 442.
- ⁷⁵ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 3.
- ⁷⁶ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 34.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁷⁸ Choy, *Koreans in America*, 248.
- ⁷⁹ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 365.
- ⁸⁰ Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, viii.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 107.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, xiii. Abelmann and Lie quote David Rieff's words.
- ⁸³ Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 110.
- ⁸⁴ Cornelius Osgood, *The Koreans and Their Culture* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1951).
- ⁸⁵ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea*, 110.
- ⁸⁶ Jong Sam Park, "A Three Generation Study: Traditional Korean Value Systems and Psychological Adjustment of Korean Immigrants in Los Angeles" (D.S.W. Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1975), 33-34.
- ⁸⁷ Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 12-13.
- ⁸⁸ See Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 52-53, on his discussion of the yangban class. According to Cumings, scholars still debate about how to define and how to determine yangbans. Many contemporary scholars estimate the number of yangbans between 9 percent and 16 percent of the population. See also Osgood, *The Koreans and Their Culture*, 134, and Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 12. Both estimated yangbans at ten percent of the population. See also Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 12-13, on "base people." They consisted of slaves, butchers, leatherworkers, and shamans.
- ⁸⁹ Osgood, *The Koreans and Their Culture*, 134.
- ⁹⁰ See Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation*, 6-8. Many scholars seem to think that several characteristics of the seventeenth century-Korea still prevailed in twentieth century-Korea, such as kinship systems, lineages, Confucian rituals and beliefs, etc. They form "the standard view of traditional Korean society."
- ⁹¹ See Abelmann and Lie, *Blue Dreams*, 68.
- ⁹² Martina Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Cambridge: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University Press, 1977), 226.

⁹³ Osgood, *The Koreans and Their Culture*, 22, 39.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

CHAPTER FOUR

UNTHINKING CHOICES

Tragically, what benefited Korean Americans in Los Angeles actually hurt African Americans in South Central Los Angeles. While the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act and global economic mobilization stimulated Korean-American immigration and the Korean economy, these two historical developments pushed South Central residents further into deep poverty, crime, and hopelessness. More importantly, South Central's crime-ridden and economically depressed condition supplied a fitting place for Korean Americans to open their small businesses by making the area cheap enough for their limited capital resources. In other words, South Central's blighted condition gave many Korean Americans a chance to work for their American dreams.

South Central's blighted condition was not an accident. Its condition actually stems from the snowballed outcome of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, the Civil Rights movement, global economy, and a long history of racial and economic oppression. The 1965 Act put further pressure on South Central's already depressed social and economic condition. Since the 1970s, South Central's African-American residents saw a huge influx of immigrants from Mexico, Asia, and Caribbean Sea who were looking for a relatively cheap place to live. The influx produced a tense competition with African-American residents for jobs, housing, and public resources. Pushed to share the limited space and scarce resources, overcrowded by immigrants, overcharged by the small business entrepreneurs, neglected by the government, and abandoned by the middle class, some African-American residents were easily drawn into crime and gang activities. As a result, South Central became a crime-ridden and poverty-stricken place.

Following the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, Los Angeles experienced unprecedented demographic changes. During the 1970s and the 1980s, because of the influx of Mexican, Asian, and Caribbean immigrants to the city, the white population declined from fifty-nine percent to thirty-seven percent, and the African-American population decreased from eighteen percent to fourteen percent in the city. During the same period, the Latino population increased from eighteen percent to forty percent, and the Asian-American population grew from less than five percent to ten percent. By 1990, Latinos had become the largest ethnic group in the city and the Asian population doubled to be almost as many as the African-American population.¹

In fact, the influx affected South Central African Americans much more than it did other ethnic populations. Since the 1970s, an influx of Latinos, particularly from Central America, had changed the ethnic complexion of South Central Los Angeles. The area had been eighty-three percent African American in 1963,² but by 1990, the African-American population had dropped to fifty-three percent.³ Although some African Americans left South Central to move into suburban communities,⁴ many more African-American residents remained in South Central. Forced to share their limited space and scanty resources with Latinos who moved into the area seeking cheap housing, South Central's African Americans found themselves mired in frustration, anger, and hopelessness.

What is more, the influx of immigrants brought Korean-American merchants into South Central. Many African-American residents in South Central perceived Korean merchants as alien invaders and capitalist exploiters. The Korean merchants were seen as outsiders who invaded their community and extracted money from them.

Many residents claimed that the merchants overcharged them for poor quality items. They resented Korean-American grocers for not hiring any African Americans and not giving back money to the African-American community, further diminishing withering resources.⁵

The fierce competition for South Central Los Angeles' shrinking job and housing markets eventually led to hostile ethnic conflicts among African Americans, Latinos, and Korean Americans. Compounding the problem of South Central, the 1970s also saw skyrocketing housing prices in the suburbs, further limiting the opportunities for African-American residents to leave South Central Los Angeles.⁶

In contrast to the current socially demoted and economically depressed condition of the South Central African Americans' lives, before 1920, African Americans in Los Angeles benefited from a better economy and less racism. Although the modern African-American community traces its roots to the land boom of the late 1800s,⁷ African descendants' involvement in Los Angeles goes back to the late eighteenth century when Mexican settlers founded the city in 1781. Their early participation in the history of Los Angeles was evidenced by at least two Los Angeles census reports during the Spanish and Mexican periods. According to John M. Weatherwax, originally, the Spanish attempted to recruit twenty-four families and fifty-nine men to establish a strong Spanish garrison along the California coast when Gaspar de Portola, under the order of King Carlos III of Spain, completed his expedition in 1769. But, subsequently, the Spanish attracted only twelve families with forty-six people who moved to Los Angeles. The twelve families became the founders of the city and appeared on First Census of Los Angeles as the record of its original settlers of the city in 1781. This census includes

names, ages, and ethnicities. According to this record, the founders of Los Angeles consisted of twenty-six individuals with African ancestry, sixteen Native Americans, two Spanish, and two “Chinos.”⁸ This indicated that people with African ancestry were the majority among the newcomers. But their majority position quickly disappeared. The 1790 census counted twenty-two persons with African ancestry out of a total population of 141. Moreover, the 1850 census counted only twelve persons with African ancestry.⁹

By 1900, Los Angeles possessed the largest African-American community in California with 2,131 persons. Both the land boom and its 1887-1888 collapse attracted African Americans from other regions of California, including unemployed African-American farmers, who moved from rural California to the city to find jobs. Nevertheless, the African-American population in the city remained very small, and its growth tended to be slow up until 1900. This trend changed after the Southern Pacific Railroad recruited about 2,000 African-American workers to break a strike by Mexican construction workers in 1903. Following the railroad’s recruitment, many poor and non-skilled African Americans migrated from southern states, expecting better jobs and a better racial climate. By 1920, the Los Angeles African-American population increased to 15,579.¹⁰

Unlike early Chinese and Japanese immigrants, early African Americans in California did not encounter much hostility from whites. Two factors probably contributed to their seemingly unconcerned attitudes toward African Americans. One was the small and “relatively inconspicuous” African-American population up to 1920. The other relates to whites’ obsession with anti-Chinese and Japanese sentiment in California.¹¹

Whites in Los Angeles did not pay much attention to African Americans until around 1915, although, in 1910, the African-American population (7,599) in Los Angeles exceeded both Chinese (1,954) and Japanese (4,238) populations in the city.¹² They were too preoccupied with the perceived threat of the Chinese and Japanese populations. So, compared with the Chinese and Japanese, African Americans in Los Angeles lived in an environment relatively free from restrictions against buying property and sending their children to school.¹³ In 1900, thirty-four percent of Los Angeles' African Americans owned homes, exceeding the homeownership rates for Mexicans or Japanese Americans. Furthermore, the early African Americans in Los Angeles had some political opportunities, too. In the late 1890s, Los Angeles became one of the few cities in the United States to have an African-American police officer and fireman.¹⁴

Despite their early laxity toward African Americans, Los Angeles whites quickly changed their mood. This sudden mood swing in 1920 grew out of two developmental changes in the city. The African-American population growth unfortunately coincided with a large number of Southern whites flowing into the city. When the African-American population in the city doubled from 7,599 in 1910 to 15,579 in 1920,¹⁵ a large number of Southerners with their southern racial etiquette migrated into the city. Los Angeles' whites became fearful, even though the African-American population amounted to only 2.7 percent of its total population. So, for this fear, Southerners attempted to transplant their racial ideas into the city. Starting a "whites-only jitney bus system," they avoided riding public transportation with African Americans. This shift in racial attitudes changed Los Angeles from a frontier city open to diversity into a narrowly

defined city closed to non-whites and brought increasingly hostile attitudes toward African Americans into the city.¹⁶

Furthermore, this hostility delivered the first African-American ghetto in Los Angeles. To keep African Americans in an inferior position, Los Angeles whites instituted very rigid and efficient residential segregation. To this end, they established race restrictive covenants and block agreements. Because racially restrictive covenants prohibited white property owners from selling or renting their property to non-white persons, these devices forced African Americans to stay in the Central Avenue area and hurried the whites to exit from Central Avenue to the suburbs. Both devices—race-restrictive covenants on property deeds and mapping out block agreements—promoted not only whites' mass exodus from the area but also African Americans' concentration in that area by preventing African Americans and other non-whites from buying homes in other areas. In essence, the devices made it possible for Los Angeles whites successfully to keep African Americans' population growth, economic gain, and educational and social mobility to a minimum. While the restrictive covenants restrained white owners from selling their property to non-whites, the block agreements reinforced and legitimized the covenants by making the whole area unavailable to any non-whites. A distinctly visible African-American community—the ghetto—appeared in Los Angeles by 1908.¹⁷

By 1920, the overcrowded and deteriorated condition became much worse. The lack of new home construction and inadequate maintenance pushed the area to further deterioration. Nearly all houses along Central Avenue that had been built before World War I showed structural damages caused by inadequate repairs and maintenance. Signs of a slum, such as “few sanitary conveniences, leaky pipes and roofs, patched windows,

and doors,” prevailed in the area. In addition, in 1922, the northern section of Central Avenue was rezoned as a manufacturing area. Over a hundred industries moved into the area by 1939.¹⁸ Although these companies might have provided more jobs, they certainly made living there very crowded and unpleasant.

By 1920, the covenants and court decisions ended African Americans’ efforts to move into neighborhoods adjacent to central Los Angeles. They prevented African-American communities from expanding into outlying areas by surrounding them with all-white areas closed to any African Americans.¹⁹ Moreover, court decisions and whites’ intimidation made the devices function successfully. In implementing race-restrictive covenants and block agreements, court decisions bolstered them, and white intimidation carried them out, creating a very rigid and efficient residential segregation.²⁰ The covenants were further enhanced in 1928 when the California Supreme Court made race restrictive covenants retroactively applicable. This ruling forced African-American families already living in the restricted areas to leave their homes because the previous sale of the property by white owners to any African American buyer was illegal. According to this ruling, all African Americans living in outlying areas of the Central Avenue were breaking the law on the grounds that a restrictive covenant retroactively made the sale illegal.²¹ By 1930, seventy percent of the city’s African-American population resided in “one physical ghetto stretching approximately thirty blocks down central Avenue [from 62nd Street] and several blocks east to the railroad tracks, or in a few detached islands, especially on West Jefferson, Temple Street, and just south of the city in Watts.”²²

Nonetheless, the growing Los Angeles African-American middle class fought against housing segregation. When African Americans moved into the northern end of Central Avenue seeking comparatively inexpensive rents, European-American property owners panicked and abandoned the area. Breaking their restrictive covenants and block agreements, they sold their property to African Americans at inflated prices. This act of selling made the African-American middle class move initially to the northern end of Central Avenue. But the majority of the African-American middle class remained in a segregated area until 1948 when the U.S. Supreme Court finally declared the covenants and the block agreements unconstitutional, making the move to the west side much easier for middle-class African Americans.²³

The Los Angeles African-American community eventually saw a different environment in the 1940s. They had made some small progress in spite of European Americans' persistent attempts to exclude them by deterring their progress. World War II brought significant economic gains and lifted them up to be one of the major groups in the city. The war economy attracted a huge influx of African Americans into the city.²⁴

During World War II, Los Angeles became a major military industrial site, and the city faced a tremendous labor shortage. Although Los Angeles African Americans had generally been shut out from obtaining skilled industrial jobs, massive military contracts for air craft and shipbuilding demanded a large number of skilled laborers, creating a market for African-American labor. Consequently, the African-American population grew from 38,894 (3.1 percent of the population) in 1930 to 63,774 (4.2 percent) in 1940 and to 171,209 (8.7 percent) in 1950.²⁵

Several factors contributed to the war industry's desperate need for African-American labor. The military conscription of as many as 150,000 men from the area, the internment of Japanese Americans in 1942, and deportation of Mexicans just before the war all caused a serious labor shortage in Los Angeles. More importantly, President Roosevelt's executive order made the substitution of African-American labor possible. In 1942, under enormous pressure from African-American labor leader A. Philip Randolph, President Roosevelt issued an executive order that prohibited any racial discrimination in the city's military defense contracts. This order broke "the iron grip of racial discrimination" that had been practiced in the defense industry. Soon after that order, the Southern Pacific Railroad transported southern African Americans "at a rate of three hundred to four hundred a day."²⁶

Despite the acute labor shortage and the executive order forbidding racial discrimination, African Americans in Los Angeles did not automatically get jobs in the military defense industries. It took local African Americans' well-organized and strong political effort. Between 1942 and 1945, the Negro Victory Committee under Reverend Clayton Russell and the NAACP organized many mass rallies and marches to win jobs.²⁷

Success in getting jobs in the defense industries caused a housing crisis. The thousands of African Americans who came to the city to work in the aircraft and shipbuilding industries did not have a place to live, although some poor African Americans moved into the abandoned Little Tokyo area. The city's race-restrictive covenants and block agreements compelled most of these newcomers to live in the Central Avenue ghetto area. The area was already run down and overcrowded with an occupancy rate over ninety-eight percent. With no other place to go, moderately well-

paid defense workers were pushed together with much poorer African Americans in the central city. Persistent housing discrimination impeded African Americans from enjoying their wealth and from further social and economic progress even though they made significant occupational gains between 1940 and 1950. The housing crisis remained unsolved until the end of the war.²⁸

Postwar Los Angeles disappointed and frustrated the heightened expectations of African Americans. Between 1950 and 1960, they lost some of their war-time occupational and political gains. The city was once again returning to minority competition for unskilled jobs, while European Americans had taken the skilled jobs. It became harder for African Americans to obtain skilled jobs because the old discriminatory rules were reinstated and the lack of public transportation kept African Americans from access to suburban jobs. It was the end of the labor shortage. Japanese Americans were released from internment; soldiers returned; Mexican workers were imported to Los Angeles again and by 1950 they outnumbered African Americans. Politically, the African-American community lost not only its strong wartime bargaining position but also its strong community-based leadership. The Negro Victory Committee collapsed soon after the war.²⁹

In addition to the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, beginning in the 1960s, the globalization of the U.S. economy, the civil rights movements, and the Watts rebellion deepened the problems of South Central Los Angeles. The globalization process affected South Central with further loss of jobs and curtailed economic activities when many companies closed their plants in the United States and relocated overseas or cut jobs through downsizing. These plant closings affected South Central residents particularly

because the majority of the plants closed were located in the African-American and Latino communities. Between 1982 and 1989, the closing of 131 plants in Los Angeles resulted in 124,000 workers losing their jobs. At the same time, the loss of jobs depressed economic activity in the area. By the end of the 1980s, most retail department stores, garment manufacturing factories, and supermarket chains moved out of the South Central area.³⁰

The loss of jobs, the depressed economic activity, the civil rights movement, and the Watts rebellion all sadly hastened the flight of middle class African Americans and European Americans from South Central. For the first time, the civil rights movement allowed African Americans to become entrepreneurs in other places and to enter white-collar jobs in big companies. As a result, many African-American business owners left South Central. Because the neighborhoods' spending capacity dropped when the majority of middle-class African Americans left, white-owned businesses left, too. Moreover, the Watts rebellion of 1965 gave a push for the business departures, as South Central's high crime rate made it too risky for business owners.³¹

South Central's abandoned market condition boosted Korean-American entrepreneurship. When large retail stores, bank branches, and supermarket chains left South Central, many Korean-American merchants found a new opportunity. Korean-American storeowners took over the businesses of check cashing, selling grocery and other convenient items, and selling liquor products. In other words, in addition to the rapid increase in Korean-American population, the abandoned market condition made the prolific Korean Americans' entrepreneurship possible. It changed their employment trend. Before the 1970s, most Korean Americans had worked in blue-collar jobs as

miners, railway workers, farm laborers, cooks, gas station attendants, and garment factory workers. But, by the late-1960s, with the small capital they accumulated from working in factory jobs in the United States, or with the capital they brought from Korea, many Korean Americans began to operate stores. Beginning with the wig retail business, they gradually expanded their small businesses into dry cleaning and food markets.³² By the early 1980s, many Korean Americans in Los Angeles, New York, and other metropolitan areas had firmly established their small businesses in “groceries and liquor stores, retail outlets for Asian-imported items, dry cleaners, produce retailers, and garment subcontracting.”³³

The Korean Americans’ propensity to choose small business over other jobs has been further evidenced by the U.S. census reports. In their study on the subject, sociologists Light and Bonacich found that small business entrepreneurship among Korean Americans was three times higher than it was among non-Korean Americans. According to the 1980 U.S. Census Report, 22.5 percent of Korean Americans in Los Angeles chose self-employment compared with only 8.5 percent of non-Korean Americans in 1980. Light and Bonacich concluded that Korean Americans’ choice of entrepreneurship exceeds that of “every other nationality origin group” and that it was a national phenomenon.³⁴ By 1986, the self-employment rate among Korean Americans further increased to over fifty percent.³⁵ Pyong Gap Min, another sociologist, explains this high increase in relation to the recent Korean Americans’ predeparture preparation for going into a small business entrepreneurship in the United States. According to Min, unlike most Korean immigrants before 1965, the immigrants in the 1970s came prepared to become entrepreneurs in the inner-city area with the resources and information needed to start and to run small

businesses. They not only brought a significant amount of money from Korea to buy businesses, but also acquired business information and received necessary training through their jobs at Korean-owned stores.³⁶

Many Korean Americans sought business opportunities in the African-American neighborhoods, where vacant stores were available, start-up costs minimal, and competition not severe.³⁷ As Light and Bonacich observe, Korean Americans have shown a tendency to open their stores in “low income, non-white neighborhoods” abandoned by big corporations.³⁸ In other words, Korean Americans chose to set up their small businesses in crime-ridden, economically disadvantaged, and downright dangerous inner-city areas such as South Central Los Angeles.³⁹

Most Korean immigrants did not have easy access to jobs in the American labor market. Despite their high educational and white-collar occupational backgrounds in Korea, the language barrier and their unfamiliarity with American culture and customs prevented them from entering the occupations of their choice. The threat of deportation because of unemployment compounded their anxiety, and their overambitious desire to be rich as quickly as possible hastened them to seize the opportunity to set up a store in the inner-city areas.⁴⁰ When these college-educated Korean immigrants could not get jobs in their pre-immigrant professional fields of training, especially when they did not want to wait to make money, and when they had some money ranging from \$60,000 to \$250,000, becoming a small business entrepreneur was one alternative for them—even in economically depressed and dangerous inner-city areas. Hence, instead of working in blue-collar jobs, these college-educated Korean immigrants started up small businesses in any area they could afford.⁴¹

South Central's low spending capacity and high crime rate forced Jews, Italians, Irish, and other European Americans to leave the area. But these two factors—low spending capacity and high crime rate—actually tailored the area to be a fitting place for Korean Americans. South Central required relatively small start-up capital. Because of little competition among the businesses in the area, it necessitated very minimal expertise to run the business,⁴² and a low level of English proficiency. Although it was very risky to open a shop in any high crime and low spending area, many Korean small business owners chose to do their business in South Central because it was quite an attractive locality if one thought that they could handle the danger. This choice of business locations set the stage for Black-Korean conflicts.⁴³

Black-Korean conflict was almost unavoidable in South Central. It was precipitated by Korean Americans' overly ambitious eagerness to make quick money in the inner-city areas by aggressively trying to succeed economically and socially, and by an almost desperate attempt to become "almost white." An apparent over-representation of Korean-American entrepreneurship in the area, low inventory, poor selection of merchandise, high prices, and rude attitudes made the situation volatile.⁴⁴ Although only approximately thirty-five percent of Korean stores served African-American and Latino-American customers in Los Angeles,⁴⁵ Korean owned liquor-grocery marts, clothing shops, gas stations, auto-repair shops, real estate agencies, and other types of stores accounted over eighty percent of all small businesses in South Central.⁴⁶

On their side, African Americans saw Korean Americans as foreign invaders who tried to dominate their lives. Korean merchants did not live in South Central; they lived elsewhere. They squeezed out the scanty resources of the community and gave very little

back. South Central African-American community leaders and residents complained that Korean merchants were ruthless moneymakers, exploiting the residents by overcharging for poor quality goods and refusing to hire African Americans.⁴⁷ They only cared about making money; the dollar defeated their social and moral obligations to the community. They neither cared about how the money was made nor were they concerned about how their businesses affected the community. One example of this is the proliferation of Korean liquor stores in African-American and Latino-American communities.

South Central had more liquor stores than any other Los Angeles counties. In South Central, liquor stores are found almost on every corner. Many times, liquor stores sat directly across from churches. Some estimated that South Central had over 254 liquor stores before the 1992 Los Angeles riots. According to Mayor Bradley's 1992 South Central Community/Merchant Liquor Task Force report, South Central had seventeen liquor licenses per square mile when other Los Angeles counties had 1.6 licenses per square mile.⁴⁸

In the early and mid-1980s, before Korean Americans bought the liquor stores in South Central, residents successfully put the pressure on passing an ordinance at least to limit new liquor stores. This ordinance, however, did not apply to the liquor stores already in operation. Additionally, when banks, grocery chains, and retail stores left the area, South Central residents did not have any access to these types of business establishment in the area. This lack of normal business in the area gave many liquor storeowners an avenue to obtain the liquor license "by providing public conveniences and necessities" that were not "widely available in a neighborhood." Check cashing, selling

groceries, and other convenience items became a vehicle for them to get a liquor license in the area.⁴⁹

While liquor is one of the most lucrative businesses to many Korean-American entrepreneurs, it is the source of violence and crime for many South Central residents. The community sees that liquor stores generally generate “drunkenness, violence, prostitution, drug dealing, and crime” in their community. They believe that liquor stores physically and morally break down the members of their community. Children cannot avoid drunks who hang out in front of the liquor stores on their way to school, nor can many church members avoid drunks on their way to enter their church as many liquor stores are located directly in front of churches.⁵⁰

The depressed economic condition, the prolific Korean-American entrepreneurs, and rampant crime, drugs, and gang violence are the backdrops for Black-Korean conflicts in South Central Los Angeles.⁵¹ They are also the backdrops for Soon Ja Du’s killing of Latasha Harlins. At the trial, Joseph Du, Soon Ja’s son, testified that the store had had three robberies, over thirty burglaries, and a couple of gang threats during the two years since it began operation in the area.⁵² In 1990, the thirty-two blocks surrounding the Dus’ Empire Liquor store at 9127 South Figueroa Street had one of the city’s highest crime rates. Assaults, robberies, and murders were frequent in the area. Gang activities threatened the safety of the residents as well as the merchants in the area, making tempers flare quickly.⁵³

Black-Korean tension in South Central Los Angeles rose to a new high point during the Soon Ja Du murder incident. On March 16, 1991, following an argument in which Soon Ja, a fifty-one-year old⁵⁴ Korean liquor and grocery store owner, accused a fifteen-year-

old African-American customer, Latasha Harlins, of shoplifting, Soon Ja killed Latasha by shooting her in the back of the head with a .38 caliber revolver after Latasha struck Soon Ja. Latasha was a ninth grader in Westchester High School at the time of her death.

Soon Ja Du's immigration experience was shared by many Korean Americans. In order to avoid Korea's hellish school entrance examinations for their children, Hung Ki (Billy) Du and his wife, Soon Ja, immigrated to the United States with their three children in 1976. In that year, the annual Korean immigration number first reached thirty thousand. They both had a college education and came from Christian, middle-class backgrounds. At first, Soon Ja and her husband worked in blue-collar jobs, as a couch assembler and a repairman, respectively. In 1981 they bought a convenience mart in San Fernando, and in 1989 they bought another store, Empire Liquor Market, in South Central Los Angeles. The residents around Empire Liquor Market saw the Dus as rude and disrespectful. According to residents interviewed after the March 16 incident as reported in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 20, 1991, the owners "often shouted insults at customers and frequently accused them of shoplifting."⁵⁵

Latasha Harlins, a studious and self-assured African American high school freshman, lived with her grandmother about five minutes walking distance from the Dus' store. Her father had left the family, and her mother was killed in 1985. Although Latasha came from a poor family, like most residents in South Central, she was ambitious. Latasha wanted to go to law school.⁵⁶ She also knew how to survive South Central's harsh street life; she knew how to defend herself when attacked.

On Saturday morning, March 16, 1991, Soon Ja and Latasha met for the first time in Du's liquor and grocery store. Soon Ja had had enough of crimes, shopliftings, and gang violence surrounding her store. She had to show that she was older, superior, and right. Soon Ja could not let the young blacks terrorize her and her family in her own store. On the other hand, Latasha could not let Soon Ja accuse her of shoplifting and take her backpack without a fight, either. Both misunderstood the other's expectations and demands. Soon Ja grabbed Latasha. Latasha swiftly hit Soon Ja's face at least three times, and Soon Ja quickly shot Latasha in the back of the head, killing her.⁵⁷

Notes

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- ¹ Edward J. Park, "Our L.A.: Korean Americans in Los Angeles After the Civil Unrest," in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, eds. Michael J. Dear, H. Erick Schockman, and Greg Hise (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc., 1996), 155. He cited Raphael F. Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 87 and 247. See also Frank Clifford and Anne C. Roark, "Racial Lines in County Blur but Could Return," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1991, sec. A1.
- ² Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 98.
- ³ Peter A. Morrison and Ira S. Lowry, *A Riot of Color: The Demographic Setting of Civil Disturbance in Los Angeles* (Rand Library Collection, 1993), 10. See Table 2.
- ⁴ Clifford and Roark, "Racial Lines," sec. A1.
- ⁵ See Marsha Mitchell, "Merchant Charged," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 21, 1991, Sec. A1.
- ⁶ Regina Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," in *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*, ed. Mark Baldassare (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 181.
- ⁷ L. B. DeGraaf, "The City of Black Angels: Emergence of the Los Angeles Ghetto, 1890-1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 39: 327.
- ⁸ John M. Weatherwax, *The Founders of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Bryant Foundation, 1954), 5-15. See "First Census of Los Angeles" in *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California*, 1931, 148-9.
- ⁹ DeGraaf, "The City of Black Angels," 327.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 327-330.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 329.
- ¹² John Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900-1942* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 23.
- ¹³ See DeGraaf, "The City of Black Angels," 329. It was not completely clear in his writing, but it was also very possible that whites at that time did not fuss too much about some small number of African-American children attending white schools, although Los Angeles had desegregated schools by the 1880s.
- ¹⁴ Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White*, 22.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22. See Table 2.2.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26-27.
- ¹⁷ DeGraaf, "The City of Black Angels," 336-8.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 349-50.

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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 347.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 337.
- ²¹ Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White*, 27.
- ²² DeGraaf, "The City of Black Angels," 335.
- ²³ Sonenshein, *Politics in Black and White*, 28-30.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 22, Table 2.2. See also Keith E. Collins, *Black Los Angeles: The Maturing of the Ghetto, 1940-1950*. Saratoga, California: Century Twenty One Publishing, 1980, 18-19. According to Collins, a large number of African Americans started to migrate from Southern states to Los Angeles in the spring of 1942 via the Southern Pacific Railroad and reached its peak in June 1943 when between 10,200 and 12,000 entered the city.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 29. The "Double V" movement means victory overseas and victory at home. Nationwide, African Americans organized this movement, which foreshadowed the civil rights movement in the 1950s.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 29-30.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.
- ³⁰ Kathleen J. Tierney, "Property Damage and Violence: A Collective Behavior Analysis," in *The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future*, ed. Mark Baldassare (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 160-1. See also Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 178-9.
- ³¹ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 180. The arrest of two Frye brothers on drunk-driving charges triggered the 1965 Watts riots that lasted four days in Los Angeles. See Paul Bullock, ed., *Watts: The Aftermath, An Inside View of the Ghetto by The People of Watts* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1969), 33-50. Scholars quite often compare the 1992 Los Angeles riots to the Watts riots.
- ³² Jin H. Yu, *The Korean Merchant in the Black Community: Their Relations and Conflicts with Strategies for Conflict Resolution and Prevention* (Elkins Park, Pa.: Philip Jaisohn Memorial Foundation, 1980), 2.
- ³³ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 4.
- ³⁴ Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 3-7.
- ³⁵ Pyong Gap Min, "Korean Immigrants' Small Business Activities and Korean-Black Interracial Conflicts," in *The Korean-American Community: Present and Future*, eds. Tae-Hwan Kwak and Seong Hyong Lee (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1991), 13-14.
- ³⁶ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 49.

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- ³⁷ Yu, *The Korean Merchant in the Black Community*, 2.
- ³⁸ Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 6.
- ³⁹ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 176.
- ⁴⁰ See Light and Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs*, 362. According to the Immigration and Nationality Act, any person who became a public charge within five years of admittance into the United States was subject to deportation.
- ⁴¹ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 176.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 176.
- ⁴³ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 4.
- ⁴⁴ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 176-7.
- ⁴⁵ Min, "Korean Immigrants' Small Business," 16. See also Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 67.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 67. See also Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 183.
- ⁴⁷ George Ramos and John H. Lee, "Demonstrators demand that Korean Market Never Reopen," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1991, sec. B1.
- ⁴⁸ Raphael J. Sonenshein, "The battle over liquor stores in South Central Los Angeles: The Management of an Interminority Conflict," *Urban Affairs Review*, July 96, Vol. 31, 718.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 718.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 719.
- ⁵¹ Freer, "Black-Korean Conflict," 181.
- ⁵² Reporters' Daily Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial Proceedings, 294-307. Also see Andrea Ford, "Korean Grocer Denies Pointing Gun at Girl," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1991, sec. A2.
- ⁵³ Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 111. See also Larry Aubry, "Learning from the Death of a Teenager," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 4, 1991, Editorial, sec. A6.
- ⁵⁴ Soon Ja's age had been reported variously from 49 to 51. I decided to use 51 because this was the age she gave in court.
- ⁵⁵ Jesse Katz and John H. Lee, "Shooting: An Immigrant Grocer is Accused of Murdering a Girl, 15," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1991, sec. A1.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. A1.
- ⁵⁷ "Girl, 15, Shot to Death Over Orange Juice," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1991, sec. B1.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE FALL FROM GRACE

On the surface, the issues in the case of *People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du* may not appear to be particularly linked to racial prejudice. Many people tried to convince the public that it had nothing to do with race. From the very beginning, police tried to convince the public that the shooting was not racially motivated.¹ Also, the Korean-American community featured the case as a simple business quarrel between a Korean-American grocer and an African-American customer that turned into a murder, while the African-American community immediately saw it shaded by racism. The two communities interpreted the case from opposing points of view. Still, Soon Ja's testimony in court and her conduct after the incident suggest strong connections to racial prejudice, which draped her unfeeling and untruth. The Dus' words to many reporters and the police, the probation report, and Soon Ja's letter to the judge all unmistakably revealed Soon Ja's negative attitude toward African Americans. They suggest that Soon Ja's racism consumed her decency.

This incident had several layers of motions, interconnecting to one another. This deadly incident was first put into action by Soon Ja's presumption that all African Americans are potential shoplifters. After her presumption set a chain of events in motion, Soon Ja's rage and racism reigned everything. Her unyielding determination to show her superiority over an African-American teen-ager placed Soon Ja in a fatal power struggle with Latasha and ultimately led to shooting her to death. As is the case with many Korean Americans, Soon Ja's unsophisticated manners in handling African-American customers, her ignorance of their culture, especially in the economically

depressed and crime-ridden area, underlined her prejudice against African Americans. Her unfamiliarity with American culture and her lack of consideration toward other cultures led to an unavoidable clash. Furthermore, Soon Ja's traditional Korean Confucian code of proper conduct based on the three bonds and the five rules deepened the deadly collision with Latasha's code of appropriate street conduct. In the fight, neither recognized the other's different interpretations, expectations, and demands.

On Monday, September 30, 1991, the murder trial, *The People of the State of California v. Soon Ja Du* started.² The testimony in this case lasted three days, with Superior Court Judge Joyce Ann Karlin presiding. Judge Karlin banned live television coverage, cameras' taking any pictures of witnesses, and tape-recording of any testimony.³ Deputy District Attorney Roxane Carvajal represented the people of the state of California while Charles Lloyd and Richard Leonard defended Soon Ja Du. Carvajal presented ten witnesses, and the defense introduced the three Du family members as defense witnesses: Soon Ja Du, Hung Ki (Billy) Du, and Joseph Du. All three Dus used a Korean interpreter in their testimony. For direct evidence in this case, a surveillance camera videotape,⁴ two eyewitnesses, and a 911 audiotape were presented.

Soon Ja took the stand on the last day of the trial and began testifying about what happened on the morning of the shooting. By the time Latasha walked into the store, about forty minutes after she opened the Empire Liquor Market at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday, March 16, 1991, she had already served "a little over ten" customers.⁵ When the confrontation began, only two children, who witnessed the entire incident, remained in the store. When Latasha walked to the juice section and got a bottle of orange juice, Soon Ja testified that she watched Latasha through the rear view mirrors⁶ installed in the store.

Soon Ja's eyes followed Latasha going to the juice section, taking a foot long plastic bottle of orange juice out of the refrigerator shelf, and sticking it in the left pocket of her backpack. And Soon Ja only "noticed the top of the orange juice." Then, she testified that Latasha immediately turned and came directly toward her at the check stand. Because she saw Latasha put the bottle in her backpack, she said that she assumed Latasha was going to steal the \$1.79 bottle of orange juice. She also noticed that Latasha was wearing what appeared to her to be gang member apparel—a cap, a jacket, and a backpack—that her son Joseph had warned her about.⁷ Until Latasha came to the counter, Soon Ja mistakenly thought that Latasha was a man in his mid-twenties. Soon Ja continued to watch Latasha as she stood in line behind the two eyewitnesses.⁸

At the time of the incident there were three security cameras inside the Empire Liquor Market. At a close range, the surveillance camera "mounted over the door"⁹ recorded the entire incident.¹⁰ Because the camera focused on the counter where the incident occurred,¹¹ it provided the most important piece of direct evidence in the murder trial.¹²

As early as March 18, the police informed the public about the existence of the videotape. Until the trial, however, the police and the district attorney kept the videotape from the public, particularly from the media, against the expressed desires of both the Dus and the Harlins.¹³ While District Attorney Ira Reiner withheld the tape from the public to obtain untainted jurors,¹⁴ the Black-Korean Alliance¹⁵ and the Korean-American community opposed the release because they feared African Americans' retaliation against Korean Americans. The Korean-American community was so worried about the strong possibility that the videotape would excite the African-American community that they had even tried to petition against ABC's effort to get the tape in court.¹⁶ According to Lou

Cannon, a *Washington Post* journalist, withholding the videotape from the public inadvertently fostered the continuation of Latasha's image as a robber in the public's mind. Had the public seen the videotape earlier, Cannon claimed, it would have shown that Soon Ja's portrayal of Latasha as a thief was false.¹⁷

On the first day of the trial, the public saw the videotape for the first time when Judge Karlin released it after admitting it as evidence. "The videotape of the incident lasted less than a minute," including "about thirty-five seconds from the time Latasha walked to the counter until she dropped dead on the floor."¹⁸ It had neither sound nor color; its pictures were black and white in muteness. Even though the Dus and Soon Ja's lawyers questioned the technical quality of the tape to explain the entire incident, many people thought it captured the incident quite well. The April 10 *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) reported that the police thought that it was a good videotape. At the same time the newspaper reported that rumors spread in the Korean-American community that police had edited it to make Soon Ja look guilty of the crime.

This tape was kept in the Exhibit Department of the Discovery Unit of the Los Angeles Police Department for five months after the trial. Then, the unit destroyed the tape in accordance with police procedure. Several descriptions of the thirty-five seconds of the tape appeared. According to the court transcripts of both the Grand Jury Proceedings and the Criminal Trial Proceedings, Deputy District Attorney Carvajal showed a slow-motion version of the tape more than fifteen times and reviewed it step by step with Soon Ja and the two eyewitnesses, nine-year-old Ismail Ali and twelve-year-old Lakeshia Combs. Defense attorneys Lloyd and Leonard rarely objected to the District Attorney's description

of the scenes in the tape. Additionally, there were four more descriptions of the thirty-five seconds reported in several newspapers.

Additionally, *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992*, a documentary tape of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, that I saw on April 22, 2002, contained a good portion of the actual Empire surveillance videotape. Free-lance journalist Itabari Njeri's description of the scenes came very close to what it showed in this documentary tape. In addition, because Njeri's narration of the videotape appears to be the closest to the interpretation sustained in the transcripts and because she interjected the least amount of her own interpretation in narrating the scenes, Njeri's narration became the base by which all other descriptions were examined for this research. In *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of A New World Black*, she narrates the silent videotape:

A young boy, hands clasped behind his back, waddles into a store. In blurred, grainy, black-and-white silence he reaches his sister, already at the counter. She is paying the merchant, a Korean woman. Someone else approaches the counter from the rear of the store, a Black teenage girl. She stands waiting her turn. In the mute video, the merchant speaks to her and points to her backpack. The girl turns sideways to show her the contents of the bag. The children watch, then slowly back away as the quarrel escalates. The merchant leans over the counter and grabs for the girl, catching the left sleeve of her black sweater. The girl tries to slap her hand away. The merchant holds on, pulling harder. The boy hops sideways toward the door. His sister backs away too, her arm springing up in a defensive reflex when she sees the girl swing at the shopkeeper's head with the backpack. The merchant snatches it. The girl swipes the woman's chin with her right fist, then slams her fist into the merchant's eye. The woman's body crumples toward the floor, but the girl tugs at the bag, pulling the merchant toward her, punching her in the face again. The merchant falls but comes back hurling a stool at the girl. The girl dodges the flying stool. The shopkeeper reaches under the counter, comes up with a holstered gun, and seems to scream for someone as she fumbles with the weapon. The girl picks up the bottle of orange juice and hands it to the merchant. But the woman knocks the bottle away. As the girl turns toward the door to leave, the merchant grips the gun with two hands, aims at her, and shoots. Literally dead weight, the girl drops to the floor. The merchant's left hand flies free, revealing the glinting barrel of a .38 in her right palm. Her knees seem to buckle. She leans over the counter, looking for the body. She presses a hand to her injured right eye, still screaming for someone. Seconds pass; she reels backward, on the verge of collapse. A man enters the picture, the merchant's husband. He rushes to his wife behind the counter, then looks over it, staring at the fallen girl. He picks up the phone and dials 911, then paces

behind the counter and peers over the divide at the girl's body. A customer walks in—a Black man with a doo-rag wrapped around his head. He stops when he sees the body, then moves closer. He is waved away but comes closer still, stares at the child's body, turns, then shambles out the door, muttering to himself in apparent disbelief (pp. 47–48). A policeman enters, spots the body, and takes the phone from Du. The cop searches the rear of the store, and another officer enters. Both policemen rush outside, passing Latasha's unchecked body (p. 151).¹⁹

The videotape, however, was fuzzy.²⁰ Its poor picture quality and its soundlessness allowed conflicting interpretations of what actually took place. Despite the less-than-perfect picture quality, both prosecuting and defending attorneys asserted that the videotape supported their claims. While prosecution declared that the videotape proved Soon Ja's intentional killing of an unarmed and retreating Latasha, the defense argued that it supported her claim of self-defense. After the first day of the testimony, Charles Lloyd, defense lawyer, told reporters that the videotape showed Latasha's strikes and threats to kill Soon Ja. According to Lloyd, even though “the picture quality of the video isn't clear and parts of what the camera captured is open to debate,” it proved Soon Ja's innocence of her shooting Latasha with the .38-caliber handgun, which went off accidentally because of its faulty trigger.²¹

Reflecting their own self-interest, the viewers interpreted differently Soon Ja's and Latasha's attitudes and behaviors in the fight that led to the murder. This chapter will present Soon Ja's claims and examine them in conjunction with the testimony in the court transcripts and newspaper reports. It will pay particular attention to the step-by-step descriptions of the videotape presented by the prosecution but not objected to by the defense.

Soon Ja claimed that Latasha shoplifted orange juice, attempted to rob her, inflicted severe head injuries on her, which caused unconsciousness and loss of memory, and

verbally threatened her life. Soon Ja also insisted that she had no knowledge of guns and no memory of the shooting because she fainted. Most of all, Soon Ja claimed that she killed Latasha in self-defense because she feared for her life. Considering the confusion and emotional intensity that had overtaken Soon Ja and Latasha in those thirty-five seconds, some of Soon Ja's claims sounded probable while others appeared to be a product of her desire to save herself from going to prison. The extreme of these interpretations, however, clearly distinguished the prosecution from the defense, the Harlins from the Dus, and the African-American community from the Korean-American community.

From the moment the incident took place, the Dus justified the killing by portraying Latasha as a robber, the aggressor, and Soon Ja as the victim. Two days after the incident, on March 18, 1991, *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) ran an article in a big and bold headline, "A Black Teenage Girl Demanded Money and Punched [the woman owner]." This was the first article covering the incident in *Korea Times*, and it set the tone of the incident in the Korean community. According to the article, the Dus told the *Korea Times* reporter that Latasha carefully looked around the store and tried to take money from Soon Ja who was alone at the counter. The Dus claimed that the killing was self-defense because the girl demanded money and attacked the owner. The *Los Angeles Times* on March 19 and 22, 1991, reported that Du said "the girl attacked her after being caught trying to steal the juice." The *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) also reported Soon Ja's telling police that "the girl attacked her and tried to steal the orange juice and take money out of the cash register."²²

Again, Soon Ja told her version of the incident to her family members at the Sybil Brand Institute for Women on March 17, 1991, and *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) reported it on March 19, 1991:

The black girl came into the store and attempted to steal a bottle of the orange juice. So when Du told her not to take it, the girl suddenly hit Du on her face with the plastic bottle of orange juice. Du also said that the girl then proceeded to take money from the cash register. When, using her own hands, Du tried to stop the girl taking money from the cash register, the girl punched Du's face first with her fist and then with the bottle of orange juice. She said that, without thinking, she pulled a gun out under cash register and all of a sudden pulled the trigger because she felt scared for her life. Du told her family that she was in the condition that she couldn't even open her eyes because the black girl punched her face.²³

Also, Joseph Du, Soon Ja's thirty-year-old first-born son, told reporters that his mother told the family about Latasha's robbery attempt. According to an article in *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) on March 27, 1991, Joseph told reporters how appalled he was by what he read in the *Los Angeles Times* article, which reported that Latasha was walking away from the fight over the orange juice when his mother shot and killed her. It continued: "Since the shooting incident on March 16," Joseph with "his pictures taken about a dozen times," told the family's side of the story to "more than two dozen reporters." The *Korea Times* article printed his story:

"They don't know anything. All they've heard is what the police have told them, and the police has distorted the story dramatically," the son said. This is what happened according to Joseph Du, who spoke with his mother. "At approximately 9 a.m. on Saturday, March 16, Latasha Harlins came into the store. She took a bottle of orange juice and was about to leave without paying. Soon Ja Du called the girl and demanded payment, her son said. Harlins started bickering with Du, and there was a scuffle between them. Harlins threw hard punches at the grocery owner—one of which resulted in the black eye, he added. Harlins then tried to steal money from the cash register. Du tried to scare her flashing the gun she kept under the register, Joseph Du explained. But Harlins was undaunted and continued to hit Du. As she was about to faint from the blows, Du shot Harlins, he said.²⁴

Six and half months later, during the trial, Joseph testified on cross-examination that his mother told him the story about Latasha's attempted robbery about two or three days after the incident, and that he told the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, John Lee, the robbery story.

In contrast to Joseph's statements to the reporters, his court testimony, and her own statement to police, Soon Ja denied in court ever telling the robbery story to either her son or her husband.²⁵ At first, she admitted telling her son the story; however, later in her testimony, she changed her previous admission.

Billy Du concurred with his wife. He said that his wife did not tell him the robbery story, but the open cash register and scattered money gave him the impression of a hold-up.²⁶ That is why, Billy said, he told the robbery story to a 911 operator and to the police officers at the murder scene. However, when asked about it on the witness stand, Billy denied relaying this story to the 911 or to the police officers until he heard his own voice on the tape.²⁷

Before the trial, in several newspaper articles, defense attorney Charles Lloyd defended Soon Ja's innocence based on her robbery story. He argued that the robbery attempt provided Soon Ja a cause to kill Latasha to protect her own life. According to Lloyd, Soon Ja had a right to protect her life and property if Latasha tried to take them away from her. Lloyd further asserted that the closeness of Latasha's body to the cash register proved that Latasha had attempted robbery and posed a threat to Soon Ja's life; therefore, Soon Ja had the right to pull the gun and to kill her. Although Latasha was not seen reaching into the cash register in the videotape, in these articles Lloyd insisted that Latasha's body position "near the cash register, close to the area where Du was standing," gave him proof that the robbery story was true and that the killing was self-defense.²⁸

Later, in court, Soon Ja reversed this robbery claim.²⁹ She testified that Latasha did not attempt to get money from the cash register. This testimony contradicted not only her

previous claim that Latasha attempted to take money from the store's cash register but also her lawyers' argument that the robbery story was true.

The videotape shows Latasha standing in line behind the two young eyewitnesses, Ali and Combs—a nine-year-old boy and his sister, a twelve-year-old girl.³⁰ They lived across the street from the store and came into the store that morning to buy hair gel for their mother. They stayed at the counter about six feet away from Soon Ja and Latasha and watched the entire incident from the time the fight broke out to the time they saw a gun in Soon Ja's hands.³¹

Ali and Combs gave quite consistent and firm testimonies. Although Ali was only nine years old and his sister was only twelve years old, they gave at least two consistent statements to police officers. Ralph Spinello, the second police officer who arrived at the crime scene that morning, took their statements at the crime scene. Again, later that afternoon, Jerry C. Johnson, a South Bureau homicide investigator, interviewed them about the videotape.³² In the trial, no one pointed out or objected to any major inconsistencies in their statements to the two police officers or between their statements to the police and their testimony in the grand jury and in the criminal court. For the most part, between the grand jury and the criminal trial court, their testimony was consistent.

Furthermore, in the grand jury on April 24, 1991, and in the criminal trial court on September 30, 1991, the videotape corroborated their testimony. The videotape had no sound; it was visual only. So these two young eyewitnesses, sometimes, gave a voice to many parts of the videotape. They stood firm on what they saw and heard even when Lloyd attempted to discredit them by employing a confusion tactic. For instance, he asked Ali to show him which hand is right or left to discredit Ali's testimony of seeing

Latasha's money in her left hand while he tried to change Combs' testimony that Latasha did not make any verbal threats to kill Soon Ja.³³

The videotape showed that Latasha had money in her left hand. In addition, the two eyewitnesses and police officers testified that Latasha had \$2.00 in her hand. In the criminal court, however, Soon Ja denied seeing Latasha holding money in her hand. When Richard A. Leonard, another defense attorney for Soon Ja, asked her about seeing the money, she answered: "No, not at all. I'm a business operator. If she had the money, I would try to grab the money rather than the orange juice since she already had the orange juice in this backpack."³⁴ Soon Ja apparently assumed that Latasha not only did not, but also could not, have money to pay for the juice.

Ali and Combs saw Latasha holding \$2.00 to \$3.00 of paper currency (not coins) in her left hand at the counter. They also testified that Latasha held the money towards the counter when Soon Ja started insinuating that Latasha was stealing the \$1.79 bottle of the orange juice. In addition, these two youngsters identified Latasha's money on the videotape by pointing at a white object in Latasha's hand. Combs testified that "at first she was trying to put it [the money] on the counter, but then the oriental lady started grabbing her. So then she—it was still in her hands." In fact, it was beside Latasha's left hand when Police Officer Jeffrey Alley responded to the call and arrived at Empire Liquor Market on that day. In court, he identified "a photograph of the victim lying in front of the counter, and there's a small amount of money underneath of her left hand." Also, Officer Johnson testified that he "saw two \$1.00 bills in U.S. currency lying on the floor next to the victim's left hand."³⁵

Ali and Combs recounted how the fight began. They testified that when Latasha's turn came to pay for the juice, Soon Ja started to accuse Latasha of shoplifting in a half-suspicious, "mean manner" by saying: "Are you trying to steal my orange juice?" and Latasha, getting ready to pay for it, responded: "No. I'm not. I am trying to pay for it." The videotape also displayed that, besides standing in line, Latasha was turning "sideways to show her the contents of the bag" when it came her turn to pay for the juice and when Soon Ja said something to her and "pointed to her backpack."³⁶ But Soon Ja did not wait for Latasha.

Within a second, the store's videotape showed that the quarrel escalated. In the videotape, Soon Ja was seen leaning over and quickly reaching across the counter to pull the orange juice out of the backpack, grabbing Latasha's [left] arm, and then catching the left sleeve of her sweater. Latasha was seen trying to slap Soon Ja's hand away from the sweater sleeve, and Soon Ja was seen pulling Latasha's sweater harder and harder and not letting her go. In describing the fight, Combs testified that Latasha told Soon Ja, "Let me go. Bitch, let me go" and that Soon Ja also called Latasha a "bitch" and repeated her accusation of Latasha's shoplifting the juice, and then they "scuffled for the backpack." Soon after that, in the videotape, Latasha was seen swinging the backpack at Soon Ja who snatched it.³⁷

Soon Ja, on the other hand, told a quite different version of how the fight started. She testified that "her first word [to Latasha] was "Please pay for the orange juice," [and Latasha's first word to her was] "What orange juice?" Latasha's alleged disrespectful response to her supposedly polite asking convinced her further that Latasha was a shoplifter, Soon Ja claimed. Now she was convinced that Latasha was one of the

shoplifters who “would take the merchandise, would place it inside the bra or any place where the owner would not notice, and would come up to the check stand, would buy some small items, and pay for them and leave.”³⁸

Contrary to her suspicion, it was a foot long, quart-size plastic juice bottle that could not be hidden easily. According to Comb’s testimony, Latasha put the bottle in the top pocket of the backpack she was wearing on her shoulder and almost the whole bottle was sticking out to the left. But Soon Ja said that she only saw the top of the bottle. Furthermore, Latasha stood in line and waited for her turn to pay. She did not try to buy any other items at the check stand.³⁹

When Deputy District Attorney Carvajal asked Soon Ja: “During the fight when this young lady was hitting you, at any point in time did you say “bitch, why are you stealing my orange juice?” Contrary to Combs’s testimony that she heard Soon Ja calling Latasha a “bitch” after Latasha used the word “bitch” first, she repudiated using the word “bitch.” Soon Ja at first firmly denied either Latasha or she used such a word. She said to her defending lawyer that they [Latasha and Soon Ja] “had no conversation” and that Latasha “just hit” her. Soon Ja added, “I never heard that word before. I never said that word. I didn’t even know what the meaning of that word was. After I got out of the hospital and the jail, and when I had a chance to talk to my daughter and I asked her about the meaning of that word, she told me that’s a bad word and you don’t really need to know.” But Soon Ja later changed her testimony about Latasha’s saying the word “bitch” when Carvajal asked her: “Is this the first time that she [Latasha] said that to you?” Soon Ja answered her: “No, she called me a “bitch” the first time also when she was hitting me.”⁴⁰

Soon Ja, on the other hand, narrated the fight more intensely. Although she thought Latasha was going to make some kind of trouble, she did not expect that Latasha “was going to beat her up,” so she “had pulled on the backpack” with all her strength “as hard as I was about to die.” Against her expectation, Latasha did not let the backpack go without a fight. When Soon Ja “was struck twice with the fist,” she described Latasha’s fist as “an iron-like fist,” which sent her down to the floor and thought her “[right] eye was going to fall out.”⁴¹

The videotape showed Latasha punching Soon Ja’s face at least three times: “the girl swipes the woman’s chin with her right fist, then slams her fist into the merchant’s eye. The woman’s body crumples toward the floor, but the girl tugs at the bag, pulling the merchant toward her, punching her in the face again.” Meanwhile, the backpack “swung free and fell to the counter.” Combs testified that Soon Ja got the backpack and “threw it behind the counter.”⁴²

Did Latasha strike Soon Ja’s face more than three times? Although it is not easy to determine with certainty how many times Latasha hit Soon Ja’s face with her fist, the number of blows ranges from two to five. Combs testified that she saw Latasha hitting her four times.⁴³ Soon Ja first said two but later changed to five all together: three before throwing the chair and two more after that. In the videotape, many saw three blows: one sweeping blow on the chin, one on the right eye, and one on the face.

The Korean-American community counted four to five strikes landing on Soon Ja’s face, which set them apart from other communities. For example, while the *Los Angeles Times* counted three punches seen in the videotape, the *Korea Times* reported that Latasha hit Soon Ja four to five times. *Los Angeles Times* on October 2, 1991, reported that in the

videotape Latasha was seen striking Soon Ja in the face at least three times. But *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) on March 19, 1991, reported that Soon Ja told her family that Latasha punched Soon Ja's face twice: first with her fist and second with the bottle of orange juice. Joseph Du told the *Korea Times* reporter that one of Latasha's punches resulted in Soon Ja's black eye. Lt. Mike Markulis, head of the police investigation, said, "Du sustained the black eye when Harlins managed to hit her twice in the face." The October 10, 1991, *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) also wrote that in the videotape, Soon Ja received four blows from Latasha: two before and two more after the chair was thrown. Also, *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) on October 7 reported that "Harlins hit Du four times with her fist and once with the bag" before the chair was thrown. It continued that "a videotape from a store camera shows Du grabbing Harlins by the arm when the girl swung her fist and backpack, hitting the shopkeeper five times."⁴⁴

In the videotape, Soon Ja was seen falling down on the floor but standing up with a three-foot high chair and throwing it at Latasha, and Latasha was seen dodging the flying chair, about five feet away from Soon Ja. Soon Ja explained that "without any thoughts" she "just saw a chair through the side of her eye" and "out of reflex," her "hand happened to grab onto the leg of a chair" and threw it at Latasha "because she thought she was going to die," when she fell on the floor. Soon Ja then insisted that after she threw the chair, Latasha "walked up to her and hit her again" in the face, which sent her to the floor for the second time.⁴⁵

The videotape supported neither Soon Ja's claim of a second fall nor of Latasha's additional hitting. In the videotape, Latasha was not near Soon Ja after the chair was thrown, so Latasha could not have hit her again. The videotape, however, showed Soon Ja

reaching under the counter after Latasha dodged the chair and coming up with a handgun after fumbling to unsnap the holster and screaming for her husband. Combs also witnessed Soon Ja's struggle to pull the gun out of the brown gun pouch. According to Combs, Soon Ja tried to unsnap the holster to take the gun out of the pouch. The videotape also displayed Latasha bending, picking up the bottle, and handing it to Soon Ja, and Soon Ja knocking it behind the counter with her gun. The videotape did not show Latasha hitting Soon Ja after she threw the chair.⁴⁶

Soon Ja further illustrated the moment just before the shooting. According to Soon Ja, when she fell to the floor for the second time, "a gun just happened to fall into her [extended] hands" after she saw a gun underneath the paper bag on the shelf right in front of her eyes. She recalled that she "just grabbed onto it somehow" and that she "had no real purpose [with the gun]." She also remembered that Latasha told her two or three times "in a very low voice, 'Bitch, I'll kill you'" from "the moment of my falling down [the second time] to the moment of my getting up again." So, according to Soon Ja, as Latasha gave the orange juice to her, she threatened to kill Soon Ja when she saw a gun in Soon Ja's hand. These verbal threats to kill her made Soon Ja feel that her life was in a danger.⁴⁷

Carvajal, the prosecuting attorney, described Soon Ja's alleged "second fall" in the videotape as "bending over and picking up the gun that was under the counter." She also pointed out to her that Latasha was "not near the counter" at that moment. Defense had no objections to Carvajal's argument. Also, the two eyewitnesses testified that they did not hear Latasha's threatening words. After seeing the videotape scenes several times from the point she threw the chair at Latasha until she stood up with a gun in her hand, Soon Ja finally admitted in court that she "felt—fallen down for the second time" because she "was

somewhat dazed so perhaps I didn't know what was going on."⁴⁸ At that moment, in the videotape, Latasha was seen turning toward the door to leave, while Soon Ja was seen gripping the gun with two hands, aiming at Latasha, and shooting her. This time, Latasha's body fell to the floor.

Claiming her memory lapse, Soon Ja at first denied shooting. She remembered neither touching the gun nor aiming at Latasha nor shooting her. The only thing she remembered was crying and the pain in her eye. Soon Ja answered, "I don't know how I held the gun even and was fired somehow," when Leonard, her lawyer, asked, "At any point in time, do you remember pointing this gun at the back of the head of that young lady and pulling the trigger?" Although she had admitted to firing the gun to Officer Johnson, after she was arrested at the hospital, in court, she repeated her memory lapse again to Carvajal: "I do not recall even discharging the gun." Soon Ja further explained: the first time she found out that she shot the girl was when her daughter told her in the hospital while she was "lying in a bed," with her chest attached to a testing machine and with both hands handcuffed.⁴⁹

Contrary to Soon Ja's repeated claims of ignorance of guns and renouncement of the aiming and shooting, she evidently aimed at the retreating Latasha who had made at least one step toward the door because Soon Ja was about five feet four inches tall and Latasha was five feet six inches tall. The difference of their height required Soon Ja to hold the gun in a slightly upward position.⁵⁰

David Butler, an LAPD firearms expert, testified about the handgun that Soon Ja had used to shoot Latasha: a .38-caliber Smith and Wesson five-shot stainless steel revolver with a two-inch barrel. According to his testimony, someone had altered the hammer of the gun to fire it with a hair-trigger pull if the hammer was cocked, meaning the gun could

go off with no trigger pressure at all—but only if the gun was already cocked under some circumstances. Unless its trigger was pulled, the gun, however, would not go off by simply dropping to the floor or bumping against a table. Butler also said, “the gun cannot be put in the holster in the cocked position and have the holster closed,” which meant that Soon Ja must have cocked the hammer.⁵¹

Many people who saw the videotape were puzzled by the inconsistency between Soon Ja’s claimed unfamiliarity with guns and her apparent familiarity with it as seen in the videotape. Soon Ja’s expressed mental and physical conditions at the time of the shooting also damaged her credibility. She was seen in the videotape holding the gun with both hands, bracing on the counter, aiming at Latasha, and firing the gun. The fact that Soon Ja’s single bullet hit the back of Latasha’s head, approximately 3 to 4 feet from her, strained credibility. She shot Latasha with her “dazed and swollen right eye,” with a gun that “just happen[ed] to fall into her extended hand,” and by simply “holding the grip of the gun and shaking it” just once “in a state of panic.”⁵²

Soon Ja, on the other hand, firmly asserted that she knew nothing about guns. She had neither seen anyone “pulling the hammer back before firing” it, nor had she known the trigger had to be pulled back in order for the gun to go off. She did not even know how to “pull the trigger on the gun.” Furthermore, she did not even “know where the focus of the trigger” was. She never touched it and never used it before the incident. To stress her ignorance of guns further, in the courtroom she demonstrated her shooting act by putting her finger not on the trigger, but entirely on the grip of the gun.⁵³

Furthermore, to support her complete ignorance of guns, Soon Ja then talked about her limited experience with American culture and Korean culture relating to women. In some

“gangster” movies and in Vietnam War films, she said, she saw people’s arms stretching out in front of the gun, holding the grip of the gun, and shaking it made the gun go off. Therefore, she did not know that a gun has to be cocked to fire. She said, “I seen hand grip it [gun], and it get discharged. I never seen somebody actually putting the finger somewhere and actually discharging the gun.” But she said that she did know that she had to point the gun in the direction of the target to hit it. In addition, emphasizing that she was a traditional Korean woman who could not have known or seen a gun, Soon Ja suggested to the court that, for a Korean woman, shooting was not imaginable. She said that the first time she ever saw a gun was after she came to the United States in 1976. Because “Korean women only take care of the house chores and domestic work,” and she never “even had an opportunity to see the gun before.”⁵⁴

Although Soon Ja tried to maintain her absolute ignorance of guns throughout the trial, many doubted her testimony. Lloyd tried to sustain Soon Ja’s story by pointing out that Soon Ja’s hand on the trigger was not seen in the videotape when she pulled the gun out.⁵⁵ Yet, in the videotape, Soon Ja appeared to be quite confident in holding, aiming, and shooting the gun. She seemed to be neither nervous nor clumsy in handling the gun. At this moment in the videotape, she showed not only a calm but also decisive and assured appearance. She was seen not shaking the gun up and down to make the gun go off as she had seen in some “gangster” and Vietnam War movies. She did not shake it; she accurately aimed the gun at Latasha, casting a serious doubt that she could accidentally make a gun go off “by holding the grip of the gun and shaking it” and kill Latasha in a single shot.

Officer Johnson also thought that Soon Ja’s claim of unfamiliarity with firearms was unconvincing when she was able to kill Latasha with a single bullet. Johnson concluded

that Soon Ja had tried “to create a false impression to the jury by claiming complete inexperience with weapons and a lack of knowledge as to how they are held.”⁵⁶

Billy, Soon Ja’s husband, was the first person to enter the store after the shooting. According to Billy, when he rushed into the store after hearing the sound of a gunshot, he saw his wife leaning on the counter with both hands stretched out; then she “slipped down on the floor.” He found his wife lying down on the floor behind the counter. Then, his wife asked him “where was that person?” He saw Latasha lying on the floor and his wife falling into unconsciousness. Billy described his wife as “falling into—collapsing into deep unconsciousness” and as “dying in front of him.” Nevertheless, when the police arrived at the store, they found that his wife appeared to be passed out, but was sitting on a chair behind the counter and that Billy was talking to a 911 operator.⁵⁷

The videotape showed Soon Ja as she “leaned over the counter” and “peered repeatedly over the counter,” “looking for the body.” Although she failed to see Latasha’s body just lying on the floor less than 4 feet from the counter in a pool of blood, she was able to ask her husband the whereabouts of “the girl who just hit her” and “asked him to call the police” as soon as she saw her husband.⁵⁸

Was Soon Ja really looking for Latasha, who had fallen to the floor less than four feet from her with blood gushing out of her? Could she really avoid or miss seeing Latasha on the floor over the counter? Or was she still trying to make sure that Latasha would not get up from the floor and somehow kill her? When Carvajal asked Soon Ja, “Were you afraid she was going to come up [from the floor] and get you?” She responded “Yes” to Carvajal’s question. At one point in his testimony, Billy quickly changed his response to Carvajal’s question of what he was saying in the 911 tape from “my wife asked me ‘Where

was that customer? She was—I'm not sure whether she's dead or not” to “she asked me where is that customer that is standing here.”⁵⁹

Soon Ja's injuries had been widely publicized in several newspapers, particularly in the Korean ethnic newspapers in Los Angeles. The March 17, 1991, *Los Angeles Times*, the first article of the incident, reported that “the owner later complained of a head injury suffered during the brief struggle with the girl.” The *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) on March 20, 1991, also reported Soon Ja's saying that “anyone who sees her injury that was caused by the girl's fist and orange juice bottle would understand that she was in a condition that shooting was unavoidable.” The *Korea Times'* devotion of many articles to Soon Ja's injuries and her health conditions following the incident played a pivotal role in getting the Korean-American community's sympathy and support for Soon Ja's self-defense.⁶⁰ This point is further explored in the next chapter.

Contrary to Soon Ja's claim, Latasha's hitting did not cause all Soon Ja's injuries. Although Soon Ja complained of head injuries that she claimed were caused only by Latasha's hard punches, Officer Spinello testified that “not all of her injuries necessarily were the result of being punched by Harlins.” He said that when he arrived on the scene, Billy was slapping Soon Ja who was in a chair behind the counter. According to Spinello, Billy started slapping her, “at first not so hard, gradually to very hard slaps until I had to stop him . . . because of the force he was using.” Billy subsequently testified that “he had hit his wife so hard because he panicked, thinking she was slipping into unconsciousness.”⁶¹

Some evidence suggests that Soon Ja may not only have faked her unconsciousness but also exaggerated her injuries sustained from Latasha's hitting. Soon Ja claimed that

Latasha's "iron-like-punches" caused her head injuries and made her lose consciousness. And yet, several pieces of conflicting evidence provide doubt to her claim. The discrediting testimony comes from Officer Spinello, Dr. Joann Williams, the hospital staff, and Officer Johnson. Officer Spinello thought she was feigning unconsciousness because he saw "movement" in her eye when he lifted one of her eyelids. When she was taken to Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital/Drew Medical Center with possible brain damage and eye and facial injuries, the hospital's medical staff concluded that she had nothing seriously wrong with her health except a black eye. They observed Soon Ja feigning unconsciousness during her stay at the hospital. After an interview with Dr. Joann Williams, who had examined Soon Ja at the hospital, Patricia Dwyer, the probation officer who was appointed by the court to evaluate Soon Ja's suitability for probation, wrote that "psychomotor testing indicated that defendant was in fact conscious, and staff observed the defendant sitting up and alert when she believed she was not being watched by hospital personnel." Officer Johnson also concurred with the hospital's findings. After reviewing the investigating officers' reports and the videotape, Johnson also thought that Du had exaggerated her injuries and feigned unconsciousness.⁶²

Soon Ja claimed that she killed Latasha because Latasha physically and verbally threatened her life. This fear that her life is in danger, Soon Ja said, came from Latasha's iron-like punches and her verbal threat, which Latasha made to her at the end of the fifth punch that sent her to the floor for the second time. Soon Ja's fear at the moment of shooting needs to be further examined because the fear became the base for her self-defense. What made Soon Ja kill Latasha? Was the fear that her life was threatened real, imagined, or fabricated?

Soon Ja's claim that she feared for her life presents some doubt. She testified that she was not afraid of Latasha when she grabbed her sweater and pulled Latasha's backpack. But she said that she started to be afraid of Latasha when Latasha beat her up. Even when Soon Ja was struck by Latasha and fell down on the floor, and felt that her "[right] eye was going to fall out," despite her "dazed, panicked, and shocked" state, she was still able to throw the backpack behind the counter and a three-foot high chair at Latasha.⁶³

Soon Ja also claimed that she feared for her life because she suspected that Latasha was hiding some weapon in the backpack. She testified that Latasha's unwillingness to give up her backpack reinforced her suspicion. According to Soon Ja, Latasha's not giving up her backpack in spite of Soon Ja's pulling it as hard as if she "was about to die," convinced her that Latasha was hiding some weapon like "a gun, a knife, or some kind of blunt instrument" in the backpack. And this suspicion made Soon Ja shoot Latasha because she felt a threat to her life from Latasha. Yet, according to Soon Ja's own testimony, Latasha had neither any weapon on her nor her backpack at the time of shooting. Actually, it was Soon Ja who had two guns and Latasha's backpack, and she was supposedly afraid for her life behind the counter.⁶⁴

Soon Ja's further claim that Latasha verbally threatened her life also sounds incredible. According to Soon Ja, Latasha threatened her by saying "Bitch, I'll kill you" when she stood up with a gun in her hand. In addition to the two eyewitnesses' testimony that they did not hear Latasha's threats, Latasha's behaviors seen in the videotape at this moment cast doubt on Soon Ja's claim. Instead of showing Latasha hitting Soon Ja again after she threw the chair at Latasha, the videotape showed that Latasha was picking up the juice from the floor and handing it to Soon Ja when Latasha supposedly said the threatening

words to her, who was swiping the bottle behind the counter with a gun. Latasha's gesture of picking up the bottle and giving it Soon Ja contradict her continuous intention to threaten Soon Ja verbally or physically at this moment, and they indicate Latasha's readiness to end the fight. Furthermore, it was unlikely that Latasha, who was familiar with the guns and crimes of South Central, would make verbal threats in such a low voice, while looking at a gun in Soon Ja's hand. It was more likely that she would either duck or run away immediately from the gun. At this moment, this is what Latasha precisely did—turned toward the door because she saw Soon Ja with a gun.⁶⁵

In justifying her shooting, Soon Ja introduced Latasha's attempted robbery story before the "iron-like fist." At first Soon Ja told her family and the police that she killed Latasha because Latasha attempted to rob the store. She did not tell them that she shot Latasha because Latasha endangered her life with hard blows and verbal threats. The story that she feared for her life surfaced a couple days after the shooting. Secondly, although Soon Ja thought Latasha fit her son's description of a gang member, she testified that she was not afraid of Latasha. At this moment, Soon Ja thought Latasha a typical woman shoplifter in her mid-twenties, who was going to make some kind of trouble but not an attacker who "was going to beat her up."⁶⁶

So the facts in this case discredited Soon Ja's claim that Latasha threatened her life. Latasha had not physically and verbally endangered her life. Physically, Soon Ja was able to retaliate Latasha's iron-like punches by throwing a chair at her. Latasha's supposed verbal threats were unlikely under the circumstance. Soon Ja's suspicion that Latasha hid a deadly weapon in the backpack was false. Thus, the facts did not support her fear of

Latasha; it was not real. Then, was Soon Ja's fear that Latasha threatened her life imagined or fabricated?

Soon Ja's fear for her life did not come from Latasha. It came from the area where her store was located: South Central Los Angeles. In many ways, South Central not only gave Soon Ja a feeling of contempt for African Americans but it also terrified her. She was fed up with South Central Los Angeles. Because of the danger of gang assaults in the area, and hearing about robbers killing some merchants there made her fear that it could be her son or her husband who would be killed the next time.⁶⁷ Soon Ja's fears and frustrations surrounding her store in South Central were understandably real.

Joseph testified for his mother on the dangers surrounding the Empire Liquor Market. Since the store's opening in 1989 until the time of the incident, he had worked with his father at the store. His mother usually worked at another family-owned liquor store, Bouquet Canyon Liquor Store in the Saugus area (in Valencia) and worked at the Empire Liquor Market only once in a while. According to Joseph's testimony, the Empire Liquor Market had been robbed three times, the first time on December 16, 1990, the second time on December 19, 1990, and the third time on March 9, 1991, and burglarized over thirty times and shoplifted countless times. Ten to fourteen gang members of the Main Street Crips terrorized the Dus by threatening more than thirty times to kill him and more than twenty times to burn down the store. Soon Ja was aware of the gang's threats and robberies. In February, the family had to close Empire Liquor Market for two weeks because the neighborhood gang members threatened Joseph's life for testifying against three gang members. At the time of the shooting incident, they were waiting to be tried for these crimes.⁶⁸

In studying her reason for killing Latasha, however, it appears that Soon Ja's racism rather than her fear for her life actuated the shooting. Considering the fact that the orange juice was only \$1.79, the shooting may have nothing to do with either a simple business related matter or fear, but may have something to do with how Soon Ja viewed African-American customers in her store. Soon Ja was not afraid of Latasha, but she undeniably perceived Latasha as a shoplifter because she was an African American. Soon Ja perceived that all blacks are potential shoplifters and thieves. Certainly, this attitude did not come from anything Latasha did on that morning. If Latasha had not been a strong, athletic-looking, dark skinned black youngster, would Soon Ja have assumed that Latasha was a gang member and a shoplifter? Would Soon Ja have confronted Latasha or assumed that she stole the orange juice if she were not black? "Would Latasha not have been shot had she been white?"⁶⁹

Although Latasha's behavior of sticking the bottle in the outside pocket of her backpack before paying could be interpreted as an attempt at shoplifting, her other behaviors indicated that she did not attempt to shoplift. For instance, Latasha had \$2.00 in her left hand, and the orange juice was \$1.79. Soon Ja admitted seeing the top portion of the bottle and watching Latasha come directly toward the check stand and stand in line behind the two youngsters. Latasha's backpack seemed to be a regular size one with an outside pocket that was not huge enough to cover the whole bottle. Combs, one of the eyewitnesses to the incident, testified that almost the whole foot-long, quart-size juice bottle was sticking out of the left pocket of the backpack. In addition, the videotape showed that Latasha turned sideways to show her the bottle when Soon Ja pointed at it.

Both Ali and Combs testified that Latasha told Soon Ja that she was trying to pay for the juice when Soon Ja accused Latasha of shoplifting.⁷⁰

Soon Ja, however, said that before grabbing her, she asked Latasha very politely to: “Please pay for the orange juice” and Latasha responded to Soon Ja by saying “What orange juice?” Considering that in the videotape, Soon Ja was seen speaking to Latasha by pointing to her backpack and Latasha was seen turning sideways to show her the backpack, her portrayal of asking her to pay for the juice “politely” appears unlikely. Also, before Latasha walked into the store, Soon Ja had waited on a little over ten customers since she opened it at 9:00 a.m. This meant that she took care of each customer in less than three minutes. Soon Ja’s saying, “Please pay for [whatever]” to each of her customers was unlikely. Her son also said to the *Korea Times* reporter that his mother called out to Latasha and “demanded” payment because Latasha was leaving the store without paying for the juice.⁷¹

Even if Latasha had responded, “What orange juice?” as Soon Ja claimed, she grabbed Latasha because she was a black, not just because she thought the girl was shoplifting. From the beginning, she was sure that Latasha was shoplifting. Soon Ja not only accused her of stealing the juice, but also failed to see the indication of Latasha’s remarks, money, and gestures that she was trying to pay for it. Soon Ja’s presumption that Latasha could not have had any money further reinforced her bias against Latasha. Despite Soon Ja’s unexpected and unfair accusation and continuous seizure, the two eyewitnesses testified that Latasha asked Soon Ja to let her go, and, then, the videotape showed Latasha slapped Soon Ja’s hand away before she ultimately punched Soon Ja in her face. But Soon Ja neither heard nor saw Latasha’s gestures.

Soon Ja's action of grabbing reflected both her contempt for African Americans and her related assumption that all African-American customers shoplift. Latasha was an African American. Grabbing in this circumstance meant subjugation, and therefore it was a contemptuous behavior, but Soon Ja felt nothing wrong with grabbing Latasha. Soon Ja more likely assumed that her older age in the Confucian value system automatically sanctified it; her higher social and economic status as a store-owner in a socially desolated and economically depressed area gave her the right and the power to grab Latasha. As a storeowner, she probably thought that she had the right to stop Latasha from stealing; it was her obligation. Soon Ja could not understand and most certainly did not expect Latasha to fight to get her dignity back when she took it away from Latasha by falsely accusing and grabbing her. In this respect, she was arrogant in expecting Latasha to submit immediately to her assumed power and authority.

Some people may see Latasha's behavior of sticking the bottle into the pocket of her backpack as the impetus of the incident. Some probably consider that Latasha's striking Soon Ja caused her own death. As Carvajal said in the grand jury summation, "What would you expect a 15-year-old girl to do?"⁷² Neither Latasha's putting the bottle in the backpack pocket nor hitting Soon Ja to get her off is such an unusual behavior among teenagers, especially in the inner cities. Police Officer Johnson stated to Njeri that his son would have "slugged" Soon Ja if she had grabbed him the way she grabbed Latasha. He also said to Njeri, "kids frequently put things in backpacks, thoroughly intending to pay for them."⁷³

Soon Ja testified that she did not expect that Latasha would beat her up when she grabbed Latasha and tried to take her backpack. Initially, Soon Ja grabbed Latasha to get

her orange juice back. When Soon Ja's suspicion escalated from thinking that Latasha was shoplifting to believing that she was hiding a weapon in the backpack, she attempted to take Latasha's backpack. Latasha, on the other hand, initially fought back to get Soon Ja off of her. But when Soon Ja tried to take her backpack, Latasha fought Soon Ja to protect her backpack. Latasha did not need to strike Soon Ja nor did Soon Ja have to grab Latasha, pull her backpack, and refuse to let her go.

Both Soon Ja and Latasha made assumptions and took actions that led to the murder. Neither had to do what they did. Without much thought, both acted out their assumptions and beliefs. In other words, Latasha did not have to put the bottle in the backpack pocket before paying for it; Soon Ja did not have to grab Latasha and attempt to take her backpack; Latasha did not have to strike Soon Ja; and, finally, Soon Ja did not have to kill Latasha.

First of all, it appeared that Soon Ja assumed that Latasha would not feel insulted when she accused Latasha of shoplifting and tried to take her backpack. Because she believed that all blacks are potential shoplifters, she assumed therefore that they would be accustomed to being accused of shoplifting. This attitude explains not only Soon Ja's failure to see Latasha's money and her attempts to pay for the juice, but also Soon Ja's unprepared position to be struck by a young black girl.

Secondly, Soon Ja, again, appeared to expect a young black girl to submit to her demand immediately. This expectation came from Soon Ja's internalized Confucian rules of proper behavior. In Confucian rules, the younger person must respect the elder's mistake as if any wrongs the elder made were actually borne by the younger. From this perspective, it is very possible that Soon Ja thought she could not be doing anything wrong,

because, compared with Latasha, she believed herself higher in social rank, material wealth, and age.

Thirdly, to Soon Ja's amazement, Latasha fought back instead of "ducking at" Du's "whip." Latasha had a different set of proper behavior rules: "a code of street conduct: You do not put your hands on me without a fight—win, lose or draw."⁷⁴ While grabbing meant to Soon Ja a simple display of her superior power, it implied to Latasha an inescapable invitation to fight for her dignity and safety. Perhaps most important, Soon Ja overlooked what grabbing could symbolize to Latasha. Soon Ja's ignorance of the street code of conduct where she operated her store heartbreakingly took away a fifteen-year-old girl's life.

Latasha grew up in the nation's poorest and most violent cities. She had lived in South Central Los Angeles since she had moved from East St. Louis, Illinois—another economically depressed and drug- and crime-ridden inner-city—when she was four years old.⁷⁵ In these cities, according to Elijah Anderson in *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, many residents, especially the younger generation, behave following a "code of the street" to protect their safety because police could not protect them. The fact that they have to use their own resources to survive based on "street justice" encourages and reinforces the ability to take care of oneself using physical violence, if the situation requires it. Anderson points out that children learn the need of physical violence to defend themselves, and the code becomes internalized. To a degree, physical and mental toughness is considered a virtue. An ability to take care of oneself is well respected in the inner-city.⁷⁶

In this interpersonal context, when someone attacks, physical prowess is a fairly common way of asserting oneself.⁷⁷ When Soon Ja accused, grabbed, and pulled Latasha and took her backpack, it was a verbally and physically aggressive attack on Latasha's personal safety. Based on street code, when Latasha struck Soon Ja, it was her self-defense against Soon Ja's attack. Latasha had to defend herself and protect her possessions.

Latasha could not have known exactly what Soon Ja expected from her. In the videotape, Latasha first complied with Soon Ja's demand by turning sideways to show her the backpack when Soon Ja asked her. That was not what Soon Ja expected. Instead of waiting for Latasha to pay for the juice, Soon Ja immediately reached over the counter and grabbed Latasha. It appears she expected Latasha to accept her insulting accusations and render respect by taking out the orange juice and putting it on the counter with her \$2.00, or perhaps by giving the backpack with a smile and apology before Soon Ja grabbed her. If Latasha had done either, or had continued to plead with Soon Ja to let her go until Soon Ja released her, and had not struck Soon Ja, she might still be alive today.

Upon closer review, Soon Ja's actions indicate more rage at Latasha than fear of her. When Latasha punched her face three times, Soon Ja was outraged as well as panicked. Up until this moment, Soon Ja was quite certain that Latasha would not beat her up even though she expected that she would cause some kind of trouble. At least two possible reasons explain Soon Ja's uncontrollable rage. One was Soon Ja's adherence to the Confucian rule of proper behaviors; the other was her feeling of embarrassment and defeat. In the five rules of Confucian values, it was unimaginable for a younger person to strike an older person. Many Korean Americans understood Soon Ja's predicament and

sympathized with her “rage at young customers’ assertive attitude to older shopkeepers.”⁷⁸ This Confucian rule supplied a ground for many Korean Americans’ belief in Soon Ja’s innocence and their justification for her killing Latasha.

Soon Ja’s rage also came from the fact that Latasha overpowered her with stronger physical power—her “iron-like-fist.” This frightened her. Latasha’s hard “iron-like” punch surprised Soon Ja because it was not what she expected from Latasha, although she initiated the fight by grabbing her. At the same time, it also embarrassed her because Latasha was a young black girl who was supposed to be neither stronger nor more powerful than she. Her belief system dictated that she should not submit to a young black girl and should make Latasha obey her at all costs even if it meant killing her.

Soon Ja’s rage at Latasha mirrored her loathing and dread of South Central; Latasha was not whom Soon Ja really hated and feared. Although her own testimony as well as her acts seen in the store’s videotape refuted her claim that fear motivated Soon Ja to shoot Latasha, she justified her killing by identifying her fear of South Central with Latasha. To reinforce her fear and to legitimize the murder, Soon Ja stressed the image of gangs and the dangers of South Central. Her son’s victimization in one of the gang’s assaults was also emphasized. So, right after the incident, Soon Ja circulated the robbery story by telling some *Korea Times* reporters that the injuries on her face would prove that the shooting was unavoidable. Her identification of Latasha with her fear of gangs and crimes brought about the public, particularly Korean Americans, understanding of her predicament. In this context, Soon Ja persuaded the public that it was the dangers of ghetto life that were responsible for the murder, and it was not she, the feeble, overwhelmed, and overworked Korean American storeowner at the mercy of shoplifters and gang members, who was

responsible for the murder. In this way, implying that Latasha's blackness and her ghetto life forced Soon Ja to kill Latasha, Soon Ja made Latasha responsible for her own death.⁷⁹

Soon Ja's robbery story shows the degree of her aggressiveness in seeking her own interests. Soon Ja ruthlessly framed Latasha as a robber. From the beginning Soon Ja knew that Latasha did not try to steal money from her cash register. But she started the robbery scenario right after she killed Latasha. At the hospital when she was arrested, Soon Ja told police that she shot Latasha because Latasha tried to take cash from the cash register. Then, she told her family members who visited her at the prison that Latasha punched her with the orange juice bottle when she tried to stop Latasha taking money from the cash register. This robbery attempt story was then spread to several newspapers.

Although the criminal court transcript and the videotape unquestionably cleared Latasha of shoplifting in the store, and it actually showed Soon Ja's motive in fabricating and circulating the misperception, the public impression of Latasha as a would-be robber has not changed. Sadly, Soon Ja did not try to erase it, and, although I can never know for sure, the Dus probably never apologized to the Harlins family not only for depriving them of love, joy, and hope by cutting Latasha's life short, but also for falsely portraying Latasha as a would-be robber.

Importantly, Soon Ja's lie of attempted robbery was believable to many because Latasha was an African American. Soon Ja used the robbery story persuasively because she knew that in the racialized American society, the image of black teenagers robbing a store was already an understood and agreed-upon stereotype. Furthermore, Soon Ja was encouraged to lie by her belief that public desire for protection from these black youngsters would make people sympathetic to her argument that she acted in self-defense. Soon Ja used this

accepted understanding to justify shooting Latasha to death. The public's expectation that Latasha "must have been doing something" that made Soon Ja kill her provided Soon Ja with a way to protect herself.

Soon Ja in essence killed Latasha twice: once inside her store with a gun and the second time outside her store with a fabrication of Latasha's attempted robbery. The Dus spread this lie to not only a *Los Angeles Times* reporter but also to some *Korea Times* reporters. The *Korea Times* in Los Angeles had several articles delineating Latasha as robber, and many newspapers in Korea reported her as a robber as well. As a result, many Koreans considered her a robber. What is worse is that many Koreans, especially Korean merchants, understood and accepted Soon Ja's fabrication as quite reasonable.

Soon Ja's framing of Latasha as a robber left a lingering imprint in the mind of many Koreans. Soon Ja's initial bold-faced lie about Latasha's attempted robbery, Billy's subsequent misleading reports to a 911 operator and the police, and Joseph's eventual misrepresentation to *Los Angeles Times* and *Korea Times* reporters spread and justified Soon Ja's action in Korean communities in the United States as well as in Korea. Even today, the image of Latasha as a "robber lady" who was going for the cash register when she was shot remains as a major flashing memory of the incident as much as or more than the bottle of orange juice.

After the trial, Soon Ja's racism came out openly. When the white probation officer Patricia Dwyer interviewed Soon Ja, she openly expressed dislike, fear, and contempt for blacks. During the interviews with Dwyer, who evaluated Soon Ja's suitability for probation, Soon Ja told her how she really felt about all African Americans. Ironically, defense attorney Charles Lloyd, an African American, was worried and warned Soon Ja

against telling Dwyer her “negative stereotypes of black people.” Although Lloyd tried to explain Soon Ja’s racism by her language difficulty and cultural unfamiliarity, he was aware of Soon Ja’s negative attitudes toward African Americans because he knew that “racism was prevalent among Koreans who wanted to be accepted in the white world.” Soon Ja’s ignorance and naiveté in race relations troubled him, too. He knew that Soon Ja’s assumption that all whites had the same racist attitudes toward blacks and that all whites therefore would sympathize with her negative feelings toward blacks would eventually lead her to reveal her negative prejudices about blacks to a white probation officer. This was exactly what Soon Ja did. In spite of his warning, Soon Ja revealed her prejudices to Dwyer. Through an official Korean translator, in the second interview with Dwyer, she told her that “[All] blacks were lazy and used welfare money to buy liquor instead of feeding their children.”⁸⁰

Dwyer’s evaluation report on Soon Ja’s sentencing disclosed her observation of Soon Ja’s racial prejudice. After listening to Soon Ja’s negative attitudes that were “tinged with suspicion, fear and contempt” toward African Americans, Dwyer wrote:

It was this attitude that caused her to set in motion a chain of events which led to the death of a 15-year-old child. Accusing the victim of theft and physically accosting her, who presumably wanted to pay for the orange juice, the defendant confronted the girl who approached the counter with money in her hand. While the victim may have responded with excessive force, the defendant’s response was horrifying . . . in an uncontrollable rage [she] shot the girl in the back of the head as she attempted to leave.⁸¹

Soon Ja’s actions in the incident further convinced Dwyer that Soon Ja did not feel remorse for killing Latasha. Dwyer wrote that Soon Ja’s actions of not providing any assistance to the victim immediately after the shooting, exaggerating her injuries, feigning unconsciousness, and falsifying an attempted robbery suggested inability to show

responsibility for her actions, compassion for her victim, or remorse at her killing.

Asserting that any of Soon Ja's expressions of guilt or remorse related only to "the possible consequences" of going to prison, Dwyer concluded that Soon Ja's actions were "a deliberate attempt to manipulate public opinion and underscore her unrepentant attitude."⁸²

Although Soon Ja's expressed racism bothered the probation officer, Dwyer was more troubled by Soon Ja's callousness. Dwyer wrote that Soon Ja "did not accept responsibility for the offense and expressed no remorse for what had occurred." Soon Ja's apparent remorseless behavior substantiated her unwillingness to be responsible for the shooting. She did not feel that she had done anything wrong. Nor did she feel sorry for taking the life of another human being. Soon Ja made her feelings very clear in her response to Dwyer's question about how she felt about killing Latasha: she said she "would not change anything if she could live through the incident again."⁸³

During the interviews with Dwyer, Soon Ja blamed Latasha for causing her and her family pain and shame. Soon Ja said to the probation officer:

"It didn't come to my mind right away . . . [I] found out she was such a young girl . . . such a painful experience . . . I pray for her, thinking that if she was born in a better family, better situation she could have been leading a much happier life . . . She made me suffer so much, and she suffered tragedy, too."⁸⁴

These statements further supported Soon Ja's unwillingness to feel responsible for the killing. She undoubtedly treated Latasha as an agent of all Soon Ja's own evil acts in the incident. It could not have been Soon Ja's fault but Latasha's. By making Latasha's poor family background and the crime-ridden South Central Los Angeles responsible for her shooting, Soon Ja rationalized that if Latasha was born in a better family, she would not have forced Soon Ja to kill her.

The court transcripts also revealed Soon Ja's avoidance in taking responsibility for her shooting. In her testimony, Soon Ja claimed that she neither remembered nor acknowledged killing Latasha. She expressed the killing in a mixed stance. On the one hand, she avoided accepting the killing by describing Latasha's dead body falling to the floor as disappearance from her eyes: "That girl was gone all of a sudden. She was there just a moments ago, and there was no girl." According to Soon Ja, the shooting did not really happen. On the other hand, if she admitted the killing, she tried to blame Latasha for her own murder. Soon Ja blamed Latasha's strong athletic physique for her own feelings of intimidation; Latasha's apparel—baseball cap and backpack—for her mistake of falsely accusing Latasha as a shoplifting gang member; Latasha's putting a \$1.79, foot long plastic bottle in her backpack for her own initiation of a fight by grabbing and pulling; Latasha's punching her in her face for her pulling out a gun and shooting her to death. It was Latasha that made her do the killing. It was Latasha's own fault that she was dead.⁸⁵

There was also no expression of remorse in her testimony. Soon Ja's testimony in most parts reflects her ability to see things centered only on herself. It manifests Soon Ja's quick and persistent tendency to appeal to others' pity. It did not show that she cared about other persons. In responding, for example, to district attorney Carvajal's question relating to the killing, Soon Ja shifted the subject of killing Latasha to her pitiable condition in the hospital by describing her chest attached to a testing machine in handcuffed position. Not even once in her testimony did Soon Ja express sorrow for taking the life of a human being. Not even once did she take responsibility for her failure to see the money and Latasha's gesture of willingness to pay, or recognize the wrongful and disrespectful insinuation she made to Latasha, or her own lack of wisdom and business sense when she

did not yield and release Latasha's sweater and backpack, and she did not accept that Latasha gave up the fight.

From the day of the killing to the day of the sentence, Soon Ja only expressed her regrets for how the incident affected her and her family. According to Cannon, "Du's letter to Judge Karlin, dated October 25, written in Korean and translated by Sandy Du" attested to her unwillingness to feel compassion and remorse for Latasha and her family. In this letter, Soon Ja described the killing as an "unexpected horrifying accident" that Latasha forced her and her family to go through. She wrote to the Judge: "Even to this day I can't believe something like this could happen to our family." Soon Ja's letter to Judge Karlin continued:

I feel like I am suffering in a nightmare. I am sad and overwhelmed by the incident, and I find myself wondering, only if my eyes weren't suffering from the iron like punch, only if I was fully aware that I was doing something like this would have never happened.⁸⁶

This letter reflected Soon Ja's unfeeling attitudes toward Latasha and her family. While her suspicion and fear played a decisive role in her power struggle with Latasha, her arrogance and contempt for Latasha definitely contributed to her refusal to take responsibility or to feel compassion and regret toward Latasha and her family.

In summary, the case of *People v. Soon Ja Du* involves racism. This was not a simple business quarrel between a Korean-American grocer and an African-American customer that turned into a murder. Soon Ja's negative attitude that all African Americans are potential shoplifters provoked the fight that eventually ended in the killing of Latasha. Soon Ja's attitude caused her to accuse falsely Latasha of shoplifting and to treat her as a gang member. More importantly, her attitude blinded Soon Ja so she could neither see

Latasha's holding money and trying to pay for the juice nor hear Latasha's verbal explanation and pleading. It deadened her common consideration and courtesy toward a member of the human race. When a fifteen-year-old teenager was grabbed and pulled continuously and falsely accused of shoplifting, after explaining that she or he was trying to pay and pleading to let her or him go, that teenager, especially in the inner city, probably does not see many other choices than striking back. In this sense, Soon Ja's prejudice toward African Americans and ignorance of the area took away Latasha's young life, even though Latasha was neither a shoplifter nor a gang member. Latasha simply became the victim of Soon Ja's prejudice and ignorance.

What was more tragic in this incident was Soon Ja's conduct after killing Latasha. Motivated by self-interest, she made a desperate attempt to save herself from going to prison and to maintain her family's reputation in the Korean community: she ruthlessly framed Latasha as a robber. In this respect, Soon Ja's racism became an integral element in her defense strategy. In justifying her killing, Soon Ja tailored her defense by using the already understood and agreed-upon images of African Americans and the image of an ignorant, and therefore innocent, Asian immigrant woman in the racialized American society. By the same token, she portrayed Latasha as a physically strong, intimidating, and uncontrollable African-American youngster who beat her fearlessly and demanded money. Consciously portraying Latasha as a shoplifter, an attacker, and a robber by emphasizing the symbol of danger and threat in young African Americans, Soon Ja contrasted that with an image of herself as an ignorant Asian-American immigrant. She used American racist interpretation to justify her act of shooting and killing. And she was very successful, at least, in saving herself from serving a prison term. To some degree, even today, Soon Ja is

successful in deceiving the public by imprinting Latasha as a robber, particularly in many Koreans' minds.

Soon Ja spread the racist image of Latasha's race and youth. Latasha's image as a robber still lingers in many Korean Americans' minds. To some degree, Soon Ja was successful in persuading many Korean Americans and Koreans to agree with her and sympathize with her. As Carvajal pointed out in her sentencing memorandum to Judge Karlin dated November 6, 1991, this was a typical case in which an innocent African-American girl was forced to give up her life for the crimes committed by some African-American shoplifters and criminals in her neighborhood. Latasha had "merely lived her life in an area where gang members abound and visited a store where shoplifting was apparently common."⁸⁷

After four days of deliberation, on October 11, 1991, the jury found Soon Ja guilty of voluntary manslaughter. On October 3, the day after ending Soon Ja's testimony, Judge Karlin had issued a ruling that jurors were not to consider a first-degree murder charge because of lack of evidence of premeditation. So, the jury came back with a compromise verdict, rejecting both charges of second-degree murder and involuntary manslaughter. The jury's decision meant that Soon Ja killed Latasha intentionally without premeditation and malice, but that the killing was not an accident. Soon Ja could have been sentenced to a maximum term of eleven years for voluntary manslaughter and five years for using a gun. On sentencing day, November 15, 1991, however, Judge Karlin suspended a ten-year prison sentence—six years for the killing and four years for use of a gun—and placed Soon Ja on five years probation with 400 hours of community service, a \$500 fine, and out-of-pocket expenses related to Latasha's funeral and any medical expenses. The judge said that

she believed that Soon Ja did not know anything about guns. She sympathized with Soon Ja's fear of African Americans and gangs in the area. She also said that she did not believe that keeping Soon Ja out of prison would endanger others, since Soon Ja had no other criminal record.⁸⁸

This verdict by the judge immediately brought anger and protest from the African-American community. Their outburst, however, came later in April 1992, when the Simi Valley's jury acquitted the four police officers involved in the King beating incident. During the 1992 Los Angeles riots, many African Americans expressed their deep anger and resentment over Soon Ja's killing of Latasha by destroying many Korean-American owned businesses. The destruction of Korean-American owned stores in the riots caused many Korean Americans to realize their precarious position in America. In some ways, the Du murder incident heightened the tension between the two communities, and in others, it marked a climate that required awareness and changes in the Korean Americans' openly negative attitude toward the African Americans.

Notes

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- ¹ Andrea Ford and John Lee, "Slain Girl Was Not Stealing Juice, Police Say," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1991, sec. B1.
- ² The testimony ended on Wednesday, October 2, 1991, in Department 111 at the Criminal Courts Building in Downtown, Los Angeles. In the criminal trial, Soon Ja testified on the last day of testimony, Wednesday, October 2, 1991. This case contained two court transcripts: Reporter's Transcript of the Grand Jury Proceedings (Wednesday, April 24, 1991) and Reporters' Daily Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial Proceedings (Monday, September 30, 1991; Tuesday, October 1, 1991; Wednesday, October 2, 1991; and Friday, November 15, 1991).
- ³ The Courtroom Television Network sought to film the trial but Judge Karlin did not permit any live coverage according to the letter from Michael J. Proctor, attorney from Kecker & Prockett, which is kept in the Reporters' Daily Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial Proceedings file.
- ⁴ After the trial, the Du's store surveillance camera videotape was kept in the Exhibit Department of the Discovery Unit of the Los Angeles Police; it was then destroyed after keeping it for five months in accordance of police procedure.
- ⁵ Reporters' Daily Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial Proceedings (RDTC), 324. At the Empire Liquor Market, Soon Ja worked about 3 or 4 times only on weekend mornings when the store was not too busy with customers. See RDTC, 322.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 326.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 351. Her son, Joseph, warned Soon Ja to watch all customers wearing pants and thick jacket, light sneakers, a cap or a headband, and a backpack. Latasha wore a jacket and a cap, which had "Bruins" on the front and carried a backpack on her back. See RDTC, 113, 325. See also Reporter's Transcript of the Grand Jury Proceedings (RTG), 24.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 325-328.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ¹⁰ RTG, 3.
- ¹¹ Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 156. See also Tae-gi Moon, "Police Concluded 'Murder'; the Family Claimed that 'the Shooting was Unavoidable,'" *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 20, 1991, sec. B1.
- ¹² RDTC, 88 and 339. An article in the March 20, 1991, *Korea Times*, a Los Angeles Korean-language daily, however, reported that the Dus told the reporter that they did not know which one of the three cameras was operating on that morning and that they questioned the videotape's clarity to explain the entire incident. But, on March 16, 1991, it was Billy Du, Soon Ja's husband, who started the videotape before he went out to sleep in the van parked outside the store, and who handed it to Officer Jeffrey Alley after rewinding it when the officer asked him for the videotape that operated on that day.
- ¹³ Tae-gi Moon, "Good Possibility of Du Having a Jury Trial" *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), May 23, 1991, sec. A2.
- ¹⁴ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 117.

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- ¹⁵ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 135-6. After four killings of Korean-American merchants in predominantly African-American neighborhood, the Black-Korean Community Relations Commission was formed in May 1986 to ease tensions between the two communities through promotion of mutual understanding and peaceful resolutions to the conflict. Later, it was renamed as Black-Korean Alliance (BKA). The BKA consisted of various religious, business, civic, police and community based organizations from the two communities. It was formed and maintained through the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission. Although it was, to some degree, successful in easing tensions between the two communities, its two specific objectives of increasing employment of African-American residents by Korean-American merchants and implementing African-Korean American joint economic projects in the area were not accomplished. When the Du incident occurred, the BKA actively participated in calming the tensions in South Central Los Angeles.
- ¹⁶ "African Americans' Violence in Korean Stores Increased" *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 30, 1991, sec. A2.
- ¹⁷ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 117.
- ¹⁸ Andrea Ford, "Videotape Shows Teen Being Shot After Fight," *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 1991, sec. B1. See also Itabari Njeri, *The Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 157.
- ¹⁹ Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 47-48, 157.
- ²⁰ Richard Reyes Fruto, "Faulty Gun: Key to Du's Murder Trial," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), October 7, 1991.
- ²¹ Richard Reyes Fruto, "Du Trial Begins," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), September 30, 1991.
- ²² Several newspapers reported Soon Ja's framing Latasha as a robber. See Tae-gi Moon, "A Black Teenage Girl Demanded Money and Punched [the Woman Owner]" *Korea Times* (Korean-language Daily), March 18, 1991, sec. B1, Richard Reyes Fruto, "Peacemakers Do the Right Thing," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), April 3, 1991. See also Ford and Lee, "Slain Girl Was Not Stealing Juice, Police Say," sec. B1 and Andrea Ford and John H. Lee, "Racial Tensions Blamed in Girl's Death," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1991, sec. B1 and B4.
- ²³ Moon, "The Shooting Incident by a Korean Woman Store Owner: Murder or Self-Defense?" *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 19, 1991, sec. A1.
- ²⁴ Fruto, "Death of a Black Teenager," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), March 27, 1991, 1.
- ²⁵ RDTC, 316-8 and 366-8.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 254-5.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 244-257.
- ²⁸ Sophia Kyung Kim, "Du's Lawyer Unable to Confer with Sick Client: Video of Shooting 'Open' to Debate," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), May 15, 1991 and Tae-gi Moon, "New Aspect of Du's Murder: Evidence of Self-defense" *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), May 17, 1991, sec. A1.

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- ²⁹ See RDTC, 366 for Soon Ja's testimony saying that she never thought that "Latasha was going for the cash register."
- ³⁰ Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 47.
- ³¹ RDTC, 28, 325, 40, and RTG, 7.
- ³² See Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 110 and Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 157. See also RDTC, 115.
- ³³ RDTC, 23 and 53.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, 327.
- ³⁵ RTG, 15, 22, 27, 46 and RDTC, 31-34, 44, 45, and 87.
- ³⁶ RDTC, 33 and RTG, 22. See also Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 47.
- ³⁷ RDTC, 33, 327, and 352. Soon Ja said that she caught Latasha's sweater in her attempt to get the juice out of the backpack. See also Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 47.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 326-7. Soon Ja's polite asking was unlikely considering that her son told the reporters: "Soon Ja Du called the girl and demanded payment." See Fruto, "Death of a Black Teenager," 1.
- ³⁹ RTG, 21.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33, 328-9, and 361. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 119. According to Cannon, Richard Leonard is an attorney "specialized in murder cases."
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 351-7
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 33. See also Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 47.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.
- ⁴⁴ See Andrea Ford, "911, TV Tapes Tell Different Tales in Killing of Teen-Ager," *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1991, sec. B3. See also Fruto, "Death of a Black Teenager," 1., Fruto, "False Rumors Breed Racial Distrust," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), April 10, 1991, Fruto, "Faulty Gun," and Fruto, "Closing Arguments Made in Du Trial," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), October 16, 1991. See also Moon, "Murder or Self-Defense?," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 19, 1991, sec. A1 and Kyoung-Suk Kim, "Self-Defense," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), October 1, 1991, sec. A1.
- ⁴⁵ RDTC, 356-9.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25, 40, and 359-365.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 359-364 and 377-8.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 374-5 and 53.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 331-7 and 377. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 120.

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- ⁵⁰ RTG, 52 and RDTC, 141. Officer Johnson testified that the bullet entered the back of Latasha's head, left of the middle line and exited at the right temple in a slightly upward direction. See also Fruto, "Faulty Gun,". In this article, Fruto saw, in the videotape, Latasha "taking two steps toward the door." See also Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 157, for Soon Ja's height.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 165-170. Billy purchased the handgun in 1981. In the 1988 robbery at the Saugus store, another of the Dus' stores, it was stolen. It was recovered by the Los Angeles Police Department two years later, and returned to Du. The LAPD now found out that the gun had been altered to reduce the pressure needed for firing. Billy said that he never knew the gun was altered because he never checked it. See also Ford, "911, TV Tapes," sec. B3 and Moon, "Closing Arguments," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), October 9, 1991, sec. A2.
- ⁵² Ibid., 335, 345, 360, and RTG, 55.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 343-6. Also see RDTC, 217, 229, 237, and 308-9. Billy, on the other hand, declared he did possess a great deal of knowledge of guns. He testified that in the Korean Army where he was a major, he used to give instructions on carbine rifles that the Korean Army had issued to its officers. He kept two guns on a shelf underneath the cash register at Empire Liquor Market: one .38 handgun and one carbon rifle. He bought the handgun in 1981. And he brought it to Empire Liquor Market for self-defense one year after he purchased the store in March 1989. Despite the dangers surrounding the Empire Liquor store and his subsequent purchase of the rifle for protection, Billy did not have any time to teach his wife how to use the guns.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 342-350. Soon Ja was born in 1941 in a southern village of North Chung Chang Province in South Korea during the Japanese occupation. Her father was the only doctor in the farming village and her mother was a nurse. Soon Ja went to a college in Seoul and majored in literature. She then met her husband, Billy, and in her junior year she married him and dropped out of the college. See Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 114. Also see Jesse Katz and John H. Lee, "Shooting: An Immigrant Grocer is Accused of Murdering a Girl, 15," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 1991, sec. A1. The fact that Soon Ja lived through the Korean War (1950-1953) and lived in Seoul at least since 1960 makes it hard for me to believe that she never saw a gun before she came to the United States in 1976. At least in the 1970s before she left the country, Koreans had television in Seoul. Also, she was in a college; guns were talked about in the newspapers. She was not a traditional Korean woman who lived in a remote countryside where no books, no newspapers, and no televisions were around. Another fact that makes her testimony unbelievable was that her husband was a major in the Korean army. He more than likely brought a gun home with his army uniform. In my telephone conversation with the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, John Lee, he told me that Soon Ja's biographical information was told to him by the family. Also, in my telephone conversation with Lou Cannon, he said that her biographical information that he wrote in his book was reported in the official reports of prosecution as well as defense, so he thought it was credible.
- ⁵⁵ Moon, "Closing Arguments," sec. A2.
- ⁵⁶ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 162.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 232-6.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 336. See Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 109 and Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 48.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 348.
- ⁶⁰ See "Girl 15, Shot to Death Over Orange Juice," *Los Angeles Times*, March 17, 1991, sec. B1 and Moon, "Police Concluded," sec. B1.

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- ⁶¹ RDTC, 105, 235-6, and 337. See Ford, "Videotape Shows," sec. B1.
- ⁶² Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 159-2. After the jury found Soon Ja guilty of voluntary manslaughter, Patricia Dwyer, the probation officer, was assigned by the court to report Soon Ja's suitability of being placed on probation. See also Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 99.
- ⁶³ RDTC, 351-7. Despite her claim of overwhelming fear of Latasha, Soon Ja neither went out to get her husband who was sleeping in the van parked just outside the store nor pushed the alarm button that was right underneath the cash register. See *Ibid.*, 239.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 355-8.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 361.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 351-7.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 294-307. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 112.
- ⁶⁹ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 115, 154, and 171.
- ⁷⁰ Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 148.
- ⁷¹ See Fruto, "Death of a Black Teenager," 1.
- ⁷² RTG, 65.
- ⁷³ Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 148.
- ⁷⁴ Wanda Coleman, "Remembering Latasha: Blacks, Immigrants, and America," *The Nation*, February 15, 1993, 187.
- ⁷⁵ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 115.
- ⁷⁶ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 9,10, and 72.
- ⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁷⁸ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 152.
- ⁷⁹ Coleman, "Remembering Latasha," 187. See also Moon, "Police Concluded," sec. B1.
- ⁸⁰ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 112 and 160. Cannon's interview with Lloyd on February 15, 1994, seemed to give him his knowledge of Lloyd's awareness of Korean Americans' prevalent negative stereotypical prejudice against African Americans.
- ⁸¹ Reporter's Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial [Sentencing Proceeding], November 15, 1991, 30. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 162.
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, 30-31. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 162.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 160-1.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 30. See also Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 161.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 18. See RDTC, 336.

⁸⁶ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 164-5.

⁸⁷ Carvajal's Sentencing Memorandum to Judge Karlin dated November 6, 1991, 10.

⁸⁸ See Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 163-173. See Fruto, "Soon Ja Du Sentencing: Outcry Over No Jail Term," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), Nov. 25, 1991. See Andrea Ford and Tracy Wilkinson, "Grocer is Convicted in Teen Killing," *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1991, sec. A1.

CHAPTER SIX

CERTAIN UNTRUTH

Soon Ja's murder of Latasha shook the African-American and Korean-American communities, dividing them further along political, economic, and racial lines. After the incident, African Americans retaliated for Korean Americans' prejudice against them. Many African-American community leaders openly criticized Korean-American storeowners' treatment of African-American customers. Some angry African Americans physically attacked Korean-Americans on the streets and in the stores. Demonstrations and boycott-signs started to appear in front of some Korean-American owned stores. This retaliation fueled racial tensions between the two communities, already exacerbated by the March 3, 1991, beating incident of Rodney G. King. In some ways this incident brought Korean Americans together, and in others it made them feel insecure about their place in American culture. Although this retaliation underlined a need for Korean-Americans to stand together for their economic interests, initially, the community was unsure of how to deal with the retaliation collectively.¹

Before the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the Du murder incident had stirred a debate about how to deal with retaliation by the African-American community. Some advocated strong and tough measures while others cautioned against such measures and pleaded for more patience and a more amicable solution. A few voices stressed doing the morally and religiously right thing, which was understanding African Americans' anger and frustration, but they were too delicate and too few to make any significant difference in the debate. The debate generally centered on two areas: Korean Americans' fear for their economic interests and their anger and frustration as they perceived that their ethnic pride suffered in

the perception of African Americans and European Americans. Korean Americans' feelings of being alienated and isolated—"only us" against "all others"—dominated the debate.

This feeling of isolation generated a dilemma over choosing a conciliatory, cooperative approach or a resistant self-defensive approach—even using guns if necessary—against African Americans' retaliation. Until the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the Korean-American community seemed to show a conciliatory approach in public while internally attempting to inspire Korean ethnic pride as a defense against African Americans' retaliation and against the mainstream's unfavorable attitude toward them. In the meantime, the Korean-American community publicly started to voice its suspicion that the mainstream was using the community to calm the African Americans' anger associated with the King incident and to make the white community look good by pitting the Korean-American community against the African-American community. The growing suspicion against the white community and the intensified retaliation by African Americans deepened many Korean Americans' hostility toward both groups. Proportionally, this perception seemed to make them lean toward a stronger resistant stance and solidarity against such retaliation among the first-generation Korean Americans.

This perception undoubtedly influenced their attitude toward the Du murder incident, making Soon Ja a symbol of a Korean-American merchant's reality. Her plight exemplified the hardships of their daily struggles. Many Korean-American merchants understood her uncontrolled rage, the constant fear of African Americans, the months-long harassment by neighborhood gang members, several dreadful threats, robberies, and the daily shoplifting, and the long hours of physical labor. They identified with her because it

could happen to any one of them, too. In many instances, they saw themselves in Soon Ja's predicament: an innocent victim of robberies in crime-ridden African-American neighborhoods.² In this sense, the Korean-American community justified Soon Ja's killing by using the reality of high crime rates that the merchants faced in predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods.³ So, in the Korean community, Soon Ja became an innocent victim and the killing was justified.

The Du murder incident was covered by the mainstream news media as well as Korean ethnic news media in Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* gave limited coverage, while Korean ethnic newspapers, particularly the *Korea Times*, covered it extensively. One day after Soon Ja shot Latasha to death, on Sunday, March 17, 1991, the incident made its first appearance in the *Los Angeles Times*. Mentioning the location of the incident without identifying the names of those involved, the *Los Angeles Times* reported it in a six-paragraph story under the headline, "Girl, 15, Shot to Death Over Orange Juice," on the fifth page of the metro section. The following day, March 18, 1991, the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) reported the incident in three different articles. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* coverage came later, on March 21, 1991, as it is a weekly newspaper that only comes out on Thursdays.

Although the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel* covered this incident during the period of March 1991 through December 1991, it neither predominated in any local news coverage nor made national news in the other parts of the United States except in the Korean ethnic newspapers. Even in the local newspapers, the incident competed with other news. For instance, at the time of the Du murder incident, the March 3 incident in which Rodney King was beaten by four white Los Angeles police officers drew the

attention of most Americans, particularly African Americans. Other cases like the securities fraud trial of ex-Lincoln Savings & Loan chief Charles Keating, Anita Hill's sexual harassment charge hearing against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, and the cross-burning trial of four white supremacists⁴ diverted the public's attention from the Du murder incident. Another reason for the media's limited coverage was probably the fact that the Du store's surveillance camera videotape was not released to the media until September 30, 1991.⁵

Despite the media's preoccupation with other cases and the inaccessibility of the videotape, the *Los Angeles Times*, the county's largest daily,⁶ gave quite steady and balanced coverage of the incident⁷ from the shooting to Judge Joyce Karlin's probation sentence. The *Los Angeles Sentinel*, one of the largest African-American weekly newspapers on the West Coast, covered this incident the least of the three newspapers, but quite steadily. Its weekly limited space was taken mostly by the King incident along with other news items.

Unlike these two newspapers' limited coverage, the *Korea Times* reported the incident quite extensively for the longest period. Editorials, commentaries, letters, and other articles associated with the Du murder incident dominated its pages. From March 18, 1991, through March 16, 1992, there were over 300 articles that were either directly or indirectly related to the incident. Not so surprisingly, at the end of 1991, the *Korea Times* chose the Du murder incident as the number one story it covered for the year 1991.⁸

But the *Korea Times* is not the only Korean ethnic newspaper in the United States. During the post-1965 Korean Immigration period, three Korean daily newspapers were

established as branch offices of the major newspapers in South Korea: the *Korea Times* (Han-kook Ilbo) in 1969, the *Oriental Daily* (Dong a Ilbo) in 1972, and the *Central Daily* (Joong-ang Ilbo) in 1973. Because of competition among them, each daily has kept its circulation information confidential; therefore, it is difficult to estimate each daily's circulation volume and its advertising revenue.⁹ Their South Korean headquarters supported them with manpower, news materials, and financial assistance until 1983. The *Korea Times* is currently considered the major Korean ethnic daily on the West Coast.¹⁰

The vast majority of first-generation Korean Americans subscribe to these Korean language newspapers.¹¹ A *Korea Times* article on April 13, 1991, entitled "The Korean Language Newspapers: The First Thing Most Korean Immigrants Do Is Read the Newspapers before They Unpack their Luggage," explained how intrinsically the Korean ethnic newspapers in America have interwoven themselves into the lives of most Korean Americans. From finding a place to stay to finding a job, a school, a church, a market, or a car, the dailies have provided vital information for finding the necessary resources.

Despite the fact that the first-generation Korean Americans depended on it for information about America, until the mid-1980s *Korea Times* ignored and avoided the issue of ethnic conflict. It did, however, report the actual incidents of some African-American criminals' violence against Korean-American merchants. The mere reporting, to some extent, fueled Korean Americans' animosity toward African Americans. The number of incidents related to the African-Korean conflicts started to rise in the early 1970s, reflecting the increased number of Korean-American merchants engaged in businesses in predominantly African-American areas, and the feelings of animosity and ethnic pride grew proportionately. The newspapers' sensationalized reporting of such

incidents not only encouraged Korean Americans' fear and dislike toward African Americans in general but also nurtured solidarity and ethnic pride in the Korean-American community. The *Korea Times*' inadequate coverage of racial issues¹² played an important role in the race conflict. As most Korean immigrants had very limited exposure to American magazines or newspapers, the *Korea Times* exerted enormous influence on them in shaping their attitudes toward African Americans.

According to a *Korean Street Journal* survey on August 19, 1982, thirty percent of 197 randomly selected Korean immigrants were afraid to interact with African Americans and fifteen percent hesitated to associate with Mexican Americans. Blacks were frequently referred to derogatively as *kamdungwee* ("darky") instead of *hukin* (black person). In another article of the *Korean Street Journal* on August 12, 1981, the reporter observed the widespread practice of Korean American's negative prejudice toward African Americans and Latinos.¹³

In contrast to its earlier coverage trend, after the mid-1980s *Korea Times* started to direct its attention to the issue of ethnic conflict. It made strenuous efforts in dealing with race relations at least between African-American customers and Korean-American merchants. Although its effort mirrored Korean-American merchants' purely economic interest, it tried to broaden their racial views and to improve their attitudes. It reported many activities that were designed to improve race relations through meetings, workshops, church services, fundraising activities, neighborhood athletic sponsorships, scholarship foundations, and cultural exchange programs. Nevertheless, the *Korea Times*' articles featuring some Korean Americans' good deeds toward African Americans appeared to be lacking in real understanding of human relationships and in genuine

concern toward them. Many of the articles suggested a sense that “we are better; you are worse”—implying a “so we save you” theme.

This change in the *Korea Times*' (Korean-language daily) coverage trend reflected two conflicting interests on the part of Korean Americans: the importance of maintaining a good relationship with African Americans for economic interest, and the importance of protecting Korean merchants' solidarity and ethnic pride. The *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) eventually embraced the latter, even though it recognized the Korean Americans' politically weak position and less profitable situation in confronting the African-American community. The *Korea Times*' position was perhaps understandable in view of the fact that its financial support came mainly from Korean merchants through subscriptions and advertising revenues.¹⁴ Another contributing factor for the choice might have been its status as an ethnic newspaper. Because few non-Koreans could read the Korean-language newspapers, it probably felt comfortable choosing this position without worrying too much about losing its economic interest through the African Americans' retaliations or loss of fairness or objectivity.

In this respect, *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) showed more balance in its coverage of the incident than the Korean-language daily did. It printed its first articles about the Du murder incident on March 27, 1991, twelve days after the incident. In its first six articles, although it generally stayed in tune with the Korean merchants' points of view, its articles emphasized the importance of maintaining a cooperative relationship between the two communities. In “Death of a black teen-ager: Blacks and Koreans join hands to heal wounds,” it stressed the on-going work of the leaders of both communities. Another

article, “Faces in a tragedy,” explained the tragic nature for both the Harlins and Dus depicted in the murder scene.¹⁵

The more balanced points of view came from the articles written by K.W. Lee. In his two articles, “Learn, Baby, Learn: Lessons from Latasha Harlins’ Tragedy” and “An American Passage: Latasha: A Haunting Presence Among Korean Americans,” Lee insightfully observed Korean Americans’ ignorance and uncaring practice toward African Americans and carefully appealed to them to practice good neighborliness.¹⁶

An overwhelming number of the *Korea Times*’ articles during this period contained the theme of Korean Americans’ fear of African-American retaliation and anger at the Korean merchants. Most of the three hundred articles in the *Korea Times* voiced an increasing fear that the Du murder incident would ignite a new flame in the already existing tension in the black-Korean relations as did the New York Red Apple case, which caused a seventeen-month-long boycott by blacks in New York. The boycott was triggered by a dispute that occurred on January 18, 1990, between a Haitian woman and a Korean manager of Red Apple produce store in Brooklyn, New York, and was finally over by late May 1991.¹⁷ Comparing the Du’s incident with the New York Red Apple case, many Korean Americans worried about a widespread boycott, mass demonstrations, and violent retaliation against Korean Americans.¹⁸ Warning the Korean-American community not to kindle the flames of retaliation, the newspaper tried to calm the community by reporting the peace-making efforts attempted by some people in the two communities such as the Black-Korean Alliance (BKA), City Hall, the Korean American Grocers Association (KAGRO), the L.A. Korean American Community, the NAACP, church groups, and Korean-American merchants.

Some people thought that the fear of African-Americans' retaliation was not based in fact. Jay Lee Wong, a consultant with the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, found that most of the rumors in the Korean community about African-Americans' retaliation with boycotts and attacks turned out to be false when they were checked with alleged victims and police. He asserted that the high crime rate in South Central Los Angeles that existed before the incident had not increased since the incident. According to Wong, "the Korean-language media is partially to blame for the rumors because it reports incidents without verification from police and sources other than alleged and actual victims." He also pointed out that the Korean-language media's increased coverage of incidents involving blacks and Koreans could have contributed to the fear.¹⁹

In reporting Soon Ja's murder incident, Korean ethnic newspapers adopted the view of Korean-American merchants and sided with the Dus. Depicting Soon Ja Du as a symbol of the Korean-American merchants who had been innocently victimized by some African-American criminals, they attempted to placate Korean-American merchants. By stressing Soon Ja's claim of innocence and self-defense, the *Korea Times* led the way in unifying the community to rally behind the Du family in the Black-Korean conflict. By encouraging caution toward African Americans' retaliation and emphasizing the importance of a unified stance as Koreans, it attempted to guide the community by shaping and manipulating information regarding the incident.

Many *Korea Times* articles reflected this effort. The paper de-emphasized or omitted anything that could be used against Soon Ja while it played up anything that could help her in proving her innocence. For example, Soon Ja's initiation of the fight, her false accusation, her shooting and killing a fifteen-year-old child, and the Dus' lies did not

receive the same level of importance in reporting as did the story of Latasha's attempted robbery and iron-like strikes, police conspiracy and scapegoating story, the faulty gun, and Soon Ja's injuries. The two eyewitnesses' accounts were completely ignored in the *Korea Times*. Eventually, the ethnic newspapers' efforts were materialized in the Korean-American community's feeling toward the verdict and sentencing, its efforts in the letter writing campaign against the Du verdict, and its active participation in Judge Karlin's fight against the African-American-led recall movement.

Unfortunately, the *Korea Times* did not address the issue of the false accusation of shoplifting, the deliberate robbery framing, and the unnecessary killing. Although more than seventy percent of Korean Americans are regular churchgoers, and Soon Ja was a deaconess in the Valley Korean Central Presbyterian Church, there was not one article in the *Korea Times* that addressed the feeling of what it would be like to lose someone they loved in a similar situation. It did not present how much grief most Korean Americans would feel if one of their daughters or sons were killed by African-American shopowners after being falsely accused and framed for robbery. Instead, the *Korea Times* tried to justify many Korean-Americans' unwillingness to show any sympathy toward Latasha and her family by comparing Soon Ja's killing Latasha to African-American criminals' killing Korean shop owners. The newspaper also blamed the community's unfeeling attitude toward Latasha and her family on the African-American community's nationalistic rhetoric directed against the Korean-American entrepreneurship and Korean Americans' disrespectful behavior toward African Americans.

In this line of reasoning, Soon Ja's false accusations, deliberate lies about Latasha after the murder, and her exaggerated injuries consumed the *Korea Times'* portrayal of Soon Ja's

self-defense. Despite the videotape evidence, Soon Ja's own testimony, and the two eyewitnesses' accounts which cleared Latasha of Soon Ja's false accusation and the robbery story, in many Korean newspapers in Los Angeles, Latasha was described either as a petty thief or as an armed robber who made Soon Ja kill her in self-defense. In many South Korean newspapers Latasha was also reported as a thief.²⁰

Although it was a false and demeaning portrayal of Latasha, not even one article in the *Korea Times*—either in the Korean-language daily or in the English-language weekly—was devoted to eradicating this false portrayal. Even several Korean-American scholars who had analyzed the cause of the Black-Korean conflict accepted Latasha's attempted shoplifting as fact. They neither recognized that Latasha, who had no previous criminal record, had not attempted shoplifting, nor did they make any effort to set the record straight.²¹ Would these Korean newspapers and Korean-American scholars have continued to identify Latasha as a thief who stole a Korean-American immigrant woman's orange juice had she not been a black girl?

The image of Latasha as a thief, robber, and attacker was sensationalized in *Korea Times* articles. From March 18, 1991, through March 31, 1991, it printed at least seven articles that described Latasha as a thief or robber. The first article that reported the incident on March 18, 1991, started with the big bold headline, "A Black Teenage Girl Demanded Money at the Market and Punched [the Owner]." It unmistakably emphasized the robbery attempt and violence by Latasha. From the beginning of the incident, sensationalizing Soon Ja's lie, the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) continued to reinforce the image of Latasha as a thief even after the trial. By printing and reporting Soon Ja's deliberate deceptions as news, the *Korea Times* gave credibility to her lies and,

therefore, strengthened her story. Unfortunately, its active participation in planting and nurturing the lies in the minds of Korean Americans has never been corrected, even long after the facts came out. The *Korea Times* never printed any articles that completely wiped out the lie. As a result, many Korean Americans remembered Latasha as a thief and robber who attacked Soon Ja viciously and demanded money.

For many Korean Americans, the justification for Soon Ja's killing came from Latasha's strikes. Reflecting this public sentiment, the *Korea Times* first visually magnified Soon Ja's injury with photos, secondly, it attempted to remove or minimize Latasha's young age, and, thirdly, it validated Soon Ja's illness claims. In proving Soon Ja's innocence by making the shooting seem unavoidable, the *Korea Times* collaborated with Soon Ja. From the beginning of the incident, Soon Ja's physical condition was underlined in its many articles. The first article of the incident reported Soon Ja's head trauma as well as her facial and eye injuries. Its reporting of her unconsciousness and the general oxygen treatment in the emergency room undoubtedly produced a vivid impression of her poor condition in the readers' minds.

Secondly, to reinforce Soon Ja's own feelings of intimidation by Latasha's strong athletic physique, the *Korea Times* presented Soon Ja and Latasha in contrast, picturing Soon Ja as a fragile, helpless, and old Korean-American woman and Latasha as an athletically built and strong African-American youngster. This point was suggested by Soon Ja from the beginning of the incident. Implying that Latasha was not a child, Soon Ja said that she thought Latasha was a young male in his mid-twenties until she came close to the counter.²² Then she perceived her as a young woman in her mid-twenties²³ until a

few days after the incident. Soon Ja's mistaken initial impression of Latasha's physical prowess gave another underlying justification of Soon Ja's claim of innocence.

This strategy sought two goals. One was to minimize the effect of Latasha's age on Soon Ja's self-defense. The other was to convince the public that Soon Ja's own feeling of intimidation was justifiable. To argue that Latasha's physique was equal to that of an adult's, the *Korea Times* stressed Latasha's physical size and strength while it neglected to mention Soon Ja's rather large and sturdy physique. Contrary to what many non-Asian people stereotypically assumed her to be, Soon Ja appeared to be neither small nor weak. Soon Ja was probably not much smaller than Latasha. In the news photos, she appeared to be quite large and in the videotape, she showed her strength and agility when she quickly lifted and threw a three-foot high chair at Latasha after being punched and falling down.²⁴ Nevertheless, the *Korea Times* emphasized only Latasha's size. Quoting Charles Lloyd in an interview with the *Korea Times*, the newspaper stated that "Harlins was physically very strong to be considered as an adult: weighed 152 pounds."²⁵ Again, in another article, the *Korea Times* pointed out that Latasha was a big girl for a fifteen-year-old.²⁶ By using the strategy, the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) implied that Soon Ja's shooting of Latasha was unavoidable and justified because the well-developed, adult-size Latasha physically overwhelmed old and frail Soon Ja.

After developing its argument that Soon Ja did not kill a child, the *Korea Times* validated her claim of disabled physical condition by detailing Soon Ja's injuries from Latasha's punches. Its news photos and articles emphasized Soon Ja's difficulty in walking, seeing, breathing, and holding her head up.²⁷ Another *Korea Times* article

wrote, “Du appeared weak and groggy at her arraignment.”²⁸ Soon Ja was still seen as a “dazed” woman in a wheel chair²⁹ long after her black eye returned to normal.

Soon Ja’s black eye from the fight became the centerpiece of her injuries. Her black eye visually symbolized the terror she allegedly went through and consequently drew sympathy for her killing of Latasha in self-defense. From this eye injury, Soon Ja’s other physical damages sprang. She could neither see well with only one eye nor walk because of loss of balance. Additionally, the eye injury could possibly indicate a head injury; therefore, she could not even think straight. Soon Ja’s belief that her eye injuries would be enough to prove her innocence was evident in her letter to Judge Joyce Karlin dated October 25, 1991. In this letter Soon Ja blamed Latasha for her own killing by saying, “only if my eyes weren’t suffering from the iron like punch,”²⁸ she would not have shot her.

Similarly, Soon Ja’s eye injury was also played up in the *Korea Times* articles. The March 18 article in the *Korea Times* stated, “Du, who shot the Black girl, had injuries around some parts of her head, which were apparently caused by the dead girl’s punches. Soon Ja lost consciousness at the scene due to the trauma of the incident and was taken to the hospital.” In the March 18 issue, the *Korea Times* reported the Du family’s claim that Soon Ja was hospitalized as a result of the injury sustained by Latasha’s aggression. A March 19 *Korea Times* article also reported that Soon Ja said to her family that she couldn’t even open her eyes because the black girl punched her face. Also stated in the same article was the Du family members’ description of Soon Ja’s condition: “At the hospital Du was unconscious and connected to the oxygen and was unable to walk but the police took her to a jail.” This article also headlined what Soon Ja said to the family

members who visited her while she was jailed in the Sybil Brand Institute for Women on March 17, 1991: “She was struck twice on her face by the black girl with the juice bottle and felt her life being threatened.” Again, in the March 21, 1991, issue of the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), an article stressed Soon Ja’s blackened right eye swollen with bruises.³¹

In spite of the evidence that Soon Ja exaggerated her injuries and feigned unconsciousness, the *Korea Times* omitted Soon Ja’s deception and exaggeration. Instead, it contributed credibility to her exaggeration. After connecting Soon Ja’s eye injuries to her incapacitated condition, the *Korea Times* wrote about Soon Ja’s health condition in her lawyers’ eyes. By quoting one of Soon Ja’s lawyers saying, “having come out of a coma just two days before,” in an article headlined, “Soon Ja Du’s Family Claims Self-defense,” the *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) described Soon Ja’s helpless condition. According to her first defense attorney Tyson Park, Soon Ja suffered from heart problems and epilepsy and went into a two-day coma induced by an epileptic seizure after her arrest.³² In his attempt to convince the public of Soon Ja’s “totally incapacitated”³³ condition, Soon Ja’s lawyer, Charles Lloyd, said that she suffered not only from a problem of “balance and equilibrium” due to her black eye³⁴ but also from “dizziness and deep depression.”³⁵ In arguing against Soon Ja’s release on bond, even Deputy District Attorney Roxane Carvajal gave her objection based on Soon Ja’s family doctor’s diagnosis of her mental condition, emphasizing that Soon Ja was a threat to herself and to society since she was suffering from “paranoid ideation (ideas or mental images) and death wishes.”³⁶

Throughout the trial, the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) faithfully stood by Soon Ja. Its interpretation of the videotape, description of the courtroom attendants, reaction of some Korean Americans, and its omission of many major issues all appeared to influence the Korean-American community to believe in Soon Ja's self-defense claim by remaining sympathetic toward her. Its distorted and selective reporting was clearly observable.

Korea Times' coverage of the first day of Soon Ja's trial was a good example. The October 1 *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) article headlined "Self-Defense: [the videotape showed] Harlins Punched Du Four Times; Du Fell twice" showed two pictures. One was Latasha's hitting motion taken from a television monitor that was almost unrecognizable. Under the caption: "a scene of Du's falling under the counter after receiving a strike from Harlins' right hand," it says that Latasha has a big frame, weighing more than 150 pounds. The other picture was a sketch of Latasha's striking Du. This drawing showed Latasha wearing her backpack on her back, both straps on each shoulder with her right hand hitting Soon Ja who was falling. The videotape, however, showed a completely different picture. In the videotape, when Latasha hit Soon Ja, her backpack was momentarily on the right shoulder only, and soon after that it fell down on the counter. Soon Ja grabbed it quickly but Latasha tugged it. Using the backpack, Latasha was able to pull Soon Ja toward her who was also pulling the bag, punched her, and pushed her under the counter. Showing the backpack securely on Latasha's back gave credibility to the story that Soon Ja did nothing to provoke the fight—grabbing and pulling Latasha.

In the same article, the *Korea Times* defended the accuracy of its information and emphasized its authenticity by reiterating how clearly and vividly the store's videotape showed that Soon Ja received four punches and fell two times. Although the videotape

showed that Latasha was shot after she turned and made at least one step toward the door, the article emphasized the timing of Soon Ja shooting at the moment of turning. It firmly placed a reasonable doubt in the minds of Korean-American readers that Soon Ja neither shot Latasha as she retreated from the fight nor were Soon Ja's hands shown in the videotape when she pulled the gun out. The article continued to describe and interpret the videotape to validate Soon Ja's claim.³⁷

Furthermore, this article concentrated on minimizing Du's shooting and killing Latasha while it attempted to magnify the effect of Latasha's punches to Soon Ja's face. It described how shocked the courtroom audience appeared and later quoted some elderly Korean Americans expressing deep anger when they saw Latasha punching Soon Ja. The article first underscored that this unthinkable and extreme attack by Latasha forced Soon Ja to kill the girl. Secondly, its repeated statements of Latasha's just-turned-head, the faulty gun, and Soon Ja's unseen hands when she took out the gun in the videotape suggested the possible lies of the mainstream reports of the incident.

The trial coverage of the *Korea Times* contrasts sharply with the coverage of the *Los Angeles Times*. Most *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) trial coverage articles omitted or ignored facts that could hurt Soon Ja's defense. One particular instance of the *Korea Times*' (Korean-language daily) distortion of the facts was its failure to point out that in the videotape, Latasha was not seen getting money from the cash register and that Soon Ja was seen pointing a gun at Latasha. While the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) trial coverage articles emphasized Latasha's punches and Soon Ja's falls, the *Los Angeles Times* stressed Latasha's retreat from the fight, Soon Ja's false claim of Latasha's attempted robbery, and Soon Ja's denial of pointing the gun at Latasha.

The two newspapers also described the reaction of the courtroom audience differently. On the one hand, the *Korea Times* focused on the Korean Americans' deeply angry reaction to Latasha's blows and their emotion toward the bloody killing by Soon Ja.³⁸ On the other hand, the *Los Angeles Times* depicted the shocked and gasping reaction of people in the court by focusing on "the graphic images of the killing."³⁹

In addition, the *Korea Times* added several articles that focused on Soon Ja's good character. One article, entitled "Mrs. Du: A Silent Helper of Lepers and Homeless," included testimony from her church minister who described her as a "compassionate, faithful, God-fearing woman" with no criminal record. She represented a fellow citizen driven to the edge in pursuit of the shared dream.⁴⁰ Although most African Americans are also Christians, it could very well be true that Soon Ja felt compassion toward Koreans and Christians,⁴¹ but not toward African-American Christians.

In the Du murder incident, many Korean Americans felt rejected by the American public. Their own feelings of disappointment came from their perception that the American public showed more understanding and sympathy toward the African-American community than toward the Korean-American community. The American public's attention given to the murder of one African-American girl puzzled their sense of fairness and made them feel unfairly treated by the public. This feeling of isolation and disappointment notably made them compare themselves with some African-American criminals who had killed their fellow Korean-American merchants. In several *Korea Times* articles, they angrily asked why the American public did not fuss about the criminals who killed thirty-eight Korean-American merchants in the United States since 1975.⁴² Although some African-American criminals were caught and sentenced for their

crimes, many Korean Americans perceived that African Americans got away with killing many Korean Americans, while Korean Americans could not get away with killing even one African American.⁴³

This perception made many Korean Americans feel isolated and defensive. It helped them see things through the framework of “only us” against “all others” and produced defensive attitudes toward the police and the mainstream news media. Questioning police investigations as well as the mainstream news-media reports of the Du murder incident, they suspected a conspiracy against them by the police and the media. From the beginning of the incident they felt that the police and the mainstream media treated Soon Ja Du unfairly, portraying her as an unprovoked and unfeeling aggressor.

Querying the police’s motive of charging Soon Ja with first-degree murder, Korean Americans linked Soon Ja’s arrest to a police conspiracy. They blamed police for making innocent Soon Ja into a scapegoat. Many believed that Soon Ja was sacrificed for the crimes of the four white police officers in the Rodney G. King beating incident to calm African Americans’ anger.⁴⁴ Some even thought that police edited the tape to make Soon Ja look guilty.⁴⁵

As early as March 20, 1991, the Dus’ conjecture that Soon Ja had been scapegoated by the police appeared in both the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Korea Times*. Joseph Du, Soon Ja’s son, accused the police of producing inaccurate and distorted information about his mother’s incident to make her into a scapegoat. At least three articles covered Joseph’s accusation. The March 20, 1991, *Los Angeles Times* reported Joseph’s claim that his mother had been victimized twice, first by Latasha Harlins, and then by the police. Because his mother was a Korean American, a minority, she became not only the victim of

the African-American robbers and thieves but also the victim of the police department which was supposed to protect her from these criminals. Quoting Joseph's words, "They [the *Los Angeles Times*] don't know anything. All they've heard is what the police have told them and the police [has] distorted the story dramatically." The March 27, 1991, *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) reported Joseph's aspersions on the accuracy of the *Los Angeles Times*' reports on the incident.⁴⁶ Another April 3, 1991, *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) article reported that Joseph called on the entire Korean-American community to stand up for his mother because the white race sacrificed his mother for the African-American race. He asserted that the media made his mother into a scapegoat for the Black-Korean conflict.⁴⁷

Not so surprisingly, many angry Korean Americans immediately embraced the theory of police conspiracy against Soon Ja Du. Even some Korean-American scholars believed the theory. Some scholars said that the mainstream media used the Du murder incident to appease the anger of the African-American community in the Rodney King incident in order to disguise institutional racism and racial inequality.⁴⁸ Others believed that the white community in general pitted one minority group against another and enjoyed watching minority ethnic groups destroying each other.⁴⁹ The *Los Angeles Times*, the District Attorney's office, and the police became the targets of the Korean Americans' conspiracy charge.

To stop rumors from spreading that could possibly cause a race riot, two days after the Du murder incident, on March 18, 1991, Los Angeles Police Department Commander Michael J. Bostic called a press conference.⁵⁰ According to the *Los Angeles Times*' report on the press conference, Bostic treated the incident as a simple business dispute, de-

emphasizing the racial implication of the incident and emphasizing instead that Latasha was neither shoplifting nor robbing the store. Based on the videotape from the store's surveillance camera and the two eyewitnesses' accounts, Bostic informed the public that, on the videotape, Latasha was seen trying to pay for the orange juice when Soon Ja accused her of shoplifting and that Soon Ja started a fight that ended in the girl's death. Even though Latasha put the orange juice in her backpack, she had money in her hand. Bostic said, "There was no attempt at shoplifting. There was no robbery. There was no crime at all. The videotape showed only 'a scuffle' begun by Du over the knapsack, not an attack mounted by the teen-ager." He also said that Soon Ja was treated at a hospital for "superficial injuries."⁵¹ Bostic tried to set the record straight by exonerating Latasha from Soon Ja's false accusations to police that Latasha "attacked her after being caught trying to steal the juice" and "attempted to take money from the market register moments before" she grabbed the gun and fired."⁵²

The *Korea Times*' report on this press conference, however, differed from the *Los Angeles Times*'. While the *Los Angeles Times* reported Bostic's statement that Soon Ja started the fight, the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) reported that Bostic said in the conference that Latasha started a verbal quarrel and proceeded to a physical fight.⁵³ Another less striking discrepancy between the two newspapers related to what Bostic said about Latasha's money seen in the videotape. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote that Bostic said the videotape showed Latasha "approaching the store counter with money in her hand."⁵⁴ But the *Korea Times* quoted Bostic as saying that the videotape captured Latasha taking money out of her pocket and then holding it in her hand.⁵⁵ It quoted, "[In the

videotape, she [Latasha] was taking her money out to pay as she walked to the counter. She had the money in her hand. You could see it in the videotape.”⁵⁶

Many Korean Americans thought that Bostic’s clarification of who started the fight— “‘a scuffle’ begun by Du over the knapsack, not an attack mounted by the teen-ager,” became proof of a police conspiracy. Arguing that the police and the district attorney’s office participated in an “activist” role in the incident, Korean-American sociologist Edward Chang has asserted that the police deliberately lied about Latasha’s strikes to Soon Ja’s face to imply that Soon Ja committed an “unjustifiable” crime. He explains that the active role might have been motivated by their desire to bring a first-degree murder charge against Soon Ja in order to calm the African-American community, which was very much disturbed by the Rodney King incident. Like Joseph Du earlier, Chang sees their eager efforts to convict Soon Ja with first-degree murder as a mystery that was tied to a conspiracy to make her into a scapegoat.⁵⁷

Motivations other than a conspiratorial intent could explain Bostic’s not mentioning of Latasha’s strikes. Soon Ja’s obviously vivid visual display of her blackened and swollen eye perhaps weakened Bostic’s need to point specifically to Latasha’s strikes. He probably thought that his description of “a business scuffle” begun by Soon Ja included the punches.⁵⁸ Although this omission could have been motivated by his interest in clarifying who started the fight rather than establishing which combatant caused more harm, the Korean-American community thought Latasha’s hitting constituted a crime regardless of who started the fight and grabbed first. Obviously, Soon Ja caused more harm: she is alive, and Latasha is dead. Bostic’s omission might not have been so important to the general

American public, but it gave solid ground to the Korean-American community to view the Du murder incident through the conspiracy and scapegoat theory.

Several articles in the *Korea Times* covered the conspiracy theme. These articles reported how defense attorney Lloyd interpreted the videotape and photographs of the murder in the interviews given to the *Korea Times*. Based on Lloyd's interpretations, the *Korea Times* presented the discrepancies between the police reports in the press conference and Lloyd's interpretations. In the first article of the *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) on May 17, 1991, under the headline, "What Is the Intention of Police's One-sided Interpretation?" it attempted to validate the scapegoat theory. According to Lloyd in this article, the police, in order to convict Soon Ja on a first-degree murder charge, hid Latasha's strikes on Soon Ja and publicly lied that Soon Ja had shot a retreating Latasha in the back, that Latasha was not stealing the orange juice, and that she did not try to take money out of the cash register. According to these alleged police lies, therefore, Soon Ja shot Latasha without any reasonable cause: a Korean merchant killed an innocent girl who tried to buy a bottle of orange juice.⁵⁹ In other words, the police sacrificed Soon Ja, falsifying facts in the incident to fabricate the charge.

Another May 17 *Korea Times*' (Korean-language daily) article headlined, "Evidence of Self-Defense': New Aspect of Du's Alleged Murder," summarized what Lloyd said during his interview with the *Korea Times*.⁶⁰ Another May 17 article stressed police lies.⁶¹ These May 17 articles validated to the Korean-American community what the Du family said two months earlier in the *Korea Times* about the police news conference: "The findings of police contained full of fabrication and malice."⁶² In another *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) article on May 17, 1991, with a headline "Harlins Punched Du,"

the paper reported Lloyd's statement that the videotape supported the Du family's claim that Latasha had attempted robbery.⁶³ Now, to readers of the *Korea Times*, it seemed to be certain that the police were sacrificing Soon Ja to quell the anger of the African-American community in the middle of the embarrassing Rodney King police brutality incident by maliciously falsifying the truth about the Du incident. The scapegoat theory explained their perceived unfair treatment from both the police and the mainstream newspapers.

These May 17 *Korea Times* articles also charged the *Los Angeles Times* with conspiring with the police against Korean Americans. Many Korean Americans thought that the *Los Angeles Times* unnecessarily sensationalized the Du murder incident as a typical example of the black-Korean conflict. They blamed the *Los Angeles Times* for inflaming the tension by portraying a Korean merchant negatively. Joseph Du, as well as many Korean-American community leaders, some Korean members of the Black-Korean Alliance, and even some Korean-American scholars were disappointed by the March 20 *Los Angeles Times* article that ran with the headline, "Racial Tensions Blamed in Girl's Death."⁶⁴ They thought that the article sensationalized the story by stirring sympathy toward Latasha and the African-American community and generated a negative impression of Soon Ja and the Korean-American community.

Edward Chang, in his article "African-American Boycotts of Korean-Owned Stores in New York and Los Angeles," agrees with this perception. Blaming the *Los Angeles Times* for playing "agitator's roles, far beyond that of simply printing facts objectively, as it claims," he asserts that although the *Los Angeles Times* articles in the Du murder incident had been factually correct, they were distorted or exaggerated by selective reporting or

leaving out critical information in the incident. He concludes that the *Los Angeles Times* gave a biased coverage of the incident.⁶⁵

Chang reviewed the first and the second articles of the incident in the *Los Angeles Times*. He asserts that the articles, “Slain Girl Was Not Stealing Juice, Police Say” and “A Senseless and Tragic Killing,” embodied a biased view toward Korean Americans. They highlighted African-American customers’ complaints about Korean merchants’ rude and disrespectful behaviors, portrayed the Korean merchant as “guilty” of murdering an innocent girl, and gave a more sympathetic tone toward the African-American community than toward Korean-American immigrants.⁶⁶

Some Korean Americans blamed the African-American community’s nationalistic rhetoric directed against their entrepreneurship for their own unfeeling attitudes toward Latasha and her family. Bong Hwan Kim, director of the Korean Youth and Community Center in Los Angeles, pointed out that many Korean Americans’ sympathy toward Latasha had been thwarted by their frustration and anger at the African-American community’s retaliation.⁶⁷ In other words, some Koreans buried their sympathetic feelings toward Latasha’s death or forgot their feelings in the response to the fear, anger, and frustration they felt against her people’s charges against Korean Americans. Nevertheless, Koreans made a conscious choice. Although the African-American community’s rhetoric made it easier for the Korean-American community’s choice, the African-American community was never the cause of their unfeeling response. This circumvention reflected Korean Americans’ making a choice: self-interest.

Some Korean-American scholars disagree with the conspiracy charge against the mainstream news media. Pyong Gap Min points out that although the media

sensationalized the Du murder incident in the context of the black-Korean conflict, he doubts that their motive had been to scapegoat Korean Americans to soothe the anger of the African-American community. He sees the media's dramatization motivated by profit-orientation.⁶⁸

Whether or not the media purposely plotted against Korean Americans with the police and the district attorney's office, their coverage of the Du murder incident appears to be somewhat selective. Larry Aubry, a senior editor of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and a consultant with the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission, points out that the city's crime rate between African Americans and Korean Americans amounts to "an extremely small percentage of total crime in the inner-city."⁶⁹ Yet, the mainstream media reported them in an exaggerated and sensationalized way, giving a false impression that the violence between the two communities is the only crime in South Central. Reporting it without any reference to other crimes in South Central distorts the reality.⁷⁰

Although the Du incident was one of many crimes in South Central, it undoubtedly sparked angry protests by many African Americans. After the incident, through numerous radio and television talk shows, organized demonstrations, and press conferences, Danny Bakewell, president of the Brotherhood Crusade, and other community activists made verbal attacks on the Korean Americans' exploitative business practices and disrespectful behaviors. Their protests that started with about 150 African-American residents around the Empire Liquor Market on March 21, 1991, expanded to buy back programs and boycotts against Korean-American stores in their neighborhood.⁷¹ The African Americans' retaliation escalated when Tae Sam Park, another Korean American liquor store owner, shot Lee Arthur Mitchell, an African American customer, to death in South

Central Los Angeles on June 4, 1991, two and half months after Soon Ja's killing of Latasha.⁷² The Du's and Park's stores were picketed, boycotted, vandalized, and set on fire⁷³ by these protesters, while the Korean-American community launched a support campaign for the Park family. Over the course of 109 days, Park received \$36,400 from the Korean-American community.⁷⁴

From the very beginning, the Du murder incident divided the two communities. Spectators on both sides often filled the courtroom, occasionally exchanging harsh words. Latasha's supporters usually protested outside the courthouse,⁷⁵ while Soon Ja's supporters filled the courtroom. At one point, defense attorney Lloyd had to stop Korean Americans from applauding,⁷⁶ and Judge Karlin had to order the spectators not to shout or talk loud in the courtroom.⁷⁷

The division between the two communities became much deeper in their responses to the verdict and sentencing, eventually leading to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. When Judge Karlin threw out Du's first-degree murder charge on October 3, 1991, most Korean Americans interviewed by the *Korea Central Daily* were pleased by the decision.⁷⁸ When the jury convicted Du on a voluntary manslaughter charge, many Korean Americans were angry, and they participated in the Korean American Coalition (KAC)'s "letter-writing campaign to Judge Karlin to request leniency for Soon Ja Du."⁷⁹ A *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) article on November 13, 1991, estimated that KAC sent 1,028 letters to the judge for Soon Ja. Furthermore, another *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily) article on November 16, 1991, reported that Billy Du, Soon Ja's husband, expressed his family's gratitude to the Korean-American community for sending about 2,400 letters, including 700 letters from South Korea, to Judge Karlin.⁸⁰

Despite the publicly-expressed acceptance of the verdict by some Korean-American leaders, many thought that the verdict was “too harsh” because “a significant number probably felt the shooting was justifiable self-defense.” This public expression appeared to be congruent with the community’s internal feeling. Jerry Yu, executive director of the Korean-American Coalition, alluded to their ambiguous stance when he said that Koreans wanted justice in the Du incident because not all Koreans “offered unconditional support for Du,” even though they sympathized with Soon Ja’s predicament.⁸¹

This ambiguous stance became much clearer when Judge Karlin placed Soon Ja on five years’ probation. Even though they knew that Karlin’s light sentence could cause more retaliatory reaction from the African-American community, many Korean Americans welcomed her no-prison-time sentence for Soon Ja.⁸² Yumi Jhang Park, executive director of the Korean American Grocers Association, expressed the Korean Americans’ sentiment regarding the sentencing: “Many merchants sympathized with Du’s plight and always believed she was innocent.”⁸³ Jerry Yu also expressed to the news media that he agreed with Judge Karlin’s lenient sentencing.⁸⁴ Judge Karlin also ordered Soon Ja to pay Latasha’s funeral costs, but the Harlins refused to accept Soon Ja’s money—the \$3,400 funeral cost was paid by a victim’s rights group and community organizations.⁸⁵

Judge Karlin’s lenient sentencing angered the African-American community. Her perceived leniency was interpreted as a double standard and as judicial racism often applied to African Americans.⁸⁶ They felt that “Du got judicial treatment as a white because she killed a black” and that she would not have been given probation if she had killed a white.⁸⁷ Some people even compared Soon Ja’s receiving a no-prison-time sentence with several dog owners’ having six months or more jail sentence for killing or beating a dog.⁸⁸

Judge Karlin's sentence further separated the two communities. The African-American leaders launched a recall drive to remove Karlin from the bench while Korean-American leaders embarked on sending her support letters,⁸⁹ formed a group to back her in the 1992 election,⁹⁰ and to raise money for Karlin's re-election.⁹¹

Many scholars note Judge Karlin's light sentence as one of the most important stimuli of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Although her sentencing did not actually trigger the 1992 riots, it played a major role in the destruction of Korean-owned businesses during the riots.⁹² About five and half months after the sentencing, "the widespread anger, frustration, and outrage"⁹³ in the African-American community exploded on April 29, 1992, when the Simi Valley's predominantly white jury acquitted the four white police officers involved in the March 3, 1991, Rodney King beating incident. African Americans' outrage over Judge Karlin's sentencing was expressed in the destruction of Korean-American businesses. The rioters burned down, looted, and destroyed approximately 2,300 Korean-American owned stores. As a result, damages in both South Central and Koreatown in Los Angeles were estimated at \$350 million, forty-five percent of the total riot damage.⁹⁴ Korean-American attorney Angela Oh said, "The disposition of the Latasha Harlins case was a major factor in the targeting of Koreans. Even today if people in South Central were asked to name one Korean, it would be Soon Ja Du."⁹⁵

Notes

- ¹ See Edward T. Chang, "African American Boycotts of Korean-Owned Stores in New York and Los Angeles," in *Riots and Pogroms*, ed. Paul R. Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 239. According to Chang, the Du murder incident is known as the Soon Ja Du case in the Korean-American community.
- ² Karen Umemoto, "Blacks and Koreans in Los Angeles: The Case of LaTasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du," in *Blacks, Latinos, and Asians in Urban America: Status and Prospects for Politics and Activism*, ed. James Jennings (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), 101.
- ³ Sumi K. Cho, "Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, Inc., 1993), 209.
- ⁴ "Trial of Korean Grocer Moved," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, September 19, 1991, sec. A-1.
- ⁵ Lou Cannon, *Official Negligence: How Rodney King and the Riots Changed Los Angeles and the LAPD* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 110.
- ⁶ Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich, *Immigrant Entrepreneurs: Koreans in Los Angeles, 1965-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 189.
- ⁷ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 110.
- ⁸ *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), December 24, 1991, sec. A3.
- ⁹ Kil-Nam Roh, "Issues of Korean American Journalism," *Amerasia Journal* 10 No. 2 (Fall/Winter 1983): 99. Roh is the chief editor of *The New Korea* in Los Angeles, a Korean-American community paper. This was a paper opposed to the South Korean government.
- ¹⁰ Pyong Gap Min, *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 9.
- ¹¹ Seong Hyong Lee, "Ethics of Korean-American Newspapers," in *Korea and the United States: a Century of Cooperation*, eds. Youngnok Koo and Dae-Sook Suh (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 59.
- ¹² Roh, "Issues of Korean American Journalism," 97.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 97. According to Roh, the South Korean government had controlled and censored information in the Korean-American community probably up until the early 1980s. He seemed to imply that the avoidance of the race issue was a result of the South Korean government's control. So, the issues dealing with African Americans' civil rights movement and ethnic relations were seldom covered in Los Angeles Korean dailies. He further pointed out that some small independent newspapers resisted the South Korean government control. One of them was the *Korean Street Journal*. It was a weekly journal, established in February 1981. It attracted some readers because of its critical views against the South Korean government, but did not last very long. The word *kamdungwee* denotes "blacky" or "darky." "Dungwee" in Korean usually used to mean a lower class person, child, or to belittle a person whereas "hukin" is used to refer a black person. See also Ken Roh, "Koreans' Need to Get Rid of Racial Prejudice," *Korean Street Journal*, August 12, 1981, p.1. for Korean's negative attitudes toward African Americans and Latinos.

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- ¹⁴ While I was reading the *Korea Times* articles about the Du murder incident, I was amazed by the number of pages that the *Korea Times* had sold for Korean merchants' advertisement. It appeared that the ratio of its advertisement pages to the news was almost nine to one. See also Umemoto, "Blacks and Koreans in Los Angeles", 107.
- ¹⁵ Richard Reyes Fruto, "Death of a black teen-ager: Blacks and Koreans join hands to heal wounds," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), March 27, 1991, 1.
- ¹⁶ See Fruto, "Death of a black teen-ager," 1 and K. W. Lee, "Learn, Baby, Learn: Lessons from Latasha Harlins' tragedy," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), March 27, 1991, and "An American Passage: Latasha: a haunting presence among Korean Americans," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), November 25, 1991. K. W. Lee was the chief editor of the *Korea Times* (English-language weekly). See, K. W. Lee, "Urban Impressionist" in Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu, eds., *East to America: Korean American Life Stories* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 1-24. According to Lee's autobiographical article, Lee came to the United States in early 1950, studied journalism, and became a successful journalist. He remembered how African Americans helped him live in black neighborhoods and how he became a "black" reporter in the Civil Rights era.
- ¹⁷ Chang, "African American Boycotts," 237-8.
- ¹⁸ Yun-Sung Cho, "Prevent the Shooting Incident from Igniting a New Flame in the black-Korean Conflict," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 18, 1991, sec. B1.
- ¹⁹ Fruto, "False rumors breed racial distrust," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), April 10, 1991.
- ²⁰ Latasha was reported as a thief who broke into the Du's store in the *Central Daily* (Joong-ang Ilbo) on November 25, 28, 1991, and February 12, May 18, July 9, 1992. See also *Josun Daily* on May 1, 1992, *Korea Times* on February 13, 1992, *Seoul Daily* on May 1, 1992, *Oriental Daily* (Dong-A Ilbo) on May 1, 1992, *Kuk-min Daily* on May 1, 1992, and *Kyeng Hyeang Daily* on May 2, 1992.
- ²¹ Yea Chun Yun, "A Roundtable Conversation with Experts in Race Relation," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), March 30, 1991, sec. C.
- ²² Reporters' Daily Transcript of the Criminal Court Trial Proceedings (RDTC), 325.
- ²³ Andrea Ford and John H. Lee, "Slain Girl Was Not Stealing Juice, Police Say," *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 1991, sec. B1.
- ²⁴ Itabari Njeri, *The Last Plantation; Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 157. Soon Ja was estimated to be 5 feet 4 inches tall whereas Latasha was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed 152 pounds. Looking at her in the newspaper photos, I think that Soon Ja's weight could be estimated from 150 to 155 pounds.
- ²⁵ Tae-gi Moon, "Evidence of Du's Self-defense Claim," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), May 17, 1991, sec. A1.
- ²⁶ Moon, "Soon Ja Du Received 4 Punches from Harlins and Fell Twice," *Korea Times* (Korean-language daily), October 1, 1991, sec. A1.
- ²⁷ Fruto, "Date set for Soon Ja Du trial," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), May 23, 1991, 1.
- ²⁸ Fruto, "Peacemakers do the right thing," *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), April 3, 1991, 1.

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- ²⁹ Njeri, *The Last Plantation*, 72.
- ²⁸ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 164.
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- ⁷¹ Danny Bakewell led the boycott of the Korean liquor store where Lee Arthur Mitchell was shot to death by Tae Sam Park, the owner. According to *Los Angeles Times*, on March 28, 1991, Bakewell announced a donation of \$5,000 to start a fund for blacks to buy back Korean stores in the neighborhood. Since the Du murder incident, he had staged several demonstrations against disrespectful stores such as the Empire Liquor Market.
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- ⁷⁴ Sheryl Stolberg and Frank Clifford, "Black-Korean Truce Termed 'very Fragile,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 5, 1991, sec. B1. See also Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 87. According to Min, the Korean community organized KARE to support the victims of the black boycott because it felt that the death of one African American was not significant compared to many Korean-American storeowners killed in robbery hold-ups. KARE members consisted of young, American educated 1.5 generation Koreans who came to the United States at early ages. However, KARE was dissolved on September 30, 1991, because the members thought that making financial support to the black boycott victims would hurt black-Korean relations.
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- ⁹³ Aubry, "Black-Korean American Relations," 153.
- ⁹⁴ Min, *Caught in the Middle*, 1.
- ⁹⁵ Cannon, *Official Negligence*, 172. Cannon interviewed Angela Oh in June 1994.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Most Korean Americans saw the Du murder incident in the context of an economic structural problem. Seeing it as a simple business dispute between a Korean-American storeowner and an African-American customer, they attempted to explain the incident in terms of economic conditions. Focusing on structural problems—unemployment, racism, poverty, crime, gang activity, and Korean Americans' employment disadvantages—they concluded that the fundamental cause of the tension was the economic frustration of African Americans. Hence, most Korean Americans believed that the cause was not the problem with Korean Americans operating businesses in African-American neighborhoods. They emphasized that Korean Americans were caught in the middle and should not be blamed for the conflict.¹

In analyzing the nature of Black-Korean conflict, scholars, journalists, writers, and some community activists pointed out two related groups of factors that had often generated conflict: structural factors and socio-psychological factors. The structural factors included African Americans' economic frustration, Korean-Americans' disadvantage in the U.S. labor market, and their "middleman" economic role. The socio-psychological factors consisted of language barriers, cultural differences, and mutual prejudice. They seemed to agree that the influencing causes are related, although they differ in their emphasis on one or the other factor.

Pyong Gap Min in *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* explains that when playing the middleman economic role, "Koreans bear the brunt of Blacks' economic frustrations."² Min argues that Korean merchants' middleman role

between big corporations and inner-city customers—distributing the corporate products to inner-city consumers—and their language barrier and weak political power often invited a situation where they became an easy target for African Americans' scapegoating for their economic and social frustration.³ Min, however, points out that the structural factor does not explain the causes of the conflict on the individual level, nor does the socio-psychological factor make clear its causes on the collective level. Based on the fact that Korean merchants' accusations of African-American customers' shoplifting often triggered the conflicts on the individual level, Min asserts that the socio-psychological factor played a much more determinant role in the Black-Korean conflict than the structural factor.⁴ Although Min sees that the structural problem has little to do with what actually happens between the merchants and the customers on the individual level, he maintains that it is nevertheless the fundamental base for supplying an environment prone to conflict, making the socio-psychological factor a frequent driving force.⁵

Asserting that Koreans' prejudiced behavior often actuates the conflict on the individual level, Min sees two causes for Koreans' prejudiced behavior that is rooted in the Korean Americans' sense of superiority over African Americans. They are the Koreans' monocultural ethnic background and Korean Americans' ideological beliefs in American opportunities. According to Min, these two causes seem to contribute far more than any other causes of the prejudice such as language difficulties, cultural differences, unfamiliarity with African-American history, class differences, and the pre-immigration exposure to U.S. racism. While Koreans' inexperience with living in a multiethnic society generates difficulty for them to cope with the different values and customs, Korean Americans'

ideological beliefs in the American dream for those who work hard inclined them to look down on African-American poor. Implying a class-based prejudice among Korean Americans, Min argues that many college-educated Korean-American merchants believe that African Americans' own cultural deficiencies—irrational consumer behavior, too many children, non-traditional family structure, and a high divorce rate—cause African-American poverty.⁶

Similarly, in “Korean Merchants in the Black Community: Prejudice among the Victims of Prejudice,” Moon H. Jo stresses Korean Americans' prejudiced attitudes as the main cause of Black-Korean conflict. In contrast to Min's view on the origins of Koreans' prejudiced behavior, however, Jo accents Koreans' status anxiety. Based on interviews with Philadelphia African-American community leaders and Korean-American merchants and data from secondary sources, he concludes that the conflict originated in Koreans' status anxiety. Jo argues that although cultural misunderstandings, communication problems, economic competition, and structural changes could explain the conflict, its source is actually Koreans' historically contemptuous attitudes toward dark-complexioned people and Koreans' insecurity in their own ability to regain the status they held in Korea. Observing their unemployed customers' spending habits and work ethics, which are far different from their own, not only reinforces their stereotype of blacks being “lazy and dumb,” but also scares them with the possibility of becoming like one of them by failing. Many Koreans, Jo says, see this as a warning sign, and they avoid any close association with African Americans. On the other hand, African Americans interpret Korean Americans' desire to disassociate from them to gain economic success and the white-status at all costs as arrogant, discourteous, and insensitive, causing the clash.⁷

Another scholar, Sumi K. Cho, sees Koreans' prejudice against African Americans as a class-based clash between two unequal classes. In "Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction," she explains that this conflict becomes critical when college-educated middle-class people in two-parent families compare themselves with unemployed and uneducated lower class people in single family settings.⁸

Some scholars like Kyeyoung Park, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, and Edward Chang emphasize the pervasive influence of white racism in the mass media in the Black-Korean conflict. Park and Chang argue that the root cause of Koreans' prejudiced attitudes comes from white-American racism against African Americans. Pointing out the pervasive American cultural influence in South Korea through the continuous American military presence, along with economic and political dominance in South Korea since the Korean War, they argue that Koreans learned the value of white skin—"the lighter one's skin, the better one is treated"—before they immigrated to the United States. This learned racial attitude became further strengthened by their daily observation of unemployed customers in predominantly African-American neighborhoods.⁹

Larry Aubry also points out that violent crimes related to Black-Korean conflict make up a very small percentage of the total crime in South Central Los Angeles. Yet the media often report the incidents, but neglect to put them in perspective. Aubry argues that not mentioning other crimes in the area distorts reality and often heightens the tension unnecessarily. The media's exaggerated urgency and frequency not only stirs a potentially explosive situation, but also facilitates formation of prejudiced attitudes.¹⁰

Itabari Njeri in *Last Plantation: Color, Conflict, and Identity: Reflections of a New World Black* emphasizes the psychological aspect—rigidity of thinking, low self-esteem, compensatory behavior—that exacerbates the structural problem in the conflict. Njeri argues that Soon Ja’s feeling of inferiority and dehumanization steered her irrational behavior to kill Latasha. Recognizing that both Korean Americans and African Americans share a history of oppressed experience—the Japanese occupation, American slavery—and day to day racism,¹¹ she believes both Soon Ja and Latasha “became too quick to defend themselves when they perceived their humanity being violated, acting on ‘internalized oppression.’”¹²

Notably, Koreans’ prejudiced attitude against African Americans has been observed in Koreans’ rude behaviors. In many instances, this disrespectful behavior is exhibited in reluctant smiling, dropping change on the counter to avoid any physical contact, avoiding direct eye contact and answering any questions, yelling, and presumptuously treating all blacks as shoplifters. Consequently, these behaviors have naturally brought forth resentment and attracted many criticisms from the African-American community. Incidentally, these behaviors resembled Chinese merchants’ behaviors in Mississippi in the nineteenth century. James W. Loewen in *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* depicts the nineteenth century Chinese merchants’ unreflective exhibition of rude racism to their African-American customers—“change was slapped down on the counter, rather than placed in customers’ hands, and discussions of prices were usually curt and unpleasant.”¹³

In response to many criticisms on Korean-American merchants’ rude behavior, many Korean Americans tried to defend the merchants’ rude behavior by their Confucian cultural

heritage, language difficulty, and their African-American customers' shoplifting attempts. In examining the rudeness, some scholars explained the reason with cultural difference and language problem while others disagreed with this explanation. Some questioned its validity. Poor English and cultural difference were not enough reason for their demeaning behavior, and many Korean Americans knew that they would not treat their white customers rudely in a middle-class white neighborhood. David H. Kim, the president of the Korean American Grocers Association in Los Angeles, in an interview with K. W. Lee, chief editor of *Korea Times* (English-language weekly), stated that "English does not really matter. If you speak English and you run a store in a white neighborhood, and you throw customer's change on the table, the people would not come to that store anymore."¹⁴ The September 15, 1991, *Korea Times* (English-language weekly) article also described how many Korean-American merchants treated their African-American customers disrespectfully. It said, "when someone asks them a question they don't understand, instead of politely asking them to repeat it, they either don't respond and wave their hands disgustedly, or squint their faces and say 'What?'"¹⁵ Sumi K. Cho argues that the disrespectful behavior stems from neither a language problem nor cultural differences, but from prevalent Korean-American's stereotypical views of African Americans. She asserts that too many Korean merchants perceive African Americans as lazy and unintelligent complaining criminals to explain their rude behavior as only due to cultural difference and language problems.¹⁶

Some Korean Americans attempted to defend Korean-American merchants' lack of smiles with the Confucian culture and the complete exhaustion from overwork. According to their explanation, the Confucian culture reserves a smile for only family members and

friends. Working long hours leaves merchants too tired to smile at their customers. Kyeyoung Park does not agree with this explanation. Park argues that since most new immigrants came from Seoul with a college degree and professional and managerial background, this explanation does not apply to them. He adds that merchants who lack smiles in ghettos will most certainly smile in a middle class white neighborhood.¹⁷

Regardless of the explanations, Korean-American merchants' rude behaviors bespeak their feeling of dislike and their moral judgment of contempt. They treat African-American customers rudely because they believe that their customers steal, are uneducated, lazy, and dirty, and drink a lot. In other words, they treat them badly because Korean-American merchants think that African Americans deserve to be treated badly. As a result, Korean Americans' prejudiced disrespectful attitudes manifest in rude behaviors. The Confucian culture and overwork may contribute, but they are not a real source of this behavioral problem.

Even though Korean-American merchants use their African-American customers' stealing as a justification for their prejudices, shoplifting occurs in all businesses, all classes, and all ethnic groups. Some African Americans as well as Korean Americans, European Americans, and other ethnic groups have cheated and stolen items in stores and, in many instances, the cost of shoplifting is passed on to customers. In other words, African Americans are not the only ones who would resort to shoplifting and stealing to survive. Poverty necessitates stealing because it is a means to survive. Many Korean-Americans' ancestors and relatives survived hunger and poverty by stealing and pick pocketing. Also, many Korean-American merchants defend their high prices for poor quality items based on adding cost of shoplifting in the price. In turn, many African-

American customers argue that Korean-American merchants cheat them by overcharging and stocking cheap merchandise to increase their profit margin because they buy it cheap and sell it high, maximizing on the poor residents' inability to shop around. Shoplifting therefore can be seen by some African Americans as a means to equalize the playing field.

Not all residents in the area steal, are uneducated and low-class, and drink a lot. Many of them are working-class Christians. Justifying rude and disrespectful treatment of all African Americans because of a Korean merchant's inability to recognize who is and who is not a shoplifter is not only immoral but also irrational.

A few scholars argue that Korean-American prejudice originated from Korean's historical tendency to "look down on people with dark skin."¹⁸ However, I argued in this thesis that Koreans' negative attitudes toward people with dark complexions appears to be more influenced by Western racism. Historically, it seems that Koreans paid more attention to status and less attention to color. Since the Korean War, however, this tendency has become more complicated because the color line was directly tied to the value of money and status. Koreans learned the value of white skin—"the lighter one's skin, the better one is treated."¹⁹

This association of one's skin color with one's status brought a tragedy. Koreans' historic "idiosyncratic" obsession with status and class gave Korean-American merchants a false impression that they had a limitless opportunity to obtain their status if they worked hard enough. In their attempt to obtain white privileges and status, they had a one-track mind; they did not allow themselves to know that openly expressing their contempt toward African Americans because of their complexion constituted not only an exhibition of their ignorance, but also a moral wrong.

Ironically, Korean-Americans' blind desire to possess white status deepened their ignorance in race relations and hindered them from attaining white status in America. It isolates many Korean Americans from mainstream America, further reinforcing their ignorance. Korean Americans' desire to disassociate with African Americans to gain white privileges at all costs,²⁰ their inexperience in multicultural settings, cultural differences, and the language problem intensified their ignorance. What is more problematic was their narrow interpretation of the American dream. Assuming that everyone has equal opportunity to achieve the individual's dream by simply working hard, they overtired themselves, often working seven days a week and 12-14 hours a day that left them with no time for reflection. This time constraint keeps them from recognizing the unethical nature of their prejudice. Many Korean Americans are unaware not only of what they are doing, but also that what they are doing is wrong. Furthermore, the deliberate avoidance of contact with African Americans perpetuated their ignorance because many Korean Americans do not meet highly educated middle-class African Americans. This actually is a disadvantage, but many are not even aware of the fact. In this respect, any improvement in Korean American race relations requires Korean Americans be educated and reflect on their own racial thoughts. Unfortunately, this awareness did not come in time for Latasha.

Both individually and collectively, the Du murder incident was a tragedy. Individually, the tragedy ended Latasha's life and inflicted pain and suffering on Latasha's family. Soon Ja also lost her dignity and caused pain and suffering to her own family. At the heart of this case were Soon Ja's tragic impulses arising out of racism. Her monocultural ethnic pride, status obsession, ignorance, exhaustion from overwork, and fear affected Soon Ja's

ability to think before destroying Latasha's life. Her self-interest, Korean tradition, and racism dominated Soon Ja's horrifying actions, while Latasha's street tradition, self-preservation, and self-respect in response to Soon Ja's dehumanizing racism determined Latasha's assertive behaviors. Latasha, a fifteen-year-old teenager, showed rational thinking when she picked up the orange juice bottle from the floor, gave it to Soon Ja, and turned away from the fight. But Soon Ja, a fifty-one-year-old mother, lost control of herself, shot Latasha to death, and lied to people to avoid going to prison. Both, in their struggle, lost their humanity.

Collectively—for society as a whole—this case represented hopelessness. Society reinforced Soon Ja's rationalization of taking Latasha's life through racial prejudice, and allowed her to practice racism against African Americans. In essence society gave more privileges to its members who are almost white. In Soon Ja's store, in court, and in the Korean community, Soon Ja's lies prevailed. Judge Joyce Karlin sympathized with Soon Ja's predicament and the Korean-American community defended Soon Ja's criminal act because it is what everyone is allowed to practice—racism against African Americans, particularly young African Americans. Under this rule, Latasha's young life disappeared through the fissures of the societal structures. Shamefully and erroneously, many Korean Americans still think Latasha was a thief who stole an orange juice and demanded money from Soon Ja.

Notes

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- ²⁰ Jo, "Korean Merchants," 406.

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