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### Korean and African-American Relations: Integrating the Symbolic with the Structural

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# Korean and African-American Relations: Integrating the Symbolic With the Structural

By  
Karen Umemoto

LaTasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du: These two individuals became symbolic figures for the plight of African Americans and Koreans. One a merchant, the other a customer, their fatal confrontation has helped shape the state of relations between the Korean and African-American communities of South Central Los Angeles for some time to come. Their relationship is a metaphor for the unequal class positions of the two communities. But, why is it that these symbols take on meaning for others outside the physical boundaries of the particular geographic region or across the class boundaries within the communities they represent?

Soon Ja Du, a Korean merchant doing business in South Central Los Angeles, fatally shot LaTasha Harlins, a young African-American customer. This tragic incident took place two weeks after the police beating of Rodney King. Trials and appeals processes ran parallel to each other throughout the following year. During the outbreak of civil unrest following the acquittal of the "LAPD 4" in April 1992, the spray-painted slogan, "Remember LaTasha," was captured in the media coverage of the smoke-filled skies over Los Angeles. The death of LaTasha Harlins and the sentencing of Soon Ja Du have become critical markers in the relationship between Koreans and African Americans in Los Angeles. What does the symbolism found in the series of events surrounding this case mean for our understanding of racial and ethnic relations?

There are a number of contrasting models of ethnic conflict in the academic literature. These models can be categorized in a variety of ways. James Jennings, for instance, has suggested the following models: ethnic succession; resentment; job competition; social and economic status; and racial hierarchy.<sup>1</sup> Though these models differ in the specific sources of conflict emphasized, all are based on the following assumptions: ethnic and racial groups compete over social, economic, or political resources; and inequality of power and resources provides the material conditions for ethnic or racial conflict.

The case study of the controversy over the shooting and death of LaTasha Harlins and the sentencing of Soon Ja Du does not entirely contradict these assumptions. Soon Ja Du is one of many Korean merchants who, while

they do not live in South Central Los Angeles, have succeeded in maintaining a small business in the area that caters to the Latino and African-American population. The area is characterized by a lower mean income than most other areas of Los Angeles County. Resentment or disdain may indeed be said to stem from a difference in class position defined along ethnic group boundaries.

Approaches that focus on the "material conditions" fostering conflict are indeed helpful, but they do not provide a complete explanation by themselves. They do not account for the emergence of conflict in one situation but not in another, even if the same material conditions are present in both situations. They also do not satisfactorily explain the existence of ethnic antagonism between individuals of equal position or status. A focus solely on material conditions does not explain the development of cooperation between individuals belonging to groups having unequal status.

Some scholars have studied the role of ideology in ethnic conflict. Kyeyoung Park and Edward Chang, for example, have provided useful insights into the ideological differences between Koreans and African Americans. Building on this work, I would like to explore a concept which Clifford Geertz has resurrected from Bruke and others, namely "symbolic action." While unequal class positions played a role in the emergence of group antagonism, the LaTasha Harlins/Soon Ja Du case gathered symbolic power beyond that directly related to merchant-customer relations. The metaphorical meaning attached to the issue by voices in the Korean and African-American communities contrasted drastically. The creation of symbolic meaning through the interaction of two individuals and, subsequently, two communities, *combined* in this case with unequal class positions and the role of the judicial system, has led to the intractability of the conflict.

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An examination of the LaTasha Harlins/Soon Ja Du case points to the importance of perception, interpretation, and the creation of meaning in the escalation of ethnic and racial antagonism. What was the symbolic value of the controversy to Koreans and to African Americans? How did their perception and interpretation of the events differ? How did their interpretations change or reinforce ethnic or racial group identity and definition of the "other"? How was this defined in relation to Anglo-Americans in the power structure? And, what are the implications of this analytic approach for policy regarding racial and ethnic tensions?

An analysis of news coverage published in the most widely circulated African-American newspaper, the *Los*

*Angeles Sentinel*, and English-language Korean-American newspaper, the *Korea Times*, provides a sampling of viewpoints expressed over the duration of the case. Approximately three hundred news articles over a one-year period referred to the specific incident and to the relations between the two ethnic and racial groups. While the two newspapers may not represent the viewpoints of their respective readerships as a whole, they may help us understand the way in which events are perceived and interpreted by the two groups and how judgments are made about one in relation to the other.

### **Background**

Relationships between Korean-American merchants and African-American residents in South and South Central Los Angeles followed the flight of Jewish-owned businesses, many of which were destroyed during the Watts rebellions of 1965. This was the same year that the Immigration Reform Act was passed, marking a period of increased immigration from Latin America and Asia to the United States. Los Angeles became the port of entry for many immigrants, drastically changing the demographic composition of the city. South Central Los Angeles has shifted in composition from being predominantly African American to having a near-even balance today between African-American and Latino residents. Many Koreans immigrants had college degrees and professional backgrounds, and with capital brought from Korea, rotating credit associations, and other institutional sources of credit, many were able to establish small businesses in the face of discriminatory hiring practices, licensing regulations, and other barriers to their employment in the skilled labor market.

Tensions initially became apparent as complaints were made by local African-American customers who felt that Korean merchants were disrespectful towards them. Mediation groups and coalitions, including, for example, the Black/Korean Alliance, were formed to address such problems stemming from cultural misunderstandings and language barriers. As merchants experienced crimes or heard of fellow entrepreneurs falling victim to theft, armed robbery, and, in some cases, murder by criminals from a cross-spectrum of ethnic and racial backgrounds, nerves became strained. Likewise, as African-American customers experienced or heard of others who experienced scrutiny and what some interpreted as the "rudeness" of Koreans, resentments continued to foment. Tensions increased as several dozen Korean-American merchants were reported to have been injured or killed in the line of work in Los Angeles over a span of several years leading up to the time of LaTasha's death. During that same period, several African-American customers were also reportedly killed in skirmishes with Korean-American business owners.

On March 16, 1991, LaTasha Harlins was shot and killed by Soon Ja Du in South Los Angeles while she was in Du's store to make a purchase. There were conflicting reports of what transpired. There was, however, a store

security videotape showing a scuffle between the two and a gunshot fired to the back of LaTasha Harlins's head as she was walking away from Soon Ja Du. Soon Ja Du was found guilty of manslaughter by the jury. The presiding judge, Joyce Karlin, ordered a sentence of a \$500 fine and 400 hours of community service. The fact that no prison time was included in the sentence enraged many African Americans. LaTasha Harlins came to symbolize the litany of injustice faced by African Americans while Soon Ja Du came to represent the hardships faced by Korean immigrants in what was perceived by them to be a violent and unwelcoming world.

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The account contained in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* painted the case as one of "injustice." The editorial columns of the *Korea Times* also decried the sentence as unjust. The major theme to emerge in the *Korea Times* coverage, however, was the "scapegoating" of Koreans who were simply in search of the American dream. Both papers portrayed Korean Americans as victims. In the presentation of the "facts" of the case, the interpretations of causal events, and the depiction of "self" in relation to "other," the contrasts in the media's coverage of the incident were marked.

Each account had more in contrast than in common, though they were presumably covering the same series of events. Two "realities" emerged.

### **Same Event: Two Interpretations**

If we take the reportage in the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Korea Times* as two distinct "frames," we can see two different "pictures" of the events that transpired, the interpretation of the meanings of those events, and the characterizations of one's own group in relation to the other.

#### **"Facts" of the Case**

The "facts" of the case as reported by the two newspapers were very different. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* depicted the shooting, for instance, as a deliberate and unremorseful act on the part of Soon Ja Du. The account of the incident was given by Soon Ja Du herself, as she reportedly confessed:

Du then said she pulled a pistol from under the store's counter and confronted the girl, who then gave the orange juice back. But, as the teen was leaving the store, the owner shot her in the head, killing her instantly.<sup>2</sup>

This is a portrayal of Du as intentionally killing LaTasha in an act of unprovoked murder without ambivalence or emotion.

The *Korea Times* featured three different articles offering contradictory evidence as to what transpired. One article quoted Soon Ja Du's son who related his mother's story. He told of a scuffle between the two and an attempt by LaTasha to steal money from the cash register. He explained, "But Harlins was undaunted and continued to hit Du. As she was about to faint from the blows, Du shot Harlins."<sup>3</sup> This contradicted the police account that was also reported in that same issue. This report concurred with the videotape which showed the shot being fired as LaTasha walked away from Du. Additionally, another headline story later reported that the gun was faulty and was set to fire at the slightest touch of the trigger. The *Korea Times* coverage, as a whole, presented differing views of the incident, leaving open the possibility that the shooting was an act of self-defense or, given the benefit of the doubt, unintentional.

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The *Korea Times* and *Los Angeles Sentinel* also featured articles on the lives of Soon Ja Du and LaTasha Harlins. The *Korea Times* articles, including one titled "Mrs. Du: A silent helper of lepers and homeless," painted Soon Ja Du in an admirable light. Stories told of her self-sacrifice for the sake of her family, the long hours she and her family worked, her devotion to her church, and the tormenting she endured from endless harassment from members of Bloods and Crips gangs.

Similarly, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* featured interviews with family members who spoke of LaTasha's aspirations to become a lawyer in order to help others, her diligence in school, and the trauma experienced by family members in the face of her death. LaTasha Harlins and Soon Ja Du personified the dreams and aspirations of many African Americans and Koreans, alike. A reading of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Korea Times* invited sympathy, empathy, and identification with each group.

### **Context of the Case**

Not only did the "facts" of the case lend themselves to differing conclusions about the events and people involved, the two contrasting contexts within which this particular case was reported gave different meanings to the case itself.

In the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, for example, accompanying the coverage of this case was ongoing coverage of the beating of Rodney King which had occurred only two weeks before LaTasha Harlins's death. The trial of the LAPD officers ran concurrently in the press with the trial of Soon Ja Du. Other cases of police

brutality were also covered. Interview excerpts telling of the insensitivity on the part of the Du family as well as the greed of other Korean-American merchants were included. Other tragedies took front page as African-American superstar Magic Johnson discovered he had contracted the AIDS virus and Mike Tyson received a prison sentence after he was convicted of rape. The victimization of African Americans and the tribulations of those who had reached heroic status were themes found in the surrounding articles. LaTasha Harlins's death fit a familiar theme and became part of a larger story.

The same was true for the life of Soon Ja Du as reconstructed in the *Korea Times*. Surrounding articles featured stories of fellow merchants who were also working long hours and making painful sacrifices in search of the American dream. Short fictional stories, including one titled "A day in the life of a Korean grocer," conveyed the drama and suspense of working in a store while threatened by angry customers. Reports of criminal acts against Korean-American store owners continued to appear in nearly every issue during the year. Other articles heralded the successes of many Korean-American community leaders, students, and business entrepreneurs. They, like Soon Ja Du, were also struggling to overcome the hardships of immigrant life, to "make it" in America. Like LaTasha Harlins's death, Soon Ja Du's plight also fit a familiar theme and became part of a broader picture.

### **Interpretation of the Case**

As metaphorical connections were made between the fate of Soon Ja Du and LaTasha Harlins to the lives of other Koreans and African Americans, so too were their collective identities clarified. In the midst of a range of experiences among individuals within each group, the newspapers were but one means of documenting and sharing those moments, feelings, dreams, and connections sifted from the extraneous events. The "facts" of the case and their relation to the other "facts" formed a story in which motivations, laws (both natural and legal), alliances, intentions, and values became intertwined.

In the case of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a portrait of Korean Americans emerged as being in collusion with the power structure against African Americans. Judge Karlin was questioned in an interview as to the reasoning behind Du's sentence, implying that it was not based on jurisprudence but on her concern over her reelection campaign.

A *Los Angeles Sentinel* reporter asked Judge Karlin how she felt the Korean-American community, especially the Korean Grocers Association, perceived her following the sentence, reminding her that the Korean Grocers Association "stated in the *Korea Times* that they were raising money for your campaign."<sup>4</sup> Upon the anniversary of LaTasha's death, a member of the LaTasha Harlins Justice Committee was interviewed saying, "I'd like to say that Judge Karlin single-handedly did what 27 policemen did in the Rodney King case."<sup>5</sup>

Combined with other articles, photos, and letters to the editor, there is a strong suggestion of collusion between

members of the Korean-American community and Judge Karlin. As Judge Karlin's sentence is likened to the police beating of Rodney King and to the later acquittal of the LAPD officers, a connection can also be made between Koreans and the Los Angeles Police Department. Both can be seen to utilize their power or privilege to protect their own interest with disregard for the lives of African Americans.

A different interpretation is constructed in the *Korea Times*. The tale is one of victimization and scapegoating. There is a distinction made between "good" African Americans and "bad" African Americans. African-American leaders and "good neighbors" who are understanding of the situation of Korean Americans and willing to work toward peaceful solutions to problems were featured. These examples of cooperation and shared values stood in contrast to articles on Ice Cube, a popular rap artist whose cut, "Black Korea," was quoted: "So pay respect to the black fist or we'll burn down your store, right down to a crisp." Related articles highlighting the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes also reinforced the notion that Korean Americans were being victimized as scapegoats of larger societal problems.

*Korea Times* articles following the sentencing also reflected acknowledgment of differing reactions within the Korean-American community. The editor, K. W. Lee, voiced strong disagreement with the judge's sentence in his editorial stating, "Compassion and leniency, yes, and courage, yes, but justice, no, no, no."<sup>6</sup> Acknowledging differences among Korean Americans, there was a heightened fear of backlash on the part of African Americans toward all Koreans, despite the varied views and attitudes existing among them.

### Implications For Future Race Relations

Based on a frame-critical narrative analysis of the *Los Angeles Sentinel* and the *Korea Times* during this period, one might see how some African Americans may have expressed their frustration at the verdict by targeting Korean-owned stores during the civil unrest. Likewise, one can understand how Korean-American store owners may have felt scapegoated in the civil unrest, regardless of whether their particular store was in fact vandalized as a result of anti-Korean targeting. This is not to condone either set of actions.

What it does suggest, however, is that interactions between members of two groups, in this case, ethnic and racial groups, can become symbolic representations of collective experiences. Individuals can become metaphors for shared ethnic group experiences. Individual experiences can symbolize the treatment of a group by others and the perception of self in relation to other. The relationship between the symbolic individual, other groups, and the broader social, political, and economic structures, can become representative of the entire group. Interactions between *individuals* can become "symbolic interactions" between *groups* in the mind's eye.

If we are to address the problem of interethnic and

interracial tensions, we must look at the patterns of inequality, exploitation, and social injustice that exist. Of equal importance is the process of social construction of group interaction and the manner in which symbolic cases such as that described above can define relations between whole ethnic groups regardless of any shared fate and precluding any cooperation. Unless these processes can be deconstructed and cooperative relations and shared interests be simultaneously reconstructed, racial tensions may continue to mire any efforts toward economic, political, and material revitalization for all.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>James Jennings, "New Urban Racial and Ethnic Conflicts in American Cities," *SAGE Race Relations Abstracts* (August 1992).

<sup>2</sup>Marsha Mitchell, "Merchant charged: Teenager shot, killed in dispute over orange juice," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 21-27 March 1991.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen W. Yum, "Soon Ja Du's family claims self-defense," *Korea Times*, 27 March 1991.

<sup>4</sup>"Interview: Judge Joyce Karlin," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 18 March 1992.

<sup>5</sup>"Anniversary: The Harlins Tragedy." (interview with spokespersons for the LaTasha Harlins Justice Committee in response to the interview with Judge Karlin), *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 25 March 1992.

<sup>6</sup>K. W. Lee, "An American Passage: LaTasha becomes part of our collective conscience," *Korea Times*, 25 November 1991.

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