

The Unwinnable Wars: Everlasting Tension as Seen in the Los Angeles Riots of 1992

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ABSTRACT

This paper, through the lens of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, examines the repercussions of racial prejudices that are often ignored during the rapid development of the United States. To assess the dominant factor in causing the Riots, the paper explores and revisits a variety of factors that are associated with the exacerbation of the relationship between Korean Americans and African-Americans, especially those in Los Angeles Koreatown. Using analysis of recent events, the paper details the traumatic aftermath of the Riots that continues to haunt numerous communities. The paper offers both theoretical and actionable insights into the future development of race relations in America and the maintenance of America's founding values. This paper, in its entirety, contributes to the understanding of how nuanced interactions between distinct populations could trigger unanticipated conflicts.

Introduction

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 represent the dire consequences of prolonged and unresolved racial tension between African Americans and Korean Americans. The riots occurred after the biased verdict in the Rodney King case, in which four white police officers assaulted a black man, exacerbating “distrust, fear, and hopelessness” between various communities in the United States.¹ During the violence that lasted almost one full week between April 29 and May 4, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 resulted in 2,383 injuries, 8,000 arrests, 51 deaths, and property damages of over 1 billion dollars.²

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992, at first glance, seem to be a series of civil disturbances involving the loss of innocent lives and valuable properties. However, delving deeper into the fundamental causes of the Riots, they have little congruence with the traditional definitions that scholars utilize to determine and evaluate civil disturbances. The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 cannot be analyzed through the theories that have been applied to comparable events, since the Riots in 1992 were not a typical conflict between white people and black people. To understand the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 as an exceptional tragedy, it is necessary to recognize the prolonged tension between the African-American and Korean-American communities, two minority populations in the United States. In the years leading up to the Riots, the government of Los Angeles revealed itself as an insensitive and irresponsible authority: the city planning of Los Angeles conditioned “a space of forced enclavization” for various immigrant populations near the center of the city.³ This unmindful decision, legalized by the racially discriminatory housing covenants during the time, paved the way for heightened anxiety and ultimately, the wild outburst of tension and hatred that left a permanent scar in the hearts of the people.

This paper argues that the root cause of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 is most closely connected to the racial tension inflicted by cultural factors and the lack of unity. This paper will discuss the Riots in four major sections. The first section is concentrated on a reconstructed reading of the history of Korean immigration to America and competing interpretations regarding the causes of the Riots in 1992. The second section will examine the four primary factors that contributed to interracial tensions between Koreans and African-Americans in Koreatown. In the third section, we will scrutinize the long-lasting impacts of the Riots and the government's attempt to remedy the damages. Finally,

the paper will conclude with an outlook on the future relationship between various communities and populations in the United States.

Literature Review

The following topics are discussed as they contextualize the factors that contributed to the occurrence of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992.

Korean Immigrants in America and Los Angeles Koreatown

Like many other minority groups, the turbulent journey of Korean immigrants in America was filled with challenges and hardships. In the early twentieth century amid Japanese invasion of Korea, a large number of Koreans decided to venture into the unknown by embarking on new journeys in the United States, despite their lack of knowledge of American culture and their separation from families. As more and more Koreans desired to flee their homeland to seek safer living environments and more stable employment opportunities, the first wave of Korean Immigration to the United States began in 1903.⁴ The seed of Korean culture, nevertheless, had already been planted in the land of America prior to the arrival of the first wave of Korean immigrants. In 1902, one year prior to the arrival of the first wave of Korean immigrants, a twenty-four-year-old Korean scholar named Ahn Changho moved to the United States in pursuit of knowledge and settled in San Francisco, California. However, the harsh realities failed the scholar's optimistic expectations as fierce anti-Asian sentiments in the region barred him from a myriad of opportunities, prompting his relocation to Riverside, California in 1904. During the time when scholar Ahn Changho was residing in Riverside, California, he established Pachappa Camp, the first Korean settlement in the United States that later served as a model for Los Angeles Koreatown. Along with the *Gongnip Hyophoe* (Cooperative Association) that provided Korean immigrants with readily available jobs in citrus farming, Pachappa Camp became instrumental in anchoring the identity of the Korean immigrant workers in America.⁵ Pachappa Camp, after its establishment, soon flourished as a compact yet harmonious community that was once home to approximately three hundred people.⁶ Unfortunately, good times did not last very long as the Great Freeze of 1913 terminated the citrus industry that many Korean immigrant workers relied upon, rendering the Korean immigrants not only jobless but also hopeless about their future in America. Thus, the residents left Pachappa Camp and spread to different parts of America as they embarked on their individual paths to achieving their American dream. Through the scattering of Korean immigrants across the United States, Koreatowns were born, with one of them being the Los Angeles Koreatown.

The formation of Los Angeles Koreatown has inherited much of the city's racial, cultural, and socioeconomic segregation.⁷ Koreatown, a name that alludes to the ethnic enclave of Korean immigrants, is not necessarily dominated by Koreans in the case of Los Angeles. Rather, Los Angeles Koreatown is a melting pot of cultures that bears not only the influx of Latino and Asian cultures but also the enduring legacy of the African-American community in this area. Notably, none of the populations in Los Angeles Koreatown at that time expected or desired to live in a shared environment with people of other ethnicities: the multiracial atmosphere of Los Angeles Koreatown was created because of racist housing restrictions, not by the wish of the inhabitants.⁸ While various ethnic communities in the Los Angeles Koreatown area initially co-existed peacefully, the limitations and circumstances unique to each ethnic group hindered the diverse communities from truly joining together.

One of the defining characteristics of the Los Angeles Koreatown was its rapid rise to prosperity. As the presence of Korean immigrants in Los Angeles Koreatown became more and more visible, Korean stores became increasingly dominant in the vicinity. The total number of Koreans residing in the Los Angeles region rose from approximately 60 to approximately 650 from 1906 to the 1930s; moreover, following the growing number of Korean immigrants in the region, Korean community organizations such as churches and clothing stores reached a new height due to increased demand.⁹ While the elevation of Korean influence in the region attests to the efforts of the Koreans

to construct the Los Angeles Koreatown as a genuine Korean ethnic enclave, it sowed the seeds of conflict with other minorities, which included African-Americans who also perceived the region as their territory.

Economic and Cultural Implications of the Riots

Scholar Manuel Pastor, in his 1993 study regarding the economic context of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, suggested that the cause of the interracial tensions between Korean and African-Americans in Los Angeles Koreatown can be found in economic competition.¹⁰ The proposed reasoning from an economic standpoint has been proven valid as the growing number of Korean businesses supplanted African-American businesses, resulting in a “fierce economic competition” between businesses for customers.¹¹ There is no doubt that immigrants from minority races endured countless difficulties in moving to the United States and achieving economic success and financial stability, which are both integral parts of the ideals of the American Dream. However, economic competition between Korean and African-American businesses is not the most important factor in eliciting the violent response seen in the 1992 Riots.

Rather than economic competition, the roots of the violent 1992 uprising stem from the lack of mutual cultural understanding between the minorities that resided in Los Angeles Koreatown. Through the lens of hyper-ethnic succession theory, it is suggested that the response of the African-American community during the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 can be categorized as a type of defensive backlash violence, for the skyrocketing number of nonblack immigrants was perceived as a threat by the black community.¹² In other words, the hyper-ethnic succession theory proposes that the conflict between Koreans and African-Americans occurred because African-Americans felt apprehensive about the possibility of Koreans taking over their neighborhood. The hyper-ethnic succession theory, through the perspective of psychology, sociology, and cultural history, deduces that violence is largely inevitable in a situation like that of Koreatown, where the enormous influx of immigrants uncontrollably shifts the ethnic composition of an area. The two minorities were accustomed to disparate cultures, which can imply attitudes, values, and practices in historical studies.¹³ The unwillingness and fear of the African American and Korean communities to accommodate one another’s culture and traditions led to a deadlock, which shifted feelings of unfamiliarity to resentment between the two communities.

Cultural implications, to a large extent, are more complicated compared to many other implications, for culture involves ideologies and thinking patterns. For example, culture influences a group’s general perceptions of a career path. Becoming an independent entrepreneur who owns businesses, to many in the African-American community, represents success; however, to most in the Korean community, it means nothing more than earning money for survival.¹⁴ The cultural differences as seen in the career path example prove that cultural beliefs and values have the power to influence the judgment of the people from that particular culture.¹⁵ After all, the root cause of the interracial tension between African-Americans and Koreans is the lack of cultural understanding, for the actions in the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 were mainly driven by a desire for cultural preservation.

Analysis

Under the shadow of stiff interracial tension as proposed by the hyper-ethnic succession theory, every minuscule action has the potential of being magnified into something unimaginably colossal. On April 29, 1992, anger overwhelmed the City of Los Angeles when a white jury acquitted four white police officers charged with using excessive force on Rodney King, a black man.¹⁶ An African American man who was unarmed and who did not display any active threat, Rodney King was severely beaten by four police officers. Rodney King not only sustained emotional distress but also severe physical injuries from the aggressive assault: the bruises from the nightsticks and the scars from the stun gun were all over King’s body.¹⁷ However, contrary to human conscience, the involved police officers were acquitted of the charges brought against them, inflicting public discontent.¹⁸ The prejudiced verdict and the failure of the realization of justice, disclosed at a time of heightened racial tension, sparked outrage amongst African-

American residents of Los Angeles, revealing the isolation and discrimination that they had been suffering from for way too long.

Following that, Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, was killed by a Korean store owner named Soon Ja Du in Los Angeles Koreatown, immediately exacerbating the tense atmosphere. Occurring thirteen days after the Rodney King incident of, the death of Latasha Harlins rubbed salt on the wounds of African Americans, as it occurred while the community was still immersed in the pain of the mistreatment of Rodney King. Though Du was convicted by jury and faced up to numerous years in prison for voluntary manslaughter, judge Joyce Karlin, a white female, went in the opposite direction. Judge Karlin not only overturned the jury's original decision but also suspended Du's sentence, rendering Du only a light probationary sentence and several hours of community service.¹⁹ While some were disgruntled but accepted this unfounded verdict, the tragic death of Latasha Harlins propelled others to demand justice.

As event interpretation is subjective, a third major contributing factor to the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 is the portrayal of concocted realities across various media outlets. News outlets that reported on events relevant to the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, including ones operated by the African-American community and those operated by the Korean community, often attempted to construct their own realities. Newspapers from a specific ethnic community, when reporting on the Riots in 1992, typically connected only selective dots in order to present information in a particular way that was advantageous to the community they served. With the priority being reality formation, newspapers not only diverged in terms of the justification of the community's involvement in the Riots but also offered dissimilar insights regarding hierarchy and interracial communication. For instance, the Sentinel, an African American newspaper, expressed condemnation of the verdict of the four white police officers involved in assaulting Rodney King. The Korea Times, on the other hand, discussed the immorality and brutality of the African Americans in damaging the hard work of the Korean immigrants, for some African-American protestors looted and burned Korean stores.²⁰ The conflicting perspectives of the African-American and Korean communities regarding their respective roles in instigating the Riots result in a predicament. Due to the influence of the newspapers, each community feels more justified in its actions than the other community, although some of the justifications are largely unfounded and fabricated.

The fourth major contributing factor was the tragic death of Edward Lee, the eighteen-year-old son of a Koreatown merchant, on the second day of the Riots. Lee, who was responding to a call for emergency assistance by another Koreatown merchant, was mistaken by another group of Koreans and was caught in the crossfire. Ultimately, Lee passed away from his severe wounds, becoming the first Korean American victim in the Los Angeles Riots of 1992.²¹ The loss of Edward Lee, whose death occurred less than one month before his nineteenth birthday, ignited a desire for improvement and forced reflection within the Korean community in the City of Los Angeles. Korean unity, for instance, is manifested in the "Roof Koreans", who took up weapons to protect the Los Angeles Korean community before the arrival of the United States armed forces. The realization of community unity and a burning desire to take revenge on African Americans for the chaos caused further divisions within various communities in the area.

Under racial tension and pressure from various aspects, the interracial relationship between the African American and Korean communities in Los Angeles was destined to reach a turning point in the Los Angeles Riots of 1992. Moreover, while the Riots occurred in Los Angeles, the messages carried by the Riots soon spread to other parts of the United States, generating awareness and protests on a national level. Examining the horrendous Riots of 1992 in retrospect, the issue with the physical structure of Los Angeles Koreatown is comparable to that of caging together predators that compete in the wilderness for territorial possession and survival. Similarly, African Americans and Koreans, both immigrants to America at one point in history, struggled for their respective resources and survival in the constricted space of Los Angeles Koreatown, resulting in heightened tension and the eventual outburst of strain.

Results

After the Riots in 1992, academics became more focused on permanent influences such as those in the area of mental health. Previously, scholarly journals heavily focused on economic factors such as the amount of property damage to

evaluate the impact of disturbances. Different from journals in the past, scholars researching the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 went beyond the clearly visible factors and studied the mental conditions of the victims of the Riots, suggesting that the Riots' impact exists beyond the superficial level. The Korean immigrants, who had invested all of their monies and energy into their properties and businesses in Koreatown, had their dreams shattered overnight, losing their American dream and not knowing how to cope with the feelings of sheer uncertainty. In a research conducted on 202 victims of Korean descent, researchers discovered that the disproportionate property loss suffered by the Korean immigrants resulted in severe anxiety, inflicting mental health crises such as post-traumatic stress disorder onto the victims.²² Moreover, healthcare facilities such as the Asian Pacific Counseling and Treatment Center in Los Angeles observed a soaring number of Korean patients seeking mental therapy in the months following the Riots, confirming the increase in mental health issues in the Korean community.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of mental disorder that develops after life-threatening events. PTSD patients often have consistent feelings of stress and danger. The increase in the number of PTSD patients within the Korean community in Los Angeles Koreatown not only exerted pressure onto the medical system but also shoved the interracial relationships further and further from peaceful coexistence. The fact that the Riots left mental health problems limits the possibility of absolute reconciliation between various communities, as the conflicts were engraved in the minds of the people. Although monetary provisions can better the situation and allow better financial capabilities, they are inapplicable to this scenario as the minds of the traumatized Koreans cannot be bettered through money. Furthermore, teachers in Los Angeles reported slower academic progress and worsened attitudes in students after the 1992 Riots. The negative influence of the Riots on the students demonstrates that the distraction of the Riots not only reached one generation but plagued future generations.²³ Essentially, recoveries of traumas such as PTSD not only require effective clinical treatments but also needs a supportive environment, which had not yet been realized due to the ongoing interracial complications in the Koreatown area.²⁴

While the Riots disrupted the peace in Los Angeles Koreatown and led to long-lasting conflicts, they awoke Koreans across America from the delusions of realities and compelled them to confront societal problems. The Korean community in the United States experienced trauma, pain, and discrimination as a minority population in America. The Korean American community realized that justice in the United States Constitution had not yet been realized and practiced in the actual world. The Korean American community recognized the lack of unity in their community and commenced a journey that placed emphasis on collective identity and efforts.²⁵

The fight for racial equality is indeed difficult, as it sometimes seems to be endless and unwinnable. During the period following the 1992 Riots, the American government did not implement many measures to address issues of equality. Although the government, on a superficial level, has been more attentive and aware of issues surrounding equality and inclusivity in recent years, tragedies continue to happen. In 2020, an African American man named George Floyd was murdered by law enforcement while under custody. The tragic death of George Floyd suggests that the policies of America are still far from adequate in rendering equal protection to people as promised in the 14th amendment of the United States Constitution.

Moreover, the attitudes of the people prove that the government won the trust of the people only to a small extent, leading to unsuccessful attempts to eliminate racial prejudices. In 2020, as the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement continued, Governor Gavin Newsom declared a state-wide emergency with curfew laws. However, some protestors not only failed to follow the curfew laws but also damaged properties including police vehicles. The illegal activities, especially looting, cast striking similarities with the violent episodes of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992.²⁶ The mistrust between the government and the people, which still exists three decades after the 1992 Riots, can be seen through the conflicts in events such as the Black Lives Matter movement and coronavirus stay-at-home orders. The core of the issue comes down to the distance between the government and the people. To truly eliminate racial prejudice, the government and the people must break down the barriers and collaborate in creating a brighter future for future generations.

Discussion

A country founded on the principles of equality and freedom, the United States and the people of this country all have a shared longing for the realization of justice. The results of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots demonstrated not only the lack of community engagement by the government, but also a deficiency in cross-cultural collaboration. As we progress toward building a brighter future for our country, we shall not forget that equality can never be realized through the oppression of others - it is achieved through cooperation. In order to prevent tragedies such as those in the Rodney King and George Floyd incidents, the people need to have empathy and a sense of team spirit.

Ideas are important, but ideas cannot be everything in the pursuit of justice. In the belief of American lawyer Bryan Stevenson, “ideas in our minds are not enough to create justice.” In the belief of German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, “Knowledge kills action, for action requires a state of being in which we are covered with the veil of illusion.” While idea formation is an important step for achieving racial justice, it is particularly important for actions to take place. In other words, actions will have the greatest impact on race relations. We shall always be vocal in our support for minority communities in the United States.

As we march forward with the lessons we have learned from the past tragedies, it is important to keep those lessons close to our hearts and prevent the reemergence of violence and racial conflicts. In addition, while we work on improving the system to prevent tragedies from occurring again, people of all backgrounds should be placed on an equal footing and treated equitably. Although certain populations require more assistance than others, it should never be considered as giving a voice to the voiceless. Instead, it should be thought of as recovering a lost voice for righteous causes. In the 21st century, America should not be devoting efforts to bettering ethnic relations on a superficial level; the time should really be devoted to changing the hearts of the people and eradicating the negative influences from a systematic level in order to achieve true equality.

The mistakes made in the years preceding up to and during the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 are inexcusable. However, we should shift much of our attention to the present and future. When communities across the United States treat each other with genuine love and respect, barriers will gradually disappear. There will always be mistakes in the process of exploring better solutions. At times, the best we can do is to use our knowledge to confront difficulties, accept our failures, and look forward to the future as an opportunity to recompense our past regrets.

Conclusion

The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 are a series of truly tragic events, which resulted from the abysmal divisions and disharmony between minorities in America. A series of exceptional incidents, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 are special in that they entailed confrontations between immigrant populations who shared numerous experiences. To truly achieve victory in the seemingly unwinnable wars against prejudice, empathy and cultural education are much needed. The Los Angeles Riots of 1992 commenced a new era of identity exploration, forcing reflection on the future of interracial relationships in the United States. For the future development of the United States, there must be reserved spaces for inclusivity, for such consideration is instrumental in connecting the diverse populations for a united effort in the United States. Policies regarding minority relations in the United States, moreover, should be centered on building trust both between minority communities and between minorities and traditional American society. In conclusion, the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 are a tragic fallacy resulted from conflicts between populations that mirror each other in countless ways. Even more miserably, the scars of the Los Angeles Riots of 1992 set minorities up against each other while the United States continues to promote unity. The war against racial prejudice seems to be one of an unwinnable nature, as humans stand helpless in front of these perceptions; however, with love, understanding, and patience, the United States can be on the right track to realizing its vision of a harmonized and equal society.

Limitations

A few limitations exist in the paper such as the diverse interpretations of scholars who come from distinct backgrounds. Having more scholars from certain populations would be more idealistic as that, to a large extent, could reveal if the scholar's opinion is truly representative of the attitude of the group they identify with.

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