

Beats of Yellow Peril

By Juliana Son

The LA uprisings of 1992 are still relevant today because it has contributed to how we consume race. What happened in LA was the long-awaited eruption derived from the social tensions festering over the years. These “social tensions” have been shallowly described as “race wars” between blacks and Asian Americans by the mainstream media. Yet other sources that have responded to the LA riots have different and deeper perspectives that force to be explored. These other sources are cultural productions, created by the people who were directly affected by the riots. They are outside the realm of traditional news anchoring of “truths”. The supposed “truth” in this particular case is the multiculturalism justification of what happened in LA in 1992. This understanding of the LA riots, that blacks and Koreans cannot get along, has collapsed a complex structure of dominance into something so simple and seemingly organic as “racial tensions”. In order to understand how and why the mainstream media had diagnosed the riots in such a simple way, we must consider what is *not* said and how the stories that have been told by the mainstream have created this racially divided America. By presenting the LA riots through a structure of dialogue, we see more sides to the story. The structure of dialogue is based on forms of popular and alternative culture. The conversationalists derive from a range of backgrounds, but I will focus on three: mainstream news, Ice Cube’s popular culture response, and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson’s alternative view. Across these responses, I will look at format, content, and the resulting racializing processes by the production and consumption of these responses. With a comparison of these three views of what

happened in 1992 LA, we see how culture is a site of tension, contesting the conventional perception of truth.

We must situate Ice Cube and Kim-Gibson's cultural productions within the historical context of 1992 LA in order to comprehend their different perspectives. Los Angeles is a city that is occupied by a diverse population who must compete with each other for resources. The different players in this riot included the residents, the new immigrants, and the state. The city of LA is also spatially divided by wealth and racial demographics. Wealthier, and usually white, residents live in the hills of LA, while poorer and more racially diverse residents live in marginalized areas (the "ghettos") such as Watts, LA. Cheap retail rent made starting businesses possible for recent immigrants. Yet black businesses were scarce. While there are some in places like Watts, blacks statistically have a harder time receiving loans and grants from the state and banks to open up their own stores. Along with the limited opportunity to start their own businesses, black residents' resentment of new immigrant, particularly Asians, business owners derive from what they see as poor customer service and disrespectful treatment. Violence between black customers and Asian store owners may appear to come from multicultural misunderstandings- but we must unpack what structural powers have placed these two racial groups against each other to have such a tension in the first place.

The history of Asian Americans will also help us understand the tensions between blacks and Asian Americans. Both groups have been marginalized by the state since the beginning of their "welcome" to the US. As blacks have entered this country as slaves, Asians have come voluntarily for labor. Although it was voluntary, Asian "coolies" were subjected to poor working conditions due to their foreignness. Asian Americans, even as

workers who helped build the foundations of this country, have been denied citizenship legally and socially. Immigration quotas and exclusion acts were implemented to limit the influx of Asian immigration. Even after these acts were lifted in 1965, Asian Americans were not seen as citizens. No matter how long their families were rooted in the States, Asian Americans could never be seen as insiders. The question of “But where are you really from?” is still asked by non-Asian Americans. Yet they are valorized and recognized by American ideology of hard work ethics and diligent persistence as the “model minority.” Kim-Gibson’s *Wet Sand* problematizes this contradicting identity of Asian Americans, as socially disempowered but an economic asset, yet the mainstream media unquestionably reproduces it. This positionality of Asian Americans has also played into the resentment of blacks. Ice Cube taps into this black resentment by exploiting the Asian Americans’ perceived otherness as “foreigners” and refers to the storeowners as “oriental one-penny counting motherfuckers” and “chop-suey ass”. This contradictory racial identity of Asian Americans is one that must be explored because it unveils the hidden side of the LA riots- the role of class structure, and at the same time, it is a tool that maintains the subjection of Asian Americans as the middleman minority.

The “middleman minority” concept is based on the racism that forms how we position racialized bodies. The American racial framework has not accounted for the groups beyond white and black and the post-1965 demographic changes have started to destabilize this familiar racial understanding with the influx of immigration. The “middleman minority” sits in the middle of the racial hierarchy- whites at the top and blacks at the bottom. This middle position controls the racist energy between whites and blacks. As a racial buffer, Asian Americans subdue the black anger as they are

scapegoated for black suffering instead of whites. The resentment is short-circuited to the nearest racial group in the racial hierarchy, Asian Americans. Yet white supremacy is still there. It is instead masked as white valorization of the Asian American in efforts to not look “racist.” By forcing Asian Americans in the middle position, it has stripped away their ability to represent themselves. This middle ground identity is only favorable to whites, as they get to mask their domination by promoting one good minority group.

Mainstream media has presented the LA riots as a racial morality play. Blacks, as the problem minority, have bullied Asian storeowners, the model minority, while the white state and media stands to the side as the referee. By consuming the news coverage at this angle, we consume and apply the racist ideology of the media. This racism is based on the essentialism of the racialized bodies. We see the black looters, the Asian American business owners, and the white police officers. These images are repeated over and over until it becomes “truth”, as if looters are all black, business owners are all Korean, and the police officers are all white. But along with this essentialism of race, there is also a layer of power that forces a hierarchical shuffle between these racialized bodies with the white state on top, the Asian American petty bourgeoisie in between, and the black degenerates subjected by all.

Along with the race structure, blacks and Koreans are also subjected to the class structure, yet this was not portrayed by the mainstream media. The Census Bureau data of 1992 shows staggering numbers on poverty, education level, and immigration, all linked to the violence in LA that was ignored by popular news stations¹. From the 1980’s to the 1990’s, the unemployment rate of Watts, LA jumped from 6% to rate of 10%, 2% higher

¹ Felicity Barringer, “After the Riots: Census Reveals a City of Displacement”, *The New York Times*, May 15, 1992. After the decennial census in 1990, this was the only popular news article I found that connected poverty and changing demographics to the rising violence in Watts, LA.

than the rate of the whole city of LA. During the same decade, the racial demographics of Watts changed dramatically. To claim that the riots occurred due to the “inherent” clashes between the two races ignores the forces of other structures that we live in - capitalism. The intersections of these structures together form a complicated system of relationships and dominance. The term “multiculturalism” used to explain what happened in LA encourages this idea that only race, especially when it comes to the other-ed races, determines our relationships. Other social factors like immigrant history and class have been ignored by mainstream media and have hindered our reach for a more well rounded social consciousness.

Ice Cube and Kim-Gibson’s cultural productions, as efforts to raise our social consciousness, do not deny the factor of race in the LA riots, but they complicate “multicultural clash” story with other intersections of power. Clare Jean-Kim’s theory on Asian American triangulation plots the Asian American as the model minority and as the intrusive foreigner in relations to black’s and white’s positionalities. Both Ice Cube and Kim-Gibson explore these contradicting Asian American identities within their own perspectives. Asian Americans as the “forever foreigner” comes into play as Ice Cube appropriates the ghetto as a black space, further underlining this point by delivering the message through hip hop, a black appropriate musical genre. The last line of the song: *‘cause you can’t turn the ghetto into Black Korea*, insinuates that the ghetto is black and will always be black. Interestingly, the notion of a “Black Korea” is alluding to Korea’s colonized history. He accuses them for trying to take over this black space and this alludes to Korea’s historical search for nationalism and placement in its civil war and annexation history. Ice Cube recognizes the growing number of displaced immigrants

trying to make a living in the only place they can afford: the ghetto. He further marginalizes Korean merchants by calling them tools and telling them to choose with “the people”. Kim’s triangulation theory becomes very clear here. The label “tool” infers that they are subservient to the hegemony, doing what they are told to do. The rapper tells Korean merchants to side with the “low” of the hierarchy, the people. Despite their othered position, blacks still pose a threat to Korean merchants as Ice Cube terrorize them with economic threats of boycotts and store burnings.

In Kim-Gibson’s *Wet Sand*, she explores the class structure at a deeper and more individualized level. Her documentary, *Wet Sand*, is a follow up of her previous film, *Sai Il Gu*, telling an multi-angle story of the riots. With a compilation of interviews exploring different points of view, she uncovers the inefficient explanation of the riots as a result of messy multiculturalism. She fleshes out the identity of the Asian American petty bourgeoisie. What does it mean to be an immigrant right after the lift of the immigration quotas? She interviews one Korean American storeowner who said that just like how his store belonged to him, the US also belonged to him. Usually, the white media has civically ostracized Asian American- ignoring their political statements. But alternative media, with no affiliations to a hegemonic ideology of racial positioning, has explored this unseen side of Asian Americans freely. Along with a Korean American perspective, *Wet Sand* provided interviews from Hispanic worker advocates, Black clergyman, and local white residents. This multi-perspective approach uncovered the problematic titling of the LA riots as “Black-Korean relations.” The participation of other races in the riots and reconciliation of the riots prove that is it beyond black and Korean. By looking at the other races, it shows that another factor of power must be at play here- class. Poor whites

were participating in the looting and it was not only Korean owned businesses that were affected. Kim-Gibson also notes that the LA riots did not occur in a vacuum but during a historically situated event when presence of new immigrants was particularly high, when poverty rates increased, and within a racist media structure of unbalanced coverage.

Ice Cube's rap is a cultural archive that has expanded our consciousness. As an archive, it records an ignored history of multiracial poverty and violence in LA. Popular news story arose during this time about gang violence and rising unemployment rates, but the violence, poverty, and racial diversity in LA have not been looked at altogether beyond racist readings. LA is not a closed vacuum and the growing diversity in LA as an explanation for the riots is not sufficient. What is the role of the state? What is the history of LA? Of these people? Beyond what is told to us, who else is involved? Despite "Black Korea" being a hip hop variation of anti-Asian sentiment, it is important to consider how this xenophobia perpetuates and maintains itself from different ends of the racial hierarchy. What is the connection between the state's old immigration quotas and the current racial hostilities in poor urban LA? Ice Cube did not produce this song to make this connection, but in see it, we must treat his song as a cultural record that can be studied and placed in historical context, and not treated as a hip hop idiosyncrasy.

In "Black Korea", we hear where the political and the musical come together. Jeff Chang, a hip hop journalist and author, analyzes the song's explosions of emotions. "The heavy bass surges back and the song rushed along to its pitched conclusion."² This conclusion is more violence and boycott. It is an aggressive stance, understood by its aggressive musical delivery. This fist-pumping music refers to fires and riots and

² Jeff Chang, "On Ice Cube's Black Korea"; *Amerasia Journal* 19:2 (1993): 87

³ Chang, 93

boycotts, all part of a social disorder. The listeners' positive reception and energetic activism of violent protest prove that the black communities refuse to sign the mediated social contract of racial hierarchy. What Chang points out in the media coverage of the song's reception is that Koreans are denied a space for response³. He calls this the "differently disempowered." While blacks lack the economic opportunity to advance and become capitalist players, Koreans do not have the social weight to make an impact on the news.

In *Wet Sand*, Kim-Gibson captures the "Unfair Media" protest by Koreans, but we do not see this in our TV screens. To mainstream media, Asian American political organizing is not as interesting as black political organizing. Korean and black church leaders have met to discuss reconciliation and clear up misunderstandings, but popular news has allowed us to continuously think that blacks and Koreans can never get along. In the documentary, Kim-Gibson notes the Korean American spokesman to practice fair and balanced coverage. The lack of Korean opinion coverage of the debate is another reason why the marginalization of Asian Americans is possible. Only the black angry citizens who boycott and protest are seen on television and read about in the papers, racializing *who* can get angry publicly.

In terms of content, *Wet Sand's* documentary format and 60 minutes length provided Kim-Gibson to express her thoughts more freely in comparison to Ice Cube's "Black Korea." Her documentary broke the mainstream media's linear story of black-Korean tensions. Her compilation of interviews included people who were left out of the news coverage, including white and Hispanic residents, and the way she edited these interviews together were usually in contrast to each other. This was to prove that a linear

story like blacks and Korean are incompatible is highly problematic because it is essentialist and does not see the bigger picture of American racial hierarchy. However, Kim-Gibson's production is considered as "alternative" and was not recognized by the masses. Ice Cube's "Black Korea", however, reached a popular audience that used his song as activism for black justice. It is important to note that this song was released one year before the actual riots of 1992, but right after the Rodney King beating of 1991. This is to show that "Black Korea", a one-minute rap, has had a political influence because of its collective feeling of black injustice.

Gary Okihiro in his essay asked, "Is Yellow Black or White?"⁷ The answer is neither, but the point of the question is that America only recognizes the black-white dyad. He answers himself by saying that, "yellow is emphatically neither white nor black; but insofar as Asians and Africans share a subordinate position to the master class, yellow is a shade of black, a black, a shade of yellow."² What Okihiro points out is that despite the tensions between blacks and Asians, they are both fighting for an anti-colonist approach to racial formation. The sharing of the subordinate position in a structure of dominance needs to be exposed in order to achieve an interracial justice. Their shared fight is also based on their shared history and struggles. Both groups have suffered from white supremacy and there are incidents that span history of Black-Asian collaboration for peace and racial justice. *Wet Sand* captures the reconciliation efforts between blacks and Koreans. Black and Korean churches came together for services and to express their harmony, in spite of media -produced fictions of innate black-Korean animosity. As an anti-subordination strategy, these alliances have occurred even before the LA riots, yet

² Gary Okihiro, "Is Yellow Black or White?" *Margins and Mainstreams: Asian in American History and Culture*

they have not be shared with the rest of the American public for fears of toppling down the current notions of racial positioning of the white-apex race triangle. The lyrics of Ice Cube remind us of the marginalization of others through racial positionality. This positionality is something that Ice Cube challenges, yet shadows at the same time. He is angered by the subordinate position of blacks, yet participates in the alienation of Asian Americans, who resides outside the realm of black and white insiders. Asian Americans are used as racial buffers who mediate the relations between white and blacks. Angry, improvised black customers see Korean storeowners as agents of the white powers, monitoring and doing the grunt work to keep black people disciplined. White media and state use Asians for their image as anti-racists, as they valorize and sympathize with the hard Asian immigrant, yet refuse to hear the Asian voice and its collaboration with the black voice. The contradictions found in how to “handle” Asian American identity, as Yellow Peril or as the Model Minority, underline its ambiguousness and foreignness. But the effort for Asian Americans to “handle” their identity has been prolific. The subalterns have spoken; they now need to be heard.