

GRAND PRIZE

The Language of the Unheard
How the 1992 LA Riots changed the culture of future generations

-Samantha Lee-

April 29, 1992 marked the beginning of a five-day wave of riots that crashed through the City of Angels. Sparked by the acquittal of four Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers for the beating of Rodney King the previous year, the 1992 Los Angeles Riots are remembered for the chaos and destruction fueled by violence and anger that impacted the lives of many Angelenos. Even with enforced curfews and added military presence, South Central and Koreatown suffered the most due to the overwhelming looting and violence concentrated in these two areas. This destruction highlighted the underlying tensions boiling under the surface of the city that created a culture of distrust and anger. One of the most significant contributing factors stemmed from cultural differences and lack of understanding between Korean immigrant and African American communities. These differences played a large role in a number of violent confrontations between the two communities who had become aggravated by perceived wrongs on both ends. This unresolved anger continued to fester as a lack of open communication and understanding sowed deeply rooted seeds of hate and intolerance, eventually spilling out onto the streets of Los Angeles during the spring of 1992. While the riots ripped apart communities, they also set in motion a new wave of reform as victims, citizens, and community leaders began to pave and navigate new roads to understand and heal the wounds inflicted by the brutality of the riots.

According to E.H. Carr, “History is the long struggle of man, by exercise of his reason, to understand his environment and to act upon it. But the modern period has broadened the struggle in a revolutionary way. Man now seeks to understand, and act on, not only his environment, but himself...” Following the devastation of the riots, the many different Los Angeles communities initiated a concentrated effort towards building and opening channels of communication to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. This groundwork also forced a reevaluation of and

improvements to the LAPD through fostering positive relationships between officers and the communities they served. The Christopher Commission's recommendations to boost multiculturalism and address racism and sexism within the force took place upon the passing of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, contributing to some of the most significant changes in LAPD history during a time when it was seen as one of the most overextended and underfunded institutions within the City. These steps can now be seen by present generations as results of the reforms begin to take shape with the goal of implementing lasting changes. In this way, the 1992 LA Riots testify to Carr's observations of the relationship between the past and present and the role of the people who address and attempt to avoid similar mistakes with the hope that their actions will produce more favorable outcomes if confronted with a repeat of those circumstances.

While the riots took place more than twenty years ago, the lessons learned from the tragedy helped to shape the present landscape of Los Angeles and establish lasting community ties that will continue to flourish throughout the future. The groundwork laid down by previous generations has enabled a continuing tradition of contribution and celebration of the unique identities of each culturally diverse community. The very differences among cultures that once fueled the anger and strife of the riots are now seen as opportunities to engage and learn as younger generations are encouraged to interact with their peers and look past race and ethnicity as deciding factors for friendships and relationships. Enriched by the lessons of the past, this younger community shapes the world with different perspectives through meaningful dialogue to focus on the potential of the future. It is a continuing process that works towards achieving harmony and understanding for all people who call Los Angeles their home.

As a part of the rising generation of future leaders, my own dialogue with the past has helped me to mold my values based on my most meaningful relationships with family members, friends, and peers. Growing up as a Korean American in Koreatown, I learned the term “Sa-I-Gu” referred to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots at a young age. While the images of the violence and anger frightened me, I did not understand what had caused this event because, as a young child, I never struggled with or noticed racism and its detrimental effects. Although my family stressed the importance of traditions and cultural preservation without sacrificing my own path of cultural exploration, a lesson I remain eternally grateful for, my parents also taught me to forge relationships based on personal ties over cultural ones, allowing me to become immersed in my friends’ heritages as we eagerly shared the influences that had surrounded us as we grew up with one another.

However, as I grew older, I began to become more aware of how perceived cultural differences affected me. Many people instantly assumed the worst about me due to negative racial stereotypes, and I felt myself growing angry. My mind instantly flicked back to the photographs I had seen years before and I began to understand the different emotions I had seen in those photographed faces; I finally understood what my family had been trying to teach me. My own frustrations allowed me to start understanding what drove the cultural divides among these different communities. I saw how limited communication and assumed negative cultural identities culminated in an explosion of violence. My experiences have shown me that it is my generation’s responsibility to build up to a culture vastly different to the one that existed during Sa-I-Gu. Our dialogue with the past continues every day as we draw valuable lessons from historical events, while we also work towards framing our present to become part of the exchange of the future. Through sharing and appreciating our diverse backgrounds, we can

contribute to our collective identities by understanding each other, rather than be driven apart by our differences.