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L.A.'s darkest days

Ten years ago today, the worst race riot in US history erupted in Los Angeles. Here, the story is told in three diverse lives.

By Daniel B. Wood | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

LOS ANGELES - Late in the afternoon of April 29, 1992, a ruddy haze of smog was softly lit from above by cool, fading sunlight. As Mira Jang switched channels on her living-room TV, she realized that the city's signature layer of stagnant gauze would soon be harshly lit from below – by flame.

Fires were erupting in neighborhoods throughout the city, and local news was in full panic mode. Roving, van-top "action cams" showed arsonists and demonstrators advancing block by block like urban guerrillas.

A Korean immigrant just 14 at the time, Ms. Jang was in her home on the affordable fringe of Beverly Hills, far from the action. But violence was rampant in the stucco sprawl of the South-Central district, near Koreatown where her parents worked. And Jang's ethnic group seemed to be a particular target. As she watched, the news featured vivid images of Korean shopkeepers defending their stores with shotguns and pistols.

"I thought, 'Where are the police? Why are these store owners having to protect their own property with guns?' " she recalls.

Randy Jurado Ertll, a 19-year-old Salvadoran, could see the plumes of smoke rising too – and not on TV. He was in his dorm room at Occidental College north of downtown, but his first thoughts were of his mother and two sisters, who ran a beauty salon in South-Central.

He and a friend jumped in a nicked-up brown Toyota and drove, tremulous, to find them. Along the way, they encountered bloodied looters. They saw ranting brick throwers. They witnessed gang members hurling Molotov cocktails.

"My whole family was totally panicked, locked inside my aunt's apartment," he recalls. "People in the streets were throwing rocks, shooting guns, pulling people from vehicles and beating them. My mom and sisters didn't want to become victims."

Todd Eskew – a member of the black "Crips" gang – was more intent on *creating* victims than worrying about becoming one. He can't recall how many windows he broke, or how many fires he and his friends started. They'd light anything in a store that would burn and spread flames quickly – and then run. Their rage was born of poverty and humiliation, and years of perceived abuse by police and neighborhood Korean stores.

"I was so angry I wanted to continue. But I stopped after two days out of sheer, physical exhaustion," says Mr. Eskew, who goes by the name of Najee Ali today.

The experiences and divergent viewpoints of Mira Jang, Randy Jurado Ertll, and Najee Ali help tell a tale of what lay behind the worst riots in US history and of how far, in the decade since, the city has come.

And hasn't.

Like Los Angeles itself, their lives have been inexorably changed by the cataclysm that played out in the streets of South-Central on those four searing nights in April. Yet many of the forces that gave rise to the paroxysm of looting and arson – economic disparity, racial animosity, Balkanized neighborhoods, a troubled police force – persist in some form.

Consequently, their stories of that night, and of their idealistic impulses to deal with it since, help explain whether Los Angeles, and, by extension other cities, can avoid the type of civil unrest that has periodically wracked urban America throughout history.

One defining moment for diverse three

The trigger on that fateful night was the acquittal of four white police officers in the videotaped beating of black motorist Rodney King. Before it all ended on May 3, fires had destroyed 10,000 businesses. Fifty-five people were dead. Estimated damage: $1 billion-plus. The episode left a cityscape resembling a bombed-out war zone, patrolled by the National Guard, Army, and Marines.

L.A. has long been at the cutting edge of American culture, and in this it was no different. Its riots were the costliest in the nation's history.

A number of neighborhoods were touched by the 1992 violence, but the epicenter was in South-Central. A decayed expanse of ticky-tacky stucco houses and aging factories, South-Central has long served as a door to L.A. for immigrant minorities. During World War II and its aftermath, blacks settled there, drawn by work in rubber plants and other industrial ventures. Later, black-owned retail in the area was bought up by Koreans who couldn't afford stores in more prosperous areas. And L.A.'s fast-growing Hispanic population began to move in, advancing block-by-block.

Fissures between minorities have long been a source of urban tension in the US. And the vast expanse of South-Central's diverse Asian-black-Hispanic mix was a tinderbox for multi-ethnic conflagration. Minority versus minority fighting in the riots was ferocious and unprecedented.

Even as the embers smoldered, city leaders began to wonder if the long-held American image of "melting pot" was a false one.

"We began to examine whether or not multiculturalism is a myth," says Edward Chang, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside. "The riots showed that perhaps white, black, Asian, and Hispanic are still all-too-separate, unequal societies."

Jang, Jurado, and Ali help explain how Koreans, Hispanics, and blacks, in particular, experienced the 1992 riots. All three were young in '92. All were seared by what they saw and heard during the days of violence. All have spent the years since trying to understand the point of view of both their own minority, and those of others – and why solid social progress toward reconciliation and rebuilding has remained elusive.

"Everyone's perception of 4/29 [1992] is totally different depending on where they stood then and stand now, what they saw and felt, and who they are," says Ali. "That's part of why this has been so difficult."

The acquittals in the Rodney King case sent blacks into the streets. The video depiction of the incident had shown King – stopped after a high-speed chase – lying on the ground while white policemen beat him. Many African-Americans simply didn't understand how a jury could have found the attackers innocent, given the video evidence.

But L.A.'s black community was primed to explode by an earlier incident. Several months prior to the King-beating verdict, Latasha Harlins, a 15-year-old black girl, was shot and killed by a Korean grocer in an altercation over a bottle of orange juice.

The grocer had been found guilty of voluntary manslaughter in the death, but received a sentence of probation. For many poorer African Americans, the verdict was an outrage, and became a symbol of what they considered decades of economic colonialism by Korean store owners who operated in black neighborhoods.

"The No. 1 enemy for us was Koreans, who we felt were oppressing us," says Ali.

Giving and getting racial hurt

Ali – then Todd Eskew – was a self-professed "gang-banger" who lived alone and hated his construction job. He'd watched as unemployment – due to an exodus of manufacturing from South-Central during the '80s – claimed the livelihoods of his friends.

Asians weren't the only ethnic group Ali disliked. He'd seen Hispanic immigrants flood L.A., competing with blacks for entry-level jobs and low-cost housing. But the Koreans edging in from the north were a case apart. They spoke no English – and used none on their business signs. Korean store owners in black neighborhoods followed

customers around, and placed change on countertops, rather than in customers' hands. They kept to themselves and didn't participate in civic life, Ali says.

For him, in 1992, the riots were not riots at all, but a rebellion aimed at throwing off perceived economic and social oppression.

"We wanted to hurt [Koreans] physically, economically, raise their insurance rates – anything we could for payback," says Ali.

Jurado knew blacks didn't particularly get along with Koreans, because he grew up in South-Central. He knew, too, that blacks didn't particularly like Hispanics, either. Crack cocaine had hit South-Central streets in the mid-'80s, creating gang turf battles in which homicides rocketed.

Race relations were so bad that when Jurado joined the police department Explorers – a group intended to recruit future officers – he became a victim of what he felt was abuse, when a white officer yanked his jet-black hair for no reason Jurado could see except that he was Hispanic.

A scholarship gave him a three-year "escape" to high school in Rochester, Minn., where he gained perspective on his hometown's troubles. When South-Central exploded in 1992, Jurado perceived that racial tension between blacks and Koreans wasn't the only reason for the rage.

There was growing unemployment and encroachment by Hispanics on traditionally black areas. Twenty-five years before, the 70-square-mile area of South-Central had been 80 percent black. By '92, it was 55 percent Latino.

"It was clear to us that residents of black neighborhoods were feeling the displacement of their numbers by immigrants from all areas south of the border," says Jurado. "Hispanics in general, and Salvadorans in particular, felt that blacks were blaming us for their downturn."

Because of this underlying tension, Jang was relieved that her parents had just months before the riots sold their South-Central hamburger stand. In 1985, when she was 7, Mira and her family had emigrated from South Korea to L.A.'s Koreatown, the largest concentration of ethnic Koreans outside the Korean Peninsula. Her parents had college degrees, but in America they worked at hard, low-pay jobs in bad parts of town, as dishwashers, cooks, and cashiers, in addition to running their own small business. For years her father worked a dangerous late-night shift at a liquor store.

"I prayed for their safety every day," says Jang.

Fortunately for her family, the riots came just months after they'd sold their hamburger stand in order to finance a move – for Mira's sake – into an affordable fringe of the safer but high-rent Beverly Hills school district. Many who lost shops and livelihoods were not as fortunate. Koreans suffered the loss of 1,800 businesses.

The incident is a defining American moment for Koreans. Like the common shorthand "9/11" used by Americans for last year's terrorist attacks, the Rodney King riots are referred to as *sa-i-gu* – literally "4/29" – by Koreans. The expression conveys a similar sense of victimization.

Jang says the rioting was fueled in part by police abuse and economic inequalities between blacks, Latinos, and Asians. But today she charges that something more was also at work. She claims the black-Korean conflict was more a "ruse" concocted by the media and supported by the government to steer blame away from the real culprits. The culprits, she believes, were government and corporate neglect of poor and underrepresented residents – and local TV outlets that wanted a return on their investments in new helicopter and mobile-based cameras and wittingly or unwittingly exploited the black-Korean conflict for ratings.

"Koreans became pawns in this game, as people of color fought for the crumbs rather than their due piece of the American pie," says Jang, now a 24-year-old field deputy to Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard, a Democrat whose district includes Koreatown.

By July of 1992, Todd Eskew was serving a state prison sentence for armed robbery committed in the wake of the riots. Chastened by jail, he converted to Islam after reading the writings of W. Deen Muhammad, leader of the

Muslim Society of America. Mr. Muhammad's teachings on peace and personality led to a change of heart, and a change of name to Najee Ali.

Transformation of hearts

"Although the shooting of Latasha Harlins and the acquittal of white police [in the King case] still struck me as grossly unjust, I realized that returning violence for violence could not be a solution," he says.

Paroled after 11 months, Ali tapped into his gang background, and began organizing a truce between the two largest black gangs in the city – an accord that made national headlines at the time.

"We realized that we had been fighting each other over our own neighborhoods, over gang turf and concrete blocks that none of us owned, instead of focusing on the real oppressor, which was the economic establishment that kept us from economic empowerment," he says.

He also participated in building cross-cultural coalitions between Korean shop-owners, blacks, and Hispanics. He says that steady interaction with leaders of other ethnic groups softened the harsh views he'd held as an isolated gang member.

"When I sat there ... and heard other races venting their frustrations and telling their stories – of losing businesses they had worked their whole lives to build – they became more personal, human," he says.

Jurado spent the first two years after the riots organizing Hispanics to try to gain more political power. He says that the violence and its aftermath woke up Hispanics and other minorities to the fact that one reason they were ignored by the political system was because their voting turnout was so low.

"They were ticked off at the system, but they also were not participating as they should in the system," he says.

"I discovered that the vicious cycle of poverty and gangs and other social problems never ends as long as individuals are not united in tackling them," he says of his college participation in demonstrations and multicultural discussion groups, and of his fellowship at City Hall.

Mira Jang says she was horrified in the riots' aftermath to find Koreans marginalized, without social or political clout. She still has lingering anger over what she feels was the media misuse of images of Korean shop owners wielding guns to protect their businesses.

Stung by the experience, she eventually altered her career path from law or medicine to journalism and civic action. Despite being in city's safer West side, which offered little ethnic diversity, she immersed herself in political and community activities.

She also became editor of a city-wide teen newspaper called "L.A. Youth," where she shared an office with members of other ethnic groups – one a black girl her age. Jang fondly remembers taking the bus far into neighborhoods she'd previously avoided to meet her new friend and shop.

"I learned what I already knew, which is that we can all get along in this city," she says. "It's just a matter of not creating walls, but looking over them."

Reality-tempered hope for recovery

Recovery didn't readily take root in the burned-out moonscape left by the riots of '92. Many of the high-profile efforts launched in the immediate aftermath of the violence fizzled. One of these was Rebuild L.A., headed by former Olympics organizer Peter Ueberroth. It was supposed to be the nation's great experiment in tapping the private sector to help resurrect an inner-city. It didn't work fully as planned.

Although corporations pledged more than $1 billion in aid, only $382 million materialized before Rebuild L.A. disbanded in 1997. A technology center, a redevelopment agency, a development bank, and special zones to provide federal tax credits to investors also largely failed.

"All these efforts failed because so few people were willing to invest heavily in poor neighborhoods," says Jurado.

Other events in the state were diverting cash and attention from South-Central's plight as well. One of the costliest disasters in US history, the Northridge earthquake, rocked the San Fernando Valley across town. Recession stole 550,000 California jobs, and a string of anti-immigrant ballot propositions – on health care, affirmative action, and bilingual education – fueled more cross-racial tension.

Two trials of O.J. Simpson – including claims that a racist police department was trying to frame him – kept the spotlight on the LAPD and its inability to produce reforms called for after the riots.

Today, a decade after the violence, there is reason for some optimism. The economic boom of the '90s is a large part of the reason. While there are huge sections of South-Central that appear little different than they did in 1992, approximately 85 percent of the properties damaged in the riots have been rebuilt. Only 170 are still vacant today.

New businesses in new buildings gleam from dozens of street corners – from Starbucks Coffee and Blockbuster Video, to Home Depot and Food For Less supermarkets. Thanks to over $3 billion in new mortgage loans, the percentage of those who own their own homes has risen, resulting in more pride of ownership.

"There is no question that these neighborhoods are better off now than they would have been if the riots hadn't happened," says Ali, on a drive through South-Central.

One lingering problem is that the vacant properties left behind are small, and not contiguous. So they're less useful for developers and most retailers, who prefer shopping malls on large tracts of land. Crime, while edging down from 1995 to 2000, is moving up slightly, thanks to the recent recession. Gang activity (a third of L.A.'s 55,000 gang members are in South Central) is on the rise, bringing more violent crimes.

Home sales and prices are up in many riot areas, though the number of businesses – reflecting a far longer trend – continues down (6,100 in 1991 to 5,100 in 2001).

Encouraged by what economic progress there is – and bolstered by signs of better race relations as well – Ali, Jurado, and Jang say they'll stay on task for the long haul. That means confronting a host of issues they feel can keep the momentum for change running in positive directions.

Most recently for Ali, the decade-long push for civic unity has meant creating and heading his own civil rights advocacy group. For Jurado, it has involved moving his emphasis from Latino voter empowerment to calling more attention to environmental issues that affect the urban environment and heading an organization focusing on political/cultural advancement for Salvadorans. And Jang, in addition to her congressional work, has helped produce a public affairs TV program on religious/cultural relations.

Jang says the years have taught her that getting along with other ethnic groups is basic in concept, but not easy in practice. It involves looking past skin color and getting to know people on a deeper level.

"I think the greatest hope for improved relations for Koreans and their ethnic neighbors lies with the second generation," she says. Often, the behavioral change she sees in Koreans is forced rather than welcome.

"Many are trying to change out of survival as business owners, not out of sincerity to better understand blacks and Hispanics," Jang says. "But the younger generation genuinely understand other races because they are rubbing shoulders with them at school and other organizations."

On a recent media and business tour of the once-scarred neighborhoods, Jang and Ali listen as local leaders cite what they consider the main reason for progress across South Central Los Angeles in 10 years: grass roots and community involvement.

"The biggest reason for success in turning these neighborhoods around has not been government or corporate help from the outside, but rather community organizations coming together to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps," says John Bryant, executive director of Project Hope. The organization was formed in the wake of the riots to coordinate all forms of government and business aid to the charred neighborhoods.

Yet reviving poor neighborhoods can be difficult no matter how much community zeal and cooperation there is. Jurado, for one, points out that the recent downturn in the US economy is forcing many kids to drop out of school

and join gangs South L.A. "Some improvements have been made, but it has taken a lot of work, and much more needs to be accomplished," he says.

"This whole thing can happen again if exploitation and mistreatment of poor people continues," he adds. "The anger boils up and explodes when least expected."

Unwittingly, the riots had at least one salutary effect. Mr. Bryant and others say it forced previously isolated races to deal with each other. The only way out from here, they add, is for citizens of South-Central to see and embrace continued demographic change.

If those changes come one relationship at a time, then some progress was made on this bus ride on a sun-dappled day. As everyone stared out the window at the endless expanse of stucco, listening to a litany of philosophies and statistics, Ali looks over at Jang – two old antagonists who had never met.

"I'm sorry for what I did to Koreans in my anger and my ignorance back then," he says quietly. "It was my own fear, it was my own lack of understanding. I didn't even see Koreans as people. The past 10 years has shown me how shallow that was."

A recent history of race in L.A.
The city has long been at the nation's cultural cutting edge – as much in sunny trends as in some of America's darkest moments. In the past half-century, the city's struggle with race reflects the multicultural challenges faced by an increasingly diverse US.

Watts riots Aug. 11, 1965
Six days of violence erupts after a white police officer arrests a black motorist for drunk driving. National Guard called in. Four killed, 1,000 hurt, 4,000 arrested, $40 million in damages.

Kerner Commission Report March 1968
A presidential commission looking at causes of US urban riots concludes that the nation is moving toward two societies: black and white – separate and unequal.

Tom Bradley elected first black mayor 1973LAPD chokehold issue erupts May 1982
A police commission bans chokeholds after a black motorist stopped for a minor traffic violation is rendered unconscious by police. It also orders an investigation of Chief Daryl Gates's remark that some blacks might be more physiologically prone to death from chokeholds than "normal people."

Rodney King beating March 3, 1991
Black motorist Rodney King leads police on a high-speed freeway chase. When stopped, he is given a prolonged beating by police. A nearby resident captures the incident on home video, which is aired widely on local TV.

Officers charged in King beating March 15, 1991
Four policemen plead not guilty of assault and use of excessive force.

Korean grocer shoots black girl March 16, 1991
Latasha Harlins, 15, is shot dead by Soon Ja Du in a dispute over a bottle of orange juice. Incident captured on security camera tape.

Investigation of LAPD begins April 1, 1991
Saying the King beating has led to a "crisis in confidence," Mayor Bradley appoints prominent diplomat Warren Christopher to head police probe.

Christopher Commission report on LAPD July 9, 1991
Report says a pattern of racism and excessive force exists within the LAPD. Recommends limiting tenure of police chief.

Jury convicts Korean grocer Oct. 11, 1991
Soon Ja Du is convicted of voluntary manslaughter. In November, he receives five years of probation.

King beating trial moved Nov. 26, 1991
New venue is a largely white community of Ventura County.

Willie Williams named LAPD chief April 16, 1992
First black LAPD chief will succeed Chief Gates.

Rodney King beating trial ends April 29, 1992
Jury acquits four police officers of most charges.

Riots erupt April 29-May 2, 1992
News of the police acquittals sparks four days of violence causing 55 deaths, 2,300-plus injuries, and $1 billion in damage. The beating of white trucker Reginald Denny by black rioters is televised live. National Guard, Army, and Marines are called in.

Federal investigation and rebuilding begin May 2, 1992
US Justice Department begins civil rights probe of police in King beating. Mayor Bradley announces "Rebuild L.A." a highly touted public-private effort that fizzles within five years.

Four blacks arrested for Denny beating May 12, 1992
Of the two eventually convicted, one receives a 10-year prison sentence, the other is given 27 months of probation.

Webster Commission report Oct. 21, 1992
Headed by former FBI Director William Webster, the panel says LAPD and city government were caught "flat-footed" by the riots; calls for reforms.

Police officers convicted in King beating April 17, 1993
A federal jury convicts two officers of violating Rodney King's civil rights.They eventually are sentenced to 30 months in prison. Two other officers are acquitted.

Rodney King awarded $3.8 million civil award April 1994O.J. Simpson saga June 1994-Oct. 1995
The black former football star's wife and her friend are stabbed to death. Simpson's protracted trial exposed one former LAPD detective as a lying racist and deeply split the US public along racial lines in the way it views the nation's law enforcement system. Though L.A. was tense in anticipation of the verdict, Simpson was acquitted and there was no unrest.

LAPD chief change May 1997
Chief Willie Williams is not reappointed after first term. His successor, Bernard Parks is L.A.'s second black police chief.

LAPD Rampart scandal 1999
Alleged beatings, robberies, and the framing and abuse of suspects in an elite antigang unit trigger a federal investigation, police convictions, and a consent decree.

LAPD Chief Parks resigns, blacks outraged April 2002
The Police Commission earlier rejected a second five-year term for Parks. Mayor James Hahn angered the African-Americans by opposing the reappointment of the black chief.

Sources: Wire services, Rand Corp., Christian Science Monitor archives.

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