



**TOPIC: Building Community Consciousness and Coalitions**

**GRADES: 7-12**

### **BACKGROUND ESSAY**

The 1992 Los Angeles riots and civil unrest were traumatic and transformative for many Korean Americans. The unrest started after the acquittal of four white police officers for the beating of Rodney King, a Black man, during a traffic stop. In South Central and Koreatown, a week of looting and rioting resulted in the destruction of over 2,000 Korean-owned businesses, damages over \$1 billion, and the death of 63 people.

Forty percent of businesses affected by rioting and looting were Korean-owned shops. Shop owners were angry at the police who left their businesses unprotected. Moreover, mainstream media focused heavily on the tension between Black and Korean Americans rather than the riot's original cause—police brutality.

In the aftermath of the event, Mayor Tom Bradley formed the Christopher Commission to review the Los Angeles Police Department's practices in recruitment and training, disciplining officers, and responding to citizen complaints. Among the Commission's recommendations were community-based policing, recruiting a diverse police force, and implementing language and cultural sensitivity training.

To support economic recovery, Mayor Bradley formed a Rebuild L.A. task force on April 29, 1992 to build new businesses and boost employment. Business and community leaders joined the task force. However, Rebuild L.A. fell short of its goals. It was dissolved in 1997. One of the leaders was John Mack, president of Urban League L.A. chapter. Mack explained that the

problems Rebuild L.A. wanted to address were hundreds of years in the making. They required a long-term approach.

The L.A. County Human Relations Commission strengthened its response to inter-ethnic relations. The Commission tracked hate crimes, intervened in hot spots where tensions were high, and brought groups together to talk. Community-led programs proved instrumental in building and mobilizing groups to foster positive and long-lasting relationships. The Multicultural Collaborative brought together leaders across racial lines. Several centers helped respond to tensions between Black and Korean Americans.

On May 2, 1992, a peace rally of 30,000 people—including Asian, Black, Latinx, and white people—was held in Koreatown to address the issue of systemic racism, community relations, and rebuilding. From the unrest, emerged a political and community consciousness within Korean Americans of the need for leadership, activism, and coalitions to create peace and to demand racial justice together with Black Americans.

### **VOCABULARY**

- **Activism:** Taking action against the wrongs in society with the goal of bringing about change
- **Brutality:** Unjust use of violence; a lack of compassion
- **Civil unrest:** Disruption to the social order, usually with a political goal; for example, people rioting or fighting
- **Coalition:** A group of people who have joined together for a common purpose
- **Commission:** A group of people who have been given the official job of finding information about something or controlling something
- **Inter-ethnic:** Between groups of people from different countries or cultures
- **Riot:** A crowd of people disturbing the peace in a public place
- **Taskforce:** A group of people who deal with a specific problem

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Why is it important to learn about the history of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest? How does this connect with events today?
- What connections can you see between this part of U.S. history and the present?
- How did the Peace Rally in Koreatown change the relationship of Korean Americans with other communities?
- Why is it important to build solidarity with other communities?
- What does a just and peaceful society look like to you?

### **ACTIVITIES**

#### **Activity 1: Connecting History to Ourselves**

After viewing the video, ask students to respond to journalist Jeff Chang’s observations about the personal impact of the 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest and riots.

Project this quote on the wall for students or pass out copies:

*“I mean it was, it was one of those moments that actually really changed my life because it was like war had broken out and I knew people that I deeply loved on both sides. And for me, you know, I had come up really deeply believing in this Third World Strike ideal and this idea of a rainbow coalition, it was like, not just peoples’ lives were at stake, but also our revolutionary dreams are kind of going up in smoke.”*

- Jeff Chang

Distribute index cards and ask, students to write a response to the quote:

- What is Chang saying?
- What is unclear or needs clarification?
- Why do you think his words are important?

Count students off into groups of three. They should decide who will be A, B, and C.

Student A will read their response to the quote. Then students B and C discuss A’s response to the quote for 2-3 minutes. A will not speak but listen to their feedback. They can ask questions, make connections, agree, or disagree with the response.

This process continues with student B sharing their index card, with student A and C responding. Finally, student C shares their index card and listens to feedback.

Each group should assign a reporter to share one insight that was generated through the process:

- *One thing we discussed was...*
- *One important thing we noticed was...*
- *One connection we had to the text was...*

Gather the students as a whole class and have each group report out.

## **Activity 2: Building Community Consciousness and Coalition**

This activity builds off of the community responses that occurred after the 1992 L.A. civil unrest and riots, such as police brutality and reforms, economic relief funds, and inter-ethnic community building.

Ask students to select a problem or issue that they’d like to research:

- Systemic Racism
- Police Brutality
- Criminal Justice System
- Economic Disparities
- History of racial segregation, including education and housing discrimination
- Community Relationships

Have students conduct independent research on their problem or issue. Ask them to discover information about the following questions and take notes:

- What are some of the causes of the problem?

- Why do these problems exist in our communities?

Ask for some initial findings from the students' research. Review the students' research process and share suggestions on reliable sources for finding information.

- How did this problem contribute to 1992 L.A. civil unrest and riots?
- How did the communities address this problem in the aftermath of the riots?
- Did the problem persist in Los Angeles and in other communities in the U.S.?

Finally, direct students to create a poster (using either poster board or a digital drawing or graphic design app) that shows their findings. When students have completed them, they should have a poster sharing session, in which students post their posters around the room. Split the class into Groups A and B. Group A stands at their posters and answers questions; at the same time, Group B wanders and engages with posters. Switch and then ask Group B to stand by their posters while Group A previews them.

### **Activity 3: Confronting Community Issues**

Break the class up into small groups of 3 to 4 students. Assign each group one of the following sound bites from the documentary:

#### **Quote 1:**

*"I recognize now the reason that Koreatown burned down. That was a neighborhood that was brought up, established, populated by people who are themselves marginalized. If those businesses were in the well-heeled parts of this town, do you think that the man would let that burn down? Never. They would go down themselves to protect those places. There's no way that they would let that happen. So you, we were victims as well, of this system."*

*-Filmmaker Alex Ko*

#### **Quote 2:**

*"It was a huge march that took us down Olympic Boulevard. That kind of diversity that you would expect to see in L.A. There were African Americans, there were Latinos, there were Koreans, there were whites. Everyone was present. We wanted to send a message that we also want justice and we also want peace."*

*-Attorney Angela Oh*

#### **Quote 3:**

*"Like every population, Asian Americans have choices to make. They can dwell on their own victimization which is a choice that is there for every so-called minority and for the majority. They can choose to side with power or to be complicit with power. And to be perpetrators or to at least enjoy the profits of being aligned with perpetrators. Or they could refuse these kinds of choices and seek to transform the system into something more just, more equitable for everyone. That's the hope of activism, that's the hope of solidarity. That's the hope of alliance, that's the hope and the conviction from which something like the Asian American movement was born."*

-Author Viet Thanh Nguyen

Instruct each group to read their quotation aloud or silently. Distribute copies of the following notetaker for students to write their responses to the passage. They should discuss and make notes on the organizer.

<b>Identify the Problem</b> What is the problem or issue identified by the speaker?	
<b>Cause of the Problem</b> What is the cause of the problem? Why do these problems exist in our communities?	
<b>Respond to the Problem</b> What did the Korean community do to respond to this?	
<b>Reflection</b> What has or could be done to address this problem? What are areas for improvement?	

Gather the class together. Put chairs in a circle. Prompt students to look at their quotations and notetakers. They should circle something significant, such as an insight or finding from their group work. Then, ask students to share their thoughts. Each student can call on another student until everyone in the circle has shared.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

- Chang, Edward. [Confronting Sa-i-gu: Twenty Years after the Los Angeles Riots](#). *UC Riverside e-Scholarship*, 2016.



[PBSLearningMedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs](https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs)

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