

## Chapter 14

### The Black-Asian Conflict?

Who now reads Allport? Not so long ago, whatever one's scientific or political predilection, the contact thesis dominated the way in which we understand and explain interethnic relationships in the United States. In Gordon Allport's (1979, 9) view, manifestations of intergroup conflict - from anger and hatred to discrimination and violence - ultimately stem from prejudice, which "is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization." In this line of reasoning, racial or ethnic prejudice - however faulty and inflexible a generalization it may be - can be corrected and rendered flexible by the experience of interethnic contact, especially if groups are of equal status. Or as Allport (1979, 281) put it: "Prejudice . . . may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals." Thus, if we could expunge the evil of segregation and the obstacle of social distance, then people of distinct backgrounds would come to live in harmony and make, presumably, correct and flexible generalizations about each other (see, for example, (Sigelman et al. 2001). Although Allport and his followers focused on black-white relations, the contact thesis has been applied to other interethnic relations. Along with the concept of assimilation, it expressed the post-World War II consensus that predicted the eventual accommodation and acculturation of immigrant groups. In this view, assimilation and harmony mark the trajectory and teleology of immigrants.

In concert with the widespread rejection of assimilation--both as a concept and a reality--many social scientists have also come to criticize the contact hypothesis. On the one hand, the vast amount of social-psychological research on intergroup contact has raised more questions than confirmations (see Pettigrew 1998; Oskamp 2000). Allport can be faulted for reducing group relations to individual psychologies and prejudices. Furthermore, the contact thesis has relied on evidence gathered in experimental or highly restricted social contexts, such as housing projects and college classrooms. Most embarrassingly, the very notion of contact remains underspecified: How frequent does contact between groups have to be? How deep and intimate?

On the other hand, many social scientists have simply rejected the contact thesis and embraced what I call the conflict thesis. Instead of consensus and harmony, conflict and discord characterize this view of interethnic relations. For example, rather than viewing segregation as the root cause of conflict and discord, Susan Olzak (1992, 3) argues that desegregation has increased ethnic conflict. In a related vein, H. D. Forbes (1997) roundly criticizes the Allport thesis for its empirical and theoretical failings. Indeed, the contemporary social-scientific vocabulary to describe and explain ethnic and racial relations--the exploitative middleman minority, the divide-and-conquer strategy, resource competition, and so on--makes conflict seem all but inevitable (see Horowitz 1985, 2001). That is, the presumption of conflict shapes many social scientists' vision of interethnic relations. Those who cite Allport today therefore often do so to criticize the contact thesis.

The very interest in the black-Asian conflict is predicated on the popularity of the conflict view. The suspicion of pervasive interethnic tension between African Americans and Asian immigrant groups generates calls for solutions, or at least academic analyses and conferences (see, for example, Kwang Chung Kim 1999 and Claire Jean Kim 2000), such as the Columbia University conference on blacks and Asians in November 2000 and the Boston University conference on "Black-Asian Conflict" in April 2002. The Columbia conference website discusses the salience of political, economic, and social tensions between the two groups and highlights the importance of the black-Korean conflict, which had in fact become a journalistic commonplace in the early 1990s.' On their 1991 album *Death Certificate*, Ice Cube raps in "Black Korea" "your [Korean] chop suey ass will be a target/Of a national boycott." Their incendiary line "we'll burn your store right down to a crisp" seemed to be confirmed in the smoldering reality of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Pundits ranging from Mike Davis to Richard Rodriguez highlighted the black-Korean conflict as one of the keys to the 1992 riots (Abelmann and Lie 1995). Yet the putative problem of the black-Korean conflict in particular or the black-Asian conflict in general hardly merited a footnote a mere decade ago. Although the leading African American intellectuals, ranging from James Baldwin to Henry Louis Gates Jr., bell hooks, and Cornel West, have propounded on the black-Jewish problem (Berman 1994), their concern with the black-Asian issue has been negligible. In fact, the received wisdom - to the extent that it exists - has emphasized black-Asian solidarity. Scholars have pointed in this regard to the existence of the African American critique of late-nineteenth-century anti-Chinese agitation (Okimoto 1994), some American policymakers' fear of African American support for Japan during World War II (Lipsitz 1998), or the impact of the Black Power movement on the Asian American ("yellow power") movement in the 1960s (Wei 1993).

In this chapter, I criticize the conflict thesis in general and question the salience of the black-Asian conflict in particular. In so doing, I scrutinize several presuppositions that animate the conflict thesis. I adduce case studies of Chinese immigrants and African Americans in the late nineteenth century and Korean immigrants and African Americans in the late twentieth century to illustrate my argument.

#### THE CONFLICT THESIS AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Because immigrants inevitably arrive in a populated land, they generate a distinction between insiders and outsiders, or established residents and newcomers. Whether for dogs or human beings, priority spells, at least initially, primacy. No dog owner could fail to observe the comical situation of minute dogs lordling over their gigantic newcomer counterparts in a dog park. Similarly, regardless of wealth or beauty, power or prestige, the established assert their indefinable supremacy over the arrivistes. Indeed, it is a mode of formal sociation that is a cultural - possibly mammalian - universal. Furthermore, the usual scarcity of housing, jobs, and other resources engenders competition and conflict. In this line of reasoning, the established seek to protect their territoriality and belonging, while the outsiders attempt to encroach on them; those attempts, in turn, generate intergroup competition and conflict. To be sure, material plenty or economic growth may alleviate and even eliminate competition and lead to accommodation and possibly assimilation. However, in the conflict view, population movement is rife with the possibility of interethnic conflict.

Whether informed by social Darwinism or evolutionary psychology or reports of racism and genocide, contemporary Americans are wont to highlight ethnic tension and conflict. The temptation is almost irresistible when two groups, such as African Americans and Asian Americans, seem so distinct in the American racial common sense. The ideologically antipodal minorities - the urban underclass against the model minority - seemed ripe for conflict (Abelmann and Lie 1995). Sure enough, the early 1990s brought the specter of the black-Korean conflict, most visibly in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In turn, the black-Asian conflict buttressed the conflict thesis.

The most powerful riposte to the conflict hypothesis is empirical. Given the sheer ubiquity of immigration in modern life, we would expect to witness, if the received view is correct, numerous instances *of* interethnic conflict. Yet, by and large, interethnic conflicts are newsworthy precisely because *of* their relative rarity. For every well-publicized boycott or deadly riot, the mundane reality of accommodation, however tinged with tension, reigns around the world. And this is certainly the case with black-Asian relations, whether in the early twenty-first century or the late nineteenth century.

Beyond its empirical plausibility, the conflict model is predicated on several dubious assumptions. First, it presumes the salience of racial, ethnic, or national relations. The purely formal character of insider-outsider sociation is not necessarily, or even all, that commonly, characterized as interracial, interethnic, or international relations. On the one hand, the relation may reflect the formal sociation between the old and the new. Even if all the new dogs in a dog park should turn out to be Chows and all the long-term users are Chihuahuas, we would be remiss to describe the ensuing sociation as fundamentally interbreed relations. Rather, they simply represent the old and the new, which in turn accounts for the particular pattern of sociation (for example, the dominance *of* the old over the new). On the other hand, we should not assume the primacy of racial, ethnic, or national identities. Why should canine sociology privilege breed but not sex or size? As for human beings, why discount or dismiss the importance of educational, occupational, political, or other differences? Should we dismiss classic British works on colonial immigrants (Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Castles and Kosack 1973/1985) that sought to analyze them through the prism of class relations? The primacy *of* race, ethnicity, or nation is something that must be proved rather than presumed.

Second, the conflict model assumes that immigrants arrive with ready-made racial, ethnic, or national identities. Certainly, we would not impute breed consciousness to dogs. Although many people in the United States today are highly conscious of their ethno-racial identity, would we be right to assume their universality across cultures, places, and periods? In general, until the dissemination of 'peoplehood identity' in the twentieth century, most migrants did not arrive in a new land with a strong sense of racial, ethnic, or national identity and probably did not even think of themselves as migrants or transplants (Lie 2001a; 2004; cf. Foner 2000). We can be fairly certain of the fundamentally religious-Protestant or Puritan-self-definition *of* the first European Americans for whom contemporary racial (white) or ethnic (English) identities would have been either alien or incidental (Delbanco 1989). Although the Puritan fashioning of the self may have informed later understandings of the American self, it should not be mistaken as an articulation of American national identity. Rather than exclusively highlighting peoplehood identity, we should also recognize the

salience of religious, familial, and other identities. Although we speak of Polish immigrants to the United States or Irish immigrants to Australia, their fundamental self-definition was probably familial rather than ethno-national. According to William I. Thomas and Florian 7.naniecki (1918-20, i, 303), "[A]ll the peasant letters can be considered as variations of the fundamental type . . . to manifest the persistence of family solidarity in spite of the separation." In a similar fashion, David Fitzpatrick (1994, 615) describes Irish immigrants in Australia: "[W]hen Irish Australians spoke of 'home,' they called to mind a social environment peopled by relatives or neighbours." Most Jewish immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth century had vague inklings of Jewish ethnic or national identity (Howe 1976). Similarly, nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants, albeit hailing principally from a few regions, were linguistically and culturally diverse (see Chan 1986).

In a similar fashion, we should question the solidarity of the receiving community. Why should we assume that the established are any more homogeneous or self-conscious than the newcomers? Here we should take a hint from the historiography of nationalism and of whiteness. If there is any consensus in recent writings on nationalism, it is that national identity is a modern phenomenon (Hobsbawm 1992; Calhoun 1997). Certainly American (that is, U.S.) national consciousness is a nineteenth-century achievement. Even when it emerged belatedly after the American Revolution, the core American identity was urban, industrial, and northern (Appleby 2000); excluded were not only American Indians and African slaves but also many others, including rural, agrarian, and southern Americans. John Higham's (1955/1963) identification of three major strands of nativism in the 1850s—anti-Catholicism, antipolitical radicalism, and antipathy toward non-Anglo-Saxons—suggests that the norm of Americanness in the nineteenth century was Protestant, politically moderate, and Anglo-Saxon. This line of argument has recently been explored with great fanfare in whiteness studies, which reveal the prevalence of what we would call ethnic exclusions and even racism against people deemed white today, ranging from Italians to Russians (Saxton 1990; Roediger 1991). The belated emergence of inclusionary whiteness makes sense of early-twentieth-century immigration restriction legislation, which targeted non-western Europeans (Jacobson 1998).

These insights can also be applied to African Americans. In spite of being conflated as a homogeneous group with an essentialized identity, linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity, as well as migration experience, divided African Americans (see Littlefield 1981). Mass or popular black nationalism, after all, is an early-twentieth-century phenomenon that developed when many North-bound blacks were every bit as immigrant as Chinese (Spear 1967). In spite of the widespread diffusion of black collective consciousness in the early twenty-first century, plural identities continue to characterize the black population (Waters 1999).

In general, the nominalist temptation to conflate category and reality is rife in the social sciences. In what would otherwise be an admirable salvo against psychologism and individualism, many social scientists unwittingly embrace essentialism that presumes the holistic and organic solidarity of groups, categories, and even societies. From Montesquieu and Durkheim to the culture-and-personality school and national character studies, some social scientists discuss groups or societies as personality writ large, thereby eliding

significant divisions of class or culture, gender or generation. Perhaps holism is warranted in certain times and places, but this needs to be shown, rather than dogmatically asserted.

Consider in this regard the classical theoretical trap that many Marxists fell into. The teleology of class conflict presumed the existence, however latent it may often be, of class consciousness or identity. Hence, few Marxists bothered to define or describe class (see Przeworski 1977). Instead, they falsely assumed the existence of class consciousness or identity and predicted class conflict or struggle. (If people feel exploited, after all, why shouldn't they at least identify themselves as the exploited and possibly agitate against the exploiters?) As their certainty about the future guided the equally certain ethnography of the present, every instance of suboptimal work performance became evidence of conscious resistance and class conflict. To be sure, recalcitrant reality drove some to highlight the distinction between class-in-itself and class-for-itself and to seek historical accounts of the emergence (or absence) of class consciousness. It would be enormously condescending to belittle the then-revolutionary insight that class is made, not given. Yet, in retrospect, a conceptual history illustrates the widely divergent meanings ascribed to class over the centuries and the hollowness of the orthodox Marxist conviction about the ontology of class and class-consciousness (Cannadine 1999). My intention is not to condemn the category or concept of class in toto. For example, the historical characterization of twentieth-century Britain as a class society has an analytical utility with a fairly solid basis in contemporary experience and consciousness (McKibbin 1998). Nonetheless, as much as we wish to use class as an analytical concept, we cannot assume its existence as a relevant category of experience and consciousness for all times and places.

Needless to say, few social scientists and fewer historians now confound the potential analytic utility of class categories with an unreflexive belief in the existence of class-consciousness. Yet many who delightfully deride the Marxist pieties confidently presume the isomorphism of peoplehood categories and identities. Why should we assume race, ethnicity, and nation to be transhistorical and transcultural categories? Just as class identity cannot be presumed, peoplehood identity should not be presumed. When Italy barely existed as an entity or even an idea—recall Massimo d'Agelio's classic statement after the Risorgimento: "[W]e have made Italy, now we have to make Italians" (Hobsbawm 1992, 44)—we can only talk of "Italian" emigrants as an analytic category (that is, as "population") rather than as a concrete or conscious group (as "people"). When I say that the existence of peoplehood identity cannot be presumed for all times and places, I mean that ethnicity-in-itself (as an analytic category) may be used transhistorically and transculturally as a heuristic idea, but ethnicity-for-itself does not (as a category of lived experience or collective consciousness) exist in all times and places. Although we can write a history of Italian emigration in the nineteenth century, we should not confuse our analytical exercise with the existence of widespread Italian ethno-national consciousness in the nineteenth century.

Finally, the conflict model highlights the potential primacy of interracial or inter-ethnic conflict, but the reverse—the potential for consensus and integration—is a priori just as plausible. As I noted, the weight of empirical evidence seems to tilt heavily toward the likelihood of nonconflictual coexistence. Does interethnic contact lead to consensus or conflict? Such an articulation of dichotomous outcomes is problematic. As many critics of

the contact thesis have pointed out, the very notion of contact needs to be specified. A similar point can be made about conflict. If an ethnic group does not demonstrate a high level of ethnic solidarity and identity, then why wouldn't it be possible for some members of the group to be in conflict with members of another group while others are in harmony? Even in the mechanistic universe of two atoms colliding, we would want at least to know mass, velocity, friction, and other variables. Why should we expect the social world to be so much simpler? In the world of post-Newtonian physics, atoms may very well split or transmogrify. Similarly, I take it as a given that ethnic groups are not homogeneous bodies organized along the line of Durkheimian mechanical solidarity. Surely, interethnic relations encompass heterogeneous entities, divides, and identities that defy simple generalizations. That is, the very articulation of the conflict thesis (or for that matter, the contact thesis) is not a well-formulated question. What we call interracial or interethnic conflicts comprise a variety of outcomes and conflicts.

Indeed, the conflict thesis risks misunderstanding an effect for a cause. Rather than a well-formed identity giving rise to conflict (or consensus), it may very well be that conflict gives rise to identity. Racist conflation is frequently the basis of political mobilization and identity formation, whether for African Americans or Asian Americans. That is, identification qua a racial, ethnic, or national minority may form precisely because of conflict.' If we reify the effect (identity formation) and treat it as the cause of interracial or interethnic conflict, then we may indeed heighten ethnic tension and conflict. What is intended as descriptive may well become prescriptive. It may even spread knowledge about group distinction and group hatred and thereby become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## TWO CASE STUDIES

To buttress my argument, I offer two instances of interethnic relations as illustrative case studies. Both concern what might be regarded as examples of the black-Asian conflict. The first deals with Chinese immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century and their relations with African Americans. The second focuses on the widely publicized conflict between Korean immigrants and (especially poor urban) African Americans.

I focus on national rather than pan-national or pan-racial grouping for Asian immigrants. If my argument about the recent and belated emergence of peoplehood identity is correct, then it should be all the more true for the highly aggregated category of the Asian American. After all, the categories of "Orientals" or "Asians" resulted from the racist conflation of "inscrutable and somnolent" people (Hunt 1987, 69), reaching something of an ideological apogee as the "yellow peril" in the early twentieth century (Daniels 1962). The national distinction between Chinese and Japanese immigrants became especially pressing during World War II, but as with African Americans, the mainstream classification largely bypassed it. The putative solidarity of Asian Americans long remained the conviction of nativist and exclusionary forces in the United States, but its existence was at best inchoately intuited by Asian Americans themselves. As a historian of the Asian American movement, William Wei (1993, 70), puts it: "The underlying impetus for the Asian American Movement was the search for identity and the creation of a new culture. Unlike European Americans, who could incorporate their ethnic identity into their sense of being American, Asian Americans had to create an entirely new identity: the Asian American." He locates its origin in the 1960s in the

crucible of the anti-Vietnam War movement and the Black Power movement. In other words, the Asian American as a peoplehood identity is of recent vintage (see Espiritu, this volume). Despite significant forces that seek pan-Asian identities (Espiritu 1992),

the common consciousness of Asian identity remains-as one quip has it-most effervescent on college campuses. As Herbert Barringer, Robert Gardner, and Michael Levin (1993, 320) have mundanely but correctly concluded: "Asian Americans do not represent a single block of persons about whom one can generalize easily."

The second case exemplifies the black-Asian conflict and requires no lengthy justification. As I noted, the black-Korean conflict became probably the most widely disseminated account of interracial or interethnic conflict in the early 1990s. For historical comparison, however, a compelling case cannot be made for analyzing Korean immigrants. Not only did they constitute a very small group in the nineteenth century, but they were concentrated largely in Hawaii. Although plantation managers' conscious "divide and conquer" strategy is interesting (Takaki 1983), it deals with relations among new immigrant groups rather than relations among new and established groups. In any case, Hawaii was not an integral part of the United States in the nineteenth century. Therefore, I consider Chinese immigrants, the most numerous and the most widely discussed Asian immigrant category in the late-nineteenth-century United States. Critical of the nominalist temptation, the dictate of the past-present comparison forces me to conform to it.

#### *Case 1: Chinese Immigrants and African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*

The history of Chinese immigration to the United States seems tempestuous precisely because of the anti-Chinese movement of the late nineteenth century. As John Higham (1955/1963, 25) writes: "No variety of anti-European sentiment has ever approached the virulent extremes to which anti-Chinese agitation went in the 1870s and 1880s" (see Saxton 1971). The indisputable proliferation of racist rhetoric and the existence of racially motivated violence seem to seal the conclusion that Chinese immigrants experienced constant conflict. Yet the existence of the anti-Chinese movement does not prove the presence of widespread ethnic conflict. After all, it was a nationwide phenomenon when the Chinese presence was largely restricted to the Pacific Coast (Miller 1969). Whether we locate its source in organized labor (Miller 1969) or electoral politics (Gvory 1998), anti-Chinese sentiments expressed a political response to the perceived, largely symbolic, threat. Furthermore, in spite of the racist veneer that we are wont to highlight, the contemporary rhetoric often highlighted nonracial elements. In particular, if we take labor-inspired opposition to Chinese immigration seriously, then the impulse behind anti-immigration agitation followed the logic of capital-labor conflict. M. B. Starr's *The Coming Struggle* (1873, 7) is symptomatic: "It is now generally understood and believed that a powerful combination of capital is systematically organized to bring into the midst of the most civilized portions of the world vast hordes of the debased, ignorant, and corrupt heathen races." Although he was discussing the threat posed by Chinese immigrants, Starr could have been talking about any group. Deployed as strikebreakers, Chinese workers faced the wrath of labor union organizers and

activists. Interestingly, many Chinese workers in turn used the language of workers and capitalists to describe their lives in the United States (see Nee and Nee 1973, 43-48).

To put it polemically, anti-Chinese racism existed relatively independently of the existence of Chinese immigrants. Anti-Chinese agitation was not motivated solely by racism. Instead, we need to consider the significance of labor opposition or electoral strategy that contributed to late-nineteenth-century anti-Chinese agitation. Not surprisingly, the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act also occurred in the context of national-level pressure groups and international concerns that had very little to do with Chinese immigrants themselves (Riggs 1950; cf. McKenzie 1927, 181).

More important for my purposes, few now or then focused on the black-Chinese conflict. Far from expressing a high level of solidarity and consciousness, Chinese immigrants entered an interethnic universe that was far from conflict-ridden. Gunther Barth (1964, 145) describes San Francisco in the 1860s: "Negroes and Chinese frequented the same dance halls. The Chinese also found other groups sharing their life. Americans entered their employ, Germans occupied their dormitories, tents, and log cabins, Frenchmen sat at their tables, and Mexicans guided their pack horses through the Sierra. All these nationalities intermarried with the Chinese." The mundane reality undoubtedly included numerous instances of tensions and conflicts-bias was certainly expressed on occasion (Chen 2000)-but they did not amount to a widespread interethnic conflict. In any case, black leaders did not support the anti-Chinese agitation and exclusion (Okhiro 1994).

Beyond the cosmopolitan city of San Francisco, the fate of Chinese immigrants can hardly be reduced to constant rejection and contestation. Consider some 1,200 Chinese who settled in the Mississippi Delta around 1870. Unlike most Chinese immigrants of the nineteenth century, they became shopkeepers (see Chan 1986). In other words, they became the middleman minority who often seem to be the structural source and the spark plug of interethnic conflict. James Loewen (1971) argues that they were initially classified as black but eventually became white over the course of the twentieth century. Be that as it may, in spite of their predominant occupation as small grocers--the classic middleman minority--the interracial relationship was free of overt conflict, and the number of black-Chinese interracial families increased (Loewen 1971). The interracial relationship became ridden with tension only after Chinese became "white" and blacks became "black" after the rise of the Black Power movement in the 1960s (Loewen 1971). The recent influx of Chinese immigrants highlights the illusory character of racial or ethnic solidarity. As one of the descendants of the original Chinese settlers, Patricia Wolf, speaks of recent Chinese immigrants: "They look like us but that's about it.... We don't have much in common" (Sengupta 2000).

More damaging to the conflict thesis is the influx of Chinese in Louisiana in 1866. According to the historian Roger Shugg (1939, 254), planters made a conscious effort to recruit Chinese workers from Cuba and the Philippines: "Competition between Chinese and Negroes, it was claimed, would teach the tatter to be industrious and thrifty." The choice of Cuban and Filipino Chinese was dictated by their Catholic background, which presumably rendered them "industrious and thrifty." The well-planned ethnic competition

and conflict failed even to generate sustained sociation. Like Marx's famous description of Wakefield's colonization scheme, the model proletariat "soon deserted the plantations to become independent fishermen and truck farmers for the New Orleans market" (Shugg 1939, 255). That is, ethnic competition and conflict failed to materialize even when it was the intended outcome.

In summary, the cases of Chinese immigrants in the second half of the nineteenth century fail to corroborate the conflict thesis. We have no compelling evidence that they were engaged in sustained conflict with African Americans. The anti-Chinese movement, to be sure, conflated not only Chinese immigrants but all Orientals. In so doing, however, it promoted not so much the solidarity of Asian Americans as the unity of whites and the idea of white supremacy (Saxton 1971). In spite of the paucity of systematic evidence, the racially inspired attacks on Chinese followed, rather than

preceded, the anti-Chinese movement (Coolidge 1909). That is, conflict in the form of racism and racist agitation generated identities that contributed to racial tension and violence. Like the Black Power movement of the 1960s in Louisiana, the white power movement was the predominant source of identity formation and ethnic violence.

#### *Case 2 The Black-Korean Conflict in the 1990s*

Let me shift to the near past: the specter of black-Korean conflict haunted urban America in the 1990s. After the 1992 Los Angeles riots—perhaps the most destructive civil violence in the twentieth-century United States—pundits often seized on the centrality of the interracial competition between long-term African American residents and recent Korean immigrants. For example, Richard Rodriguez (1992) wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*: "[O]ne of the most important conflicts in the 1992 L.A. riots was the tension between Koreans and African Americans."

Unlike the nineteenth-century Chinese immigrants, twentieth-century Koreans have a well-honed national consciousness that it would be foolhardy to deny. However recent the popular dissemination of Korean national consciousness (Lie 2001b), most post-1960s Korean immigrants arrived with a distinct and strong sense of their national identity. Furthermore, the strength of black identity was undeniable by the 1990s. Indeed, few would question the strength of in-group feelings among Korean Americans and African Americans or the solid boundaries that divided them.

Nonetheless, the conflict thesis offered misleading prognostications. First, the bases of conflict were less than robust. Whether we consider employment, housing, or politics—the usual loci of resource conflict—we find little or no presence of interracial competition or conflict between African Americans and Korean Americans. Quite simply, the two groups by and large did not vie for the same type of jobs, seek the same housing, or fight for political representation. In each instance, Chicanos or Latinos posed a much more compelling threat for African Americans, whether for jobs at hotels, in housing in South Central Los Angeles, or in city politics.

Second, there was no compelling evidence to sustain the conflict thesis. Although Fifty-eight people died during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, no one died as a result of interracial violence. That is, Korean Americans did not kill African Americans, nor did blacks kill Koreans. Some African Americans may have targeted Korean-owned stores, but only one-third of the destroyed businesses in South Central Los Angeles were Korean-owned when Korean Americans accounted for roughly 40 percent of the dry cleaning businesses and 50 percent of small grocery stores in the area. Indeed, the extensive destruction in South Central Los Angeles and the neighboring area of Koreatown was due in large part to propinquity to rioters and looters and to the police protection of other areas (or lack of protection in Koreatown).

Interviews that Nancy Abelmann and I conducted with blacks and Koreans revealed expressions of prejudice and ethnic tensions, but they did not amount to a state of pervasive interethnic conflict. As a young Korean American man told us:

The media attributed the black-Korean conflict as the underlying factor of the violence [the riots]. To justify their point, images of crying Korean merchants damning the looters and angry African American bystanders asserting that Koreans received what they deserved flooded the media. Unfortunately, people's sense of judgment became anesthetized after a while, so that many accepted conflict between Koreans and African Americans as a motivating factor for the violence.

Many working-class Korean Americans actively resisted the suggestion that there was an interracial conflict, and some even explicitly claimed the existence of class solidarity between black and Korean workers. Only a few Korean Americans accepted the existence of the conflict, usually in order to acknowledge the antiblack prejudice among Korean Americans. Similarly, many African Americans, while aware of interracial tensions, resisted giving significance to the black-Korean conflict. A young African American gang member told us: "It's not the Korean-black thing; the merchants were there, there were problems, but it's a way for us to not think about the real problem, which is the oppressor [white]." An owner of a restaurant in South Central Los Angeles went so far as to praise Korean immigrants and claimed that he sought to protect his Korean American neighbors during the riots. As I noted, black intellectuals largely bypassed the topic of the black-Korean conflict. To the extent that conflict existed, it often signaled something other than black-Korean racial conflict. The 1991 Red Apple boycott in Flatbush, New York, was often cited as a major manifestation of black-Korean conflict. However, it was initiated by Haitian immigrants. Although "black" in the dominant U.S. racial vocabulary, Haitians are not synonymous with long-established African Americans, as evinced by the black-Haitian conflict in Miami (Portes and Stepick 1993). The Bulls riots in Chicago featured shopkeepers and looters who were both ethnically diverse (Rosenfeld 1997); Arab American merchants, far more than Korean Americans, were the central target during that disturbance. The Los Angeles riots were, of course, not triggered by black-Korean conflict but by popular anger against the "not guilty" verdict for the four police officers who had beaten up Rodney King, an African American. It would certainly be a huge leap to locate black-Korean conflict as the source of the largest civil disturbance of the twentieth-century United States.

Needless to say, I am not denying the existence of individual altercations or group-level prejudices. However, reports of racial tension between African Americans and Korean Americans have focused almost exclusively on the realm of merchant-customer relations (Min 1996; Yoon 1997). There have been frequent reports of African American clients complaining about rude Korean American merchants as well as Korean American merchants bemoaning the frequency of African American shoplifters. There is a grain of truth to the middleman minority thesis that political movements by inner-city African Americans demanded the encouragement of black merchants and the collateral resistance to immigrant entrepreneurs. Hence, in the early 1990s there were newspaper reports on the black-Palestinian conflict in Cleveland, the black-Laotian conflict in Philadelphia, the black-Arab conflict in Chicago, the black-Chinese conflict in Washington, D.C., and the black-Vietnamese conflict in Los Angeles. It is possible to conclude that African Americans are in conflict with virtually every ethnic group or that all immigrant groups are prejudiced against African Americans. It would be more reasonable, however, to seek the source of these conflicts in the economic and political efforts by urban African American groups to demand economic empowerment and social dignity. In any case, these manifestations of merchant-customer tensions in poor areas do not necessarily point to the general existence of a simmering interracial conflict (see Gold, this volume).

To the extent that the Los Angeles riots were significant for interracial relations, the causal arrow went the other way from that predicted by the conflict thesis. The wide-spread report of the conflict heightened the identity and mobilization of both groups. African American as well as Korean American organizations sought racial identification and promoted putative racial interests (see Kim 2000). Rather than well-established identities leading to conflicts, it was the presumed existence of a conflict that seemed to entrench ethnic-based identities. Once reified, however, the new s of the black-Korean conflict spread as a matter of fact.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have criticized the conflict thesis, especially its articulation as the black-Asian conflict. Just as social scientists have rejected the class nominalism and essentialism associated with Marxism, I argue that we should avoid ethno-racial nominalism and essentialism. We simply cannot assume the existence at all times and places of ethnic or national identities and therefore the possibility of describing group relations as simple phenomena (though even relations between two individuals can be exceedingly complex). Neither should we assume the inevitable existence of ethnic tensions or conflicts.

The very discussion of the black-Asian conflict would constitute a height of un-healthy abstraction. Yet we should be wary of merely reversing the conflict thesis and asserting black-Asian racial harmony. In countering the notion of black-Asian conflict, the Columbia University historian Gary Okihiro (1994, 34) writes: "[Y]ellow is a shade of black, and black a shade of yellow. We are a kindred people, African and Asian Americans. We share a history of migration, interaction and cultural sharing, and commerce and trade. We share a history of European colonization, decolonization, and independence under neocolonization and dependency. We share a history of oppression in the United States." I am not an expert on colors, but I do know that Japan and Thailand--two indisputably Asian nations--were never

colonized by Europeans, and Korea and China were colonized principally by Japan. I also know that in Hawaii—a topic of one of Okinaka's books—Asian immigrants were part and parcel of European colonization, however exploited they may have been.

«e11-intended abstractions, though platitudinous, may promote interracial or interethnic harmony. However, romantic abstractions strike me as the stuff out of which destructive demagogues and mass murderers empower themselves. After all, the very expression of interracial conflict reifies identities and strengthens boundaries that may in turn lead to interethnic conflict. By mistaking effect for cause, the contingent power grab—such as the brutal Serbian regime that sought to justify state power and expansion in the name of Serbian nationalism and anti-Bosnian racism—is articulated as interethnic conflict, a nearly natural state of affairs (Lie 2004). Wrong analysis, in other words, contributes to the particular form in which savage hatred wreaks havoc.

Here Henri Tajfel's (1981) striking work lends some empirical support. He argues that it is not contact per se but the establishment of crosscutting social ties that deconstructs, as it were, the solidity of categories and identities. That is, interracial or interethnic harmony is achieved precisely by attenuating, rather than articulating and reinforcing, racial and ethnic boundaries and consciousnesses. In this regard, we might take a leaf from an early Marx essay in which he inveighs against the Young Hegelians for talking of freedom of religion rather than freedom from religion. In our desire to eliminate the blight of racism, we should not become trapped in the prison-house of race.

## NOTES

1. See the website for the Columbia University conference "Blacks and Asians: Revisiting Racial Formations" (November 9-10, 2000), Institute for Research in African-American Studies
2. (IRAAS), [www.columbia.edu/cu/iraas/htm/iraas\\_events-11\\_09\\_2000.htm](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/iraas/htm/iraas_events-11_09_2000.htm) (accessed July 30, 2002).
3. "Sociation," following Georg Simmel's (1908/1992, ch. 4) pioneering analysis, refers to formal and generic modes of social interaction. See Elias and Scotson (1965/1994) for the sociation of established and outsiders.
4. "Peoplehood" is a generic term to refer to racial, ethnic, or national group; see Lie (2004).
5. The thesis that conflict generates identity—rather than identity generating conflict—may appear mechanistic and simpleminded. However, construction is perforce never de novo, and the thesis points to the general strengthening and dissemination of an identity that may have been inchoately intuited by the populace. For a suggestive case study, see Turits (2003, ch. 5).
6. This section is a revised articulation of the argument in Abelman and Lie (1995, ch. 6). All of the references and evidence can be found therein.

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