BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE

Racial Conflict in the New Multi-ethnic City

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Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, 300 pages, ISBN 0-300-07406-9, $45.00.

Jennifer Lee, *Civility in the City: Blacks, Jews, and Koreans in Urban America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002, 270 pages, ISBN 0-674-00897-9, $35.00.

In-Jin Yoon, *On My Own: Korean Businesses and Race Relations in America*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997, 274 pages, ISBN 0-226-959279-9, $45.00.

During the past decade, scholars of ethno-racial relations have increasingly grappled with the thorny issue of Black-Korean conflict. This attention is no doubt the result of a number of high profile, sometimes violent, and often prolonged clashes between Blacks and Koreans in large urban settings. On January 18, 1990, an incident between a Black customer and a Korean storeowner at the Family Red Apple Inc. grocery store touched off a yearlong boycott of two Korean businesses in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, NY. The 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion, which was originally sparked by the acquittal of four White police officers accused of beating Black motorist, Rodney King, led to three days of looting, arson, and violence. The event quickly became framed in terms of a conflict between Blacks and Koreans, however, as Koreans owned more than half of the stores that were burned or looted. While the evidence of real and often acute tensions between these groups is irrefutable, in many instances the media has tended to distort the nature, scale, and significance of the clashes by over-dramatizing Black-Korean conflict (Lee 2002), obfuscating Korean-Latino conflict (Bobo et al., 1994; Oliver et al., 1993), and ignoring and therefore silencing Korean voices (Abelmann and Lie, 1995). Thankfully, careful, scholarly analyses of these incidents and the tensions that precipitate them are starting to

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emerge. *Civility in the City*, *Bitter Fruit*, and *On My Own* are some of the best recent examples of this new literature and are each valuable attempts to increase understanding about the nature of merchant-customer relations in predominantly Black urban neighborhoods.

In-Jin Yoon's book, *On My Own*, places Korean immigration to the United States in its historical context, paying close attention to the "pull" and "push" factors motivating immigration and explaining how Korean immigrants came to be concentrated among small business owners, especially in low-income Black neighborhoods. This is all important background to the motivating question of the book: explaining Korean-Black conflict. Such conflict, Yoon argues, is the result of a complex web of factors: America's racial and ethnic stratification system; personal and psychological factors such as prejudice, language barriers, and cultural misunderstanding; economic factors including deteriorating economic conditions in the inner city and intra-ethnic competition, and, finally; what Yoon calls political factors—that is, Black Nationalism and the use of boycotts as a mobilizing and grievance-airing tool.

The premise of Claire Jean Kim's book, *Bitter Fruit*, on the other hand, is that racial power—defined early on as "the racial status quo's systemic tendency toward self-reproduction" (Kim, p. 2)—is *the key* to understanding Black-Korean conflict: its source, form, and resolution. Through a critical analysis of the Red Apple Boycott in Brooklyn in 1990, Kim argues that racial power helps to replicate the racial order that sets Korean merchants against Black customers (and vice versa); it prescribes the form of conflict by defining the ideological parameters and the setting within which conflict occurs, and circumscribes Black resistance through the White power structure's deployment of a hegemonic colorblind discourse (Kim, p. 10).

Unlike Kim and Yoon, Jennifer Lee's book, *Civility in the City*, is *prima facie* less interested in understanding why conflict occurs, than in understanding the everyday interactions between merchant and customer in Black urban neighborhoods. She critiques previous scholarship and news accounts for their overemphasis on conflict. She makes the important, if belabored, point that every day relations between Black, Jewish, and Korean merchants and Black customers are ordinary, even civil, in large part because merchants make sustained efforts to keep them that way.

Despite Lee's exhortation to focus on the quotidian, Lee still spends much of the book trying to understand why normally civil interactions between merchants and customers sometimes escalate into full-fledged racialized conflicts. Lee is clearly at her best, however, when she stays away from trying to explain the sources of large scale-conflict. In her discussion of the everyday, she shows how important context-specific factors other than race and ethnicity can help shape customer relations, including the age of the typical customer, the gender of the merchant, the presence of Black employees to act as cultural brokers, the length of time the merchant has been operating as well as the typical length of interactions between merchants and customers. She makes the valuable point that Black customers feel poorly treated by most merchants at least some of the time, regardless of the merchants' race or ethnicity. And she demonstrates that despite their clear theoretical preference for Black-owned businesses, many Black customers tend to shop in Korean- or Jewish-owned stores even when they have the option of frequenting a Black-owned store. Revealing such complexities in the politics of race and space in the inner city certainly adds to the reader's overall understanding of such an important and politically fraught topic.

Lee is best able to explain these day-to-day interactions because her methods serve that function well. She interviewed seventy-five Black, Jewish, and Korean merchants and seventy-five Black customers in New York City and Philadelphia in

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the mid 1990s, with no special concern for tapping the voices of those involved in larger scale conflicts such as boycotts, riots, or the fire bombing of Freddy's (a Jewish-owned clothing store in Harlem), all of which she cites as inspiration for the book. Yoon, by contrast, interviewed nearly 400 Korean merchants in Chicago and Los Angeles during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This results in a rich and vivid portrait of Korean entrepreneurs but, unfortunately, leaves the attitudes of Black customers or urban residents to secondary data and speculation. Of all the authors, Kim is best able to help the reader understand the source of acute or prolonged conflict, both because it is her central concern and because of the methodology she employs. Kim interviews *participants* on both sides of the Red Apple Boycott and attempts to speculate how representative those views are through the use of citywide surveys as well as newspaper articles and other secondary sources.

These differing methodologies often lead the authors to divergent conclusions about the nature and sources of inter-racial conflict. The relative importance of negative merchant-customer interactions is a case in point. Kim found that the alleged poor treatment of Ghiselaine Felissaint by Korean merchant, Bong Ok Jang, was an important trigger for the Red Apple Boycott because it was representative of a *set of interactions* as well as a symptom of the overall racial order. Yoon acknowledges that negative merchant customer interactions elevate already extant tensions—tensions that result from the concentration of upwardly mobile Korean immigrants in minority neighborhoods whose conditions have gradually deteriorated throughout the 1980s and 1990s. But Black-Korean conflict, that is to say organized conflict—boycotts, protests—is not, in Yoon's mind, the result of "economic competition or a cultural clash," rather it is a "political phenomenon," that arises when Black Nationalists "intervene and mobilize individual blacks' bad feelings toward individual Korean store owners into a broader notion that Koreans are exploiting blacks" (Yoon, p. 235). Lee, on the other hand, argues that while Korean merchants do occasionally mistreat Black customers, "the fact that the majority of merchant-customer relations are civil demonstrates that merchant-customer relations are *not* the source of hostility that leads to inter-group conflict" (Lee, pp. 192–193). Lee comes to this conclusion not only because most interactions are civil (a point Yoon's data also supports, pp. 215–216), but also because Black customers are also treated poorly by Black merchants and are treated even worse by White merchants in predominantly White areas. What is more, some boycotts are aimed at businesses that have been in the community for a long time (and hence must not treat customers poorly?) or were not party to the precipitating incident.

While merchant-customer relations may not be the *only* cause of large-scale conflict (none of the authors make this claim), Lee's insistence on downplaying the relevance of these negative interactions is highly problematic. First, it overemphasizes the frequency and ignores the substance of the negative interactions between Korean merchants and Black customers. Because Korean merchants have such negative stereotypes of Blacks (see also Bobo et al., 1994; Bobo and Johnson, 2000), the form or subtext of a dispute over a return or exchange may be quite different when the merchant is Korean or Jewish than when the merchant is Black. Moreover, according to Lee's data, Black customers clearly felt more comfortable in Black businesses—even if they were not always treated better—and felt more "scrutinized and monitored" in Jewish and Korean stores. In addition, Lee found that Black customers were twice as likely to report poor treatment from Korean merchants than from Jewish or Black merchants. While Lee says that this disparity can be "explained by other variables," the reader is never told what those other variables are (Lee, p. 75). Finally, there is no reason to believe that just because most merchant-

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customer relations are conflict free that negative interactions cannot be an important source of conflict. For example, if negative merchant-customer interactions are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for conflict to ensue, even a relatively small number of negative interactions may be enough to trigger inter-racial conflict, especially if those interactions are representative of the larger racial power structure.

The most important source of divergence between these three authors centers around the ultimate source of Black-Korean conflict. While on the face of it all agree that structural conditions should be central to any analysis, Lee's version suggests that large scaled racialized conflicts arise because Jews and Koreans are doing well and experience a considerable amount of mobility while Blacks do not: Lee's version can be reduced to a simple story of envy. Lee's characterization that Black anger at Korean merchants is misdirected (Blacks should really be boycotting White stores [Lee, Chapter 8]) frames moments of conflict as irrational outbursts or evidence that Blacks are lashing out at the closest available target. Lee's policy prescriptions illustrate this line of reasoning most clearly. She believes that if only Black customers knew that Korean merchants do not get special favors from the government and that they are not in direct competition with Black entrepreneurs, all would nearly be well. (And why does Lee not suggest challenging the myths that Korean and Jewish merchants have about African Americans?)

Ultimately Lee's emphasis on the civility of everyday interactions blinds her from a full appreciation of the most important source of conflict. She argues that by ignoring civility, previous researchers have "over-predicted" conflict (Lee, p. 182). But it is hard to believe that previous researchers actually made predictions about the number of boycotts or protests that might occur. The evidence on this is not in the book for the reader to judge, but it strikes me that Lee has not carefully thought about how to conceptualize or theorize about the sources of relatively rare events. The fact that boycotts, violence, and riots are "anomalous events" while poverty, inequality, and unemployment are "ever present" (Lee, p. 181) does not present as much of a problem as Lee suggests. Poverty, inequality, and unemployment (as well as many other factors, including negative merchant-customer relations and racial power) may simply be necessary, but not sufficient conditions for such conflict to occur. Knowing the certain combination of necessary but not sufficient conditions for inter-racial conflict may not allow a researcher to predict overall levels of violence, but it still suggests likely points of intervention.

Thankfully, *Bitter Fruit* and *On My Own* give Korean merchants *agency*, an ingredient that is too often lacking in such accounts, including Lee's. Yoon suggests and Kim shows that Blacks are not just envious of Korean success, but see Korean merchants as the "frontline representatives for the White power structure" (Kim, pp. 110–126). Kim illustrates that the Red Apple Boycott is not a pure economic transaction gone awry or evidence of racial scapegoating, as Lee might no doubt suggest, but part of a larger Black Nationalist social movement resisting White domination. Kim rightly points out that Korean merchants actively negotiate the opportunities and constraints presented in the American racial order. "Black collective actors are not mindlessly lashing out at the nearest target but purposefully reacting to the existing parameter of oppression" (Kim, p. 12). By their full embrace of the American dream and adoption of both the underclass and the model minority myths, Korean merchants have clearly chosen sides. Because Korean entrepreneurs buy into and benefit from the racial order, Kim argues, they are implicated in it (Kim, p. 51). To be sure, Yoon is far less emphatic than Kim about the role Korean merchants play in remaking the racial order. Yoon acknowledges that Korean merchants' anti-Black prejudice is an important factor, if one of many, at the root of the conflict, but he also

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stresses the role that language barriers and cultural misunderstandings play in the tension that can arise in day-to-day interactions—factors which are presumably a inevitable byproduct of many immigrant-native relations. Lee, on the other hand, clearly fails to recognize or acknowledge how Koreans help daily remake the racial order they live in. If Kim and Yoon are right, and I believe they are, then Lee's policy prescriptions to educate Blacks about why Korean merchants succeed is not only entirely misguided, it's absurd.

Despite the fact that Yoon and Kim both stress the role of negative merchant-customer interactions, they disagree profoundly on the significance and meaning of Black Nationalism in the genesis of intergroup conflict. In fact, unlike Kim who strives to fully understand and appreciate both sides of the dispute, Yoon is unabashedly unsympathetic to the Black Nationalist agenda. Yoon goes so far as to suggest that Black Nationalist organizations are in large part responsible for serious and prolonged conflict between the two groups (Yoon, pp. 206–207). Therefore, in his policy prescriptions Yoon argues that Korean merchants should participate in and support "responsible Black political organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and/or the Rainbow Coalition." In return, Koreans could call on these organizations in times of political crisis to "prevent political demagogues," *read Black Nationalists*, "from using Koreans as convenient scapegoats for their selfish political interests" (Yoon, pp. 227–228). Indeed, Yoon's account reduces Black Nationalists to nativist demagogues. Kim, on the other hand, takes a more nuanced approach, illustrating how many Red Apple Boycott participants continued to frequent Korean stores during the boycott. Indeed, despite frequent calls to create Black institutions for Black people, participants were generally hostile to only those Korean merchants who "declared allegiance to the White power structure, [and] denigrated Blacks . . ." (Kim, p. 127).

Yoon's account works best when he places Korean immigration in its proper socio-historical context. For example, he offers a fascinating account of how Korean immigrants became shop owners in predominantly Black neighborhoods by dominating the low-end wig industry during the late 1960s and early 1970s (Yoon, pp. 111–114). He also argues that Korean immigrants originally *preferred* to locate their businesses in Black neighborhoods, for in White neighborhoods Koreans were met with severe discrimination and resistance. And that at the time Korean merchants perceived Blacks as "easy to please whereas Whites were seen as condescending" (Yoon, p. 121).

Yoon's focus on the Korean immigrant community also allows him to break myths about the internal homogeneity and social harmony of this community. One only wishes that he had devoted the same attention to the Black community. Because of this partiality, it comes as little surprise that Yoon's portrayal of specific instances of Korean-Black conflict can at times appear to be overly biased in favor of Korean merchants (compare his and Kim's portrayal of the Red Apple Boycott, for example). Moreover, echoing many pundits (Miles 1992; Skerry 1995), Yoon makes use of secondary data to suggest that Blacks are particularly, and through the 1980s increasingly nativist. Such exaggerated accounts, however, have been recently called into question. For example, some polls indicate that Blacks are actually less likely than Whites to view undocumented Mexicans as economic threats (Oliver and Johnson, 1984). Furthermore, Blacks are slightly less likely than Whites or even Hispanics to advocate lowering current levels of immigration (Citrin et al., 1997).

Though Yoon pays insufficient attention to Black customers, he is the only author among the three to consider Korean-Latino relations. Yoon wonders why Korean-Latino interactions do not appear to be nearly as heated or fraught as

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Black-Korean relations, even though Latinos make up a significant proportion of the customer base in both his Chicago and Los Angeles studies. To explain this paradox, he suggests that group conflict is more acute between groups whose position in the racial order is contested.[1] From the merchant perspective, Blacks appear to feel superior to Koreans because of their English and cultural fluency, while Koreans feel superior to Blacks because of their greater material success. In contrast, Latinos are perceived to pose less of a challenge. While they share the same social class as Blacks, they, like Koreans, are often immigrants.

> The nativity difference between Koreans and Blacks seems to conflict—at least in the eyes of Koreans—with the roles expected of employers and employees. With Latino employees, Korean employers can maintain a seemingly proper hierarchy of race, nativity and class (Yoon, p. 212).

From the merchants' view, Latinos more readily accept their subordinate status; as a result, Latinos are perceived to be less demanding or pushy, and more hardworking, naïve, docile, and easily exploitable than Blacks. Yoon suggests alternative or supplementary hypotheses to account for the differences, namely the media's pervasive misrepresentation of Blacks, as well as Korean merchants' perception that Blacks do not fully embrace the American Dream of upward mobility through hard work and rugged individualism. Here, like elsewhere, data that shed light on Latino and Black employees' and customers' perspectives, would help to give a fuller picture of the dynamics involved. Such data are all the more important given what Lawrence Bobo and his colleagues call the "Hidden Conflict," or the mounting friction between Latinos and Koreans (Bobo et al., 1994). Their focus groups with different ethnoracial groups in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Rebellion in 1992 revealed that Latinos and Blacks expressed *similar* grievances about Korean merchants. And interestingly, though not widely acknowledged, a larger number of Latinos were arrested and killed during the Los Angeles Rebellion than Blacks. In fact, Latinos in South Central "did not hesitate to participate in looting, particularly against Korean merchants" (Oliver et al., 1993, p. 130).

Of course, there are limitations to *Bitter Fruit* as well. Kim's discussion about racial ordering is not as nuanced as it should be. She argues that the racial order was basically set at the end of the nineteenth century when works by Jacobson (1998) and others show that there was considerable fluidity in the concept of Whiteness up through the beginning of twentieth century. There was also considerable variation in the treatment of different Asian groups (most notably the Japanese and Chinese) over the last two hundred years. Furthermore, Kim's discussion about the relative valorization of Asians could use a bit more elaboration. Asians are not only stereotyped as having a superior work ethic to Blacks, but also to Whites as well. There are, of course, other negative stereotypes about Asians (such as poor leadership ability) that place Asians, overall, somewhere between Whites and Blacks, but along any one dimension they may fit above or below Whites or even, sometimes, Blacks. Finally, Kim makes a good point about the permanent foreign-ness of Asians (see also Tuan 1998), but fails to discuss how foreign-ness can be an asset, not just a liability, as in Mary Waters' (1999) or Roger Waldinger's (1996) work on employers' preferences for hiring immigrants over native Blacks. It is also unclear how Kim reconciles the permanent unassimability of Asians (Kim, p. 16) with the high rates of intermarriage between Whites and Asians (for a nuanced discussion of this issue, see Tuan 1998, pp. 34–37). But these are all relatively minor points in what is overall a lucid and thought-provoking book.

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Kim's work is especially valuable because of its refusal to romanticize either side in the conflict, taking great pains to explain the myriad points of view both within and across opposing camps. She exposes prejudices and mistakes on either side of the conflict while placing those views and decisions within their proper context. Just as importantly, she exposes how the dominant White discourse silences and distorts Black resistance—belying its claims of neutrality—to further its own aims. Thankfully, Kim does not resolve her story neatly with gratuitous policy prescriptions at the book's end. Instead, she asks the reader throughout to "confront the acute normative dilemmas raised when two racially subordinated groups clash head on in their respective struggles for empowerment" (Kim, p. 12). We may not know how to prevent conflicts in the future, but we are certainly far more aware of why they come about, why they play out the way they do, and why their ultimate resolution is all but preordained.

Taken together these three works expose the considerable theoretical challenges of studying inter-ethnic conflict among groups imbedded in a society stratified along multiple ethnoracial divisions. To do justice to Black-Korean conflict, these works tell us one needs to clearly understand the historical forces that brought these groups together, the conditions under which they meet, the multiple perspectives and understandings that members of each group hold, the position of each group in the larger racial order, the role that dominant groups play in mediating and framing conflict between groups, and the function that conflict between subordinated groups can serve in maintaining ethnoracial stratification. It is only to the extent that scholars of ethnoracial relations engage each of these weighty questions that our understanding of inter-ethnic conflict will be advanced. The books reviewed here also suggest that the literature would benefit greatly from studies that are explicitly comparative in design. For example, to better understand Black-Korean relations—indeed, to better understand urban ethnoracial relations in general—we need work that seriously engages Korean-Latino relations and systematically compares Korean-Latino and Korean-Black conflict. Finally, to date, the literature on Black-Korean conflict has been largely dominated by Korean-American scholars (Yoon 1997). Given the silencing of Korean-American voices by the media, the introduction of this perspective into the debate is as much appreciated, as it is long overdue. We are only left to wonder, however, whether new perspectives on these issues would emerge if Black American and other scholars took on the worthy challenge of explaining the causes and consequences of Black-Korean conflict.

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NOTES

1. For an excellent analysis of racial group competition and threat between Asians, Blacks, Latinos, and Whites, see Bobo and Hutchings (1996).

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