

# **The Contested Murder of** **Latasha Harlins**

Justice, Gender, and the Origins of the LA Riots

**Brenda Stevenson**



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of the LA Riots*

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***Thank you God!***

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## Preface

On the unseasonably cool, damp Saturday of March 16, 1991, at approximately 9:35 a.m., 15-year-old Latasha Harlins walked into the Empire Liquor Market located at 9172 South Figueroa Street in Compton, California. Within the course of five short minutes, she lay dying in front of the store's counter, bleeding from a single, close-range gunshot wound to the back of her head. Two neighborhood children ran away from the store in horror. The shop owner's wife, Soon Ja Du, sat crouched on top of the counter, trying to see where Harlins had fallen. The middle-aged woman's face already was beginning to swell and discolor from the brief, but violent, struggle between the two that began when the storekeeper accused her young customer of trying to steal a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice. Two useless dollars meant to pay for the juice sat crumpled in the still girl's left hand.<sup>1</sup>

Latasha Harlins was shot and killed two weeks after the LAPD pulled Rodney King out of his car and patrolmen mercilessly whipped him.<sup>2</sup> The videotape of King's senseless beating riveted the world, casting Los Angeles in a stark, but typical, black and white racial, male construct. As painful as it was to watch, the racial dynamic behind the King beating, no matter

how disturbing, has been such a fixture in American history that these types of events are almost predictable.

The black community was still digesting this latest version of the white lynch mob turned against black masculinity when another videotape, that of Soon Ja Du shooting Latasha Harlins in the back of the head as she turned to leave Du's store, hit the airwaves. The shooting was devastating; but it also was profoundly different from the usual violent scenarios across racial lines that typically garner public outrage. The people involved, Soon Ja Du and Latasha Harlins, were female, not male. Du was Korean, not white. She was a mother, wife, and shopkeeper, not a policeman, deputy sheriff, security guard, or domestic terrorist with a white sheet over his head. Latasha was killed midmorning with witnesses present, not in some isolated field or highway in the dark of the night. Her murder was not another challenge of black masculinity, that constant theme in the history of race in America. It underscored, instead, the vulnerability of the most defenseless in the nation's socially constructed hierarchy—women and children of the racially, culturally, economically, and politically marginalized.

Eight months after Latasha's death, Soon Ja Du, who had been convicted of voluntary manslaughter, sat quietly in a small, packed courtroom in downtown Los Angeles with her husband at her side. The change of venue for the case from Compton to downtown LA purportedly gave the advantage of a secure courtroom: bulletproof glass shielded the defendant, judge, and lawyers—physically and perhaps emotionally—from anguished and angry spectators alike, all who had come demanding justice.<sup>3</sup> That last eight months had written a telling tale of interracial misunderstanding in South Central Los Angeles, characterized by boycotts, heated public debates, private bitterness, Molotov cocktails, and convenience store murders. Despite the intervention of major civic, religious, and economic leaders from the black and Korean communities, it was clear that the situation between the two groups had continued to deteriorate. Everyone knew that the most immediate answer to this question of justice lay in the hands of the sentencing judge. Many believed that if Judge Joyce Karlin could render a sentence that left most feeling that justice had been served then, perhaps, the hostility and violence that had escalated with little abatement since Latasha's death would begin to dissipate.

Judge Karlin heard defense and prosecution statements as she waited to deliver the first sentence that she would render in a jury trial since she had taken the bench only a few months earlier.<sup>4</sup> Roxanne Carvajal, assistant district attorney, argued passionately for the convicted felon to receive the maximum prison sentence allowed—16 years. “Any other sentence, your honor, would create a perception in the mind of the community that young black children do not receive the full protection of the law.”<sup>5</sup> Patricia Dwyer, the appointed representative of Probation Services, who interviewed Soon Ja Du before making a recommendation to the court, agreed that Du should receive the maximum sentence. Charles Lloyd, Du’s veteran black attorney with a long and deep connection to LA Mayor Tom Bradley, argued, cajoled, reasoned, and preached, however, for his client to receive only probation. “It’s a difficult call, but it would not be difficult if litigants were all black . . . all Korean or [all white],”<sup>6</sup> he assured the judge. The courtroom was packed and tense as Judge Karlin began to read her sentencing statement.

It was soon apparent to those in court that day that Judge Joyce Karlin was not swayed by the prosecution’s arguments that Soon Ja Du should receive the maximum sentence for killing Latasha Harlins. Karlin was not persuaded that Du should receive any jail time. Instead, the judge rendered a sentence that was one of the most lenient imposed on a felon convicted of voluntary manslaughter with the use of a gun in California that year: no jail time beyond what Du had served prior to her release on bail, payment of Latasha’s funeral expenses, 300 hours of community service, and five years probation. What kind of “justice” was this? many, and not just in the black community, asked.

*Contested Murder* recaptures the details of Soon Ja Du’s shooting of Latasha Harlins, her trial, Judge Karlin’s sentencing logic, and the responses of various factions of the public to it. The *People v. Du* has both historic and contemporary significance. It was, after all, one of two legal cases whose outcomes led to the Los Angeles riots/uprising of 1992, the most deadly and costly race riot in United States history.

In late April 1992, the nation and the world turned its attention to a city on the brink of chaos. For the next five days, they watched in horror as thousands of Angelenos took to the streets to burn and loot, sometimes to assault and kill. “No justice, no peace!” was the anthem of the day as local blacks, Latinos/as, and even a sprinkling of Asian

Americans and whites joined in the five-day “rebellion” that purportedly erupted in response to the injustice of the Simi Valley verdict in the Rodney King police brutality trial. But for many who actively participated in the protest, as well as in the looting and destruction, and for the thousands who stayed at home but understood all too well why others had gone, Rodney King was not the symbol of injustice that catalyzed the protest: Latasha Harlins was.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the uprising’s slogan, “No justice, no peace,” was chanted by protestors at the Empire Liquor Market immediately after Latasha was killed, a full year before it became the catchphrase of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. And while the Rodney King case has been immortalized in popular culture through song and rap, so too has the death of Latasha Harlins. Ice Cube’s controversial “Black Korea” was a direct retort. Tupac, one of the most important rappers of his generation, dedicated two songs to the slain teen: “Hellrazor,” and a moving ballad supporting poor black women and their families, “Keep Ya Head Up.” His words in “Hellrazor” captured the feelings of many who wondered at the tragic death of “little” Latasha:

Dear Lord if ya hear me, tell me why  
Little girl like LaTasha, had to die.<sup>8</sup>

Tupac also mentions Latasha in three other songs, including “That the Way It Is” in which he links Rodney King and Latasha Harlins:

Tell me what’s a black life worth  
A bottle of juice is no excuse, the truth hurts . . .  
Ask Rodney, Latasha, and many more.<sup>9</sup>

Consider the consequences of the riots: 54 deaths, 2,300-plus injuries, 3,600 fires, 1,100 buildings destroyed, 4,500 businesses looted, more than 12,000 persons arrested, and one billion dollars in total damage. More than 2,300 Korean-owned shops were looted, damaged, or destroyed because of this case.<sup>10</sup> It was an event so devastating that Korean Americans have commemorated it with the simple phrase “Sai-I-Gu”—April 29.

The cases involving Rodney King and Latasha Harlins, and their attendant judicial processes, have tremendously different characteristics. King, a convicted felon, was driving drunk and eluding the police

in a full-on chase. Harlins was shopping in a neighborhood store. The LAPD badly beat King, but he recovered from most of his injuries. Du shot Latasha in the back of the head, killing her. The Simi Valley jury in the King case found the defendants not guilty. The downtown Los Angeles jury in the Du case found her guilty of voluntary manslaughter with special circumstances. Still the result of each trial was the same—none of the defendants were sentenced to jail time—“No justice, no peace.”

An analysis of the *People v. Du* also has great significance because it sheds a unique light on the complicated places of women, historically and currently, in American society. It serves remarkably well as a case study that exposes the complexity of the female in the United States as part of distinct groups, but also in relationship to one another.<sup>11</sup> The gendered, racialized, classist, cultural, and generational aspects of this case are quite unique—unique enough to lend themselves to an examination of the sometimes overlapping, sometimes complementary, sometimes oppositional realities of late twentieth-century female life in urban America. All the case’s leading actors, for example—the victim, the defendant, and the judge—were female. They were all from a different race or ethnicity: Du is Korean; Harlins was African American; and Karlin is Jewish. Each represented somewhat different generation, and all three were from a different socioeconomic class—Du, a shopkeeper, was 49 when she was arrested; Latasha was a 15-year-old girl from the working class; and Karlin was a wealthy, 40-year-old judge whose father was a leading Hollywood insider.

What effects, indeed, did race/ethnicity, culture, class, age, gender, or a combination of some or all these variables have on any, or all, aspects of the case of the *People v. Du* and the questions of justice that emerged from it? Would Latasha Harlins have cursed at or struck a white or black shopkeeper? Would she have behaved this way if Mr. Du had been behind the counter that Saturday morning instead of his wife? Would Soon Ja Du have assumed that Latasha was stealing if the teen were white or Asian, or male, or adult? Would she have pulled a gun on an Asian or white adolescent, whether male or female? Or a black male? Would Latasha have turned and walked away if a white or black woman, or man, had pointed a gun at her? Would the Los Angeles District Attorney’s Office have charged Soon Ja Du with first-degree murder with special circumstances—a potential death penalty felony—if she had not

been an Asian woman? And her victim not a black girl? If Soon Ja had been male? If the beating of Rodney King had not exposed the LAPD's racist legacy to the world just two weeks before?

What about Judge Joyce Karlin, perhaps the most controversial of the three females. Would she have given Du a harsher punishment had the shopkeeper been of a different race? Or had she been male? Or younger? Or had a different occupation? If Latasha had not been black? If Karlin had not been Jewish? Were her actions, as judge, mere mimicry of what white male judges do when women of color come to their courtrooms, or did her gender or ethnicity have some influence on her decisions? Would she have been assigned this controversial case had she not been young, female, and inexperienced?

"Cultural" difference, a concept at the various intersections of race, class, gender, generation, and even geography, is also important to consider.<sup>12</sup> Embedded as culture is within the layered constructs of other socially significant variables and characteristics investigated here, it is sometimes especially difficult to assign what impact it has and/or had on the ways in which women interact with each other formally or informally. It is clear, for example, that the US judiciary system has a cultural foundation rooted in Western ideals, philosophies, and conventions, including gender conventions. As such, one might imagine that a person's "place" and "treatment" in this system would depend, in part, on one's gendered and racial relationships to Western (European, US) patriarchal cultures. Were the actions of these three females, singularly, or in relationship to one another, affected by their cultural backgrounds?

Questioning justice, of course, is a right many in American society exercise. It is a well-used, popular, and popularized freedom that is based, not only on the First Amendment to the Constitution that guarantees everyone a right to express his or her opinions, but also on the principal of equal treatment under the law codified in the Fourteenth Amendment. Indeed, questioning justice has evolved into something of a fine art in the black community. Given the circumstances of this case in which a black child was harmed, it is not surprising that the African American community was the most vocal in their challenges to various decisions made in almost every phase of the case's development, presentation, and conclusion. Many believed that the judicial outcome of the criminal case against Soon Ja Du was predictable. That faction of the

African American community, having a general sense of a group history of legal and judicial injustices fueled by events during their lifetimes and those orally passed down through the generations, anticipated that there would be little justice had. Still, others in the community invested mightily in the legal avenues that they hoped would lead to an equitable ending. Were they naïve to do so?

A venerable coalition of politicians, activists, religious leaders, Harlins's family members, and grassroots organizers came together to advocate for justice for Latasha soon after her death. They remained active as the months passed between her shooting and Du's trial. They were still there on the day that Soon Ja Du left the courtroom, virtually a free woman, and they vowed to fight on for justice for Latasha. Traditional political black organizations, like the NAACP and the Urban League, lent assistance to the Harlins family and protested the sentencing. The family and their supporters formed their own activist organization—the Latasha Harlins Justice Committee (LHJC)—before the trial took place and made great strides in keeping the case in the public eye afterward. They helped persuade District Attorney Ira Reiner, for example, to appeal Karlin's sentencing of Du, held candlelight vigils, mounted protest rallies outside of Karlin's courtroom, petitioned the Justice Department to file a civil rights violation case against Soon Ja Du, and organized two petition campaigns to remove Karlin from the bench. But to what end?

Justice, it seems, was as slippery as wet stone when larger political or personal agendas were at stake. Grassroots political organizations like Danny Bakewell's Brotherhood Crusade (BC) and Mothers in Action (MIA), for example, quickly seized upon the tragedy and broadened its implications. They took a black nationalist, self-determination stance that included holding community business owners to a respectful protocol with their black customers on threat of losing their businesses. Black politicians like California Representative Patricia Moore, US Representative Maxine Waters, Compton Mayor Walter R. Tucker III, and Mark Ridley-Thomas (elected to the Los Angeles City Council shortly after the trial) protested the murder and the sentencing. Mayor Tom Bradley attempted to stay neutral, frustrating both the Harlins family and the Korean business lobby. Black church leadership acted not so much as individual entities, but as partners with other activist black groups. Some also became partners with Korean American churches to



help ameliorate fears of a black upheaval. Latasha's family continued to worry, with little wonder, that justice for Latasha would get lost in it all—that once the cameras stopped rolling, the elections were won or lost, and businesses had exchanged hands, that no one would be left to pursue the long fight of justice for their loved one.

The black community, however, was not the only voice that doubted justice would be served. The Korean community also questioned the fairness of many aspects of the case, the media coverage, and public perception of what had occurred. They questioned whether Soon Ja Du was arrested and charged with first-degree murder as a scapegoat for the LAPD beating of Rodney King. Didn't Soon Ja, they argued, have a right to protect herself and her store if she felt violently threatened? They wondered whether Du could receive a fair trial in Compton, a predominantly black community that had a history of poor relations between black consumers and Korean shopkeepers.<sup>13</sup> They also wanted to know if the political cache of black Americans in a city with a five-term black mayor would bend the blade of justice away from them.

Judge Joyce Karlin, who shared responsibility with the jury for delivering justice in *People v. Du*, seemed, to many observers, not only to question, but also to nullify the decision of the jury as well as the advice of the court-appointed probation officer. Why? The Jewish community, and other whites as well, remained relatively quiet about the case, but it assisted in her subsequent bid for reelection and supported her later career as a successful politician in Manhattan Beach. Did European American or Jewish communities have any stake in the verdict or sentencing? Ira Reiner, for example, the Jewish district attorney for Los Angeles at the time, fought desperately against Karlin's sentence of Du; he tried to have it overturned and threatened her career status as a judge. In the end, it was Reiner who lost his job. And what of the Bradley coalition that included a large contingent of Westside Jewish residents? Did Judge Karlin represent these interests in this case?

*Contested Murder* maintains that much about the outcome of this case can be understood when one examines closely the personal biographies and group histories of Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Joyce Karlin. Their individual life stories, and those of their ancestors, are windows into their personal socializations and perspectives that must have affected the ways in which they regarded and responded to one other.