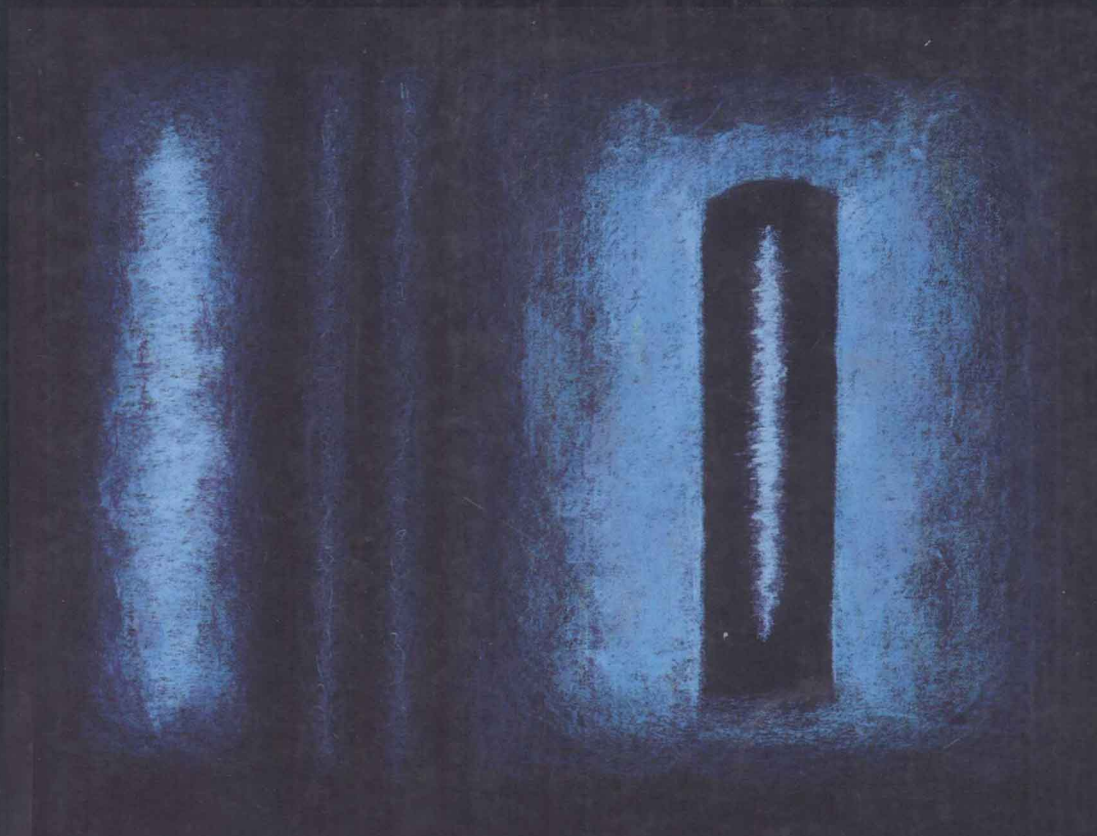


BLUE DREAMS

Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots



NANCY ABELMANN
AND JOHN LIE

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the Los Angeles Riots



Nancy Abelmann and John Lie

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· Blue Dreams

To our parents
Rena and Walter Abelman, Jane and Harry Lie

Preface

In this book we narrate the Korean American story in the context of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 and simultaneously place American ideologies on trial. We probe the transnational dimensions and diversity of Korean Americans in Los Angeles. In turn, Korean Americans' situations and voices challenge cherished assumptions about the United States and its minority populations. These concerns—the transnational character of the Korean diaspora, the heterogeneity of Korean Americans, and the critique of American ideologies—constitute the main themes of *Blue Dreams*.

The transnational perspective necessitates transcending received boundaries and frameworks. Indeed, any adequate account of Korean Americans needs to take seriously the interpenetration of South Korea and the United States. Although scholarship on Asian America must challenge the presumption of irrevocable links between Asian Americans and their ancestral homelands, it should not neglect either pre-immigration backgrounds or post-immigration networks. This is especially crucial for Korean Americans, many of whom are first-generation immigrants. They inescapably bring the experiences of their homeland and their ideas about what the United States is like into the vestibule of their new society. In many cases, they continue to maintain political, economic, cultural, and personal ties with South Korea. Limiting our analysis to an American frame of reference would seriously distort our understanding of this community and its diverse values, beliefs, and actions.

Consider, at an ostensibly trivial level, the question of what most Korean Americans call the L.A. riots: *Sa-i-gu p'oktong* (4-2-9 riot). In Korean political history, integer chains mark significant uprisings, demonstrations, and political turns; for example, the March First Demonstration (1919) against Japanese colonial rule is known as *Sam-il undong* (3-1 movement), while the Student Revolution of April 19, 1960, is called *Sa-il-gu* (4-1-9). To be sure, even naming is not simple or unified among South Koreans or Korean Americans. When we spoke to a friend in Seoul and told him that we were writing a book on the 4-2-9 riots, he retorted: "Oh, you mean the 4-2-9 *uprising*." The Korean dimension was equally striking in the mourning for Eddy Lee, the only Korean American to die in the riots. The frequently reproduced image of a young man holding Eddy Lee's tasseled black-and-white photo was reminiscent of South Korean demonstrators mourning political martyrs. The Korean dimension, moreover, is not restricted to Koreans or to Korean Americans. A European American National Guardsman posted in Koreatown, reflecting on his tour of duty in South Korea, remarked how the streets reminded him of Seoul. Framing the L.A. riots is a transpacific venture; we need to transcend national borders to understand Korean Americans.

In reconnecting Korean immigrants to the Korea they left behind, *Blue Dreams*—the color associated with dreams, hopes, and aspirations in Korea is blue, like the clear blue sky—highlights invisible, even repressed, threads: modern Korean history, class and status hierarchies in South Korea, and resources and hopes that immigrants have brought to the United States. The transnational Korean diaspora alerts us to the enormous diversity of the people essentialized into the easy receptacle of "Koreans" or "Korean Americans." Many reports on the riots, for example, identified Korean Americans as prosperous ghetto shopkeepers. Yet not all Korean Americans are entrepreneurs, nor are they all successful. Further, the stereotyped image of the Korean American entrepreneur, which validates the ideal of the American dream, breaks down against the recalcitrant reality of Korean immigrant lives in the United States. Some Korean dreams have turned into American nightmares, oneiric blue into ominous blues.

The diversity and division among Korean Americans, even within Los Angeles's Koreatown, elude facile generalizations. The timing of immigration, for example, is a widely accepted marker of differentiation among Korean Americans. More striking, as we shall see, are class

divisions. Effaced in the presumption of a strong national and cultural identity and the post-riot call for ethnic and community solidarity, class differences—income, educational, or status inequality—remain a conspicuous feature among Korean Americans in Los Angeles. While some bask in their wealth, others eke out a living; dreams are both realized and deferred in the United States.

Immigrant dreams and nightmares place dominant American ideologies on trial. Korean American experiences highlight persistent class divisions and structural obstacles to minority advancement. Nowhere is the distance between ideal and reality greater than in the dominant media framing of the “black-Korean conflict.” The popular account of the interethnic conflict reifies essentialized views of the two ethnic groups and fails to make sense of the concrete structures of opportunity they face. Facile ethnic and cultural generalizations are drawn, and class divisions within each group are passed over in silence. Although we do not deny that tensions exist between African Americans and Korean Americans, we criticize the dominant “black-Korean conflict” frame by considering its place in the American ideological crucible. In so doing, we challenge comfortable views of American society and its minority populations.

In elaborating these themes—the transnational dimension of the Korean American story, the diversity of Korean Americans, and the challenge to the dominant American self-understanding—*Blue Dreams* scrutinizes the ideological assumptions underlying the popular portrayal of Korean Americans, the American dream, and the “black-Korean conflict.” To narrate the Korean American story inevitably forces us to deal with the causes and consequences of the L.A. riots, the history and structure of the Korean diaspora in the United States, the political economy of Los Angeles and Korean American entrepreneurship, and the “black-Korean conflict.” Yet we should state at the outset that readers seeking a comprehensive analysis of the L.A. riots or an in-depth ethnography of the “black-Korean conflict” will not find it here. Instead, we offer a broad sketch of the crossroads of Korean and American ideologies and realities as they manifested themselves among Korean Americans after the 1992 L.A. riots.

In challenging some of the dominant ideologies about the United States, *Blue Dreams* also criticizes most media reports and analyses. The mass media profoundly shapes popular perceptions and beliefs about

pressing social issues—indeed, even in deciding which issues are important (Herman and Chomsky 1988, chap. 1). We found most media accounts of the 1992 L.A. riots and of Korean Americans, in particular, problematic. If we had not, we would not have written this book.

Yet media accounts neither inevitably reproduce dominant ideologies and distort social reality nor always convince the public. Many perspectives and voices are aired in mainstream media reports. There are truths and significant data even in biased reports. And people often question media-propagated facts and interpretations. Nor is the mass media monolithic or the public passive. Further, social scientists do not have a privileged access to social reality; journalists often do a better job of describing and explaining it. In the age of “sound bites,” we suffer not so much from the absence of diverse perspectives but from the dearth of sustained syntheses and interpretations. In the absence of alternative frameworks, a dominant frame emerges to “make sense” of various voices, while muffling other voices and interpretations. Our goal here is to provide a sustained alternative interpretive framework.

The voices of Korean Americans in Los Angeles provide a crucial source for this book. We solicited focused responses from about fifty Korean Americans representing a variety of social positions. We interviewed not only riot victims but also Korean Americans of various age groups, occupations, immigration history, and regional, educational, and economic backgrounds. We especially sought people who are routinely neglected in media and academic accounts of Korean Americans in Los Angeles. These include, for example, an extremely wealthy businessman with domiciles in three countries; an unemployed, non-college-educated immigrant from the 1960s; and a young vigilante with a millenarian vision.

Our interviews were framed by their time and place—in Los Angeles, within one year of the riots. We aimed for loosely structured exchanges. We did not have a battery of questions; we made no attempts to standardize our queries’ form or style. Conversations occurred over business counters, on building stoops, in living rooms, and so on. Most interviews were conducted in Korean, with English phrases and acronyms; some were conducted in English, scattered with Korean idioms. Our respondents had questions for us, as well. Lie was usually

asked to situate himself: when did you come to the United States? Lie answered that he had been born in Seoul and grew up in Tokyo and Honolulu. Abelmann was often asked to explain why she could speak Korean, and where she had lived in South Korea. Abelmann responded that she had been born and raised in Massachusetts, but did her dissertation research on a South Korean farmers' movement in North Chölla Province.

We have used pseudonyms except for people speaking or writing in the public domain, such as politicians, organizers, and academics, or for those who are quoted in written sources.

Some explanations of the linguistic conventions we follow are in order. We generally characterize "blacks" as African Americans, "whites" as European Americans, "Hispanics" as Latinos, and "Koreans" as Korean Americans. To be sure, it seems absurd to use an abstract and incoherent category like "Latinos." A Latino may refer to a person of either gender and to people of various "races" as conventionally understood, national origins, immigrant status, class background, and so on (Muñoz 1987, pp. 36–37; Portes and Rumbaut 1990, pp. 137–139; Shorris 1992, pp. xv–xvii). While some Haitian Americans may be perceived as "white," others are considered "black." Because Haitians usually speak French or patois, they are often excluded by other Spanish-speaking "Latinos." The category of "Latino" may even include people, such as descendants of the Maya, who would actively resist such a categorization. The problem becomes more intractable when we consider the estimated one million children of "mixed-race" marriages (Rosin 1994, p. 12; see also Spickard 1989). These complications underscore that the categories we use are mandated by the necessity of convenience and the usefulness of convention; the categories should not be seen as natural. We consider racial and ethnic categories to be constructed; they are historical products that are negotiated and struggled over (see, for example, F. James Davis's 1991 analysis of "Who is black?" in the United States; see also Waters 1990; S. M. Lee 1993).

We attempt to use the United States to refer to the country in which Los Angeles is located. Many Koreans and Korean Americans, however, refer to the United States as "America," especially when its symbolic meaning is stressed. Lack of another adjective forces us from time to time to rely on "American" to characterize the United States. Furthermore, many of our interviewees as well as written sources refer to

South Korea simply as Korea in spite of the continuing existence of two Koreas.

We refer to all U.S. residents of Korean descent as Korean Americans, regardless of their citizenship status. We realize, however, that many people we identify as Korean Americans refer to themselves as "Koreans." David Rieff, in writing about Los Angeles, notes: "Koreans, with their fierce and settled sense of national identity, would usually insist, when asked, that they were Koreans, plain and simple" (1991, p. 238; see also Cha 1977, p. 198.) Contrary to the received Korean practice in which last names are given first, we follow standard American practice because most Koreans who appear in this book are in fact Korean Americans, who themselves conform to the dominant U.S. convention. We have made exceptions for those who have no discernible American connections, however; their names are given with surnames first. In such cases, we have italicized the last name (for example, *Kim Chi Ha*). In transliterating Korean words and names into English, we have followed the McCune-Reischauer system, except for well-known names (*Kim Il Sung*, rather than *Kim Il Söng*) and for the pseudonyms we used (*Soh* rather than *Sö*). All translations from Korean, from both written and oral sources, are ours, unless otherwise indicated.

Finally, although many prefer the term "rebellion," "insurrection," or "civil uprising" to denote the political and conscious character of rioters and looters (see, for example, Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993; Thompson 1993, p. 49), we refer to the upheaval in Los Angeles as it is most widely known: the L.A. riots. We do not attach moral connotations to words such as "riots" or "looters," but rather use them descriptively. Further, we do not assume that "riot" refers to apolitical or senseless action; to call a civil disturbance a riot does not deny its political character (compare Klein 1992, pp. 115–116, 120; Noel 1992, p. 41; Carson 1993, p. 35; Lieberman and O'Reilly 1993, p. A1). The historian E. P. Thompson writes: "It is only the shortsighted historian who finds the crowd to be blind" (1978, p. 398; see also McPhail 1991, p. 225).

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We have drawn on an impressive group of scholars writing on Korean Americans. That we disagree with some of their analyses and conclusions should not contravene our enormous respect for their scholarship. Certainly, a 1978 lament—"Among major Asian-American groups, probably less is known about Korean Americans than about any other"—is no longer true (B. L. Kim 1978, p. 177). In particular, we would like to thank Won Moo Hurh, Kwang Chung Kim, In-Jin Yoon, and Eui-Young Yu for sharing their thoughts and writings with us.

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At Harvard University Press, Michael Aronson was very supportive throughout. Elizabeth Gretz was a superb and scrupulous editor. We are also grateful for Norah Vincent's kind attention to our manuscript. Bruce Cumings and an anonymous referee provided us with enormously helpful suggestions.

The epigraph is taken from John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), copyright © 1984 by John Berger.

Finally, we would like to thank our students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Oregon, and Yonsei University. Our reckoning of the L.A. riots was mediated through our teaching. In the spring of 1992, we were both teaching: Abelman on the "Korean Diaspora" in Urbana; Lie on "Asian Americans" and "Theories of Ethnicity" in Eugene. Although our students were far away from Southern California, the riots had a tremendous impact not only on Korean American students but on other class members as well. Classroom discussions raised questions we could not answer; students' anguish and anger, sorrow and soul-searching, demanded sustained responses. Intellectual bafflement and emotional urgency initially took us to Los Angeles after the term was over, and we returned again and again to listen to the Korean American voices we heard there. They constitute the heart of this book. As we wrote, our classroom concerns were never far away; we hope that we have answered at least some of the questions we could not answer in the spring of 1992.

Every migrant knows in his heart of hearts that it is impossible to return. Even if he is physically able to return, he does not truly return, because he himself has been so deeply changed by his emigration. It is equally impossible to return to that historical state in which every village was the center of the world. The one hope of re-creating a center now is to make it the entire earth. Only worldwide solidarity can transcend modern homelessness. Fraternity is too easy a term; forgetting Cain and Abel, it somehow promises that all problems can be soluble. In reality many are insoluble—hence the never-ending need for solidarity.

—John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*

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1

The Los Angeles Riots, the Korean American Story

The focused destruction of Korean American businesses and the dramatic image of armed Korean Americans on Los Angeles rooftops during the L.A. riots piqued public attention. Koreans? Why are they in Los Angeles? Are they hated? Are they hateful? The mayhem of fire, looting, and vigilantism seemed to augur an apocalyptic vision of a race war, a real-life preview of Ridley Scott's film *Blade Runner*. Frank Chin, an Asian American writer, saw Korean Americans with Uzis and AK-47s guarding their own and compatriots' shops, and wondered: "The Alamo in Koreatown was a mini-mall. In the race war that's started, are we all going to choose up sides and appear at the appropriate mini-mall to man the barricades?" (1992, p. 41).

In the media barrage during and after the riots, Korean Americans came to occupy a particular place in the American ideological landscape. They were often invoked to support one point or another about the L.A. riots. Imagined variously as quintessential or exceptional immigrants, as culturally legible or inscrutable, as racist or oppressed, Korean Americans emerged at the crossroads of conflicting social reflections over the L.A. riots. Through the Korean American story, observers decried the "death of the immigrant dream," underscored intra-minority racism, and again and again offered formulaic cultural contrasts between Korean Americans and African Americans. *Blue Dreams* presents the Korean American story against the backdrop of the L.A. riots, media bafflement, and the contentious American debates over capitalism, race, and community.

Making Sense of the L.A. Riots

On March 3, 1991, Rodney King, a twenty-five-year-old African American living in Altadena, California, was speeding down a highway in San Fernando Valley, when he was stopped, shot by a stun gun, and repeatedly kicked and beaten by police officers.¹ What distinguished this episode of police brutality was that the "excessive force" used against King was videotaped by George Holliday, a nearby resident, and repeatedly shown on television news shows throughout the United States. Whether the grainy imagery confirmed suspicions of police brutality and racism or shattered myths of police civility and fairness, very few doubted that the worst offenders in the King beating would stand accused and be duly punished.² Yet, on April 29, 1992, twelve Simi Valley jurors—ten European Americans, one Latino, and one Asian American—acquitted all four officers standing trial: Stacey Koon, Laurence Powell, Timothy Wind, and Theodore Briseno.³

The dissonance between the manifest guilt and the innocent verdict stunned virtually the whole country. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported:

Mayor Bradley appeared at a press conference, saying he was stunned, shocked and outraged: "I was speechless when I heard that verdict. Today this jury told the world that what we saw with our own eyes is not a crime." Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, expressed fear for the nation. Even in South Africa, he said, white police officers are punished for beating blacks. Benjamin Hooks, the executive director of the NAACP, called the verdicts outrageous: "Given the evidence, it is difficult to see how the jurors will ever live with their consciences." (1992a, p. 45; see also 1992c, pt. 4)

In many parts of the United States, angry demonstrations, civil disobedience, rioting, and looting broke out. In San Francisco, a curfew was declared for the first time since the 1906 earthquake; in Las Vegas, uprisings occurred four weekends in a row; in Seattle, Atlanta, and other cities around the country, demonstrations and disturbances rocked urban centers.⁴ Nowhere was the violence more pronounced than in Los Angeles. After three days of what came to be known as the L.A. riots, there were an estimated "58 dead, 2,400 injured, 11,700 arrested, [and] \$717 million in damages."⁵ It was the worst urban up-