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To cite this article: Jean-Paul R. deGuzman (2012) The Twenty-Year Tale of Interpreting a Multiethnic Urban Uprising: Towards an Historiography of Sa-I-Gu, *Amerasia Journal*, 38:1, 175-192, DOI: [10.17953/amer.38.1.47t14789550v8w54](https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.47t14789550v8w54)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.38.1.47t14789550v8w54>



Published online: 08 Feb 2019.



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## The Twenty-Year Tale of Interpreting a Multiethnic Urban Uprising: Towards an Historiography of Sa-I-Gu

Jean-Paul R. deGuzman

This essay examines how cultural workers and scholars have archived and interpreted the causes, origins, and far-reaching implications of the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings.<sup>2</sup> Rather than an exhaustive literature review, I highlight selected primary and secondary texts to map the historiography of the uprisings onto the trajectories of both the history of Los Angeles and the development of Asian American Studies as an academic field since the 1990s. Writings on the uprisings evolved as immigration reshaped the contours of Los Angeles politics and as the cultural and transnational turns in the humanities charted new analytical frameworks in Asian American Studies.

### Documenting Stories from 1992

As the city emerged from the smoldering embers of the dark days of late April and early May 1992, Angelenos of all races set about making sense of the urban rebellion. In the midst of rebuilding the city, community-based cultural workers stood at the forefront of documenting the lived experiences of the residents of Koreatown, Pico Union, South Los Angeles, and other parts of the city.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the arts have long played a critical role in animating community-wide reflection and action in Los Angeles's subaltern communities.<sup>4</sup>

Falling within this genealogy, acclaimed playwright Anna De-veare Smith interviewed over one hundred individuals in the aftermath of the 1992 uprisings. Her subjects range in age, sex, race,

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and socioeconomic class; they included the famous, infamous, and otherwise obscure. The result of these interviews is her influential one-woman play, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, which premiered at the Los Angeles's Mark Taper Forum on May 23, 1993 and is regularly used as a pedagogical tool in high school and college classrooms.<sup>5</sup> Smith emphasizes that *Twilight* "is a form of documentary theater" and that "the audience should be made aware" that "this play is about a real event, using the words of real people."<sup>6</sup> In juxtaposing the testimonies of people with intense personal investments in the 1992 uprisings with visceral footage of the signal acts of violence of 1991-92 (the shooting of Latasha Harlins along with the beatings of Rodney King and Reginald Denny), Smith holds that "an actor is seen here as a culture worker meant to *help society* work on its problem with tribalism in a time that it prevails all over the world."<sup>7</sup> Rather than a venture in laying blame, the assemblage of voices leaves the audience to their own devices in assessing the uprisings.

Beyond performance, documentary film also served as an important channel through which community voices were documented and disseminated. In 1993, Christine Choy, Elaine Kim and Dai Sil Kim Gibson released *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives*.<sup>8</sup> Choy, an independent filmmaker whose credits include the Academy Award-nominated *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987), Kim, one of the most influential founders of Asian American feminist cultural criticism, and Gibson, an erstwhile religion professor turned filmmaker, brought attention to the voices of Korean American women as they grappled with their personal losses from 1992. Simultaneously rendered visible (through the trial of Soon Ja Du) and invisible (though the mainstream media's circulation of the hypermasculinist image of the gun-toting Korean storeowner), the need to detail the voices of Korean American women was timely and necessary. The brutal and controversial honesty of the women of *Sa-I-Gu* drives the central narrative of the film and has enshrined the documentary on Asian American Studies syllabi to this day. The three main protagonists share a story often etched into the annals of Asian American history: the contradictions of the American Dream and the realities of urban immigrant entrepreneurship under a late capitalist regime. *Sa-I-Gu* traces the financial losses of the families of the protagonists (a narrative that consequently garnered trenchant criticism), in addition to the individual and community trauma wrought by the killing of 18-year-old Edward Song Lee.<sup>9</sup>

These community-based archives of the 1992 uprisings did not necessarily seek the origins and causes of the city's civil unrest with the same precision as social science studies. However, through collecting individual voices, Smith, Choy, Kim, and Gibson were able to unearth on-the-ground reflections on the flames that enveloped Los Angeles's urban landscape.

#### Fragmentation and Unity: The Multiethnic Anthology

Reflecting many of the same concerns as the earlier cultural works, a series of anthologies emerged in the wake of the 1992 uprisings that sought to interweave the lived, quotidian experience of Angelenos with a burgeoning scholarly analysis. Continuing a community-based impulse to build bridges across populations as a means to salve the profound wounds of 1992, these texts foregrounded narrative diversity and analytical inclusivity.<sup>10</sup>

*Amerasia Journal* featured an early attempt at bringing together Asian, black, and Latino voices that would have been otherwise pitted against each other in the mainstream media. In a 1993 issue, which was updated a year later for a volume published by the University of Washington Press, *Amerasia Journal* editor Russell C. Leong and scholar-activist Edward T. Chang edited *Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, and Latino Perspectives*.<sup>11</sup> Presciently, the editors began laying the groundwork for this collection even before the uprisings, upon witnessing the “racial clock ticking” in the wake of the 1990 boycott against the Korean American-owned Red Apple Grocery in New York and rising urban inequality in South Central Los Angeles.<sup>12</sup> As the L.A. uprisings and aftermath wrote a wrenching new chapter in race relations through flames and protest, the journal issue rapidly evolved. The final product, an interdisciplinary collection of scholarly essays, creative works, and practitioner commentary, reframed the study of race relations in a multiethnic landscape.

In his introduction, Chang maintains “the 1992 unrest can be seen as a turning point in academic research on race, as the site has shifted from East to West.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the structure of *Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community* encapsulates this now taken-for-granted argument. Rejecting earlier sociological models that privileged immigrant European settlement, incorporation, and assimilation, or treated race along a powerful, yet limiting, black/white axis in metropolises such as Chicago or New York, Chang and Leong's contribution moves discourses

on urban race relations towards an explicitly comparative scope, attuned to the overlapping structures of migration, inequality, and development. As such, the anthology also includes an early analysis of Latino participation in the uprisings.<sup>14</sup> The academic portions of the anthology underscore how deindustrialization and Reagan/Bush-era federal policies stripped an already vulnerable urban core of valuable avenues of economic empowerment, thus sowing the seeds of rebellion. These essays highlight how other fluid issues such as communication patterns and mass culture foster misunderstandings and conflict between races. Meanwhile, essays by students and community members humanize the uprisings reflecting not only a desire to understand the diverse perspectives of the city, but also the enduring importance of social histories and the study of agency to the field of Asian American Studies at this time.<sup>15</sup>

Like *Los Angeles — Struggles toward Multiethnic Community*, philosopher Robert Gooding-Williams's 1993 *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* assembles an interdisciplinary and multiethnic series of authors and essays.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Chang and Leong's volume, Gooding-Williams's collection dedicates significantly more attention to the beating of motorist Rodney King and subsequent trial of Los Angeles Police Department officers Stacey C. Koon, Theodore J. Briseno, Lawrence Powell, and Timothy E. Wind, and the politics of policing black bodies. Because of this particular focus, legal scholarship maintains a prominent role in this collection, with Critical Race Theory (CRT) informing many of the analyses in the anthology.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the more pronounced focus on structures of law and legality, *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Rebellion* takes a more explicit approach to identifying and critiquing the devastating late capitalist economic structures and neo-conservative urban policies that wrought the uprisings. While social scientists Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson, and Walter C. Farrell, Jr. dissect the structural factors that facilitated urban unrest in their "political-economic analysis," this volume also includes an interview with the incisive cultural critic Mike Davis, who labels the uprisings "a postmodern bread riot," providing an early vocabulary to the field of scholarship that came to be known as the Los Angeles School of Urbanism.<sup>18</sup> While these individual analyses provided damning critiques of aggressive capitalism within a larger constellation of immigration and race, as time passed, social scientists increasingly produced monographs largely fo-

cused on the economic and social dynamics of Korean American immigrant entrepreneurs.<sup>19</sup>

### Conflicts, Causes, and Case Studies: Social Sciences and the City

By the middle of the 1990s, social scientists in Asian American Studies established an impressive array of case studies that situated Korean immigrants at the nexus of the politics of immigration, urban decline, and the relationship between the state and disenfranchised populations.<sup>20</sup> Countless journal articles, further anthologies, and a handful of monographs with tighter foci than the more conceptually inclusive anthologies emerged from this moment.

One of the most authoritative books from this stage in the historiography of the uprisings is *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (1995).<sup>21</sup> Co-written by anthropologist Nancy Abelmann and sociologist John Lie, *Blue Dreams* draws upon a trove of diverse interviews with Korean American Angelenos. Centering their narrative around Korean American perspectives provides a corrective to mainstream media accounts that muted the voices of Los Angeles's Korean community, constructing its members "as part exploiter and part victim," a dual image with staying power.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, this sample reveals the complexities and diversity within the Korean American community. Echoing the findings of previous studies and furnishing empirical rigor to earlier commentaries, Abelmann and Lie place socioeconomic class conflict and the larger processes of capitalism at the root of urban unrest, yet note that Korean Americans were situated in a variety of class positions. Significantly, they also excoriate the powerful hand of mainstream media in crafting a "black-Korean" conflict narrative that played upon older stereotypes of Asian American "success" in contradistinction to an African American "underclass." Needless to say, "these two portraits constitute flip sides of the same ideological coin, which presumes that the United States is an open society with no systematic barriers to success."<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the persistent intellectual task of unpacking and deconstructing the messy ideological underpinnings of "black-Korean" conflict motivated a great deal of this scholarship after the publication of *Blue Dreams*.<sup>24</sup> This impulse reflects two overlapping epistemological currents of ethnic studies: challenging the received wisdom of dominant rhetoric and logics that serve to uphold white supremacy and an attempt to forge solidarity (or

at least understanding) among people of color. In 1999, sociologist Kwang Chung Kim edited a volume specifically dedicated to analyzing the imagery, myths, and realities of "black-Korean" conflict. *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict with African Americans* included several essays by mostly Korean American scholars who had largely established the field of examining Korean immigrants in urban conflict and protest.<sup>25</sup> Collectively, the essays laid bare the socioeconomic conditions and middleman position of Korean merchants that led to conflict and differential experiences of "victimization" in not only Los Angeles, but also New York and Chicago. Kyeyoung Park's piece, notably, exposed how the problematic framing of "race" and "culture" across various narratives served as both determining factors in the rise of unrest and tools for the erasure of "the instigating role of whiteness in black-Korean conflict."<sup>26</sup> Given the political expediency of addressing these conflicts, the works of social scientists, accustomed to working in the moment, was necessary. However, the changing currents of Asian American Studies soon pushed the study of the uprisings towards new interpretive and geographic directions.

### The Shifting Terrain of Asian American Studies: New Turns Take on the Uprisings

The previous works by social scientists emerged at a fascinating time of transition in the field of Asian American Studies.<sup>27</sup> Reflecting the rising flexibility of migration patterns, Asian American Studies scholars increasingly committed themselves to transnationalism as an analytic and diasporas as sites of inquiry in the 1990s.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, given Abelmann and Lie's training in Asian Studies, *Blue Dreams* represents an early intervention into Asian American Studies literature that had otherwise bound itself to the U.S. nation-state.<sup>29</sup> With specific attention to the pre-migration lives of Korean Americans, they emphasize how "riot responses must be understood in [the] crucible" of lived experiences with "colonialism, war, and their legacies, including national division, military authoritarian political regimes, and class polarization."<sup>30</sup>

As the twenty-first century dawned, Asian American Studies scholars across fields embraced transnational and diasporic approaches to understand racialization, migration, and political engagement, among other processes.<sup>31</sup> As sociologist Nadia Y. Kim skillfully demonstrates in *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (2008), identifying the global dimensions of race and

racialization is imperative to grasp the reach of neo-colonialism in the making of immigrant ideologies as well as the interactions between diasporic Koreans and other communities.<sup>32</sup> While *Blue Dreams* emphasizes how pre-migration encounters with colonialism and militarism shaped the lives of Korean immigrants during the uprisings, Kim illustrates how the events of 1992, in turn, shaped the complex racial ideologies of future migrants. For example, juxtaposing interview data with an analysis of South Korean periodicals, such as the *Chosun Ilbo*, Kim documents how some new immigrants conflated their negative experiences with African American soldiers during the Korean War with reports of black criminality from Korean news outlets, which drew from U.S. media sources such as the *Los Angeles Times*.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, transnational understandings of race relations also included ambivalence towards, if not a critique of, white Americans due to the U.S. media's reliance on "black-Korean conflict" narratives as a way to exonerate the power of whiteness, in addition to the mainstream media's constant airing of footage of Soon Ja Du's shooting of Latasha Harlins and, more generally, "scenes of Black animosity towards Koreans."<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the differing portrayals of Korean merchants even influenced ideologies of belonging and nationhood in Korea as the "'riots' were. . . fodder for South Koreans who most fiercely critiqued their overseas coethnics as self-interested national traitors," or, as Kim labels them, "Korean Benedict Arnolds."<sup>35</sup> This new orientation to transnationalism pushed the historiography towards questions that removed the uprisings solely from the events leading up to the ruptures of 1992. This transnational perspective, as well as the ever-increasing temporal distance from 1992, allows Kim to reinterpret the uprisings as both a *result* of a variety of structural factors and a driving *cause* for rearticulated ideologies of race.

By the late 1990s, the cultural or linguistic turn in the humanities profoundly reshaped the intellectual environment of Asian American Studies scholarship.<sup>36</sup> Informed by critical post-structural and postmodern theories, new works on the uprisings began to shift the gaze from unearthing origins and causes to analyzing cultural discourses and their implications.<sup>37</sup> This new scholarship interrogates the repercussions of the cultural works that had once been at the forefront of documenting and grappling with the uprisings.

Literary critic Min Hyoung Song's *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots*, published just over ten years after the uprisings, signaled this new agenda.<sup>38</sup> Song traverses a wide



collection of literature and film, including Kathryn Bigelow's film *Strange Days* (1995); Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight* (1993); Christine Choy, Elaine Kim, and Dail Sil Kim Gibson's *Sa-I-Gu* (1993); and Chang-Rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995), extricating how these texts wrestled with "far-reaching questions about the changing meanings of race, economic relations, national identity, and mass mobility within and across national borders."<sup>39</sup> Song's assertion that "The Los Angeles riots have also become a cultural-literary event, an important source of tropes for imagining the seemingly endemic social problems plaguing the United States and the country's possible future" binds his treatment of these nuanced cultural documents.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, *Strange Future* uses the metaphors of pain, trauma, wounding, injury, and haunting to explore the uprisings and their aftermath within the overlapping contexts of pessimism and neoconservatism in the 1990s and beyond.<sup>41</sup> Song's perspectives help theorize the uprisings within larger national ideological currents and anxieties. Nevertheless, the civil unrest remained a galvanizing force for local politics in Los Angeles.

The Uprisings in the Context of Rebuilding a New Los Angeles  
"Korean America was born on April 29, 1992," noted civil rights activist Angela Oh suggests in *Open: One Woman's Journey*. "Prior to that day, there were Koreans living in all parts of the United States, but after that day a new political community and collective consciousness was born."<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, as Los Angeles neared the twenty-year anniversary of the uprisings, the academic gaze shifted to the long-term implications of 1992 with respect to a variety of politicizing moments and community organizing across diverse populations and constituencies. In the wake of 1992, community-based activists remapped Korean American political history as increased immigration, the concomitant rise in nativist legislation, the greater electoral participation of people of color, and a post-industrial economy continued to leave an indelible mark on Los Angeles.<sup>43</sup>

Angie Chung's 2007 *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* traces how Los Angeles's Korean American community "has been instilled with a new sense of urgency to ensure that what happened in 1992 does not repeat itself."<sup>44</sup> The aftermath of the uprisings quickly bred a diverse Korean American body politic whose actions ranged from coalition building with African American organizations to mass protests

that shifted energy away from chiding looters to a systematic critique of state institutions and media.<sup>45</sup> In the long run, the political ruptures of 1992 largely shifted the grounds upon which Korean American organizing rested: the political utility of the immigrant generation's "conservative homeland orientation" slipped away as 1.5 and second generation activists sought to "recenter organizational structures on the diverse needs of the Korean American community."<sup>46</sup> Despite these tensions, the different generations did seek out mutual "accommodation" in different political campaigns.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, "The sudden availability of mainstream funds in the aftermath of the 1992 civil unrest did much to facilitate the expansion and specialization of ethnic organizations within the Korean American community," thus providing greater opportunities for competition, but also coalition building.<sup>48</sup> Chung also makes clear how community-based organizations took on multiple responsibilities from direct social services to political advocacy. She cites the instructive development of the Korean Youth and Community Center and Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates, which, reflecting the expanded scope of their organizing efforts and the present and future of Los Angeles grassroots mobilization, are now named the Koreatown Youth and Community Center and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance.<sup>49</sup>

### Possible Turns

As the essays in this issue illustrate, the time is ripe to continue pushing the study of the 1992 uprisings towards new empirical and conceptual questions. While I have outlined examples of how the cultural and transnational turns in the field have reoriented this historiography, other directions remain possible.

With the passage of time, a handful of scholars have complicated the ideological and material stakes of previous narratives of Korean American merchants. These new interpretations triangulate the role of the merchants, the African American community, and the state to examine how white supremacy remained intact during the uprisings and beyond. As a part of a larger 2005 critique of Asian American Studies' intellectual and political relationship to the carceral state, ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez reinterprets the narrative of the scapegoated Korean American merchant targeted by "rioters" and "abandoned" by the police as an incarnation of the model minority myth, retrofitted for the "age of the Prison Industrial Complex." "In this narration," he explains, "we are to envision the innocent, naïve,

hard working, and law-abiding Asian immigrant entrepreneur as the misdirected and unfortunate target of opportunistic Black-Brown aggression against white racism and the police enforced sanctity of private property."<sup>50</sup>

In a similar repudiation of the "abandonment narrative" as "political fiction," sociologist Tamara Nopper suggests "we are to conclude that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were abandoned because they were Asian American and, therefore, racialized as outsiders who were unwittingly caught in the cross hairs of black-white antagonism."<sup>51</sup> Nopper remaps the material presence of Korean merchants onto the landscape of antagonism between African Americans and the state through a collective examination of property losses, law enforcement's relationship to rioters (which was "driven less by racism against Asian Americans as by anti-black racism"), and the ways in which representatives of the state expressed "identification" with entrepreneurial Korean merchants.<sup>52</sup> How can future research, informed by insights from critical works on race, policing, and incarceration, both reject complicity with the state and foreground the lived experiences of different participants of the uprisings?

Historians might also contribute to newer frontiers of research on the uprisings. As Scott Kurashige and Mark Brilliant have recently shown, the construction of *race* takes on new paths and meanings within the contexts of *multiethnic* spaces.<sup>53</sup> How can we situate the uprisings in a larger historical process of crafting race and meanings of race in the migrant metropolis of Los Angeles? Likewise, how can we respond to Quintard Taylor, Jr.'s call to critically interpret the uprisings within a larger framework of interracial conflict, competition, and coalition in the urban west?<sup>54</sup> With rich results, many comparative historians have recently charted Los Angeles's multiethnic past, although their scope has yet to reach the powder keg of 1992.<sup>55</sup>

Los Angeles is now a "majority minority" city, the center of a new and vibrant multiracial immigrant rights/labor movement, and home to a variety of politicians of color equipped with grassroots organizing experience.<sup>56</sup> However, egregious inequality still exists in the shadows of fortresses of transnational capital, urban gentrification, and unrelenting white flight.<sup>57</sup> As the city continues to grow and sprawl, scholarship on the uprisings should continue to elucidate and subvert, to use historian Tomás Almaguer's words, the "racial fault lines" that might reproduce those disturbing days that set the City of Angels ablaze.<sup>58</sup>

## Notes

1. My sincere thanks to Professor David Yoo for entrusting this essay to me and to Professor Kyeyoung Park for introducing me to the literature of the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings.
2. Riots, rebellion, uprising, unrest, disturbance and Sa-I-Gu (literally 4-2-9 in Korean) are all common, and at times competing, signifiers for the events of 1992. What one merchant might see as a wanton riot, a community activist may see as a rebellion. While a municipal task force labels the arson and looting of 1992 as a civil disturbance, an Asian American Studies scholar might invoke Sa-I-Gu. In *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing and Resistance* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), sociologist Darnell M. Hunt illustrates how even in the face of the mainstream media's discursive practices, "raced ways of seeing" persistently inform audience interpretations of, and language for, the events of 1992 (11). "For black-raced informants" in Hunt's study, for example, "raced subjectivity was clearly an important lens through which the events and [local KTTV television news] text were viewed" (141). In *Ethnic Peace in the American City: Building Community in Los Angeles and Beyond* (New York: NYU Press, 1999), sociologists Edward Chang and Jeanette Diaz-Veizades caution, "the first step in rebuilding the city and promoting multiethnic coalitions is recognizing and respecting the various communities' perspectives and voices" (143).
3. Although I only focus on Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* and *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives* by Christine Choy, Elaine Kim, and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson in this essay, other examples of early collections by cultural workers capture the tenor of life during and immediately after the 1992 uprisings; they include a special edition of the Santa Monica, California-based *High Performance: A Quarterly Magazine for the New Arts* entitled "The Verdict and the Violence" (published in the summer of 1992) as well as the photographic exhibition and accompanying catalogue for *Life in a Day of Black L.A.: The Way We See It: L.A.'s Black Photographers Present a New Perspective on Their City*, organized and published in 1992 by UCLA's Center for Afro-American Studies (now the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies) and Black Photographers of California. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to include mainstream filmic portrayals of the 1992 uprisings, anthropologist Dionne Bennett provides a fascinating appraisal of Albert and Allen Hughes' immensely popular *Menace II Society* (1993). Bennett demonstrates that the film's duplication of tropes of black male criminal pathology fundamentally undermines its claims of representing the "realities" of urban life surrounding the 1992 uprisings; see Bennett, "Looking for the 'Hood and Finding Community: South Central, Race, and Media," Darnell Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, eds., *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York: NYU Press, 2010): 226-228.
4. This storied past includes the trailblazing East West Players, *Teatro Campesino's* performances in the Southland, and the L.A. Rebellion. For background on these artistic institutions and movements see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Yuko Kurahashi, *Asian American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999); Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*

(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); and David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

5. Anna Deveare Smith, *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2003): 2. *Twilight* appeared on Broadway in 1994. On the pedagogy of *Twilight*, see, for high school students, Korean American Youth Leaders in Training (KAYLT), *Roots, Riots, and Reflections: Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deveare Smith Curriculum Supplement (Los Angeles: K.W. Center for Leadership, 2006) and, for the university setting, Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, "Teaching the Politics of Identity in a Post-Identity Age: Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight*," *MELUS* 30:2 (Summer 2005): 191-208.
6. Smith, 4.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives*, produced by Christine Choy, Elaine Kim, Dai Sil Kim-Gibson; directed by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson and Christine Choy; narrated by Dai Sil Kim-Gibson (San Francisco: Center for Asian American Media, 1993). Ten years later, Kim-Gibson produced a follow-up documentary, *Wet Sand: Voices From L.A. Ten Years Later* (San Francisco: National Asian American Telecommunications Association, 2003).
9. Asian American Studies scholar Sharon Park charges that "the film focuses heavily on the financial losses and thus contributes to the stereotype of Koreans as greedy and materialistic. . . . Material losses were chiefly emphasized and in doing so reinforces the mainstream media's portrayal of Koreans and money-hungry people who would kill for a \$1.25 bottle of orange juice," referencing the murder of Latasha Harlins by Soon Ja Du; see "*Sa-I-Gu*," *Amerasia Journal* 19:2 (1993): 161. In a retrospective on *Sa-I-Gu*, published in 2004, Elaine Kim addresses the various critiques of the film; see Min Hyoung Song, "*Sa-I-Gu* Revisited: Interview with Elaine Kim," *Amerasia Journal* 30:1 (2004): 229-242.
10. Before these scholarly anthologies appeared, by the end of 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* published *Understanding the Riots: Los Angeles Before and After the Rodney King Case* (Los Angeles: *Los Angeles Times*/Times Mirror Company, 1992), a collection of several archival photographs and journalistic accounts of the uprisings.
11. Edward T. Chang and Russell C. Leong, eds., *Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community: Asian American, African American, and Latino Perspectives* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).
12. *Ibid.*, vii. On the Red Apple Grocery boycott, see Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
13. Edward T. Chang, "Introduction: From Chicago to Los Angeles—Changing the Site of Race Relations," in Chang and Leong, eds., 3.
14. See Armando Navarro's essay "The South Central Los Angeles Eruption: A Latino Perspective," Chang and Leong, eds., 69-85. Other social science inquiries into the dynamics of Latino actors in the uprisings include David E. Hayes-Bautista, Werner O. Schink, and Maria Hayes-Bautista, "Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots: A Behavioral Sciences Perspective," *His-*

- panic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15:4 (November 1993): 427-448; Albert Bergesen and Max Herman, "Immigration, Race, and Riot: The 1992 Los Angeles Uprising," *American Sociological Review* 63:1 (February 1998): 39-54; and Hunt, "Stigmatized by Association: Latino-Raced Informants and the KTTV Text," in *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots,"* 53-76. Examining the Latino presence, which included a large proportion of Central Americans, is particular significant in situating the uprisings within the shifting tides of immigration and the accompanying rearticulation of anti-immigrant racism for, as David E. Hayes-Bautista and his colleagues note, the "Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Border Patrol was sent into Latino areas of South Central to restore order by rounding up pedestrians and deporting those it could"; see "Latinos and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots," 428.
15. For a discussion of the social history turn in Asian American Studies (a response to older historical writings premised on assimilation and later victimization), see Sucheng Chan, "Asian American Historiography," *Pacific Historical Review* 65:3 (August 1996): 363-399.
  16. Robert Gooding-Williams, ed., *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993)
  17. See particularly Kimberlé Crenshaw and Garry Peller, "Reel Time/Real Justice," in Williams, ed., 56-70.
  18. Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson, Jr., and Walter C. Farrell, Jr., "Anatomy of a Rebellion: A Political-Economic Analysis," Williams, ed., 117-141; Mike Davis, interview by the *CovertAction Bulletin*, "Uprising and Repression in L.A.," Williams, ed., 143. Including Davis in this collection is significant, given the cacophony of observers who claim that his influential and polemical *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, published in 1990, predicted the 1992 uprisings (see D.J. Waldie, "Pornography of. . .Despair," *Salon* [September 1998], available online at [http://www.salon.com/1998/09/21/feature\\_15](http://www.salon.com/1998/09/21/feature_15)). On the L.A. School of Urbanism, see Michael J. Dear, ed., *From Chicago to L.A.: Making Sense of Urban Theory* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).
  19. Another instructive multiethnic anthology is Eui-Young Yu and Edward Chang's *Multiethnic Coalition Building in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Regina Books for the Institute for Asian American and Pacific Asian Studies, California State University, Los Angeles, 1995). The published proceedings of a two-day symposium held in November 1993, this collection blended academic analyses with essays from community-based organizers and other practitioners that discussed strategies for community empowerment in the wake of the uprisings. Edward Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades's *Ethnic Peace in the American City* (1999), in a sense, continues that dialogue on coalition building through an analysis of lessons from different community development centers and organizations including the Black-Korean Alliance and the Latino-Black Roundtable.
  20. Although "social science" is by definition an expansive umbrella term for a variety of fields and disciplines committed to the study of human society, I generally focus here on works by sociologists and anthropologists.
  21. Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). For other case studies, see the works cited in footnote 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 9. Abelmann and Lie and others note that it was only after concerted protests by Korean Americans and the larger Asian American communities that attorney and civil rights activist Angela Oh appeared on ABC's *Nightline*; see *Ibid.*, 10 and Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000): 183.
23. Abelmann and Lie, 149.
24. In the year following the uprisings, Angela E. Oh penned a scathing critique of "black-Korean conflict" as a deceptive framing device in "Race Relations in Los Angeles: 'Divide and Conquer' is Alive and Flourishing," *Southern California Law Review* 66 (1993): 1647-1651.
25. Kwang Chung Kim, ed., *Koreans in the Hood: Conflict With African Americans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). This anthology included essays by Edward T. Chang, the co-editor of *Los Angeles—Struggles toward Multiethnic Community and Multiethnic Coalition Building in Los Angeles* and co-author of *Ethnic Peace in the American City*; John Lie and Nancy Abelmann, authors of *Blue Dreams*; Kyeyoung Park, author of *The Korean American Dream: Immigrants and Small Business in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Pyong Gap Min, author of *Caught in the Middle: Korean Merchants in America's Multiethnic Cities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Political scientist Patrick D. Joyce uses a comparative analysis of the architectures of civic participation to understand how "Black-Korean conflict" erupted into a full-blown uprising in Los Angeles, but not New York; see *No Fire Next Time: Black-Korean Conflicts and the Future of America's Cities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).
26. Kyeyoung Park, "Use and Abuse of Race and Culture: Black-Korean Tension in America," in Kwang Chung Kim, ed., 65. Historian Brenda Stevenson also examines the collusion between whiteness and the state in order to unravel the myths of "black-Korean conflict" in her study of competing ideologies of race and gender in the trial of Soon Ja Du; see "Latasha Harlins, Soon Ja Du, and Joyce Karlin: A Case Study of Multicultural Female Violence and Justice on the Urban Frontier," *Journal of African American History* 89:2 (2004): 152-176.
27. For recent analyses of the genealogy of Asian American Studies as an intellectual, political, and applied field, see Sucheng Chan, *In Defense of Asian American Studies: The Politics of Teaching and Program Building* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Mark Chiang, *The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the University* (New York: NYU Press, 2009); and Russell C. Leong, Warren Furumoto, and Arif Dirlik, eds., "Pedagogy, Social Justice, and the State of Asian American Studies," *Amerasia Journal* 29:2 (2003), especially the section "Asian American Studies: Origins, Identities, Crises."
28. Yen Le Espiritu highlights the 1980s rise in communities of non-resident Indians, Vietnamese *Viet Kieu*, and Pilipino *balikbayans* among other transnational immigrants in her assessment of the field, "Asian American Studies and Ethnic Studies: About Kin Disciplines," *Amerasia Journal* 29:2 (2003): 201. Given the early inspiration that Asian American Movement activists drew from Third World Liberation Movements of the 1960s, theorizing Asian America has long had transnational dimensions; see Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). See also Lisa Lowe's influential essay that helped reori-

- ent Asian American Studies scholarship towards diasporas, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences," published, appropriately enough, in the inaugural issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1:1 (Spring 1991): 24-44.
29. For a historiographical analysis of the shift to transnational writing in Asian American history (a methodological intervention that complemented the rise of historical analyses of imperialism and colonialism in addition to general migration and settlement histories), see Mae M. Ngai, "Asian American History: Reflections on De-Centering the Field," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25:4 (Summer 2006): 97-108, and Moon-Ho Jung, "Beyond These Mystical Shores: Asian American History and the Study of Race," *History Compass* 6:2 (2008): 627-638.
  30. Abelmann and Lie, 84, 83.
  31. See, for example, Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Madeline Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Joshua Hotaka Roth, *Brokered Homelands: Japanese Brazilian Migrants in Japan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Russell C. Leong, Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, and Evelyn Hu-DeHart eds., "Asians in the Americas: Transculturations and Power," *Amerasia Journal* 28:2 (2002); Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Augusto Espiritu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Haiming Liu, *The Transnational History of a Chinese American Family: Immigrant Letters, Family Business, and Reverse Migration* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Lok Siu, *Memories of a Future Home: Diasporic Citizenship of Chinese in Panama* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005); Rhacel Salazar Parrenas and Lok Siu, eds., *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); and William Luis, Evelyn Hu-DeHart, and Kathleen Lopez, eds., "Afro-Asia" Special Issue, *Afro-Hispanic Review* 27:1 (Spring 2008).
  32. Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to L.A.* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
  33. *Ibid.*, 104-105. Conversely, other new immigrants were long attuned to the global power of American mass media and critically identified anti-black paradigms; other immigrants, according to Kim, came to actually identify with African Americans as fellow recipients of white oppression through politically daring films such as *Roots* and *Malcolm X*.
  34. *Ibid.*, 73.
  35. *Ibid.*, 226.
  36. As early as 1995, *Amerasia Journal* published a special issue entitled "Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies," (21:1/2), signifying the epistemological debates in the field as poststructuralist and postmodern theories gained increasing currency. On the parallel and intersecting growth of "theory" and transnationalism in Asian American Studies, see Sau-Ling C. Wong, "'Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads,'" *Amerasia Journal* 21:1/2 (1995): 1-27. For a fuller assessment of these trends in the field, see Kent



- A. Ono, "Asian American Studies in its Second Phase," Ono, ed., *Asian American Studies After Critical Mass* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2005): 1-16.
37. This attention to discourse falls into a longer trajectory of criticism that included the voluminous challenges to the "black-Korean" trope that social scientists produced in the 1990s.
  38. Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Another thoughtful study of the literary dimensions of the uprisings is King-Kok Cheung, "(Mis)interpretations and (In)justice: The 1992 Los Angeles 'Riots' and 'Black-Korean Conflict,'" *MELUS* 30:3 (Fall 2005): 3-40, which employs literary criticism and Critical Race Theory to unpack Ty Pak's short story "The Court Interpreter," a dramatized version of the trial of Soon Ja Du.
  39. Song, *Strange Future*, viii.
  40. *Ibid.*, 3.
  41. *Ibid.*, 19-24.
  42. Angela E. Oh, *Open: One Woman's Journey* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2002) 13-14. See also Edward Taehan Chang, "'As Los Angeles Burned, Korean America Was Born: Community in the Twenty-First Century,'" *Amerasia Journal* 30:1 (2004): vii-ix.
  43. On Los Angeles demographics and politics in the years following the 1992 uprisings, see Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996); Roger David Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); and George J. Sanchez, "Face the Nation: Race, Immigration, and the Rise of Nativism in Late Twentieth Century America," *International Migration Review* 31:4 (Winter 1997): 1009-1030 .
  44. Angie Y. Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 96.
  45. *Ibid.*, 96-104.
  46. *Ibid.*, 105.
  47. *Ibid.*, 106.
  48. *Ibid.*, 119. Sociologist Edward Park provides an earlier account of Korean American coalition building and municipal politics immediately after the 1992 uprisings in "Our L.A.? Korean Americans in Los Angeles After the Civil Unrest," Dear, Schockman, Hise, eds., 153-168. See also Chang and Diaz-Veizades, "Building Cross-Cultural Coalitions: The Black-Korean Alliance (BKA) and the Latino-Black Roundtable (LBR)," in *Ethnic Peace in the American City*, 105-128.
  49. Anthropologist Karen Brodtkin profiles several activists who forged a political consciousness in the aftermath of the 1992 uprisings and through work with KIWA in *Making Democracy Matter: Activism and Identity in Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007).
  50. Dylan Rodríguez, "Asian American Studies in the Age of the Prison Industrial Complex: Departures and Re-narrations," *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27 (2005): 253.

51. Tamara Nopper, "The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the Asian American Abandonment Narrative as Political Fiction," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6:2 (Fall 2006): 74.
52. *Ibid.*, 104. Nopper's other recent work infuses an analysis of colorblind racism into the study of ethnic banks and state support in Korean American entrepreneurship and has engendered a lively debate which should be extended to the origins of the 1992 uprisings. See Nopper, "Beyond the Bootstrap: How Korean Banks and U.S. Government Institutions Contribute to Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurship in the United States," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Temple University, 2009) and "Colorblind Racism and Institutional Actors' Explanations of Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurship," *Critical Sociology* 36:1 (2010): 65-85. For critiques of the latter piece by two respected scholars in Korean American Studies, see Kyeyoung Park, "Sources and Resources of Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurship," *Critical Sociology* 36:6 (2010): 891-896, and Pyong Gap Min, "The 'Disadvantage Thesis' and Colorblind Racism," *Critical Sociology* 36:6 (2010): 897-901. For Nopper's response, "Where to Look: A Response to Min and Park Regarding Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurship, the Disadvantage Thesis, and Colorblind Racism," *Critical Sociology* 36:6 (2010): 903-914. These lively debates should invite scholars to reevaluate the financial dimensions of the Korean American role in the 1992 uprisings.
53. Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Mark Brilliant, *The Color of America Has Changed: How Racial Diversity Shaped Civil Rights Reform in California, 1941-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
54. Quintard Taylor, Jr., "From Esteban to Rodney King: Five Centuries of African American History in the West," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46:4 (Winter 1996). In other words, Taylor examines how we can place and interpret the uprisings within the "New Western History," exemplified in texts such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987) and his own *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).
55. Among many others that take a comparative, multiethnic approach to Los Angeles's history, see George J. Sanchez, "'What's Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews': Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s," *American Quarterly* 56:3 (2004): 633-661; Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*; William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008); Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*; Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
56. See Ruth Milkman, *LA Story: Immigrant Labor and the Future of the Los Angeles Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006); Robert Gottlieb, Regina Freer, Mark Vallianatos, and Peter Dreier, *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Ruth Milkman, Joshua Bloom, and Victor Narro, eds.,

*Working for Justice: The L.A. Model of Organizing and Advocacy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

57. See Lawrence Bobo, *et al.*, eds., *Prismatic Metropolis: Inequality in Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000); Paul Ong, *et al.*, *The State of South L.A.* (Los Angeles: UCLA School of Public Affairs, 2008); and Kyeyoung Park and Jessica Kim, "The Contested Nexus of Los Angeles Koreatown: Capital Restructuring, Gentrification, and Displacement," *Amerasia Journal* 34:3 (2008): 127-150.
58. Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Faultlines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).