The 1992 Los Angeles Riots and the Asian American Abandonment Narrative as Political Fiction

Tamara K. Nopper
Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Riots, Narrative, and Fiction

It is difficult to read any lengthy reflection of race relations written by an Asian American without coming across some mention of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. The desire to tell the story of the riots and their actual (re)telling has helped to produce a core narrative that is consistently found in accounts produced by Asian Americans. This narrative is one of abandonment, whereby we are to understand that Korean immigrants were abandoned by the state during the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and, therefore, were not protected from rioters who subsequently damaged or destroyed their property. While it is certainly true that Koreans incurred a great deal of property damage or losses and that the state perhaps could have been more efficient in preventing the extent of both, the narrative of abandonment serves a greater political purpose than mere description.

In this narrative, the Korean immigrant entrepreneur is an outsider who is unwittingly caught in the conflict between the state and the consumer, but who is supposedly disconnected from both sides. As such, the Korean immigrant serves as a stand-in for the Asian American—one who is
(presumably) floating, victimized, used by both sides, and, most importantly, unrelated to American racial conflict. Despite the multiracial nature of the riots, the police serve as a stand-in for whites, and the rioters serve as a stand-in for blacks. Subsequently, 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.

The abandonment narrative is political fiction more than reality because it is predicated on the assumption that the state has no interest in or does not acknowledge Asian suffering and, therefore, acted accordingly during the course of the riots and after. Overall, we are to conclude that the state does not recognize or address Korean immigrant trauma or suffering simply because Asian Americans are racialized as outsiders (and, to an extent, as foreigners) and, therefore, are unimportant to domestic black-white relations. This conclusion is predicated on the sub-assumptions that

1. Korean immigrants experienced a unique type of violence primarily because they were nonwhite or Asian;
2. The state was not present at all during the riots or at least was not present soon enough; and
3. The state did not attempt to address the concerns of Koreans after the fact.

This set of assumptions helps to obscure how the state did specifically respond to the 1992 L.A. Riots when they were happening. Moreover, this set of assumptions contributes to the idea of Asian American particularity where we are to conclude that no other group has a basis for similar concerns regarding the lack of state intervention against black rioters. As Park and Park (1999) rightfully argue, there is certainly a need for more work theorizing Asian Americans and their particular location in the color line. Yet the notion of Asian American particularity as it relates to the abandonment narrative has actually served as an a priori conclusion rather than as a possibility to investigate.
A critical interrogation of the abandonment narrative will reveal that while Koreans may have been targeted during the riots, they were by no means entirely abandoned by the state. Rather, the state operated during and after the riots in a fluid and contingent manner in ways that were both physical and symbolic. This fluidity and contingency appear to be less about Korean immigrants’ racialization as Asian American or nonwhite as they did with the state’s fixation with blackness. In this sense, many businesses may have been sacrificed at different points during the riots, but these sacrifices were not uniform or experienced only by Korean immigrant entrepreneurs.

My effort to critique the abandonment narrative is not just driven by an interest in empirical accuracy. Rather, I am more motivated by an interest in questioning the abandonment narrative because of how it has served as a mobilizing force for Asian American writing and activism. The L.A. Riots and the Asian American abandonment narrative are found in a variety of research that has been produced about Asian America since 1992 (Cho 1993; Chang 1994, 2004; Kim 1993, 1994; Kim and Kim 1999; Omi and Winant 1993, 1994; Prashad 2001). Additionally, research has shown how pivotal the 1992 riots have been in influencing Asian American political identity construction and activism (Park 2002; Chung 2004; Louie 2004). Finally, it is necessary to interrogate the abandonment narrative because it has reified an Asian American particularity thesis that, ironically, has helped Asian Americans to avoid important political questions about their particular relationship to both whiteness and blackness and the antagonism between these two positions. That is, Asian Americans have elided a vexing question that just won’t go away: What is the relationship Asian Americans have to the antagonism between blacks and whites? While this research does not attempt to answer this question, I do provide some data and suggestive comments that may contribute to this line of inquiry.

I will spend most of my energy providing different data that demonstrate how the abandonment narrative is a type of political fiction. I will first discuss patterns of property damage and police response during the riots, at times making comparisons with previous riots of the 1960s.
Second, I will explore political discourse regarding the L.A. Riots generally and Korean immigrants and rioters specifically in order to determine how the former were symbolically situated in regard to the latter and to the nation. In this vein, I will look at speeches given by then-President George H. W. Bush who was running for reelection when the riots occurred. While a great deal has been written about the 1992 L.A. Riots in the past decade, very little research has paid detailed attention to how prominent politicians have framed the event.

Before I proceed, I want to explore how various Asian American writers have contributed to the narrative of abandonment. While there is some variation in their discussions of the 1992 L.A. Riots, the included texts will demonstrate how individual work operates or reproduces key assumptions of the abandonment narrative and, in turn, helps create a coherent narrative about the Korean immigrant/Asian American experience.

**Constructing the Asian American Abandonment Narrative**

According to the abandonment narrative, the abandonment of Korean immigrants by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) during the 1992 L.A. Riots serves as a catalyst for what Elaine Kim (1993) describes as Korean Americans’ “baptism into what it really means for a Korean to ‘become American’ in the 1990s” (219). Kim continues:

> When the Korean Americans in South Central and Koreatown dialed 911, nothing happened. . . . How betrayed they must have felt by what they had believed was a democratic system that protects its people from violence. . . . What they had to learn was that, as in South Korea, protection in the U.S. is by and large for the rich and powerful. If there was a choice between Westwood and Koreatown, it is clear that Koreatown would have to be sacrificed. (219)

Similarly, Bong Hwan Kim (1994), a Korean community activist in L.A., states in an interview:
Korean Americans across the country shared the anguish and despair of the Los Angeles tongp’o [community], which everyone seemed to have abandoned—the police and fire departments, black and white political leaders, the Asian and Pacific American advocates who tried to disassociate themselves from us because our tragedy disrupted their narrow and risk-free focus on white violence against Asian Americans. (71–72)

And in a piece titled “A Haunting Prelude to the Fire Next Time” that was recently featured on the front page of the Korean American Journalists Association (KAJA) website, celebrated veteran journalist K. W. Lee comments:

Local and state politicians hurriedly held post-4–29 hearings, their findings merely half lies and white lies, ignoring why and how Korean-owned mom-and-pop stores were targeted for arson and looting. Korean immigrants—divisive, insular and powerless as ever—don’t matter to them.

Overall, as Edward Chang remarks in the well-cited 1994 anthology The State of Asian America, “For Korean Americans, the riots raised the important question of what it means to be ‘Korean American’” (113). A decade later, in the second part of an Amerasia Journal edition titled “What Does it Mean to be Korean Today?” Chang, serving as the guest editor, expresses a similar sentiment in his introduction, tellingly titled “As Los Angeles Burned, Korean America Was Born” (2004, vii). Acknowledging the multiracial nature of the riot—a point he has emphasized in previous work (1994), Chang, nevertheless, depicts Koreans as particularly isolated (read: outside) due to a disdain for their effort to pursue the American dream:

The Korean American community was not alone in being devastated by looting, burning, and violence during the riots. Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and whites who lived in the inner city were also afflicted. And yet, for Korean Americans, the riots served as a catalyst to critically examine what it meant to be Korean American in relation to multicultural politics and race, economics and ideology. Korean immigrants, in pursuit of
the American dream, had been depicted as narrowly focused on economic success to the exclusion of the society, culture, and politics of which they were a part. (Chang 2004, vii)

While some commentators, like Chang and B. Kim, suggest that the L.A. Riots revealed how isolated Koreans were from both the greater society and Asian America, other Asian American writers are quick to analogize what they see as the abandonment of the Korean community during the riots with other violence perpetrated against Asian Americans of various ethnicities. For example, in their introductory statement in Reviewing Asian America: Locating Diversity—a collection of papers presented at the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) conference held a month after the riot from May 27 to May 31—the editors argue that the victimization of Koreans in the 1992 L.A. Riots is part of a larger history of anti-Asian violence:

The violence experienced by Korean American merchants cannot be ignored, nor can it be treated as a mere isolated event. Asian Americans have encountered much violence throughout history, from the 1885 murders of Chinese miners at the Rock Springs Massacre in Wyoming, to the violence directed against Filipinos during the 1930s Watsonville Riots, the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and the killing of Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982. (Ng et al. 1995, 1–2)

The editors are not alone in making this general assessment and, in particular, analogizing the riots to the federal government’s internment of around 60,000 Japanese living in the United States during World War II or the murder of Chin, a Chinese American, by two disgruntled white auto workers who never served any jail time for their murder (Chang 1994; Lee 1999; Park 1999; Yook, Albert, and Ha 2000). Lee even goes so far as to connect the 1992 L.A. Riots with the Jewish Holocaust (Lee 1999). And Vijay Prashad (2001) relates the lack of police intervention to U.S. imperialism. Describing how Korean merchants connect their victimization during the riots with U.S. aggression in Korea, Prashad comments, “The merchants
see a link between the harsh U.S. bombardment of their native land and the LAPD’s disregard for their property and bodies” (118).

In making these connections, the authors jumble together many events that, while not necessarily isolated, surely cannot be analogized without ignoring some careful differences. Yet this approach does suggest that the Asian American writers are intimating that there is something about being Asian American that speaks to why Korean immigrants supposedly were abandoned by the police during the L.A. Riots as they were confronted by rioters. Overall, making connections between the experiences of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and those of other Asian American groups who were victims of violence from either the federal government or white individuals serves the purpose of posing Korean immigrant entrepreneurs as outsiders who had no relationship to the racialized conflict between the white state and black rioters during the 1992 riots.

Even when Asian American writers attempt to sympathize with African American rioters, they do so in ways that substantiate and reinforce the abandonment narrative. That is, they discuss the various conditions that African American residents lived in but do not relate the Korean immigrant entrepreneur to these conditions or associated factors. Indeed, most efforts of this stripe tend to suggest that Korean immigrants are divorced from both the conditions of inner city Los Angeles and the whites they consider responsible for such conditions. Thus, even slightly sympathetic discussions of black life reify a central tenet of the abandonment narrative: Korean immigrants are caught in the black-white conflict but not materially related to it.1

For example, Chang (1994) comments, “What took place in Los Angeles for a few days in April 1992 showed a remarkable resemblance to Watts in 1965” (104). However, he does not give too much detail of how the riots were similar except to suggest that rage fueled both riots and that a great deal of destruction ensued. The major difference between the 1992 L.A. Riots and their 1965 predecessor is that the former “involved a multiethnic uprising, whereas the Watts riot was primarily an African American revolt against injustice and racism” (105).

While Prashad delves more deeply into some of the particularities that Chang fails to explore in detail, his writing nevertheless contributes to the
abandonment narrative. In Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity (2001), Prashad emphasizes the role of poverty and deindustrialization as major factors contributing to the “devastation of south-central Los Angeles” (117) and suggests that conflict between Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and black consumers is due to rioters being alienated by white supremacy and economic factors, to which, seemingly, Korean storeowners have no defined relationship. In Prashad’s work, then, Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were not only victimized by the state who failed to protect them but also were unfairly targeted by misguided black consumers overwhelmed by what he terms “white supremacist capitalism” (2001, 115). Prashad describes this misguidance:

Faced with the enormity of a white supremacist capitalism, working class black folk have always sought means for sovereignty and dignity. One of these means is to assert one’s claim to territory, to the neighborhood that is generally seen to be one’s own. Ownership as self-determination is a particularly delicate subject among African Americans, whose ancestors were owned and who had lost the forty acres and a mule intended to be the down payment to freedom. If there is nothing else to own, at least I own my body and I have my ‘hood. The anti-Jewish and anti-Korean tendencies in the ‘hood come from this profound desire for dignity among the working class who labor for others, but who do not have the means to produce the services to run their own territory. (2001, 115; emphasis mine)

Like Prashad, Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim (1999) suggest that black rioters were misguided in their anger by attacking Korean immigrants. However, unlike other Asian American writers, they identify two sets of victims in the riots: African Americans and Korean immigrants. The victimization of the former has been inflicted by “the dominant white group in numerous ways throughout American history” (20). Some examples they give of how whites have victimized African Americans include factors Prashad mentions, such as racial segregation, concentrated poverty, and other current “adverse life conditions” that “stem from a number of historical and contemporary forces, many of which are intricately related
to past racial discrimination” (23). “Contemporary forces” given are the exodus of large corporations from the inner city as well as a general process of deindustrialization (24). Given that Kim and Kim never connect the victimization of Koreans with the victimization of African Americans, it is inevitable that, like Chang and Prashad, they depict African American victims who damaged or destroyed Korean businesses as misdirected in their anger:

Although their anger was directed toward the white dominant group, what residents actually did was to vandalize and destroy local nonwhite businesses and other properties, including a large number of small Korean businesses that were left unprotected by the police force during the three days of unrest. (Kim and Kim 1999, 25; emphasis mine)

Indeed, it is what Kim and Kim portray as the misdirected anger toward nonwhite businesses, i.e., “small Korean businesses,” and the subsequent lack of protection by the LAPD that are largely responsible for Korean victimization. Kim and Kim conclude:

Their faith in the whole American system was badly shaken—leaving in its place a sense of despair and anomie. Their feelings of betrayal have been intensified not just by the original harm inflicted by the minority local residents but also by the subsequent disappointing responses from various federal, state, and local government agencies. (1999, 27–28)

**Political Fiction versus Reality**

A central assumption of the abandonment narrative is that, despite the multiracial group of business owners affected during the riots, Koreans had the particular experience of being abandoned by the police. Moreover, this abandonment is due to the state not being interested in Korean suffering because Koreans are Asian, or not white. While it is widely mentioned in various literature that other racial and ethnic groups owned businesses negatively affected by the riots, Asian American writers tend, nevertheless, to
emphasize the Korean American experience of victimization as particular and distinct. However, a closer look at the data reveals a more complex story. First, the L.A. Riots did not just affect South Central L.A. and Koreatown. Out of 756 census tracts in Los Angeles, 195 sustained some degree of damage. Korean businesses were overrepresented in 54 of these census tracts that experienced about 28 percent of the total riot damage for the city (Tierney, Reshaur, and Ames 1994, 15). While I do not aim to depoliticize the possible targeting of Korean immigrant businesses by rioters—an important subject that is not my focus of study but that certainly requires further investigation and theorizing—I do want to point out that Asian American writers generally tend to give short shrift to how concentrated Korean businesses were in certain areas of the riot zones. While it has been estimated that almost a third of all Korean-owned businesses in Los Angeles at the time were located in South Central L.A. (Tierney, Reshaur, and Ames 1994, 13), it is necessary to keep in mind that the overrepresentation of Korean businesses was not confined to South Central L.A. or Koreatown.

Along with the distribution of Korean immigrant businesses across L.A., other important details tend to go unexamined. Kathleen J. Tierney, Lisa Reshaur, and David Ames (1994) created a data set combining research conducted by the Los Angeles Department of Building and Safety and a data set from the Los Angeles City Clerk’s office. The final data set included 1,079 businesses that were either damaged or destroyed during the riots. While Koreans owned 34 percent out of all the businesses damaged by rioting, this data demonstrates much more distribution across other groups than tends to be emphasized by proponents of the Korean immigrant particularity thesis. Other Asian groups combined to make up nine percent of the businesses that were damaged by the riots; “Others,” who included whites, blacks, and other non-Asian and non-Latinos, incurred 25 percent of the damages; Latinos suffered 12 percent; and corporate businesses owners of any race the remaining 20 percent (10–11).

Additionally, Korean immigrants tended to own businesses that were more likely to experience severe damage or arson. As Tierney, Reshaur, and Ames describe, “Regardless of who owned them, certain types of
businesses were singled out more frequently for severe damage and arson” (1994, 12). Businesses most likely to be destroyed included eating and drinking establishments, lodging and entertainment establishments, grocery stores and markets, jewelry stores, and health-related service sites. Businesses that were more likely to be the victims of arson included eating and drinking spots, jewelry stores, and health-related service sites. Thus, in this data set, Korean entrepreneurs tended to be most concentrated in businesses that were “attractive targets for damage overall” (13).

Further, it is important to point out that during the 1992 L.A. Riots, commercial property bore the brunt of damage or destruction. Data compiled by the City Planning Department in September 1992 found that out of 1,120 damaged buildings, only 98 were residential. Thus, commercial property made up over 90 percent of the 1,120 damaged buildings included in the study. Consistent with the data provided by Tierney, Reshaur, and Ames, 70 percent of the commercial properties damaged were retail businesses (DiPasquale and Glaeser 1998).

The 1992 targeting of businesses, specifically retail stores, is consistent with the urban riots of the 1960s. Even before Asian immigrant entrepreneurs in black neighborhoods began to grow in substantial numbers, rioters damaged or destroyed businesses in inner city neighborhoods during various protests. For example, during the 1960s, rioters looted and/or burned 100 businesses in Harlem, 600 in Watts, 1,000 in Newark, and 2,500 in Detroit (Bean 2000, 169).

Many of the entrepreneurs who experienced these riots during the 1960s also complained that the police had abdicated their posts and subsequently failed to protect their businesses. As described by Jonathan Bean (2000), a historian of small business policy in the United States, one Washington, DC, store owner whose store was being looted recounts his experience of asking a police officer, “‘What are you going to do about these people?’ And about that time there were twenty or thirty people in the store. And he said, ‘We can’t do a thing’” (177). Yet during these earlier rebellions, thousands of rioters were arrested. For example, 7,000 people were arrested in the Detroit 1967 riot and 6,036 were arrested in the 1968 DC riot (Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell, 1993, 117).
Additionally, as if to presage the abandonment narrative that would emerge from the 1992 L.A. Riots, business owners affected by the 1960s riots testified to a 1968 U.S. Senate Committee that they felt unsupported and in some ways betrayed by public officials. As Bean describes:

Small-business owners voiced their outrage at the statements made by these “black racists” and “demagogs”[sic]. They objected to the negative stereotyping of merchants as unscrupulous exploiters of the poor. Above all, these businesspeople sought official recognition that they, too, were victims of the riots. Jerome Litvin, the president of a small grocery chain, argued that “silence is consent”: by remaining indifferent to the plight of inner-city businesses, public officials were acting as silent accomplices of those who spread “prejudice and false rumors.” (Bean 2000, 177)

What is striking about this account is that the criticism lobbed at both (black) rioters and public officials in the 1960s is similar to that expressed by various Asian American writers toward the police and government about their responses to the 1992 L.A. Riots. Such a similarity in accounts would suggest that perhaps the narrative and some of the circumstances leading one to develop such a narrative are not specific to Asian Americans. That is, perhaps the criticism lobbed at the police and public officials is a structural perspective dictated not just by one’s racial position but also by one’s economic relationship to African American consumers. This crucial nexus between racial position and economic relationship to black rioters may provide important insight into the patterns of state response.

As a central tenet of the abandonment narrative, the Asian American particularity thesis helps to conceal how Asian American writers tend to avoid addressing the structural similarity between the experiences and narratives of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and non-Asian entrepreneurs who were affected by the riots of the 1960s. What does any possible similarity mean for the Asian American abandonment narrative? If one assumption of the abandonment narrative is that Korean immigrants have a particular experience and a particular grievance about this experience, how, then, do we reconcile how similar and in some ways indistinguishable
the discourse of merchants from the 1960s is from that of the Korean immigrant entrepreneurs of the 1992 L.A. Riots? And in what ways must this particularity thesis exist in order to differentiate (unconvincingly) Korean immigrant entrepreneurs from white entrepreneurs, who, as Bean (2000) describes, owned the majority of the businesses in black neighborhoods and subsequently incurred the most losses during the 1960s riots?

Not only do proponents of the Asian American abandonment narrative avoid addressing the similarities between riot victims of the 1960s and Korean immigrant entrepreneurs of the L.A. Riots in regard to grievances, they also fail to accurately discuss the similarities in terms of state response. According to the abandonment narrative, Koreans were abandoned by the state to deal with looters who were targeting them because the state did not care about Korean immigrants since they were not white. And in an interesting twist, Lee argues that Korean immigrants were unfairly neglected because the state was more concerned with controlling the riot than protecting the interests of nonwhite business owners: “But the System (City Hall, LAPD, the district attorney, the courts and the media) was more concerned with deflecting another massive Watts uprising than defending the hapless folks of color in the neighborhoods of South Central, Pico-Union and Koreatown” (Lee).

While Lee may be alluding to the way in which the state struggled to gain control of the riots, his argument nevertheless works to sanitize state violence. That is, he appears unconcerned with his own interest in a more efficient state effort in hopes of “deflecting another massive Watts uprising,” which is basically a euphemism for containing blacks. But Lee’s point does raise an interesting question about why the police put less effort into protecting private property than trying to contain blacks. We can consider what this may reveal about the inadequacy of the Asian American abandonment narrative, which tends to suggest that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were abandoned because they were not white, not because the rioters were either black or served as stand-ins for blacks.

In some ways, without probably meaning to, Lee helps to illustrate the deficiencies of the neo-Marxist analysis of the police, which is quick to argue that the police are motivated solely to protect private property. Even
class accounts that attempt to appreciate the role of race as an organizing force in society tend to operate with the same assumption, only going so far as to say that the state is primarily concerned with white property. It is fair to say that during the 1992 L.A. Riots, the police—and the fire department—were unsuccessful in protecting private property to the extent that property owners would be satisfied and were probably more concerned with protecting white people than others (as illustrated in the repeated naming of Reginald Denny’s attack despite the fact that nonwhites were physically transgressed during the riots). Over the course of the riots, the fire department received 5,537 structure fire calls but only responded to about ten percent of them. Eventually, an estimated 4,000 businesses were destroyed and 52 people, including 20 law enforcement and fire personnel, died (Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993, 118).

But these figures do not mean that the police and other state forces were not available during the riots or failed to be aggressive with rioters. Nor do they suggest that the state in general retreated or was slow to respond simply because Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were nonwhite or Asian American. And they certainly do not mean that the state has no concern for the suffering of Asian Americans or business owners in general. Most Asian Americans avoid this possibility, and even Lee does not pursue his own line of inquiry about why police seemed more interested in “deflecting another massive Watts uprising,” as revealed in the paragraph immediately following his previous comment:

At work was a cynical symbiosis between the white power structure and marauding gangs, acquiescing politicians and so-called civil rights leaders. The law enforcement agencies and the media—assuming the role of neutral arbitrators—successfully diverted a rebellion against police brutality and accumulated inequity into a black-Korean race war in the most violent police districts in the country. (Lee)

From this statement, we are to assume that rather than an antagonism between the two parties, rioters and the state actually had some type of symbiotic relationship that served to victimize Koreans. While many Asian
American writers would probably disagree with Lee’s conclusion, the general ethos of Lee’s statement is found in the Asian American abandonment narrative: the idea that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs are unfairly caught in a conflict, or in this case, caught in a symbiotic relationship, between the state and rioters rather than being related to it.

Another point of agreement—indeed, a foundational tenet—among proponents of the abandonment narrative is the general conclusion that the state was not present until the riots were almost over. As Lee claims:

The vaunted LAPD weren’t there in the early hours when the Riots first broke out. Many officers stayed aloof while watching Korean victims lying wounded. Their commander, LAPD Chief Daryl Gates, went AWOL, attending a social event. Neither did the National Guard arrive in time, and when they did arrive, they stood guard over the affluent areas of Beverly Hills and West L.A. (Lee)

And Kim (1993) goes so far as to claim that the state was not around at all during the riots to protect Koreans in South Central or Koreatown: “When their stores and homes were being looted and burned to the ground, they were left completely alone for three horrifying days” (219).

One of the weaknesses of Asian American writings on the 1992 L.A. Riots is that they rarely utilize important sources that provide vital information relevant to this debate. For example, Bert Useem’s (1997) interviews with the LAPD after the 1992 riots provide some insight into police accounts of both the riot’s trajectory and the police’s subsequent response. According to many interviewees, the intersection of Florence and Normandie in South Central L.A. is significant for several reasons. First, Florence and Normandie was where the riots really began to gain momentum. Second, rioters reportedly remained at the intersection even after police showed up. Third, unlike other areas where the police were somewhat successful at dispersing people, rioters at one point actually drove the police out of the Florence and Normandie area. Fourth, police gave much attention to Florence and Normandie, which subsequently absorbed most of their resources. Indeed, the 77th Street area station, which is in South
Central L.A., created a Field Command Post (FCP) and required that all 911 calls from the 77th area be directly routed to the FCP.

It is fair to suggest that Koreatown may have served as collateral damage in the effort to contain rioters. But the reason why it was collateral damage must be reevaluated. According to the abandonment narrative, Koreans were abandoned because they were nonwhite in general and Asian American specifically and, therefore, less valuable than whites. For example, Sumi K. Cho (1993) argues, “The police nonresponse to the initial outbreak of the violence represented a conscious sacrificing of South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown, largely inhabited by African Americans, Chicanos, Latinos, and Korean Americans, to ensure the safety of affluent white communities” (201).

I agree with Cho that the state cares less about urban working class and poor areas than affluent suburbs and nonwhite bodies than it does whites. However, I want to offer an alternative interpretation of how the state addressed the L.A. Riots: what may really have motivated police action is an interest in containing the spread of blackness as represented through the superimposed image of the black rioter hell-bent on violence and destruction. This black containment strategy appears to have played a role in dictating the creation of the FCP at Florence and Normandie as well as in shaping how the police worked to block rioters into Koreatown.

As one Korean observer explains:

Well, you know, a lot of people were wondering, a lot of Korean Americans were wondering, why the riots really seemed to hit them so hard. And it turns out that what the police did was that they barricaded different roads. They did it so that the riots wouldn’t spread to downtown, or to places like Hancock Park, where really rich people live, and so they more or less surrounded the North, West, and East of Koreatown with barricades. And so all these people who were coming up from South Central just wound up in Koreatown. Now, the amazing thing is, is that the police and fire department pretty much considered those places off-limits, and so they wouldn’t respond to cries for help coming from inside K-town, and so that’s why there was so much damage there. (Quoted in Tangherliini 1999, 161)
Suggested by this observer is that the police may have tried to block rioters into Koreatown, which was near South Central L.A. where the riots began and the field command post was established. Further, police may have been less apprehensive about rioters destroying or looting businesses in these areas because they may have been unconcerned with the quality of black life, including the physical conditions in which blacks live.

However, the LAPD’s efforts to contain rioters or even to retreat from rioters as a possible strategy of containment do not mean they did not actively arrest people when the riots were happening. Yet those who promote the abandonment narrative tend to be relatively quiet about the fact that many people were actually arrested. There are some conflicting reports as to exactly how many arrests were made. One estimate is as high as over 16,000 (Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993), but various estimates generally agree that there were at least 5,000 arrests made during the riots by the LAPD and over 12,000 arrests made in Los Angeles County as a whole. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, during April 30 to May 4, 1992, the LAPD reported 5,438 arrests. Of these, 2,764 were Latino, 2,022 were African American, 568 were white, and 84 were “other” (cited in Navarro 1993). Another *Los Angeles Times* article, published on May 21, 1992, shows that the Sheriff’s Department of Los Angeles County reported 12,545 arrests made between 6:00 P.M. on April 29 and 5:00 A.M. on May 5. Out of this number, 45.2 percent were Latino, 41 percent black, and 11.5 percent white (cited in Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999).

The *Sentinel* reported on August 6, 1992, that 2,239 people had been arrested for looting during the riots. Slightly more were arrested for violating the curfew imposed on April 30. Of the 3,000 people arrested for ignoring the curfew, 46 percent were black and 45 percent Latino, and men made up 90 percent of the total number arrested. While those arrested for curfew violations ranged in age from 12 to 67, the majority of them (40 percent) were between the ages of 19 and 24. One in four of those arrested for being out after curfew was homeless. Some people were standing two blocks from their homes or on their own property.

And as the *Sentinel* reported on June 25, 1992, an analysis of 5,633 adults arrested and detained during the riots between April 30 and May 5 revealed
that Latinos comprised 51 percent, 36 percent were black, and 11 percent were white. Most of the arrestees were men, with women making up 12 percent of those arrested; 232 women were Latina, 281 black, and 130 white. Latinas tended to be arrested more for looting rather than for civil disturbances, whereas with black women, arrests were evenly distributed along the two types of violations.

Additionally, proponents of the abandonment narrative tend to discount how several of these arrests were of undocumented Mexican or Latin American immigrants, many of whom were eventually deported (Navarro 1993; Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993). While Asian American activists tend to emphasize the post-9/11 era as the moment when local law enforcement began to work more actively with the Immigration Naturalization Services (INS), they tend not to mention that during the 1992 L.A. Riots, local law enforcement went against its own general agreement with the INS not to engage in immigrant apprehension.

Another issue that troubles the abandonment narrative is how militarized the city of Los Angeles and specifically the riot zones became during the riots. In his address to the nation on the third day of looting, President Bush described the “assistance” he provided to California governor Pete Wilson and L.A. mayor Tom Bradley to address the “urgent need to restore order.” According to Bush, the following measures were taken:

[Three thousand] National Guardsmen [are] on duty in the city of Los Angeles. Another 2,200 stand ready to provide immediate support. To supplement this effort I’ve taken several additional actions. First, this morning I’ve ordered the Justice Department to dispatch 1,000 Federal riot-trained law enforcement officials to help restore order in Los Angeles beginning tonight. These officials include FBI SWAT teams, special riot control units of the U.S. Marshals Service, the Border Patrol, and other Federal law enforcement agencies. Second, another 1,000 Federal law enforcement officials are on standby alert, should they be needed. Third, early today I directed 3,000 members of the 7th Infantry and 1,500 marines to stand by at El Toro Air Station, California. Tonight, at the request of the Governor and the Mayor, I have committed these troops to help restore order. I’m also
federalizing the National Guard, and I’m instructing General Colin Powell
to place all those troops under a central command. (1992a)

Proponents of the abandonment narrative will be quick to point out that
Bush sent the troops too little, too late. But as research conducted
by Christopher Schnaubelt (1997) for Parameters: US Army War College
Quarterly shows, this was not necessarily the case. While Bush may have
waited until the third day to send in federal troops, military support was in
the works and present before then. For example, anticipating the possibility
of a riot though perhaps not the extent of it, the California Air National
Guard (CANG) had already lent out several thousand of its vests, helmets,
and gas mask filters to the LAPD and local fire departments. By the end of
the first night of rioting, local enforcement learned that the governor was
dispatching 2,000 CANG members to L.A. at the request of the mayor.
Twelve hours later, another 2,000 CANG members were requested and
approved to go to L.A. Refer to the appendix for a detailed table of police and
military action during the course of the riots as provided by Schnaubelt.

While I am not suggesting that the state should have been more efficient
during the riots, I will point out that, as Schnaubelt’s study indicates, the
abandonment narrative appears to be driven more by hearsay than an
actual knowledge of how the state operated in the riot zones. Schnaubelt
describes how local law enforcement, while somewhat prepared for a riot,
seemed to have faith in itself to handle immediate reactions to the Rodney
King verdict, even to the point that most of the LAPD’s senior leaders felt
comfortable attending a training seminar 40 miles north of the city on the
day the verdict was to be announced. Coordinating an immediate response
to the riots may have proven difficult because, according to Schnaubelt’s
report, senior police officers, police chief Darryl Gates, and Los Angeles’s
mayor “were not on speaking terms with each other as a result of partisan
bickering and political maneuvers” (1997, 91).

In addition, the mutual aid system between the LAPD and local fire
departments and the military was not instigated as soon as it could have
been. This mutual aid approach called for the CANG to be deployed to
assist cities when local law enforcement became overwhelmed. It appears,
as described by Schnaubelt, that mutual aid was not called on by the city as soon as it should have been to satisfy property owners. But the reason does not appear to be a lack of concern per se with Korean immigrant entrepreneurs because they are Asian American or not white. Instead, the failure to implement the mutual aid system seems to have been driven partially by political in-fighting and bruised egos. Specifically, Gates appeared to have resented having to coordinate efforts with military officials. As the police chief told a television news reporter at the end of the first night of rioting, Gates “didn’t want to be taking orders from a general” (quoted in Schnaubelt 1997, 4). Finally, once different military personnel were on the ground, coordinating efforts became increasingly difficult. As such, bureaucratic problems made it difficult for military personnel, despite being stationed, to intervene in the riots to the satisfaction of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs.

Some who criticize the police for not being efficient enough may fail to remember that during many urban riots, mayors and governors have expressed a sense of helplessness and eventually called on the National Guard to intervene. For example, in 1943, an urban riot in Detroit was met with 6,000 federal troops and 5,000 members of the National Guard. There were 13,398 National Guard troops dispatched to Watts in 1965. And two years later in 1967, 10,253 National Guard troops and 4,700 federal troops were sent to Detroit (Adams 1995). What differentiates the response to the 1992 riots from earlier military responses, according to National Guard officials interviewed for a May 7, 1992, Sacramento Observer story, is that the actual military response to the L.A. Riots was faster than during the 1965 Watts Riots. Despite the difference in how quickly the military actually got to their respective riot zones, an important thread connects the various riots together: discussing internal military intervention, David Adams (1995) concludes, “the extent of riot interventions in recent years surpasses anything seen before in U.S. history” (205).

That these military interventions in support of local law enforcement took place during urban riots in which a significant number of blacks were involved helps to demonstrate that state response may be less about protecting private property as it is about containing blackness. That is, state
efforts, even those hampered by political in-fighting, egos, or bureaucratic problems, appear to have been consistently about containing black people—even those who may not have been rioting—when disorders occurred. Understanding that the desire to contain blackness is the motivating logic of state responses to riots helps explain why so many businesses suffered damage or destruction. That is, regardless of owner, businesses in black areas or areas where blacks have convened may become collateral damage in the state’s fight to control and contain black people.

Some will certainly question my conclusion about blackness providing coherence for state responses to the riots given that a significant portion of rioters and those arrested were Latino, a point several authors emphasize (e.g., Oliver, Johnson, and Farrell 1993; Omi and Winant 1993, 1994; Chang 1994; Palumbo-Liu 1999). While I appreciate empirical accuracy, I surmise that such a response neglects to consider how blackness gives coherence to constructs of criminality and deviance, regardless of the race of the accused and arrested. This, of course, does not mean that Latino arrestees were corporally black (although they very well may have been) or ontologically black. But it does suggest that in the conflict between the state/capital and the consumer, rioting is associated with criminality and deviant forms of expression, and criminality and deviance are associated with blackness and specifically black people. As Joy James (1996) describes, “In racialized societies such as the United States, the plague of criminality, deviancy, immorality, and corruption is embodied in the black . . . the dreams and desires of a society and a state will be centered on the control of the black body” (26–27).

Although some will inevitably suggest that I am collapsing significant differences between the racialization of Latinos and blacks—which is an important political and theoretical area that warrants further investigation—I am merely trying to demonstrate the ways in which the Latino rioter has been understood through blackness and simultaneously collapsed into blackness by proponents of the abandonment narrative. In turn, this gesture fails to appreciate how the abandonment narrative’s theoretical fixation on black rioters, as opposed to Latino rioters, assists in the analogizing of criminality with blackness. I do not aim to universalize the
critiques of blacks or to suggest that they may not have specific reasons to riot, but I do want to emphasize that proponents of the Asian American abandonment narrative appear to have great difficulty seriously theorizing Latinos’ role in the riot, as opposed to simply describing their participation. While there is a small but growing body of research exploring Asian-Latino relations (Saito 1993; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Kim and Lee 2001), there has yet to be a serious theorization of Latino participation in the riots and what implications this has for our interpretation of Asian Americans’ position in the color line. I suspect this is because the abandonment narrative actually relies on the theoretical erasure of Latinos from the story since serious consideration might force Asian Americans to confront their fixation with blackness and what they perceive as blacks’ misguided hostility towards Asian Americans.

By confronting their fixation with black rioters, Asian American writers may begin to interrogate more honestly how Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were located both materially and symbolically in relation to the state and the rioter. This would help us to appreciate better how Asian Americans exist in relation to, instead of in spite of, the black/white binary.² Working toward this end, I will explore in the next section how, after the riots, Korean immigrant business owners were symbolically situated by George H. W. Bush, who was the president in 1992 and working toward being reelected. I examine his speeches in the month following the riots to determine how he represented the L.A. Riots in general, rioters, and victims, with a particular emphasis on his discussion of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs.

**Symbolic Situating of Korean Immigrant Entrepreneurs**

Curiously, very little attention has been given to how President Bush addressed the riots that occurred in the last year of his presidency and less than six months before the 1992 presidential election. There are, of course, a few exceptions, including Omi and Winant’s (1993, 1994) discussion of how both Bush and Bill Clinton framed the riots in racial speak that served
their respective party platforms. Yet in regard to Bush, the authors rely on his quotes provided by the *New York Times* but do not look directly at the incumbent’s speeches. As such, they mistakenly conclude that both presidential candidates failed to “concern themselves with the devastation’s victims: principally Korean storeowners, but also businesses of every racial and ethnic provenance” (1994, 153). As I show, in regard to Bush, this is simply an inaccurate statement. Omi and Winant are not alone in their failure to look at Bush’s speeches. Indeed, to date, no analysis of Bush’s many speeches regarding the 1992 L.A. Riots has been published even though the speeches are easily available online through Bush’s public papers library.

To determine how one actor of the state—indeed one of the most publicly recognized worldwide—symbolically situated different participants of the riots, I analyze 17 of Bush’s public speeches given over the course of a month, starting the third night of the riots. Some will surely question what significance symbolism has for understanding dimensions of material reality. In defense of analyzing symbolism, I think it is helpful to understand the ways in which reality gets depicted and, in turn, may help to shape different facets of material reality. I am sure that the many people who have written about the model minority myth—one of the most commonly discussed symbolic figures in Asian American studies—will agree with me on the importance of exploring symbolism as it relates to racial ideologies and their materialization. However, I do want to point out that this section on Bush’s speeches is simply an analysis of discourse and not a conclusive statement on how Koreans were materially addressed after the riots.

During his various speeches, Bush consistently referred to rioters in such terms as: “criminals breaking windows” (1992i), a “gang of looters” (1992i), and a “criminal element” (1992d). By identifying rioters as criminals, Bush depoliticized the uprising as an act of political protest. As he told the country during his national address, “What we saw last night and the night before in Los Angeles is not about civil rights. It’s not about the great cause of equality that all Americans must uphold. It’s not a message of protest. It’s been the brutality of a mob, pure and simple” (1992a). To Bush,
then, civil rights activity is an appropriate response whereas the riot demonstrated what he later described as “that thin blue line that separates good people from the worst instincts of our society” (1992i).

Moreover, Bush constructed rioters as perpetrators not only of criminal behavior but of injustice as well. He told the nation, “The wanton destruction of life and property is not a legitimate expression of outrage with injustice. It is itself injustice. And no rationalization, no matter how heartfelt, no matter how eloquent, can make it otherwise” (1992a). Increased policing and militarization of the riot zones was necessary, according to Bush, to restore order, which as he suggested was the same as bringing about justice: “And let me assure you: I will use whatever force is necessary to restore order. What is going on in L.A. must and will stop. As your President I guarantee this violence will end” (1992a).

Bush’s comments reveal that he did not consider property owners the only victims of the riot; rather, victims also included those unfairly caught in it. One strategy Bush used to criticize rioters was to emphasize the multiracial nature of opposition to the riots. On the campaign trail, Bush often relayed to audiences how people in L.A. returned looted goods or provided the police with tips about where they could find items (1992g), how the audience at a black church burst into applause in support of the police (1992i), along with the tale about Bennie Newton, a minister who placed his own body between rioters and a man being beaten. As Bush remarked at a commencement address, “America is a nation of Bennie Newtons. . . . Few of us, of course, are ever called to take the risks that Reverend Newton did” (1992j).

Along with the anecdote about Newton, another repeated story of Bush’s was that of the “four black strangers” who rescued Reginald Denny, a “savagely beaten white truck driver.” As Bush told the nation, Denny is “alive tonight because four strangers, four black strangers, came to his aid.” Consequently, it “is for every one of them that we must rebuild the community of Los Angeles, for these four people and the others like them who in the midst of this nightmare acted with simple human decency” (1992a).

The idea of decency was consistently deployed by Bush to differentiate between rioters and those who, from various positions, were victimized by them. Thus, policing measures were not only ordered to restore damages
experienced by property owners in L.A. but to repair those whose political sensibilities were offended by the riots. By distinguishing rioters from “decent” people, Bush projected an image of a multiracial public victimized and united in their disgust.

For example, upon arriving on May 6, 1992, in Los Angeles for the first time since the riots, Bush remarked:

Let me say something, something I promised myself I’d say the moment we got here, say this to every one of the people who reached out across the barriers of color and put their own safety at risk to help others: Thank God for what you did. You did more than simply save a life. You gave a Nation great cause for hope. And you proved amidst the hate and the horror that this is still the City of the Angels. (1992l)

At an event with Asian American community leaders in Los Angeles, Bush declared, “Americans everywhere condemned the violence and the looting. Victimized neighbors, black, Hispanic, Asian-American, came together to renounce darkness and embrace healing. The buildings were destroyed, but, you could feel it, not the spirit, not the spirit” (1992h). And at a fundraising dinner in Philadelphia, Bush told attendees about the “extraordinary courage of just plain ordinary people” who “braved the gang of looters” and “stood up in the face of angry mobs and reached across the color barrier to save lives of their fellow men and women. . . . [T]hey are the stories that tell us the power of simple human decency” (1992c).

Another strategy Bush deployed was connecting the domestic threat of urban rebellions with national security by using the L.A. Riots as a metaphor for the United States’ potential vulnerability to internal and external threats. When addressing an audience at the Mount Zion Baptist Missionary Church a week after the riot, Bush remarked, “Look at the chaos and turmoil in this country, not just in the wake of the riots of Los Angeles but all of the problems we face in the country, the problems we face internationally” (1992g).

The connection that Bush was attempting to make between global and domestic security became more pronounced at a fundraising picnic in
Westchester, New York, where the incumbent proclaimed, “We have changed the world, and we’ve changed it for the better,” providing examples such as “seeing that these kids don’t go to sleep every night worried about nuclear war” and helping make sure that ethnic groups such as Ukrainians and Hungarians “are no longer captive nations.” Bush concluded that with the help of “my predecessor Ronald Reagan . . . democracy is on the move all across the world” (1992e).

But Bush was addressing supporters who were still reeling from a rebellion that occurred just a few weeks before the picnic. In an effort to quell their fears, Bush remarked:

So just as we have brought these changes, with a lot of help I will concede, but we brought these changes to the world, we’ve got to change things at home. . . . I went out to Los Angeles and looked at it . . . [a]nd it’s not just to take care of that city that went through horrible times. It’s not just that, because the ideas I’ll mention to you real quick are ideas that would resonate with other cities, other communities across this country. (1992e)

At a fundraising dinner in Atlanta less than a week later, Bush also made clear that the rioters were more than what he had earlier referred to elsewhere as “a community that was divided and torn apart and then turning on itself in despair” (1992q). According to Bush, rioters were more than just a nihilistic bunch, they were terrorists. This construction of rioters was reified when, after discussing how he had addressed the riots by federalizing the National Guard and placing marines on post, Bush declared, “We cannot condone the kind of reckless, terroristic behavior, no matter how bad the conditions in any city in America. So we moved to restore order, and now we have a . . . plan for change, dramatic change” (1992b). Therefore, rioters were not only criminals because they broke existing laws, but they were, as Bush later referred to them at a town hall meeting in Los Angeles, “criminals who subjected three days of terror and hate” (1992m).

Aggressive policing of urban communities was necessary both to stop the L.A. Riots immediately and to protect against “terrorists” who threatened domestic security by turning urban neighborhoods into what Bush
referred to as “war zones” (1992q). Thus, militarization and policing were necessary to ensure stability in the streets. The street served as a metaphor for nation, as Bush made clear when he commented, “I think the very fact that the military was here, prepared to do what was necessary, served as an enormously inhibiting factor from those hoodlums that wanted to disrupt the civil tranquility of Los Angeles, indeed, of our country” (1992o). To firefighters and law enforcement personnel, Bush rejoiced, “You showed that people that would wantonly destroy, wantonly terrorize, wantonly kill their fellow citizens, were not going to prevail” (1992n). And at a memorial ceremony for law enforcement officers held a week later, Bush used rhetoric that suggested law enforcement personnel were, indeed, fighting a domestic war: “Police officers have the toughest job,” which is the “priceless task of upholding good against evil.” Thus, police work is “populated by people willing to risk their lives to save ours, people who are part social worker and part soldier. It’s a job that I sum up in two words: American hero” (1992i).

Military personnel and law enforcement officers, then, were serving a dual purpose: helping to restore order in L.A. and working to restore America’s faith in itself as a secure nation. Suggested in Bush’s speeches was that the L.A. Riots were not just urban rebellion but also a specter of insecurity and fear that was certain to become a reality without a tough approach, and most important, Bush’s reelection. In Bush’s discourse, then, rioters were not only to blame for looting and destroying property in L.A., they were also responsible for waking up America to its vulnerability to violence and hatred from urban terrorists. Bush spoke to this when he stated, “All of us saw the sickening sights in Los Angeles of criminals breaking windows and burning buildings and looting businesses. But even worse was the looting of something harder to replace than merchandise, the stealing of something precious, stealing hope, promise, the future. This we cannot allow” (1992i).

Although his speeches expressed concern and appreciation for all those who were opposed to the riots, Bush did prioritize business owners when discussing federal support for rebuilding Los Angeles. At a ceremony honoring small business owners, Bush reassured awardees: “It’s hard on this
Small Business Day not to think of the thousands of small business people who suffered damage out there in Los Angeles. And my commitment to them is this: We are working to get whatever disaster assistance the Federal Government can provide into their hands in record time. They have suffered enough” (1992f).

Bush expressed particular concern for Korean immigrant business owners. In his address to the National Retail Federation, Bush remarked, “What happened in the Korean community, where it was particularly concentrated, was just horrible. . . .” (1992p). Sympathetic statements about Korean immigrants were peppered throughout his speeches, demonstrating a stated empathy with Korean losses, both material and psychic. For example, at a roundtable with Korean leaders in Los Angeles, Bush said:

I think people in Korea share the same hurt that all of us do when they look and see this community of enterprising individuals that . . . came here, what, some 25 years go, some more recently: got in, grabbed a piece of the American dream, and built something. To see it shattered is not the American way. . . . And with that in mind, it means I want to help. It means the Federal Government is prepared to help in every way we possibly can. (1992k)

Bush’s speeches also suggest that his expressed concern for Korean immigrant entrepreneurs may have been somewhat motivated by a concern for the United States’ diplomatic relationship with South Korea: “I look at this in a very broad sense, not only in terms of families that were hurt but in terms of international. I think most people here will concede and rejoice in the fact that we have good relations with Korea, something I take great pride in, incidentally” (1992k). Repairing the damages made to Korean owned property in the United States may also have been driven by the goal of maintaining good relations with South Korea, a possibility Bush alluded to when he commented, “I will do everything I can to show our friends abroad as well as here that it’s not the American way” and “I want to be the President to take the signal out around, back to Korea itself, and say: Look, people got hurt in my country, good people, good citizens. But
we’re going to make them whole, and we’re going to give them some hope” (1992k).

One way Bush offered to give Koreans “hope” was to make Korean immigrants feel more welcome in the United States. As he admitted to Korean community leaders in Los Angeles, “I think I maybe have more of a responsibility on this point to make clear to the American people that you’re welcome and that this is an aberration. This isn’t the American dream. So I’ll try to assist in that as best I can” (1992k).

Bush’s intentions are open to interpretation, but as expressed in his speeches, he was publicly empathetic to Korean immigrants’ property losses. For example, at an Asian Pacific American Heritage Dinner in L.A., Bush shared the following: “I went through Koreatown, and I saw how a community that had been building its roots and reaching out for its dreams for 25 years could be reduced to ashes, over 1,600 stores burned or ransacked in the rampage” (1992h).

The destruction of Korean property was not only a loss for the Korean community but, as Bush intimates, a blow to the nation’s own faith and identification with the entrepreneurial route to the American dream. At the Asian Pacific American Heritage Dinner, Bush also praised Korean immigrants for contributing to the national economy and the entrepreneurial spirit of the United States:

You have contributed more than inspiration. We need look no further than your commitment to the entrepreneurial spirit to see how you’ve helped our country and helped our economy. You’ve built dreams. You’ve also built jobs. You’ve opened up opportunities for all Americans by bolstering economic growth. (1992h)

In addition to publicly empathizing with Korean immigrants in terms of their loss of property and identifying with their entrepreneurial spirit, Bush publicly claimed he was supportive of Koreans expressing their frustrations through organized actions. A few days after the riots ended, Bush made the following remark in regard to a “demonstration” held the day before:
I don’t know about the demonstration last night. I know there were some nice political shots fired at me which I didn’t appreciate particularly, but I understand also that it comes from a people wanting to get something done. And that you were mistreated there, I feel very, very badly about that because you shouldn’t have been. You were expressing your rights as an American. (1992k)

And in a later speech, Bush made supportive comments about Koreans marching in response to the riots and meditated on what such actions demonstrated about the Asian character: “You’ve drawn on your inner strength for courage and hope. Thousands of you marched together to reclaim your streets. And even as cinders smoldered, volunteers started cleaning and family storeowners started rebuilding. You have years of your lives’ work invested in your communities and thousands of years of heritage to guide you” (1992h).

Evident from his speeches, Bush was publicly sympathetic to Korean immigrant entrepreneurs. In some cases, Bush appears to identify with their losses and relate to their efforts through an American-centered framework of both entrepreneurialism and the east as expressed through his praise toward ancient Asian heritage. By emphasizing foreign relations and the “heritage” of Asians, Bush constructed the Asian American community as somewhat foreign—but relatable. Pertinent to our conversation here, the emphasized dimensions of foreignness did not necessarily render Asian Americans as unimportant to the president or the state’s interests.

Simultaneously, Bush juxtaposed Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and all of those who he felt were victimized against the rioters, who he painted as urban terrorists jeopardizing national stability. While Bush depicted victims in multiracial terms, he tended to avoid identifying the racial background of the rioters. Yet Bush did rely on familiar tropes of blackness when condemning the acts of rioters. Thus, Bush’s assessment of the riots symbolically situated Korean immigrants as victims in relation to black perpetrators.

It is inevitable that Bush’s commentary will be interpreted as reifying the model minority myth, which praises Asian Americans while simultaneously
condemning blacks in an effort to maintain white supremacy. Of course Bush’s discourse reproduces the model minority myth. But this does not mean Bush’s speeches (or the model minority myth itself) should be dismissed for what they may reveal about Asian Americans’ material relationship to the conflict between the state and the rioters. While several Asian American writers (Cho 1993; Chang 1999; Palumbo-Liu 1999) argue that the model minority myth informed what happened to Korean immigrant business owners during the riots, they do not consider how the model minority myth may help to explain Asian Americans’ actual involvement in black-white conflict before, during, and after the riots. Instead, most accounts citing the model minority myth generally reinforce the abandonment narrative by suggesting that Korean immigrant business owners were simply caught. By proposing that Korean immigrants were targeted by misguided blacks and forgotten by the state during the L.A. Riots, Asian American writers conclude that Korean immigrants were stuck in the conflict rather than part of it. This image of Koreans reinforces a central tenet of the abandonment narrative: that Asian Americans are somehow disconnected from American racial conflict and the black-white antagonism that structures it.

CONCLUSION

This paper interrogated the Asian American abandonment narrative that has emerged from Asian Americans’ responses to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots. This abandonment narrative posits that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were victimized by both the rioters and by the police who abandoned them. It is assumed that Korean immigrant entrepreneurs were abandoned because they are nonwhite, specifically Asian. This telling of the L.A. Riots has served as a catalyst for Asian American writing and activism since 1992 and has been used to demonstrate Asian America’s vulnerability in the color line. As such, the Asian American has become equated with abandoned, victimized, and outside, which in turn suggests that the Asian American is caught in the conflict between the state and the rioter rather than related to it materially or symbolically.
I have attempted to demonstrate that this abandonment narrative is a political fiction of sorts for several reasons. First, the narrative operates with the false pretense that Asian Americans suffered a particular grievance because they are nonwhite. I have shown that Asian Americans were not the only ones to experience damage to or destruction of businesses and that their grievances are strikingly similar to those of white business owners who experienced urban riots before them.

Second, the abandonment narrative posits that the state was not present soon enough or did not aggressively deal with rioters and that the state response was motivated by the nonwhite status of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs. I argued that the state seeks its coherence from blackness and the fixation on controlling black bodies and that, in this process, various business owners concentrated in black neighborhoods may be treated as collateral damage. While Korean immigrants are certainly not viewed as valuable as whites, my assessment of state management of the rioters suggests that it was driven less by racism against Asian Americans as by antiblack racism.

Finally, the abandonment narrative suggests that Asian Americans are not related to the conflict between the state and the rioter or serve no purpose for either side. I examined President George H. W. Bush’s speeches given the month following the 1992 riots to determine how he constructed the riots in general and the rioters and victims in regard to one another. I found that Bush was publicly sympathetic to Korean immigrant entrepreneurs and condemned the rioters on their behalf. Additionally, Bush intimated that Korean immigrants were foreigners, or at least newcomers to American society, but he also suggested a sense of identification with their pain, thereby implying that politically, he could relate to them. This public empathy with Korean immigrant entrepreneurs was grounded in a larger condemnation of the rioters who, in Bush’s assessment, demonstrated America’s vulnerability.

As I stated at the beginning of this article, my effort is not motivated simply by an interest in empirical accuracy but more so by wanting to address the abandonment narrative’s political implications. Specifically, I am concerned with how the abandonment narrative has served to define
what we think we know about black-Korean or black-Asian conflict. Despite suggestions that the black-Korean or black-Asian conflict is largely a media concoction (Cho 1993; Lie and Abelmann 1999), there is conflict between blacks and Asians and a material basis for this antagonism. Yet black-Asian conflict is generally depicted in a way that draws its moral force from the Asian American abandonment narrative. That is, by juxtaposing Korean immigrants as being unfairly attacked by blacks and then abandoned by the state—and in the process, erase the Latino rioters from the story—Asian Americans can continue to avoid materially locating themselves in the 1992 L.A. Riots and in relation to the different parties involved.

NOTES

While I had conducted research regarding both the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and Black-Asian relations in general before engaging the work of Jared Sexton, his research is invaluable for my current understanding of Asian American approaches to Black-Asian relations. The following writings of Sexton inform the line of inquiry undertaken in this paper: “Properties of Coalition between Blacks and Asians,” which originates from the paper “The Specter of Violence in U.S. Black-Asian Relations”; and “Raw Life: An Introduction,” written with Huey Copeland.

1. For a particularly nuanced reading of how Asian American Studies scholars address Korean immigrant entrepreneurs’ material relationship to Black communities, see Jared Sexton’s unpublished “Properties of Coalition between Blacks and Asians.”

2. For an insightful discussion about how the call to “go beyond black and white” informs race theorizing and the implications this has for dealing with blackness, see Sexton and Copeland’s “Raw Life: An Introduction” (2003).

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CA: Stanford University Press.


## APPENDIX

**Timeline of Military Intervention in the 1992 Los Angeles Riots**

### Chronology of the 1992 Los Angeles Riots

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 April</td>
<td>1515</td>
<td>Acquittal verdicts announced in the trial of police officers accused of beating Rodney King.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1850</td>
<td>Rioters beat and nearly kill truck driver Reginald Denny as a television crew captures both the horror of the incident and the absence of Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officers. Hundreds of arson and looting incidents begin.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2100</td>
<td>The California governor’s office informs the adjutant general that the governor has decided to mobilize (call to state active duty) 2000 California National Guard (CANG) troops at the request of the LA mayor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 April</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>A dusk-to-dawn curfew is imposed in large portions of the city of LA and the surrounding county.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0400</td>
<td>Approximately 2,000 CANG soldiers have reported to armories.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1100</td>
<td>Los Angeles County requests 2,000 more CANG personnel; the governor approves the request.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>Ammunition from Camp Roberts (in central California) arrives in LA area via CH-47 helicopter.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1435</td>
<td>The first CANG elements (two military police companies) deploy in support of the LAPD and the LA Sheriff’s Department (LASD).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>About 1,000 CANG troops are currently deployed “on the street,” with more than 1,000 more prepared to deploy and awaiting mission requests from law enforcement agencies.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2356</td>
<td>LAPD and LASD request 2,000 additional CANG troops, for a total of 6,000.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 May</td>
<td>0100</td>
<td>Perceiving the CANG deployment to be too slow, the governor requests federal troops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0515</td>
<td>The president agrees to deploy 4000 federal troops to LA.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0630</td>
<td>Approximately 1,220 CANG soldiers are deployed in support of LAPD, 1,600 are deployed in support of LASD, and 2,700 are in reserve awaiting missions.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1430</td>
<td>Active component Marines from Camp Pendleton, California, begin arriving in the LA area via convoy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1630</td>
<td>Commander, Joint Task Force-Los Angeles (JTF-LA) arrives in LA area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1730</td>
<td>Active component soldiers from Ft. Ord, California, begin arriving in the LA area via C-141 aircraft.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>The president announces that the CANG will be federalized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 May</td>
<td>0400</td>
<td>Final plane with active component soldiers arrives.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1100 Approximately 6,150 CANG troops are deployed on the street, with 1,000 more in reserve; 1,850 soldiers from the 7th Infantry Division are in staging areas; Marines prepare for deployment.

1900 First active component troops deploy on the street; a battalion of Marines replaces 600 CANG soldiers.

2359 More than 6,900 CANG soldiers are deployed, with 2,700 more in reserve. Approximately 600 Marines are deployed, but most active component Army and Marine Corps personnel remain in staging areas.

9 May 1200 CANG reverts to state status, ending federalization; active component forces begin redeploying home.

13–27 May — CANG releases troops from state active duty, returning them to “part-time” status.

*Reproduced from Schnaubelt (1997).*