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Remapping Koreatown: Folklore, Narrative and the Los Angeles Riots

TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI

On April 29, 1992, in reaction to the acquittal of the four police officers charged with the beating of Rodney King, Los Angeles exploded into one of the most destructive episodes of civil unrest in American history. Originally centered at the intersection of Florence Avenue and Normandie Avenue in the South Central district, acts of violence, looting and arson quickly spread to other parts of the city (Jencks 1993, 79-80). Koreatown, situated just to the north of South Central, found itself directly in the path of this maelstrom of destruction. As a result of the widespread arson that accompanied the looting of stores, large parts of the man-made environment were essentially erased from the landscape. In the aftermath of the riots, a landscape that had been defined by the spatial practices of the people who worked and lived in these areas had been deeply scarred and, in some instances, reduced to rubble. The text of the city, particularly in these two neighborhoods, had been forcibly rewritten by the destruction, and the earlier man-made landscape could only be interpolated through a palimpsestic rereading of the city. Although committees to both study the cause and effects of the riots and to rebuild Los Angeles were almost immediately established, in the considerable period between the physical destruction of places—and the implicit challenge to identities associated with those places embodied in that destruction—and the envisioned phoenix-like rise of a rebuilt Los Angeles from the ashes, a reinscription of place and, by extension, identity was well underway in Koreatown through the tactical deployment of culturally informed practices, among them traditional performances and personal experience narratives (de Certeau 1984, xix). In both cases, the streets of Koreatown became a primary focus of these folkloric performances. By “taking it to the streets,” both in performance and through performance, Korean

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Americans began reasserting control of the contested spaces of Koreatown (Lees 1998:238; Berman 1986).

A majority of the scholarship on the 1992 Los Angeles riots focuses on the political, social and cultural causes of the violence with little exploration of the folkloric aspects of the event (Chang 1994; Gooding-Williams 1993; Salak 1993; Hazen 1992; Los Angeles Times 1992). Considerations of the effects of the riots on specific ethnic communities and on Los Angeles as a whole are plentiful (Park, E. 1998; Totten and Schockman 1994; Chang 1994; Chang 1993; Madhubuti 1993; Navarro 1993; Stewart 1993; Kwong 1992), while a number of studies have focused on the tensions between the Korean American community and the African American community, both from short term riot specific perspectives (Cho 1993) and from longer term historical perspectives (Aubry 1993; Chang 1990; Chang and Leong 1994; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1996; Park, K 1997). Perhaps the most complete consideration of Korean Americans in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots is provided by Nancy Abellmann and John Lie (1995). Their approach fuses a historical sociological evaluation of Koreans in America and southern California with an ethnographic exploration of the effects of the riots on Korean Americans drawn from a broad generational and class spectrum in the greater Los Angeles area. Their study ultimately ranges far beyond the scope of the Los Angeles riots and they conclude by suggesting that, “the complexities-confusions of Korean American politics refract the major political and ideological struggles of our time: the persisting divides of ethnicity and class, the meaning and morality of community, and conflicts over gender and multiculturalism” (Abellmann and Lie 1995, 185). Despite the validity of these conclusions, their broad approach, unfortunately, sheds little light on the folkloric dimension of the Korean American responses to the riots—responses that were intimately related to a well-developed sense of place.

The riots were in large part about place. While the riots were not the territorial warfare that nations frequently engage in, nor even the violent battles over neighborhood fought out by street gangs (although this may have played some role in the riots), the riots instead posed a direct challenge to the spatial practices of self-defined ethnic communities. In the case of Koreatown, the riots impacted a space that had been transformed into highly specified and culturally charged places by Korean Americans, Latinos and African Americans all living and working in close proximity to one another. The challenge to the claims of these groups’ rights to define these places accordingly echo the questions posed by Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 11): “Who has the power to make places of spaces? Who contests
this? What is at stake?" These questions, in turn, lay at the very roots of the riots.

Geographers and anthropologists alike have long commented on the connection between place and identity (Pile 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Sorkin 1992b; Logan and Molotch 1987; Malkki 1992; Appadurai 1988; Clifford 1988; Carter, Donald and Squires 1993). Furthermore, geographers of Los Angeles have begun articulating a theory of postmodern geography that problematizes the notion of monolithic definitions of place and the idea of a singular connection between place and identity (Soja 1989; Sorkin 1992a; Davis 1990; Robins 1993; Davis 1996). In this postmodern geography, places defined by earlier groups are reinterpreted by recent arrivals. The transnational circulation of people contributes to a Los Angeles landscape in which different groups—defined both by ethnicity and class among other things—overlap, thus providing multiple and at times conflicting interpretations of one and the same place (Soja 1989). Edward Soja mentions that "the new topography of race, class, gender, age, income, and ethnicity has produced an incendiary urban geography in Los Angeles, a landscape filled with violent edges, colliding turfs, unstable boundaries, peculiarly juxtaposed lifespaces, and enclaves of outrageous wealth and despair" (Soja 1996, 448). Gupta and Ferguson add, "In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been reterritorialized in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized high modernity" (1992, 9, their italics). Instead, as Robins notes, "new kinds of networks—physical and virtual—subvert 'traditional' territorial formations, deconstructing and recomposing them in more complex ways. In the process, established forms of urban community, culture and sensibility are disrupted" (1993, 318). The disrupted landscape of conflicting, intersecting, overlapping, contradictory and multivalent meanings describes well the status of Koreatown in 1992.

Charles Jencks views the spatial developments of Los Angeles as explicitly postmodern and proposes that in the city, "immigrants assimilate in some ways—economically, legally, technically—and still remain culturally distinct," adding that this distinctness is preferable to the "melting pot" cliché, since "culture is, in the end, what makes life worth living—the peculiar values, customs, ideas, and religious practices which are always historical" (Jencks 1993, 104). Jenck's view might be overly optimistic in his assessment of the positive impact of this differentiation, or even the ability of these distinctions to persevere in anything but the most reified form, such as the proliferation of commodified representations of an entire culture, a view proposed by Soja, who sees Los Angeles as a series of
overlapping cultural Disneylands, simulacra of other parts of the world, historically sanitized and made compact (Dear 1996, 85; Soja 1992). In the case of Koreatown, a more appropriate view than that of Jencks may be that of Michael Sorkin, who notes that “the city has historically mapped several relations with profound clarity, imprinting in its shapes and places vast information about status and power” (Dear 1996, 78), thus acknowledging the potential for multiple, simultaneous—at times competing—claims for a particular place and the implicit power relationship that informs those claims.

Koreatown is perhaps one of the best examples in Los Angeles of an area that has had such a history of overlapping uses, and an area in which social relations, and ethnic identities, are mapped clearly onto the man-made urban landscape in newly emergent hybrid forms. These mappings, in turn, are negotiated on a daily basis in tactical and non-violent ways by the people who circulate in this neighborhood (de Certeau 1983, xix). Not until the riots did these low-level, day-to-day skirmishes concerning negotiations of power and place explode into a full-scale battle. When it did, however, the attempted reinscriptions of place were fought out on a block-by-block basis on the streets that criss-cross the town, mirroring Loretta Lees’s notion that “the street provides an urban space where ‘subversive forces, forces of rupture, ludic forces act and meet’” (Lees 1998, 237; Barthes 1986, 96). In the aftermath of the riots, these very same streets became a locus for a peaceful reassertion of the Korean American connection to the area. In this sense, in post riot Koreatown, as Gupta and Ferguson suggest, “Territoriality [was]...reinscribed at just the point it [was] threaten[ed] to be erased” (1992, 11).

Koreatown received official designation as a community by the city of Los Angeles in 1980, although the area had been a magnet for Korean businesses at least since the late 1960s. The “town” is loosely bounded by Pico Boulevard to the south, Crenshaw Avenue to the west, Hoover Street to the east, and Beverly Boulevard to the north, although any attempts to put distinct boundaries on the area are doomed to failure (Kim Yong Mok 1994, 6). In fact, nearly every person familiar with Koreatown proposes slightly different boundaries for it and one should consider some of the narrative responses to the riots as attempts to determine the boundaries of the area, to establish a cognitive map, both prior to and after the riots. In a discussion of the folkloric process of cognitive map-making, Ryder points out that “we draw...cognitive maps as a result of our needs and experiences in a particular environment. Depending as they do largely on experience, they tend to be highly subjective” (Ryder 1993, 54). In light of
Gupta and Ferguson's (1992, 11) remarks on the power relationships that inform notions of place, and concomitant to the subjective nature of these cognitive maps, it is clear that such mental images are also highly politicized.

Unlike the enclaves considered by Abrahamson (1996), Koreatown is not monolithically dominated by people of Korean heritage or their stores and businesses. Although Korean language signs are ubiquitous throughout the area, so too are Spanish language and English language signs. While Soja suggests that Los Angeles in 1992 was a “cosmopolis” where “scores of different cultural worlds collided without mixing” (Soja 1996, 458), Koreatown at that time was more a locus where these different cultural worlds overlapped, writing themselves simultaneously onto one and the same space. The signed landscape of Koreatown presented (and still presents) a person walking or driving along any of its streets with a multilingual landscape. This landscape, in turn, enables multiple, overlapping interpretations of the area. The signs that label stores and businesses are not insignificant features of the landscape since they provide clues to the circulation of goods and services and, in the case of “foreign” language signage, give clues to the ethnic background of intended customers (Kim S. 1997, 58; Cresswell 1998, 268; Crouch 1998, 172). Sojin Kim adds that Koreatown, as opposed to Chinatown or Boyle Heights, “quickly carved out a distinctive landscape using signs to distinguish the area and create a visual impression of a Korean neighborhood” (Kim S. 1997, 77).

For the person who reads only Korean, the landscape appears as a predominantly Korean one, mimicking the dense landscapes of Seoul or Pusan. Indeed, many of the signs that line the streets make specific references to establishments in Korea, emphasizing in this manner a close connection to Korea. For those intimately familiar with Korean place names and the regional politics of South Korea, the cues offered by the signed landscape allows for a greater sense of the role regionalism plays in the particularization of segments of the Korean American community. For the person who reads only Spanish, the landscape appears significantly different—intelligible but with a clearly Korean (yet indecipherable) element to it. The mix of stores is also considerably less diverse, with small markets, street vendors, lunch trucks and the occasional botanica constituting the bulk of predominantly Spanish language establishments. For the person who reads neither Korean nor Spanish, the signed landscape presents yet another face—one that is predominantly “foreign”—punctuated occasionally by the icons of well-known fast-food restaurants (Kim S. 1997, 78; Abrahamson 1996, 77). Interestingly, signs that sport seeming
English translations are often misleading. “Pyŏnghwa Sijang” or “Peace Market”—a swapmeet rebuilt in the aftermath of the riots—translates on its sign as “Champion Market,” for example. In this sense, the seeming accessibility of the signed landscape is simply an illusion. Of course, there are people who have multiple linguistic (and cultural) competencies, thus further complicating the potential interpretations of place (Abelmann and Lie 1995). Ultimately, the landscape—and the semiotic tags attached to that landscape—provide visitors and residents alike with a multivalent text, one that can be read in various ways wholly dependent on the linguistic and, to a certain extent, cultural competencies of the individual observer. As Michael Keith notes, “The street is both a state of consciousness and a locus of meaning, a way of thinking about the world and a semiotic source of dramaturgical keys and cues. As such it is...a particularly powerful illustration of the manner in which a vocabulary of the city renders the social visible” (Keith 1995, 310).

Koreatown is for many Korean Americans much more than simply a high density agglomeration of stores catering to the specific needs of the large Korean heritage population in Southern California (Kim E. 1993; Cho 1993; Abelmann and Lie 1995). Rather, the town acts as an anchor of identity, a referent point in the vast multicultural landscape of late twentieth century Los Angeles and, as such, echoes Gupta and Ferguson’s observation “that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 10). It is this intensification of the idea of cultural and ethnic relationship to place that in part accounts for the response of Korean Americans in the aftermath of the riots. Even for those Korean Americans who had no direct connection to Koreatown, the conceptually mapped area still acted as an imagined source for a sense of cultural identity that had roots in Korea but was anchored now in America (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 11; Abelmann and Lie 1995, 85). In short, Koreatown in 1992 served an important role in the collective imaginings of a Korean American identity (Anderson 1991). As Soja rightfully points out, by the early 1990s, a “recharging of locale and spatial location with active political attachment and identity...spread to the poorest neighborhoods,” (Soja 1996, 450) Koreatown included, so that the area was charged not only with aspects of identity of the imagined Korean American community, but also with the active imaginings of various Latino communities as well. The forceful erasure of a significant element in this political imagining of identity—in this case, a part of town that held value as a “staging settlement” for Koreans—
resulted in a far more elaborate response from Korean Americans than would have been expected if Koreatown had been untouched.

Immediately after the riots, large parts of Koreatown no longer bore the markers that identified area stores and businesses as predominantly Korean American owned or serving a Korean heritage clientele. Instead, landmarks had disappeared from the landscape making previous patterns of circulation and day-to-day navigation irrelevant. What was left were the traces of businesses and a landscape that bore the scars of several days of protracted burning, looting and fighting. For those people who read the landscape as predominantly Korean, the immediate need was to reconstitute icons of identity that were closely associated with place. Two of the most effective tactics deployed by Korean Americans in the considerable time between the end of the riots and the beginning of the replacement of concrete manifestations of Korean heritage and Korean American identity in the landscape were the public staging of culturally informed performances in Koreatown and the repeated telling of narratives that emphasized place.

The peace rally at Ardmore Park and march for solidarity through Koreatown on May 2 was perhaps the most public of the various culturally informed performances enacted by Korean Americans in Koreatown in the immediate aftermath of the riots. Attended by more than 10,000 people according to police estimates, the route of the march—west on Olympic Boulevard to Western Avenue, north to Third Street and finally east to Vermont Avenue—was confined to Koreatown and went directly past many businesses that had been burned or looted during the riots (Park, W 1994, 201; Ong and Hee 1993, 78-104). The demands and complaints of the demonstrators were numerous—accusations that the police and fire departments had responded slowly or not at all to calls for assistance from Koreatown merchants, complaints that FEMA and other state and federal agencies were dragging their feet, and appeals for solidarity among the various communities that comprise the multicultural fabric of Los Angeles (Park, W. 1994, 201-205). In the case of this rally, Korean Americans literally “took it to the streets,” and enacted what Don Mitchell has theorized, namely that “on the streets...marginalised groups [can] make themselves publicly (and thus politically) visible enough ‘to be counted as legitimate members of the polity’” (Lees 1998, 237; Mitchell 1995, 115). Apart from the explicit political goals of the rally, marchers made use of particular Korean expressive forms that implicitly linked the demonstration to the minjung movement in South Korea and, simultaneously, endeavored to rewrite a Korean American identity onto the landscape.
Among the most explicit of the Korean cultural enactments incorporated into the demonstration was the use of farmer’s band music (p’ungmul, nong’ak) as musical accompaniment to the march. The use of p’ungmul as part of the protest made two immediate connections—one that linked the march to the minjung movement and student protest in Korea, and one that made a direct reference to the spatial organization of Korean American businesses in Koreatown. In Korea, it is not uncommon for p’ungmul groups to play during demonstrations as the music is considered to be a sonic and visual representation of the culture of the minjung, the disenfranchised masses who have been subjugated historically by the ruling elites (Choi 1995, 108; Kim 1994). Accordingly, the use of p’ungmul during the May 2 rally in Koreatown invoked the rhetoric of minjung struggle for audiences familiar with Korean politics. Coupled with the demonstrators’ calls for solidarity among communities of color, an intriguing correlation was implicitly made between the Korean minjung and these communities of color (Chang 1993, 11). Ironically, this correlation was only accessible to audiences familiar with the history of minjung struggle in Korea. In the inaccessibility of the message to a non-Korean audience, the implicit equation mimicked the Korean language signs that defined the landscape prior to the riots. Accordingly, at the moment of reaching out to make a connection between the Korean American struggle and the struggle of other disenfranchised groups in America, the potentiality of that very connection was undermined by the very premise of the connection itself.

Another aspect of the p’ungmul performances during the May 2 demonstration—and once again an aspect only accessible to those familiar with Korean American culture in Koreatown—was its clear link to the New Year practice of chisin palpgi (earth spirit treading) during which nong’ak groups wander from business to business in Koreatown playing in return for “good luck” money. The chisin palpgi performance chases away dangerous spirits that could threaten the businesses in the coming year. Beyond its folk belief function, the practice, known primarily from rural Korean villages, also serves to map the community. By transferring the practice to the dense urban landscape of Los Angeles, the farmers’ bands and the Korean businesses that participate in the event make an implicit reference to the sense of community in Koreatown (effectively equating it with a village) and simultaneously delimit the boundaries of this newly imagined village. Members of one of the p’ungmul groups that played during the demonstration explicitly referred to the link between the New Year’s practice and the May 2 performance, with one of my informants saying,
“We played in the demonstration for two reasons: to show the businesses that support us that we support them as well and to emphasize that Koreatown is our kohyang (home village) now.” When the p’ungmul group tours the Koreatown businesses at the New Year, they essentially map, with their music, the spatial organization of Koreatown. Appearing in the march through Koreatown in the aftermath of the riots, the p’ungmul group engaged a remarkably similar process. Through the deployment of this quite specific performance—a performance that’s multilayered message was only accessible to those familiar both with Korean politics and practices of Korean American groups in Koreatown—the p’ungmul group contributed significantly to the reinscription of Korean American identity onto the damaged landscape.

Other aspects of the march made further reference to the tradition of protest in Korea, and thus furthered the role of the march as one designed to reclaim—or rewrite—the erased markers of Korean American identity. Chants accompanied by rhythmic clapping and elaborate hand gestures, banners written in Korean, and the use of headbands (traditionally associated with peasants’ dress (Kim Kwang-ok 1994, 196), as well as dangerous, even sacrificial, quests to protect communal integrity) were clear visual elements that made direct reference to the protest movements in post-liberation era South Korea. Once again, much like the Korean language signs that so marked the landscape prior to the riots, these were visual signs found in a clearly described environment (here, a Koreatown mapped by the procession of the demonstrators through the streets) that made direct reference to Korean heritage and Korean American identity and whose thick meaning was inaccessible to those who could neither understand Korean nor had any knowledge of Korean protest movements (Geertz 1973). This inaccessibility of meaning was not necessarily a deliberate, or even conscious, gesture on the part of the march participants—and certainly not intended to be provocative—but rather symptomatic of the extraordinary cultural complexity of the riots and their aftermath. Ultimately, one can view the May 2 march as serving an inscriptive function alongside its expressed political function. Through the deployment of Korean cultural enactments of Korean heritage and Korean American identity, the demonstrators performed culturally meaningful spatially situated acts that began the process of reinscribing the erased legacy of the Korean language signs that once marked Koreatown as Korean American. Like a scribe retracing the palimpsest of a hidden text, the cultural performances (explicit and implicit) during the protest march began the process of reproducing the environmental text of Koreatown.
Another intriguing reinscription of Korean identity onto the charred landscape emerged in Korean Americans’ personal experience narratives detailing the riots. Since the riots were about place, and the aftermath so clearly involved place, it is not surprising that many of my Korean American informants made frequent, persistent use of geographic referents (street names, descriptions of buildings, landmarks) in their stories. Nearly all of the personal experience narratives I collected also emphasized the connection between place and identity. The challenges to place—particularly to Koreatown, but also to Korean American owned businesses throughout Los Angeles—posed by the riots were all presented by the narrators as challenges to identity and, ultimately, to the legitimacy of the Korean American community in Los Angeles (and in the United States).

From a folkloristic perspective, perhaps the most fascinating response to the riots was this narrative one. Riot narratives—primarily personal experience narratives but also the occasional second or third hand account—fall into two main categories, namely narratives told by people who participated in or were first-hand witnesses to the events in Koreatown, and narratives told by people who only saw the events on television. In either case, the narrators emphasized aspects of place in their stories. The role that place plays in narrative is one that has been considered in detail by folklorists (Nicolaisen 1980, 1991; Ryder 1993), geographers (Tuan 1991), and psychologists (Anderson and Schooler 1991; Bahrick 1983). Part of the narrative process is clearly linked to memory, and memory is to a great extent informed by spatial imagery (Paivio 1971 and 1976; Rubin 1995, 49-63). Narrators have conceptual images both of Koreatown and of the riots, and these images in large part guide their narration (Ryder 1993). In the process of narrating, the pre-riot images of Koreatown are mapped onto the post-riot space, recalling and, through this memorializing, reestablishing the pre-riot Koreatown. For many narrators, remembering a story is akin to watching a film—as the film unfolds in the mind so too does the story (Rubin 1995, 60). In the case of riot narratives, the main action in the film is that of the riot, while the background, the setting, is Koreatown. Accordingly, even as a narrator tells of the destruction of Koreatown (or in some cases the defense of Koreatown), a strong image of Koreatown emerges. The images of the riot, for some narrators played out directly in front of them and for others projected onto a television screen, though primarily images of destruction, are also images of constructed place. Through the recall of the events in place, the place reemerges as a conceptually mapped area. Even though a narrative may concern the destruction of Koreatown, simply by recalling Koreatown, the
narrator rejects the notion of a destroyed Koreatown and, consequently, narratively reconstitutes it.

The majority of riot narratives told by people not directly involved with the violent destruction in Koreatown recount images primarily gleaned from the television. Raphael Kim, a young Korean American whose parents' booth at a swapmeet was burned, provides the following account:

Our store got hit. It was in South Central, it was at Broadway and Manchester. And that night I was watching you know TV and stuff and my mom called and stuff... Now, Broadway and Manchester is pretty much South Central area and it was an indoor swapmeet. You know other Koreans they have their business in that area, its an indoor swapmeet. And that night, I wasn’t really worried, like I thought there’s gonna be police, there’s gonna be protection, National Guard’s there, its gonna be protected. My mom called and she was really worried and my dad was like what do you think I should do, and I said don’t go out there, just don’t worry about it, its gonna be protected. And after that around 10 o’clock I was watching the news, and a helicopter kind of went by—it was a helicopter shot right? The picture on the screen was a real close one and it was our shop. People were going in and out and looting and stuff. I was speechless. And after that we said, “OK fine, if its looted that’s OK, but please don’t get burned.” And then a couple of hours later there was another helicopter shot goes by and its in flames. Its all over. And then my parents called and they were pretty upset. I was still shocked, I couldn’t believe that this was going on. There was a huge building that we were in and the whole thing burned and all the way down the street that was all burned, it was looted across the street, and that area was really hot. It was really a hot area and we couldn’t go back until like four days later. Four days later like all the merchants got together who had their stores there and they all went down together and saw that it was totally demolished. I saw it too and all the metal was burnt. It was a basement and the whole place was a mess. It was horrible.

In the narrative, the repeated fly-overs of a television helicopter provide information about a now inaccessible place. The narrative is punctuated by laughter, likely a commentary on the surreal nature of watching one’s parents’ livelihood burn on television. An intriguing element of his story—and stories like it—is the inaccessibility of the store. Here, what was once coded as a Korean American business area is now recoded as a site of violence. However, through the narrative’s resolution, in which he accom-
panies his father and other merchants to the damaged store site, Raphael is able to narratively reclaim this place and begin the process, at least conceptually, of reestablishing the space as a well-defined Korean American place.

Michael Lee, a student from Orange County, who was studying at UCLA during the spring of 1992, provides the following account of the riots, once again foregrounding the role television played in many Angelenos’ experience of the riots:

The whole shebang was on TV. And when I heard them mention Koreatown, for some reason it kind of sounds bad, but it just didn’t hit me until the minute they said Koreatown, it hit home, right there. And I was like, “Oh my gosh, I know that street,” or, you know, “I know that store that is getting burned down,” because when you see it and when you’ve been there before and when you know it, it’s a whole different thing. I just heard that it was centralizing around Koreatown and I took that personally. For the first time it really hit me personally. I have friends’ parents who have stores there, and also I have distant family members that live there or live right next to there. My ex-girlfriend, her parents live only fifteen or twenty minutes away from there, so it was kind of scary. I just remember being really shocked about it and then I remember the next couple of days with the Korean shop owners taking control, and you know how they have guns and things like that and they were on top of their roofs, protecting their stores. I remember some of my friends who were non Koreans saying, “That’s so stupid, why are they doing that? They shouldn’t be out there.” Whatever. And I felt like for some reason I just knew I would have done the same thing if I was in their position because they come here—what other people don’t understand is that they come here with nothing and they spend their whole lives building those shops and to see it go down without them, being helpless it just doesn’t seem right. That store is their life basically. There’s a reason why there’s a Koreatown and the whole idea about being Korean is important. You can’t forget the Korean in Korean American.

In his account, Michael points out the importance of Koreatown as a touchstone for ethnic identity. He admits to having little experience in Koreatown itself, instead noting the role that the area plays as a conceptual category. When he encounters the images of Korean businesses burning on the television—and the passionate defense of those businesses by masked Korean Americans—he feels that his identity as a Korean American
is under attack. His narrative account of the riots conjures up both the image of Koreatown—and thus makes explicit his conceptual mapping of the area—and the image of the riot—and thus makes explicit the threat the forceful remapping of that area poses to his conceptualization of Korean American identity.

Among the most common stories told immediately following the riots detailed aspects of the police response. Michael Kang tells one variant of this oft-repeated story:

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.

This story was quite popular in the Korean American community, and even informants from as far away as New York could provide fairly detailed versions, such as the following told by Yong-mi Park:

YMP: Did you hear what happened in Koreatown?
TRT: How could I avoid hearing about it?
YMP: No, do you know what the police did? Do you know why it happened in Koreatown? I heard that when the rioting started, the police blocked off all the streets leading into the nice neighborhoods and around USC, so all of the rioters were funneled into Koreatown. You see, there was no way for them to go but to Koreatown, and once they got there, they couldn't go any further, so all of the looting and violence got centered in Koreatown.

The story appeals to concepts of the spatial organization of the town, as well as the notion that the town is threatened by the Other—in this case, people from other ethnically and geographically defined communities. The narratives also highlight the perception among many Korean Americans that, despite their impressive economic and social gains over the past thirty years, they have yet to be accorded the same status—and protections—that other, predominantly white, groups enjoy. The narratives work simultaneously as a mapping of the town and as an expression of outrage. In this
sense, the stories are deeply political, tying together notions of identity, space and the hegemonic orderings of ethnicities in multicultural Los Angeles. Interestingly, just as the May 2 march made implicit references to the protest movements of the past three decades in Korea, these narratives invoke similar references to narratives of dissent and resistance from Korea. Perhaps the clearest link that can be drawn is one between these Los Angeles narratives of non-response and, in some cases, conspiratorial neglect and those concerning the Kwangju uprising in 1980 in South Korea.

Stories about the Kwangju uprisings often mention the role that the American government played in the tragic events (Clark 1988; Chang 1988; Pak 1990, 225-253; Han’guk kija hyŏphoe 1997). In these stories, narrators emphasize that the American military first released ROK troops to Cholla province and later refused to intervene in what clearly had become a massacre (Clark 1988; Chang 1988; Pak 1990, 225-253; Han’guk kija hyŏphoe 1997). These stories of non-response to violent events in a clearly defined place—Kwangju as the capital of Cholla province is considered by many the spatial center for the minjung movement—resonate remarkably well with the Los Angeles stories of non-response and, in the most extreme cases, government collusion in the targeted destruction of Koreatown. In both cases, blame for the tragedy is laid squarely at the feet of American authorities. Of course, in Kwangju, the attackers were government soldiers whereas in Los Angeles, they were an ill-defined and largely amorphous group of citizens. In a bizarre refiguration of stories about the collusion between American and Korean authorities in Kwangju, several of my informants told me stories that the Korean government had sent a special detachment of riot police to train and equip the Los Angeles Police Department. While these narratives clearly represent an extreme position, stories about police refusing to respond or deliberately blocking streets to funnel the progress of the riots into Koreatown echo the accusations leveled at the American military in Kwangju, namely a refusal to respond to cries for help emanating from the citizenry of Kwangju and, in some accounts, surrounding the city while the government troops “mopped up” within the city’s borders. In both cases—Los Angeles and Kwangju—the narrators, through their frequent appeal to place names and other features of the man-made environment, not only map the perceived injustices onto a now politically charged space, but also reconstitute that space—at least in the narrative—despite the very destruction of that space.

Far more dramatic than the riot narratives told by those who witnessed the events on television are those told by people who were in Kore-
atown during the actual events. Among my informants were several members of the Korean Young Adult Team (*Hanin Ch'6ngny6ndan*) who had all participated in the protection—at times armed—of Koreatown businesses during the height of the riots.17 Their stories, and in particular the elaborate narrative of Kim Min-ki, make clear the importance of place as a seminal aspect of the riot experience, as well as the clear connection between identity and place. Kim Min-ki told his story one evening nearly a year after the riots, the narrative occasionally interrupted by corrections and emendations by another member of the group:

During the riots, the National Guard didn’t come and the police stayed out of Koreatown. At first, we were blocking Olympic and Western, because Koreatown, before the Koreans came, was nothing. Nobody lived here, there were only prostitutes. Olympic and Western is very important for our people, it is like a center, so that’s why we were protecting it. A bit past midnight we had some trouble when we were blocking the intersection. Two black people came up and were swearing at us, so one of our team members started shooting up into the air. Then at Normandie and Olympic, or near to that intersection, we had some more trouble. The rioters came and our members were protecting the stores, and so we were fighting over there. So we had something like two or three people injured there, they had gunshot wounds. Then we went over to Olympic and Vermont, at the corner there, people were robbing and looting, so we went over there and shot up into the air. Not at the people. We shot into the air.

Then we heard about things happening just on the border of South Central, that a store was being looted, so two of our team members went over there and we had some more problems. That was our first encounter with the police. The police arrested some of our team members. That was the first time. So, on the first day, we were over at Eighth and Vermont—there’s a store there called Cosmos Electric—and they started to loot. Now one of our guys there had a .38 revolver, and so he shot about six times into the air, and so all the looters left. They went somewhere. They got scared away.

On the second day we were still protecting our town, Koreatown. I think there was a fire for the first time in the town, somewhere between Third and Fourth streets, on New Hampshire. They had built an apartment building there, it was under construction, and somebody lit that on fire. That was the first fire in Koreatown. Nobody lived there and the firemen didn’t come, because on the first
day, I’d heard, when the firemen were working, somebody shot a fireman, so the firemen wouldn’t come. A few hours later over at the Kaju Market, or near to Kaju Market, at the Western Gun Shop, they tried to loot, but since our members were protecting Kaju Market, it was very close to the gun shop, the market, so they shot up into the air. One of our members had a rifle with a scope on it, so he shot just under the store sign, and so they left. I think about 9:15 or almost 10 o’clock, we heard that a few of our members had gone to Eighth Street and Oxford, the news said that three people were up on the roof, and they were protecting over there at Eighth and Oxford. There are some department stores and other stores, and so they were protecting that area. Then some of our group went to Eighth and Oxford. These other guys were protecting their place and we didn’t know that, since it was dark. I just heard about it. So they thought that we were looters, that’s why I think they shot our members. The employees of the store. And one of our guys died, everybody knows his name, and another guy got a bullet wound. Maybe two guys were wounded, I don’t remember.

Then over at Western and Third Street, I think that was a Shell gas station, we were protecting over there too. There was one guy, he’s dead now, his nickname was Dok-sa. I liked him very much because he protected our town.... Some people looted the furniture shop, and he went over there and he got a big stick and he hit a lot of people and chased them away. Three guys across the block they were jeering and were swearing at him and he went over there alone and hit them and then he came back to the store. He was a leader of the protectors of the gas station. I liked him a lot, but after the riot he got killed. He got shot and was killed.

Then on the third day I went out on patrol at about midnight. I went downtown. My car is an estate wagon, so there were seven of us in it, we had white head bands around our head. We went downtown, but downtown was very quiet then, nothing was happening because there were a lot of police patrols. But in our town there were almost no police. No police. Then on the third day we were protecting Kaju market, on the rooftop. Other days were a little better than the first three days. After the riot, I had a lot of nightmares about the riots for three days. Somebody was trying to kill me. I had a gun and bullets and everything, but when I tried to shoot, the bullets were too small, so when I put them into the gun, they’d just slide through. I had these dreams for like three days. Other members still have
nightmares about the riots.
The account, which at times sounds more like a litany of street names and intersections than anything else, conceptually maps Koreatown and locates within that space challenges to the integrity of the localized community. His story—a running chronology of events—positions him and his “teammates” within the threatened landscape, where they emerge as champions of their “town” and protectors of the well-spring of the Korean American community. Without doubt, the narrative lends a certain coherence to events that were largely unstructured or even downright chaotic at the time. Interestingly, the coherence of the events is one that is spatially determined and mapped almost entirely within the confines of Koreatown.

The retelling of events many months after the riot serves multiple purposes. On one level, the narrative contributes to the creation of a sense of watchful readiness among the team members who, at the time of narration, were still actively engaged in patrolling Koreatown (Gabriel 1991:869). In the context of the telling—a meeting of the young adult team—the narrative was used as evidence for the need to keep vigilant. Many of the team members expressed a sincere belief that an event similar to the 1992 riots would likely occur again and, in numerous comments, they vowed that this time they would not be caught unawares. On a second level, the narrative traces the familiar streets of Koreatown—“our town” as the narrator expresses it—thereby emphasizing the Korean American identity of the physical space. On a third level, by recalling the defense of places that weathered the storm of the riots, as well as mentioning places that were destroyed by the riots, the narrator effectively reconstructs Koreatown. On a final level, by incorporating the narrative of official non-response to Korean American appeals for help (a non-response that contrasts sharply with the effective response of the narrator and his teammates), the narrator constructs an oppositional category, “us” versus “them” or Korean American versus non-Korean American, that charges both the narrative and the location detailed in the narrative with the politics of ethnicity and class in late twentieth century Los Angeles.

An even closer connection between narrative and location emerges in the story of another informant, Su-wŏn Yi, also a member of a Korean American defense group. He told his story while driving the streets of Koreatown, linking the narrative flow to physical places that he sought out on this drive. At times stopping and standing out on the sidewalk, Yi told stories of particular events that happened in those very places. While driving from one riot destination to the next, he told more general stories of the riots, punctuated by accounts of police non-response and his own views on
the problems of class and ethnicity in Los Angeles. In the case of his stories, locational cues clearly called to mind events. By telling stories in the very location they had occurred, Yi effectively reinscribed the events onto the landscape. Ultimately, the result of this both physically and narratively peripatetic recounting of the Los Angeles riots was the remapping of Koreatown and its coding as distinctly Korean. Simultaneously, Yi’s narrative and the physical revisiting of these sites of resistance recalled both the agency of those who defended Koreatown and the destruction of those businesses where the defense was futile. Consequently, the narrative charged the physical environment with the notion of resistance and the sense of identity so fundamental to post riot conceptualizations of Koreatown.

The narrative response among Korean Americans to the Los Angeles riots reveals the close connections between place and identity. In the aftermath of the riots, when Korean American identity had been clearly threatened by the physical destruction of the built environment, the ability to recall in narrative both the earlier Koreatown as well as moments of defense and resistance allowed narrators a chance to begin reinscribing a Korean American identity onto the now charred and splintered landscape. Events such as the demonstration march on May 2 further exhibited the close connection between identity and place. By performing culturally charged expressions such as the playing of p’ungmul, the wearing of white headbands and the chanting of rhythmic slogans, Korean Americans were able to provide visual and sonic expressions that emphasized Koreatown as a site for Korean American identity formation, despite the very visible erasure from the landscape of the previously ubiquitous han’gul signage. Riot narratives that told of government collusion or conspiracy heightened the link to Korean narratives of resistance familiar from the Kwangju uprising of 1980. Although Abelmann and Lie point quite rightfully to “a fundamental lesson…for many Korean Americans…[was] to shift their focus from South Korea to America” (Abelmann and Lie 1995, 185), at least in some of the articulation of resistance immediately following the riots, there was a frequent appeal to the “Korean in Korean American,” as my informant Michael Lee said. In the riot narratives, however, by remapping Koreatown, and establishing Koreatown as a central locus for Korean American identity in Southern California, many Korean American narrators put the emphasis decidedly on Los Angeles. Although the rebuilding of Los Angeles did not get under way in earnest for several months after the riots, by that time, Koreatown had already been reclaimed, remapped and in a sense rebuilt as a site for the formation of
Korean American identity through the performance of Korean cultural expressions in Koreatown and through the process of multiple retellings of riot related personal experience narratives by Korean Americans.

Notes

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1 The Watts rebellion in 1965 was, according to Soja and Scott, “the most violent upheaval in American history up to that time” (Scott and Soja 1996: 11). See also Totten and Shockman (1994: xvi). While it is difficult to compare the destructiveness of the two events, the monetary damage during the 1992 riots far outstripped that of the 1965 rebellion (Fogelson 1969).

2 The first recorded episode of violence did not occur in South Central, but in Hyde Park, an area to the east of the intersection of Florence Avenue and Normandie Avenue (Jencks 1993: 79). Jencks provides excellent maps showing the extent of the riots coupled to maps showing income distribution. See also Alan-Williams (1994) for a far-reaching account of the progress of the violence.

3 According to a report on losses from the riots, Koreatown and South Central were two of the areas hardest hit by the convulsive violence of the riots (Ong and Hee 1993).

4 Indeed, after the riots, parts of Los Angeles had gone far beyond the “transportation palimpsest” suggested by architect Reyner Banham, and had now become community palimpsests (Banham 1971: 75-91; Dear 1996: 93).

5 See Edward Park’s discussion of these efforts in the context of political mobilization among Korean Americans in the aftermath of the riots (1998: 45-47). Many of these efforts to “rebuild” Los Angeles were criticized from within the various communities they were intended to help. For a criticism of “Rebuild LA” from a Korean American attorney, for example, see Oh 1993.


7 See also Foucault (1986).

8 See also Davis (1992).

9 The notion of the “s simulacra” comes primarily from the writings of Jean Baudrillard. See, for example, Baudrillard 1984.

10 Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Koreatown is that people of Korean heritage constitute a minority of the population, with Latinos making up approximately 68% of its population in 1990 (Yu 1993: 157; Abelman and Lie 1995: 105; Ong and Hee 1993: 8).
11 Abelmann and Lie (1995: 104) mention this multilingual landscape as well.
12 Estimates for attendance ranged from the conservative police estimate of ten
thousand, to the more common estimates of thirty thousand.
13 One can find discussions of the minjung movement from numerous perspec-
tives in Wells (1995). The use of traditional expressive forms by the student
movement has been explored by Choi (1993, 1995), and Tangherlini (1998).
Dilling explores the use of traditional expressive forms in relation to national
14 A discussion of Chisin Palpgi as it is practiced in rural Korea can be found in
Minsokhakhoe 1994, 408.
15 Martin Stokes considers a similar sonic mapping that occurs in Northern Ire-
land through the tactical deployment of politically motivated lambeg drumming
16 The labeling of the events in Kwangju as a “hangjaeng” or struggle, the stan-
dard moniker used in contemporary Korea to describe the events of May 18,
1980, brings to mind the at times heated debate over the naming of the
events in Los Angeles. Many people from progressive political groups referred
to the events as “The Los Angeles Uprisings.” Nearly all of my Korean American
informants referred to the events in Los Angeles as a “riot” or, in Korean, “p’ok-
tong.” When I suggested the terms “bonggi” (uprising) or “hangjaeng,” my
informants generally reacted quite negatively.
17 Despite the illegality of some of their actions during the riots, members of the
group were quite willing to talk to me. I suspect this was in large part due to the
introduction I received to the group through a colleague who had been
working with them for several months.

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