
**Los Angeles, Asians, and
Perverse Ventriloquisms:
On the Functions of Asian
America in the Recent
American Imaginary**

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We can perhaps do better than to take stock directly of the ideological contents of our age; by trying to reconstitute in its specific structure the code of connotation of a mode of communications as important as the press photograph we may hope to find, in their very subtlety, the forms our society uses to ensure its peace of mind and grasp thereby the magnitude, the detours, and the underlying function of that activity.

[ROLAND BARTHES]¹

How does one derive peace of mind from an image of utter chaos and violence? One of the most conspicuous figures of the Los Angeles rebellion of late April 1992, which circulated among popular radio talk shows, television news reports, and daily and weekly print media, was that of the "vigilante Korean." In this essay I will argue that the image of Koreans, and, by extension, Asians in general, formed an integral part of a powerful homology of race, property, violence and "justice" that significantly reinforced white hegemonic

I am grateful to Marilyn Ivy for her many helpful comments and suggestions. Mayfair Yang points out that this photo/caption may be read quite differently from different subject positions, and this is worth pursuing.

1. Barthes (1977:31).

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identifications.² At the same time, it allowed the effective *absence* of whites within the framework of representation, thereby effecting the pacification of social trauma remarked upon by Barthes.³ This essay offers a set of readings of one news photo that I will argue emblemizes the *function* of Asian-Americans, both in the specific public discourses surrounding the Los Angeles rebellion and within the late twentieth-century American political economy.

Let us examine closely a color photograph that appeared in the 11 May 1992 issue of *Newsweek*: a young Korean-American male in the foreground looks askance toward the left of the frame, holding a semiautomatic handgun upright. He is wearing a Malcolm X T-shirt with the caption, "By any means necessary. . . ." Beneath that caption on the shirt is a print of a black and white photograph of a black man in a suit and tie holding an automatic rifle, looking down to the right of the frame, peering through a set of blinds out a window. In the background of the *Newsweek* photograph, two red fire engines spray jets of water on a smoldering building; a street sign tells us this is Olympic Boulevard. *Newsweek's* caption, quoting a Korean-American witness to the riots, reads, "This is not America" (see fig. 1).⁴

How can we decipher this intensely overdetermined set of signifiers? The pose seems (too deliberately)⁵ to cast the Asian figure into ironic dialogue with the figure of Malcolm X, with reverse angles of vision, of perspective, and inverted objects. Malcolm X guards against the attack of the white police state, while the young Korean-American stands in for a police force that withdrew its protection

2. I want to underscore that I will be discussing the *image* of Korean-Americans. As Elaine Kim notes, Koreans were essentially not heard from within the mass media's coverage of the rebellion, *except for* highly selective and fragmented representations. I want to make clear that I am arguing for a particular understanding of their functionality, and *not* assuming that Koreans themselves endorse any specific representation or are complicit with that functionality.

Kim conducted a number of interviews with Korean-Americans shortly after the rebellion, and incorporated these interviews into her film, "Sa-I-Gu." See her essay, "Home is Where the *Han* Is: A Korean-American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," in Gooding-Williams (1993). Another useful article is Sumi Cho's contribution to the same volume, "Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction."

3. The police officers, the actual perpetrators of the beating, I would argue, were curiously *disembodied*—their status as "human" obviated by the constant reiteration, by both their attorneys and by sympathetic media, of their mental disorientation at the "scene," their fear for *their* lives. They were, for all intents and purposes, transformed into phantasmal forces, (merely) reacting to a situation, "incited" by King, who, we were told, was "controlling the action."

4. Photo credit is given to Jean-Marc Giboux, of Gamma-Liaison.

5. Barthes points out that the press photograph "benefits from the prestige of denotation: the photograph allows the photographer to *conceal elusively* the preparation to which he subjects the scene to be recorded" (Barthes 1977:21).

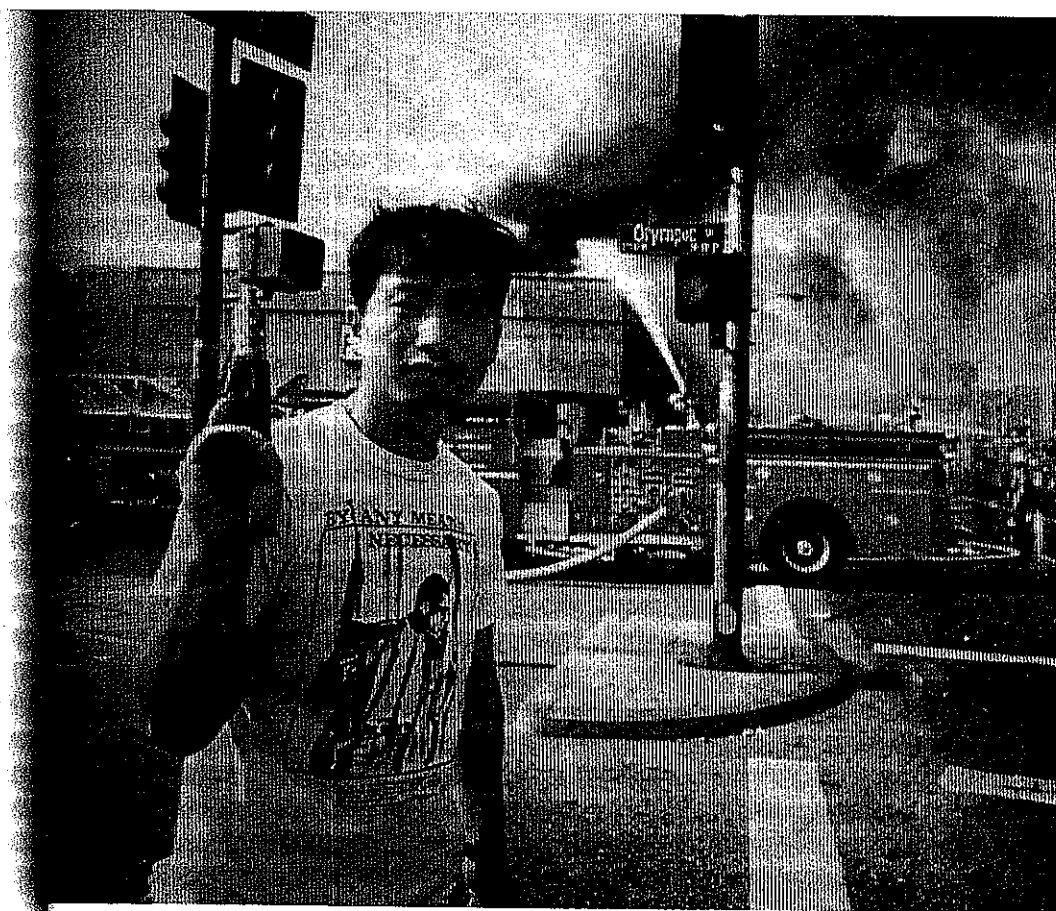


Fig.
A11

of his property in order to protect white property against (predominantly) black and Latino looters and burners. The photo in turn engages the caption, "This is not America," for although the caption would attempt to explain, to rationalize the content of the photographic image, the photo gestures toward a discursive space *beyond* and outside it.

The semiotic density engendered by the conjunction of the Malcolm X T-shirt with that Asian body, set within a complex social, economic, and political history which is commonly reduced into the abstract arena of "race relations" in the United States, opens up a number of questions which evince the inadequacy of our usual paradigms of interpretation. Indeed, any interpretive strategy not open to the mutual *disruptions* of narrative and image, representation and history, goes only so far in teasing out the crosscurrents of signification at work. We could ask, among other things, How has an icon of Black Power been uprooted from its historical specificity and appropriated, so that it now seems to sanction and even prescribe counterviolence against blacks and others who might *threaten* the dominant ideology? That is, How have the words of Malcolm X, aimed to free African-Americans and arm them against the intrusive violence of the state, come to legitimize protecting property from blacks and other groups consistently disenfranchised from the judicial and economic machineries of the state, as evinced most emphatically in those days of late April 1992 by the acquittal of the assailants of Rodney King? Furthermore, we could ask, How, in this rescripted context of racial violence and counterviolence, has Asian-American property come to stand in for white property? And how can we account for the incommensurateness between the Korean-American "vigilante" and the "legitimate" police force to which the vigilante is symbolically correlate?

Finally, what exactly are the absent referents *beyond* the frame of the photograph (since the metonymies of the photo gesture toward other buildings, other victims, other agents of violence)? Most importantly, the text implicates a reader/viewer whose moral sense is assumed to be represented (both mimetically, and in the sense of ideologically speaking on behalf of those absent)⁶ in the simple declarative, summary recitation of another Korean-American's enunciation ("This is not America"), which now *speaks back* to the photo, creating the illusion that it is articulating the mentality of the photographed subject.⁷ But most compelling

6. This double-semiotic of "representing" is of course the formulation of Gayatri Spivak in Spivak (1988:271-313).

7. The caption as commentary thus functions both as an objectivized mentality within the frame and a subjective response to the larger context—both ostensibly representative of "the" Korean-American perspective when in fact both are subsumed beneath the editorial *coup* of photo and essay editors "representing" that "community."

and confusing in this frame are the particular double inscriptions of the image and caption on that T-shirt with the body that displays it, and of the body with the shirt that augments the representation of that multiply significant body (Asian, American, male, merchant, vigilante, etc.)—and their specific materializations in this historical moment.

The questions posed above map out a set of trajectories into the density of this image, a density which, I would stress, is linked intimately to the liminal position of Asian-Americans in the United States. This photograph "documents" a crucial, interstitial element that breaks apart the black/white dichotomy that was the simple image retained in the general account of the events of May, 1992.⁸ In this photograph, indexes of the violence are eclipsed by the figure in the foreground, a seemingly ancillary player—neither a black, nor a white, nor a Latino, but an Asian.

Why did *Newsweek* select an Asian for this focal space? The obvious reason is that, supposedly, the main targets of black and Latino rage were Korean-American businesses. This was in part explained in the press by the longstanding animosity between Korean-Americans and (particularly) blacks, the latter being especially bitter over the slaying of a black teenage girl by a Korean-American grocer over the alleged theft of a bottle of orange juice, and the extremely light sentence meted out to the grocer.⁹

The hierarchy of presence is significant here: an Asian body occupies the foreground in this narrative; blacks are present as second-level images (Malcolm

8. The minimal attention awarded to the predominance of Latino "involvement" in the rebellion, and, more important, to the essential part the Latino community plays in race relations in the United States, particularly in Southern California, is noteworthy. I would argue that just as the representation of Asian-Americans in this event served as a "positive" surrogate for dominant white ideology, so did the media's representation of Latinos serve to underwrite the basic premises of dominant ideologies—the presence of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents engaged in sweeps of Latino neighborhoods after the rebellion rivaled the presence of the Los Angeles Police Department, without comment from the mainstream news media. The INS used the riots as a pretext to round up *any* "suspicious" Latinos and detain them without warrant or charge. Thus, we have the Asian-American as white surrogate in the battle of capitalism against chaos, and Latinos as deportable surrogates for a black population that cannot be "legally" disenfranchised because of their birthright. This essay is a preliminary attempt to account for the various symbolic displacements of racial "functions" distributed among different groups.

9. Here I am referring to the killing of 15-year-old Latasha Harlins, who was accused of stealing a bottle of orange juice by a Korean-American grocer. Upon being accused, Harlins shouted back at the grocer, who then tried to detain her. Harlins broke free and struck the woman. When she turned to leave the store, the grocer reached under the counter, pulled out a handgun, and shot Harlins. The entire event was caught on the videotape of the store's security camera.

X on the T-shirt)—however, whites are invisible, somehow not part of “this” America. Thus what is missing in the narrative implicated by this photo/text is any inquiry into the structure of an economic system that historically has pitted Asians against blacks and Latinos, and which exploits that antagonism in order to construct a displaced rehearsal of a simplified white/black, purely “racial” antagonism. To begin to account for this elision of whites and the restaging of race relations without whites (but nonetheless containing the *function* of a white supremacist ideology channeled through the historically convenient body of Asian America), one must understand the continuity of the function of Asian-Americans in the recent American imaginary.



Many have pointed up the parallels between the Watts riots of 1965, and the recent riots in Los Angeles and elsewhere over the verdict delivered in the trial of four Los Angeles police officers for the videotaped beating of Rodney King—one such parallel is the ideological function of images of Asian-Americans. Between 1966 and 1992 the key elements persist: hard-working, persevering, and not dependent upon state or federal largesse, Asian-Americans serve as emblems of the inherent logic of laissez-faire capitalism and the inconsequential nature of race and ethnicity before such a logic.¹⁰

It has been nearly a quarter of a century since the first articulation of the model minority thesis was made in an article by William Petersen entitled, “Success Story, Japanese American Style,” which was published in the *New York Times Magazine* on 9 January 1966, less than six months after the Watts riots in Los Angeles. Several other journalists picked up this theme, which focused on the high educational achievement levels, high median family incomes, low crime rates, and the absence of juvenile delinquency and mental health problems among Asian-Americans, and juxtaposed this “success” with the failure of blacks

in America. The message was clear: patient and quietly-determined hard work brings success; welfare dependence and sheer “laziness” bring economic disaster. Asian-American scholars have since questioned the data from which this myth was created; nevertheless, the predominance of the image of the quietly hardworking Asian-American has persisted in the popular imagination.¹¹ While there is obviously nothing wrong with hard work, what is important here is how the model minority myth reifies Asian-American identity, and how it has been deployed in an eminently programmatic way against other groups, mapping out specific positionings of minorities within the U.S. political economy.

In 1992, a little over a quarter of a century after Watts, in another “race riot” in the same city, Korean-Americans were represented as the frontline forces of the white bourgeoisie. Not only were they successful even under the most oppressive circumstances, they were not afraid to arm themselves against blacks and Latinos to protect what is not only their territory, but also the buffer-zone between the core of a multiethnic ghetto, and white middle-class America. The locating, real and figurative, of Asians *in between* the dominant and minor is made less tenuous and even rationalized by a particular element which situates Asians within the dominant ideology, and frees them of the burden of their ethnicity and race while retaining (for obvious ideological purposes) the signifier of racial difference: the notion of *self-affirmative action*.

During the late twentieth century, minorities in the United States have been told to stop complaining about oppression and to start drawing upon inner strengths. This formula conveniently absolves the state of any continued responsibility toward social justice, transferring it instead to (only) those groups affected negatively by injustice. The specific brand of self-affirmative action that is the linchpin of the model minority myth uses an exaggerated representation of Asians as embodying those “traditional family values” whose lack brought about the Los Angeles riots, according to Dan Quayle and the Bush administration.¹² Here, the “Asian family structure” represents the perfect apparatus for the reproduction of the ethos of diligent hard work, self-denial, and political quietude. Instead of

11. For a critique of this thesis, see Chan (1991:167–83). See also Suzuki (1977:23–51), and Osajima (1988:165–74). Colleen Lye also has spoken of the liminal status of Asian-Americans within the hegemonic ideology in her talk, “What is an Asian American Minority Discourse?” presented at the convention of the Modern Languages Association, December 1991.

For a comparable case in Britain, see Lawrence (1988:95–142).

12. This element is transposed to other minority groups as well, as was clearly seen in the confirmation hearings of Clarence Thomas, and the tremendous success of Shelby Steele’s and Steven Carter’s books.

10. The other side to this image—a rising number of “gang-related crimes,” as well as the not-so-appreciative response to Asian success: Asian-bashing—is left out of the picture. Interestingly, the recent hysteria over “illegal Chinese immigrants” has forced a radical reassessment and repoliticization of the representation of the “Asian immigrant.” Some argue this hysteria foretells a return of anti-Asian sentiment in a time of economic crisis. This issue promises to intensify the tension between the bourgeoisified, “assimilated” class of Asian Americans and the more recent immigrants, and to demand a rethinking of the ethos of the model minority. Asians as the model minority now come into contradiction with Asians who, within the context of a post-Fordist late capitalism, have helped place the “native” U.S. economy in crisis either by economic “aggression” (i.e., Japan), or illegal infiltration (thereby glutting the labor pool and draining the welfare state).

collective activism "without" the family, Asians enjoy self-supporting family units whose "traditional values" (often traced back to Confucian pragmatic education) ultimately triumph over whatever difficulties might lie in their way. As such, Asian families reaffirm the values of conformity, of deference to civil and familial authority. This representation, of course, writes out a substantial history of social resistance and protest as well as the wide range of familial structures evident in the multiple Asian cultures whose insertion into American society has been extremely uneven and varied. Instead, the *Newsweek* photograph ends up specifically implicating "traditional family values" within the moral imperative to protect the sanctity of private *property* that is viewed as the reward for the practice of those values within a market economy.

The notion of "traditional family values" is, of course, an impossibly vacuous one, since it has no purchase outside of *specific* ideological practices. In this case, *Newsweek's* representation of Korean-Americans creates a frame that sketches out the endpoints of a particular narrative linking the personal, the familial and the communal to the material objects around which negotiations between and across those three take place. Just as the photograph we have discussed places the viewer in the middle of an ongoing activity, eliding any representation of the structural causality of the riots and picking up instead at the point *after which* causality can be taken as relevant (the critique of structural causes now being secondary to the higher and more immediate imperatives of the protection of life), so does the photograph that concludes *Newsweek's* discussion of the riots. Published in the subsequent issue (18 May 1992, page 30), it shows three Korean-American women in mourning, weeping at a funeral.¹³ This photograph fills in the end point of "this" America.

This juxtaposition of photographs of Korean-Americans, seeming to outline the essential parameters of their involvement in the Los Angeles uprising, becomes a convenient speculum of the tragic narrative of how the "traditional family values" of the dominant culture come up against those who are popularly represented as severely lacking such virtues. This "drama" is scripted within an unproblematic idealization of Asians (who, thus configured, stand in for dominant white ideologies, to which they have a tenuous and contingent relation) and an equally essentialized depiction of the black family as "pathological" (and therefore bereft of the property earned by Asians), always on the margins by dint of some inherent resistance to the ethos so well exemplified by Asians. Both these formations are

13. The caption read: "While mourning their dead, Koreans were living proof that the old vocabulary of race no longer applies."

the products of a process of reification that exculpates the dominant ideology from its role in setting the stage for the mutual antagonism of ethnic communities.

That Asian-Americans are thus used as a defamiliarized, and hence all the more compelling, image of the "traditional American" is confirmed in a recent talk by Elaine Kim. In it, Kim recounts how *Newsweek* magazine solicited from her an opinion piece on the subject of Korean-Americans and the Los Angeles riots. The editor insisted that Kim work into her essay some reference to "Korean-American cowboys," wishing to dramatize the "resistance" of Korean-Americans to black violence.¹⁴ Although Kim explained that the carrying of firearms would be something relatively unfamiliar to Koreans (since guns are outlawed in Korea), the opportunity was simply too great for *Newsweek* to pass up.

What *Newsweek* perceived was a "photo op" that would neatly draw upon and intensify the model minority myth (self-affirmation, individual initiative, and, now most important, an overriding will to protect the fruits of the free enterprise system). As was the case in 1966, in the contemporary coverage of the Rodney King incident Asians are again used as a fulcrum inserted between ethnic groups to leverage hegemonic racist ideology. A particular homology is set in place—Asians stand against blacks and Latinos as white settlers stood against "pillaging" Indians. The Korean-American "cowboy" thus serves as a defamiliarized image of white America's manifest destiny.¹⁵

The intense materialism behind this idealization of the Korean-American "cowboy" and self-affirmative action is revealed in *Newsweek's* picturesque prose, which blends a calculatedly limpid style with references to inventive American know-how, to the signs of Korean-American success being sacrificed to protect the stores, to the adaptation of high-tech personal communications devices to paramilitary purposes, and to a relentlessly practical entrepreneurial spirit:

With the police in disarray, some Koreans formed their own vigilante groups for self-defense. They strapped metal grocery carts together [*Newsweek's* thinly veiled allusion to "circling the wagons"?] in a line across the parking lot at the Korean Supermarket on Olympic. Then

14. See Kim, in Gooding-Williams (1993). Her *Newsweek* piece appears in the 17 May 1992 issue.

15. In my essay on "Closure as Capitulation" (included in Abdul JanMohamed's forthcoming anthology on minority discourse and ideological containment) I again treat the doubleness of defamiliar/familiar found in the interpolation of Asian-America into the U.S. imaginary.

The image of the "cowboy," and particularly, the *lone* cowboy, as depicted in this photograph, of course resonates with the imaginary of Reagan/Bush (television and film cowboy/Texas urban cowboy).

they drew their Volvos, Mercedeses and other high-end cars into a Maginot line. Behind the cars crouched a dozen men with shotguns and pistols. Some had cellular phones strapped to their belts; others set up fields of fire from a supermarket roof. "No trouble," said one of the defenders with a wave. "Come back tomorrow."¹⁶

In some way, this image serves as a twisted corollary to the image of the beating of Rodney King. If white America¹⁷ was repulsed by the image of the anti-black violence of the King beating, it could by contrast react positively, immediately, and with ethical purity when viewing Asian-Americans defending themselves against black and Latino looters. And just as Rodney King's beating was supposedly the result of his "controlling the action," so too do black Americans bear responsibility for violence aimed against them by Korean-Americans. Only here, there seems to be no ambiguity about the justness of the accusation. In this photograph, it is doubly inscribed—by indices of black and Latino violence such as burning buildings, by a series of articles on the riots, but most immediately by the words of Malcolm X himself—"By any means necessary"—which now come to endorse *repression of African Americans* "by any means necessary." The movement of repression/rebellion comes full circle by means of this appropriation and inversion of the term "necessity."

While it is difficult to condemn acts of self defense, one should note that what was at stake in the images of Korean-American vigilantes guarding their shops was not just life, but as I have been arguing throughout, property, and *particular* property (against a particular threat)—hence the evocativeness of the image.¹⁸ For the riots were as much about the material conditions of economic survival as they were about police brutality—the verdict set into relief the "justice" of Reaganomics as much as the racism of the judicial system.

To sum up: The property so stalwartly guarded thus operated as a *signifier*. It was the product of a particular regime of capitalism seemingly unfettered by the obstacles of racism and allowed for by political quietism, self-denial, and discipline and condensed in the image of the model minority. As such, non-ethnic viewers could sympathetically identify with particular property, and assume the

role of one who had (likewise) acquired such property—for example, a middle-class readership could look at the often-mentioned "high-end" automobiles used by Korean-Americans and then look into their own garages, imagining that their own cars were trophies of *similar* arduous labor and self-sacrifice. And, by extension, they could sympathize with the urge to protect such hard-earned objects against those Latino and black rioters whose pathological laziness prevented them from earning such objects "honestly."

Thus, even more than any abstract "spirit" of free enterprise, what draws the viewer to identify with the image is the notion of the protection of private property. The protection of private property creates a strong identificatory bond precisely between both those who have it in abundance and those who may not, but who have nonetheless accepted the validity of the mechanisms whereby one is to acquire it in U.S. society, and therefore view themselves as *deserving* it.¹⁹

In the use of private property as a sign of racial and moral superiority, the "representation" of Asian-America(ns) overtly coincides with the vested interest of dominant American ideology—in Asian-America(ns) it finds a speculum of the function of white dominance. The representation of Asian-American protection of property achieves particular weight exactly because it appears to be another "case," *different* from white supremacist ideology. It involves a racially different group, and therefore vindicates the "neutrality" of American capitalism. The supremacy, the ultimate "soundness," of the capitalist economics that have disproportionately favored whites over racial and ethnic minorities now seems color-blind because "yellows" have found it to work in their favor, too. And thus the underlying mechanisms that continue to work against blacks, Latinos, and Asians as well, are made invisible by the inflationary symbolic of the "model minority."

In U.S. history the Asian has served as a powerful signifier—at first, as a local illustration of European orientalist mythologies, and more than a century later as a "model minority" used to vindicate American ideology. Nevertheless, there is a hard residue of old-style orientalism—the notion that Asians have no concept of the sanctity of human life (as articulated endlessly during the Vietnam War), plays a crucial role in the representation of the Korean-American "cowboy." For if whites are too "refined," too attached to western Enlightenment notions

16. *Newsweek* 11 May 1992, p. 38.

17. Here and throughout the essay, I want to admit the generalization "white," but retain it provisionally to denote the dominant's constitution of a majority consensus which, as is clear from this essay, can be bought into by any number of individuals of varying racial and ethnic identities.

18. It was standard journalistic practice to couple the body count of the riots with statistics regarding the damage to property in millions of dollars.

19. Patricia Williams points out the economic basis for our notions of private and public: "I have been thinking about the unowning of blacks and their consignment to some collective public state of mind, known alternately as 'menace' or 'burden'—about the degree to which it might be that public and private are economic notions, i.e., that the right to privacy might be a function of wealth" (Williams 1991:21–22).

Judge chastises media for reporting about possible hung jury

■ Judge in Rodney King trial says his comments were distorted

ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — The judge in the Rodney King beating trial angrily berated the news media Wednesday for reporting he was concerned about a possible hung jury in the case, suggesting he should have held jury instruction hearings in secret.

"I haven't any idea of what's going to happen in this case," said U.S. District Judge John G. Davies. "I don't think any of us do."

Davies made his remarks after a midafternoon break during which he was told of radio broadcasts about his earlier comments regarding the so-called Allen instruction that encourages jurors

to break deadlocks.

"Word has been relayed to me that my comments about the Allen charge have been taken by the radio press, twisted, distorted, embellished, disguised and then broadcast," Davies said.

"We're doing this in open court because the press wants an open court," the judge said as he scolded reporters. "... I wonder if we shouldn't do this in private."

"To take the comments by the court out of context, then distort it and broadcast the distortions is a good argument for keeping the discussions confidential."

A radio reporter arose and suggested that the broadcast media was basing its stories on wire service reports.

When arguments began over jury instructions Wednesday morning, Davies questioned why lawyers had not asked for the ex-



David Chu, manager of the Western Gun Shop in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles, says sales have been brisk as a verdict approaches in the Rodney King beating trial.

traordinary Allen instruction reserved for a deadlock. He suggested it be given to jurors before they begin deliberating.

"I foresee difficulties," Davies told lawyers. "What can we do to minimize the difficulties?"

Later, he said those comments

had been misinterpreted.

"It does a disservice to say the judge thinks there will be a mistrial," Davies said. "That's not the case."

He said that his suggestion to include the instruction did not mean he anticipated a hung jury.

of law and order, then Asians, genetically bereft of such encumbrances, can act out the primal imperatives of capitalism.²⁰ Asian-Americans provide the prescribed body for the pristine strain of violence that America would euphemize in itself but exploit in others.

(One final note: in April 1993, when the federal trial of the Los Angeles police officers was near its end, the media coverage of the event resurrected the "vigilante Korean." So invested was the media in this image that it was used by the *Oakland Tribune* for a story entitled, "Judge Chastises Media for Reporting about Possible Hung Jury" [see fig. 2]. The photo and its caption ["David Chu, manager of the Western Gun Shop in the Koreatown section of Los Angeles, says sales have been brisk as a verdict approaches in the Rodney King beating trial"], at first appear to have nothing to do with the story. Instead, they seem only to add "excitement" to it. Yet we are actually revisiting exactly the same terrain as mapped out above.)



20. Films such as Sam Peckinpah's "Straw Dogs" (1971) play out this notion of the American male's impotence and reluctance to engage in violence until his "property" is threatened.

The obvious inversion of property and propriety that takes place across that homology are striking, and forces us to return to the caption and its implied question: What is "America"? What legitimates such relations of property and race? Or better yet, What have 'we' come to be? And this query is both prompted by articulated within the caption chosen for the photograph, which sets off a quest for a narrative capable of representing "America." This narrative is generated precisely in a *double function*, twice articulated in the photo/caption.

In his early essay on "The Photographic Message,"²¹ Barthes explains how the press photo inverts the "traditional" relation between text and image: "The text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to 'quicken' it with one or more second-order signifieds. In other words, and this is an important historical reversal, the image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic on the image . . . Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination." (Barthes 1977:25-26).²² However, in this particular case, the "texts" and "images" are exactly *doubled*—there is a scene quoted within the image, comprised itself of photo/caption. Moreover, in both instances there is as well a significant rupture (instead of collusion) between image and text precisely along the grain of history and ideology.

The *Newsweek* photo/caption exploits *both* what Barthes calls the "traditional" direction of commentary (the image does, in fact, give illustration to the impossible-to-visualize declaration, "This is not America"), and the "modern" relationship between text and image—the text "burdens" the photograph with meaning. In the embedded image as well, we find a similar doubling—the text ("By any means necessary") functions as the designator of the scene, and the image of Malcolm X particularizes the universal instrumentality referred to in the caption. In the

21. Barthes (1977:15-31). Barthes attempts to account for the semiotic structure of press photographs:

The press photograph is a message. Considered overall, this message is formed by a source of emission, a channel of transmission, and a point of reception. The source of emission is the staff of the newspaper, the group of technicians certain of whom take the photo, some of whom choose, compose, and treat it, while others, finally, give it a title, a caption, and a commentary. The point of reception is the public which reads the paper. As for the channel of transmission, this is the newspaper itself, or, more precisely, a complex of concurrent messages with the photograph as center and surrounds constituted by the text, the title, the caption, the lay-out and, in a more abstract but no less "informative" way, by the very name of the paper.

22. This notion of the "naturalization of the cultural" is of course developed more fully in Barthes 1972.

two text/images at hand, this reciprocal effect produces "clarity" through its transparent illustrative designation—e.g., the raised gun supersedes the now vacant generalization "By any means necessary."

Yet it *also* points to that which it cannot designate: the chaotic scene at Olympic Boulevard eclipses the verbal statement, "This is not America," betraying an inability to articulate that which *is* America—an object perhaps only recoverable through another mythic construction. And such a construct is found within the interstices of the quotation, made significantly more compelling by coming from an "immigrant" perspective. It again accentuates the difference between the idealistic (and successful) Asian-American and the cynical, destructive black or Latino, who denies the "America" envisioned by the other.

Nevertheless, despite this seeming "racial saturation," what this photograph actually performs is an *evasion* of racial terms, rather than their instantiation and confirmation. And as such, this photo/caption serves as an exemplary text of pacification: "Certainly situations which are normally traumatic can be seized in a process of photographic signification but then they are indicated via a rhetorical code which distances, sublimates and pacifies them" (Barthes 1977:30). Having set up this problematic of the pacification of photographic "trauma" via the specifics of text/image rhetoric, I can begin to unpack more precisely the *narrative* that informs the composition of both the *inset* photo/text and its frame.

I return to the photograph within the *Newsweek* photo, the photograph of Malcolm X reproduced on the T-shirt, which was originally published in *Ebony* magazine. Peter Goldman asserts that this photograph was part of a series of staged photographs that Malcolm X set up to deter assaults by both white racists and his black enemies.²³

Malcolm X's best-known pronouncement on blacks arming themselves regards such acts as necessary for self-defense against racist attacks in an era when the police refuse to grant blacks equal protection:

I must say this concerning the great controversy over rifles and shotguns. The only thing I've ever said is that in areas where the government has proven itself either unwilling or unable to defend the lives and the property of Negroes, it's time for Negroes to defend themselves. Article number two of the constitutional amendments provides you and me

the right to own a rifle or a shotgun . . . If the white man doesn't want the black man buying rifles and shotguns, then let the government do its job. It is constitutionally legal to own a shotgun or a rifle (Malcolm X 1964).

Now the context for Malcolm X's endorsement of arms does not completely coincide with the caption chosen for the T-shirt, which uses his general statement regarding the liberation of blacks to endorse specifically violent means. Goldman recounts a conversation between Malcolm X and a black reporter that provides a specific context for that enunciation: "I'm for the freedom of the 22 million Afro-Americans by any means necessary. By any means necessary. I'm for a society in which our people are recognized and respected as human beings, and I believe that we have the right to resort to any means necessary to bring that about." (Goldman 1973:222)

The marketing production of the T-shirt (and I suspect this must be a poster as well) uses the vagueness of the original quotation and the unmarked context of the photograph to create a highly provocative endorsement of armed self-defense. (This T-shirt, incidentally, predates the riots by several years.)

Ironically, set in the context of *Newsweek's* photo, Malcolm X's comments on why and when blacks should arm themselves now legitimize Korean-Americans arming themselves against blacks: the police were drawn back from Koreatown by Daryl Gates, leaving it to burn. Hence, Korean-Americans faced the necessity of protecting their property themselves "by any means necessary."

But however complex, fragmented, and twisted the crosscurrents of violence and oppression may be, staged in this photograph as involving the opposition black/Asian, the condensation of this ideology in this overdetermined representation neatly elides the key agent of this antagonism, and leaves it free both to stand apart as spectator, and to enjoy a vindication of its political economy. This distantiation and identification is reproduced in the formal structure of the photograph—there are no whites, there is one Asian, and an image of a black torn out of its historical context and appropriated to speak for another, who in turn serves the function of the absented dominant. We find an eerie convergence in the double captions—the decontextualized voice of Malcolm X meets the voice of the Korean-American ventriloquized through the Asian body in the photograph. But any investigation into the "origin" of this enunciation must take into account the apparatuses of production outlined by Barthes that, in this series of displacements, shift the trauma of racial violence onto Asian America.²⁴

23. Goldman (1973:155–56). This text reproduces the photo (insert following page 170). Clayborne Carson documents the numerous threats to his life Malcolm X reported to the police, and their response. See Carson (1991).

24. There is something here that reminds one of Foucault's famous analysis of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*, in which he notes how the orienting point of view, the "human subject," is everywhere

Now by saying this I am not suggesting that the "actual" protagonists in this siege were or are simply passive, manipulated subjects. Nor do I wish to suggest that this very real event was somehow only an illusionary construct. And, perhaps most important, I do not want to suggest that the "shift" of violence onto Asian-Americans is only symbolic—far from that. However, I do want to widen the scope of our inquiry to see how the narratives that are set into motion by these text/images implicate as well the mechanisms by which the dominant ideology comes to account for, pacify, and use to its own advantage a seemingly inexplicable event, while apparently standing outside and beyond violence. The photograph before us both solicits and constructs a *narration* of cause and effect, agency and rationale, that allows the political, economic, and ideological apparatuses that set the stage for the Los Angeles uprising of the spring of 1992 to obscure their own workings. In particular, what is at stake here is not only the recovery of the specific histories that are written out of the picture, but also the unmasking of the programmatic effects of such representations as this photograph, which draw upon and in turn solidify (in their powerful *silences*) structures of feeling around the issues of race, ethnicity, class, capital, and human justice.

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implicated but radically absented from the painting (Foucault 1973). I would argue that here we have an allegory of the way that dominant ideology is inscribed everywhere in this photograph, but made invisible by the way Asian America has been used as its stand-in.

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