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(Mis)interpretations and (In)justice: The 1992 Los Angeles “Riots” and “Black-Korean Conflict”

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“Can we all get along?” asked Rodney King during the Los Angeles civil disturbance in April 1992. This essay attempts to shed light on interracial conflicts by focusing on (mis)in-terpretations in the legal and cultural realms. I would like to re-visit one event preceding the urban unrest by discussing “The Court Interpreter,” a short story by Ty Pak, a Korean immigrant writer, alongside the legal scholarship surrounding the uprising. The story is a fictionalized version of the trial of Soon Ja Du, the Korean liquor store-keeper who killed fifteen-year-old Latasha Harlins, an African American. Harlins, suspected of walking away with a gallon of orange juice, attacked Du when the latter confronted her; the teenager was shot dead by the Korean woman. The incident took place only thirteen days after the beating of Rodney King by four white LAPD officers. Du was convicted of voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to “probation with prison time suspended, a small fine [\$500], and a requirement of community service” (Gotanda 379). The court ruling incensed the already wounded and antagonized African American community, and “*Latasha Harlins* soon became virtually synonymous with the ‘black-Korean conflict’” (Lie & Abelmann 75).

Pak adheres quite closely to these events. He, of course, changes the names of all the principals: Soon Ja Du becomes Moonja Joo and Latasha Harlins becomes Natasha Brook. Fur-

thermore, because “The Court Interpreter” is presented from a limited first-person point of view, the narrator’s perceptions must be distinguished from those of the author. There are times, however, when these two perspectives do conflate, as will be shown. The narrative is recounted by the title character, who has been asked to interpret for the Korean proprietor by her defense lawyer. The narrator deplores the shooting of the black teenager, but bristles at the way the national media and the African American press lump all Korean Americans together as abhorrent. He therefore decides to do his best to help the defendant during her trial by making her *sound* educated and eloquent; later, he believes his superb performance as court interpreter accounts for the lenient sentence received by his client. The fictional trial—as was Soon Ja Du’s trial—is followed in the narrative by the controversial police-brutality trial in Simi Valley, with the not-guilty verdicts and the initial acquittal of the four white police officers accused of beating Rodney King, and by the ensuing eruption that ravages Los Angeles. Countless businesses are looted and burned, and the narrator’s brother-in-law is killed while guarding a store during the uprising.¹

I find “The Court Interpreter” both illuminating and troubling, especially in its depiction of the tension between blacks and Koreans. The story magnifies the various obstacles to sound judgment, most notably with regard to people of color, and reveals traces of what legal scholar Lisa Ikemoto describes as the “master narrative”: “white supremacy’s prescriptive, conflict-constructing power, which deploys exclusionary concepts of race and privilege in ways that maintain intergroup conflict” (1582).² I would like to extract from Pak’s narrative several issues of both legal justice and quotidian judgments made in a pluralistic society. How can we—as readers, viewers, or jurors—exercise judicious judgment amid media distortions and racial stereotypes? How can we avoid the burden of representation and knee-jerk identity politics? How can we avoid unfairly judging or being judged on account of skin color, gender, class, or language? How do we negotiate the subjective assessments that occur in the courtroom (and in the narrative) at every level—from the court interpreter, to the witnesses, to the attorneys, to the judge? Above all, how can we extricate ourselves from the ideological web of the master narrative?

As the narrator's court interpretation makes all too clear, what passes for objective description is invariably subjective construal. By ferreting out the dubious assumptions lurking in both the legal and cultural discourses about the trial of the Korean storekeeper, the trial of the white police officers, and the subsequent civil explosion, I wish to demonstrate the glaring misrepresentation that can come about when social events are detached from their contexts and when individuals are supplanted by stock images. Taking the lead from scholars of Critical Race Theory who have shown how African Americans and Korean Americans were positioned agonistically in *People v. Soon Ja Du* and in the media accounts about the L.A. uprising, I submit that Pak's narrative at once satirizes and underwrites the oppositional racial identities dictated by the "master narrative," which fuels Black/Korean conflict and mitigates white accountability. Especially unsettling is the way members of one racial minority align themselves discursively and ideologically with the white majority in their attempt to debase another racial minority. Like Ikemoto, I do not posit "a unilateral 'master hand,' [but] use that image to evoke a sense of control felt but not seen, and of contrivance" (1582). Pak, and by extension artists of color, can be likewise liable to exploiting the contrasting ethnic stereotypes and oppositional racial identities scripted by the dominant culture.

In addition to showing how (mis)interpretations in line with the master narrative fan interracial hostility in both the legal and the literary realms, I hope my essay can prompt a reciprocal reflection between law and literature. On one hand, the essay uses concepts from Critical Race Theory such as "disaggregation," "racial stratification," and "master narrative" to cast light on Pak's fiction. On the other hand, it uses "The Court Interpreter" to flesh out these concepts and to provoke further inquiry into the practices of translation in the courtroom. The critique Kirsten Silva Gruesz directs at American Studies generally seems equally applicable to Critical Race Studies: "It is as if everything is subject to critique except the language in which those critiques are voiced: by default, the register of academic US English" (85). Pak's story should call attention to the pitfalls associated with court interpretation and with the paramountcy of the English translation, and to the need for linguistic

equity before the law. I am aware of the intrusion of my own interpretations in undertaking such a critique, which may nevertheless expose the biases of putatively neutral texts. I move freely between the actual and the fictionalized events in the hope that my inquiry can have implications beyond the precincts of literature.

Understanding the social context and the operation of opposite stereotypes is crucial to unpacking both the legal and the literary texts. I therefore offer brief sketches of the situation in South Central Los Angeles and of the stereotypical images of African Americans and Asian Americans prior to the civil disorder. Sociologists Melvin Oliver et al. believe that besides the longstanding abusive treatment of black suspects by the police,³ there were many underlying causes for the uprising in 1992, and the police-brutality trial was but “the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back” (120). To them, the urban tumult was a response to many external forces that increasingly have isolated and impoverished the community. These forces included “structural changes in the local (and national) economy; wholesale disinvestments in the South Central Los Angeles community by banks and other institutions, including the local city government; and nearly two decades of conservative federal policies which have simultaneously affected adversely the quality of life of the residents of South Central Los Angeles and accelerated the decline and deterioration of their neighborhoods” (120). Owing partly to these developments and partly to employers’ negative attitudes toward black workers, the black-male jobless rate in some of these neighborhoods approached 50% (122).

These developments in South Central coincided with a radical demographic transformation, which provoked considerable friction between long-term black residents and recent immigrants “over jobs, housing, and scarce public resources” (121). During the seventies and the eighties the community was transformed from a predominantly black to a mixed black and Latino area, with Latinos constituting nearly half the population. This new group, working mostly in low-paying jobs, fared little better than African Americans: incomes of both groups were “below the poverty level” (122-23). Into this volatile milieu entered Korean immigrants. The exodus of Jewish owners in the wake of the Watts riots in 1965 had left a space which family-run Korean businesses came to fill (121).

The Korean Americans who opened stores in the neighborhood were, according to Sumi Cho, resented by underprivileged residents and were seen as "'outsiders' exerting unfair control and power in the community" (198). Furthermore, many of the shops owned by Korean immigrants in 1992 were liquor stores, and these proprietors were viewed by many African Americans as "poison-pushing merchants" (Zia 177).

The friction between African Americans and Korean Americans⁴ was exacerbated by prevailing stereotypes about the two groups—the popular imputations of African Americans as indolent, economically dependent, or violent and of Asian Americans as hardworking, self-sufficient, and law-abiding, worthy of being named the "model minority." As Cho has pointed out, the prevailing US racial hierarchy and its attendant stereotypes were "transferred worldwide to every country that the United States [had] occupied militarily" (199). The US military presence in South Korea, according to John Lie and Nancy Abelmann, had itself crystallized the hierarchy for South Koreans: "They [had] observed the segregated restaurants, bars, and brothels and the black-white division of the U.S. military" (83). For Korean immigrants in the United States, these memories from home were compounded by negative images of African Americans in movies and television shows. Cho believes that many Korean immigrants have absorbed the myths about African Americans as "lazy, complaining criminals" and that these stereotypes, combined with the high crime rate inherent in businesses such as liquor or convenience stores, produced the "bunker mentality of Soon Ja Du" (199).

Asian Americans have borne the opposite stereotype. The image of the model minority gained currency in the 1960s, in the wake of the civil rights movement when African Americans were pressing for political and social reforms. This image was used by neo-conservative pundits to cast a negative reflection on other racial minorities, particularly African Americans: if Asian Americans could do so well despite the fact that they too had been victims of racist practices such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Japanese American internment, why couldn't African Americans also succeed? Why should the government do anything to help racial minorities? All the other minorities could just follow the Asian

American example (see Petersen; Bell; Bennett).⁵ The exemplary Asians often were invoked in contrast with African Americans, thereby pitting the two groups against each other. Nadia Kim points out that many Korean immigrants were prone to “accept and reproduce [these] prejudicial notions by interpreting their ‘model minority’ positioning above Blacks and Latinos as proof that those who try hard enough can overcome forms of racial discrimination” (16). The reality turned out otherwise. In the case of South Central Los Angeles, Korean immigrants readily inherited the stereotypes ascribed to their Jewish predecessors, whose stock images as unscrupulous shopkeepers and chronic over-chargers dated back to Shakespeare. However, unlike Jewish merchants before them, many Korean merchants were non-Anglophone speakers and were therefore seen additionally as “foreigners” (Chang 10). As I will show later, the image of Korean Americans as outsiders who don’t speak English is writ large, with acrimonious connotations, in “The Court Interpreter.”

Many African American residents in South Central reiterated these popular conceptions about Asian Americans—seeing them as members of the touted “model minority” who were likely to look down on other racial minorities. These ideas were reinforced by the conspicuous mercantile presence of Korean Americans in the inner city. Cho observes that after the civil unrest many African American leaders rationalized the violence against Korean Americans by repeating the myth that Korean immigrants unfairly competed with aspiring entrepreneurs from the Black community because Korean Americans received “preferential treatment over African Americans for bank and government loans,” when in fact “banks and government lenders uniformly reject[ed] loan applications for businesses located in poor, predominantly minority neighborhoods such as South Central Los Angeles, regardless of the applicant’s color” (197). Instead of receiving traditional financing, Korean immigrants who opened stores and small businesses either had come over with capital, or borrowed from family and friends, or created their own financial institutions through informal rotating credit associations. Furthermore, many of these Korean immigrants held college degrees; they turned to small business because they could not find jobs commensurate with their education

due to systemic discrimination and general anti-foreign sentiment. Describing such “occupational downgrading” and “self-exploitation” in mom-and-pop grocery stores as “success” was an overstatement, which nevertheless contributed to the scapegoating of Korean Americans “by those above and below Koreans on the socioeconomic ladder during the L.A. riots” (Cho 200, 197). The attribution of contrasting stereotypes to Korean Americans and African Americans occurs in both Du’s trial and in Pak’s story. The media, the judge, the narrator, and Pak himself are all responsible for sustaining these images.

Interpretation in the Courtroom and the Media

Personally I don’t believe one is intrinsically this or that, except as packaged and presented.⁶

The title “The Court Interpreter” seems nicely polysemous. The story turns on the various senses of *interpretation*—rendering one language into another, as by a translator; offering exegesis or a subjective analysis, as by a literary critic; giving a personal and distinctive rendition of a script, as by a performer. Soon after the story opens, the accused Korean storekeeper’s attorney tells the narrator that he wants to find a “classy” interpreter for her, “with the right diction and style to *project* [his] client as an educated, refined person, not some callous killer from a backward culture as the media has been portraying her” (89; my emphasis). Implicit in the remark is the understanding that the client is already the subject of competing narratives—of the media and the defense—and that a well-spoken defendant (and an interpreter) from the upper-middle class is much more likely to get a favorable hearing than one who is less endowed. The attorney is not concerned with the proprietor’s real character; he simply wants an interpreter who can “project,” or re-present, his client as respectable. When asked whether the Korean defendant is credible or trustworthy, the attorney responds that “she may not be the classiest lady, but then who is? Personally I don’t believe one is intrinsically this or that, except as packaged and presented” (96). His answer points to an intrinsic flaw in a judicial system that pivots on adversarial performances.

An attorney's job is to defend the client—whether guilty or not; his only goal is to win. It is in a similar vein, as will be shown, that the narrator interprets for Joo: he is less concerned with justice than with his own performance, with his mastery of the English language, and with the public image of Korean Americans. These attitudes of the attorney and the interpreter call into question the ostensible neutrality of a court of law.

The firestorm of 1992 was itself subject to disparate interpretations. To President Bush (Sr.), it represented “the brutality of a mob, pure and simple” (quoted in Hunt 1997, 1). The general American populace refers to it as a “riot.” But scholars differ in their choice of terminology. Melvin Oliver et al. note that “the burning and looting were neither random nor limited to a single neighborhood [but] targeted, systematic, and widespread, encompassing much of the legal city. This fact has led us to purposefully and consistently refer to the civil unrest as a rebellion as opposed to a riot” (118). Lisa C. Ikemoto also chooses “rebellion” in the hope that the events in Los Angeles would “provoke an effective narrative against white supremacy” (1584). Elaine H. Kim, however, points out that many Korean Americans, herself included, were reluctant to call what happened in Los Angeles an “uprising” (216). Helen Zia concurs: “To [Korean Americans] it was a SCUD missile attack with a very definite target” (172). Jerry Watts believes that ultimately the distinction between a riot and a rebellion would be politically insignificant to the television viewing audience, who were largely indifferent to the plight of poor blacks in America (238). These viewers, one might add, were probably even more unconcerned about Korean immigrants, hitherto off the US black-white radar. While distressed by the injustice triggering the turbulent events, I (Chinese American) was no less appalled by the burning in South Central and the targeting of Korean American merchants. To me the violent protest, however understandable as an expression of the politically disenfranchised, inflamed rather than healed racial wounds. Hence my text uses relatively neutral terms such as “civil disturbance,” “urban unrest,” and “sa-i-gu” (literally 4-2-9, a phrase used by Korean Americans to refer to that day of calamity).

The mainstream media—the most powerful interpreter—certainly represents the civil disorder as “riot.” Darnell Hunt notes that most of the accounts we read and watch in the media are shaped to provide us “with a particular understanding of the events” (3). Kwang Chung Kim observes, “As the event unfolded, the mass violence, which had begun as a protest by African Americans against the dominant society, was reconfigured as an interminority group conflict between Koreans and African Americans” (1). Major television networks and newspapers framed the occurrences around sa-i-gu by playing up the collisions between blacks and Koreans, stereotyping the immigrant community, discounting Korean American perspectives, and presenting the mass revolt merely as violent rampages. Although the immediate catalyst of the explosion was the “not guilty” verdict following the Rodney King beating and although the “majority of the people arrested for rioting and looting. . . were Latinos, not African Americans” (Lie and Abelmann 80), the Black-Korean rivalry became the central media-constructed frame. As Bong Hwan Kim, a member of the Black-Korean Alliance and executive director of the Korean Youth Cultural Center, points out, “Reporters seemed satisfied to portray the matter as race hatred between two communities of color, rather than looking at the forces that brought them into conflict” (quoted in Zia 180). The print media repeatedly ran the story, “Girl killed over \$1.79 bottle of juice.” Many Korean merchants “were so angry with the *Los Angeles Times* for depicting the killing as a racially motivated incident representative of all Korean grocers that they refused to sell certain issues at their stores” (Zia 177).

Angela Oh accuses the media of exploiting “the hardship and tensions between two communities engaged in a struggle for survival.” She adds, “Without diminishing the reality of the tensions between Korean-Americans and African-Americans, it is critical to recognize that persistent institutional inequities were the root cause of the Los Angeles riot” (1647-48). She further observes that the major news outlets publicized every clash between African Americans and Korean Americans, but ignored cooperative efforts between these communities: “Where were the stories about George Chung who runs a convenience store in South Central Los Angeles and the special services he provides to predominantly African-

American house-bound senior citizens? . . . Where were the stories about the minority bar associations in Los Angeles, trying to effect change in the very system that sparked the events of April 29, 1992?" (1647). John Lie and Nancy Abelmann provide a convincing answer for why the mainstream media is so intent on amplifying the dissonance: "the interethnic conflict frame resonates with underlying American ideological currents, which pit Asian Americans, as a model minority, against African Americans, as an urban underclass" (79-80).

The national news networks also depicted Korean immigrants as aggressive defenders of their property during the commotion and gave short shrift to their perspectives before, during, and after *sa-i-gu*. Helen Zia observes that "even when news reports were quick to label the riots a black-Korean problem rather than one of police brutality, replaying images of Korean Americans with guns, few reporters ventured to Koreatown or bothered to interview Korean Americans" (183). Over and over again major television networks aired the close-ups of armed Korean store owners shooting wildly at looters when, according to Edward Chang in *Frontline Episode* (1993), most Korean business owners did not even own guns. While the beating of Rodney King reflected prevalent police brutality against blacks, the killing of a black customer by a Korean merchant was a rare incident; yet footage showing the shooting of Harlins and the beating of King was played consecutively throughout the day as though the two events were linked and were equally commonplace. No mention was made of the fact that, even before the death of the black teenager, many Korean storekeepers had been robbed and killed. Zia tells that in a single month in 1986, "four Korean storekeepers in L.A. were shot to death by African Americans in separate incidents" (174). Although Korean immigrants suffered the bulk of the damages during the uprising, they often appeared on television as vigilantes and, in part on account of language barriers, the "mainstream media. . . virtually excluded Korean American voices" (Lie and Abelmann 79).

African Americans fared worse. The assault by young blacks on Reginald Denny, a white trucker, was palpably painful to television viewers. Images of black and Latino looters and arsonists also filled the screen, suggesting that the mass violence was prompted

purely by retaliation and greed among racial minorities. Attributing the civil disturbance to mob brutality alone, as did our President, ignored the "seeds of rebellion" put forward by Oliver et al. Darnell Hunt recounts his encounter, two days after the upheaval, with a black storekeeper whose record store had been badly looted. Pointing out the substantial damages to his store, the proprietor remarked: "This is all material. . . I'd sacrifice it all to help the black man rise" (Hunt 1997, xiv). His comment suggests that there were other ways of looking at the fires that flashed across television screens during the civil disorder, that the mainstream media's emphasis on lawless violence was but one version.

The news outlets described in Pak's story likewise fail to give a balanced picture. The narrator points out that after the shooting of the black teenager, the mainstream media honed in on the boycotts and protests by black people, "faithfully reporting their daily demonstrations, depicting us as pushy, crass materialists, holding human life cheap, obsessed with the goal to get rich quick, taking, never giving" (91). By casting aspersions on all Koreans, the media assigns collective blame and disregards individuals (like the narrator) who initially decried the killing of the black teenager. The Korean language press, on the other hand, paints an antipathetic picture of the black victim and her family. The narrator describes the "revulsion and indignation" felt by himself and his compatriots as "more facts about the Brooks," i.e. the black teenager and her family, are disseminated by the Korean language press: "the grief of the family and friends, so telling on TV screen, appeared positively repulsive and obscene. . . . Natasha herself, at the tender age of 15, was the mother of two children already, and had been living with her current boyfriend" (91-92).

While the narrator is quick to point out the distortions in the mainstream coverage, he seems oblivious to the possibility of equally skew reporting from the Korean language press, taking its account for "facts." His own response is patently racist and sexist: "Instead of pity for [Natasha] or her orphaned children, she evoked with her enormous weight of 250 pounds orgiastic images of eating, mating, and breeding destined to unbalance global ecology" (92). He thus implies, with unabashed black humor, that the death of an obese teenage mother hardly deserves sympathy. Not surpris-

ingly, he refers to African American rage against the killing of the teenager as “black hysteria” (91). Pak’s story shows how the different news media intensify racial antagonism and how easy it is to fault the “other” coverage while being blind to “our” individual and collective bias. Ikemoto contends, moreover, that this myopia is chronic rather than event-specific:

The stories of intergroup conflict came from the master narrative of white supremacy. Those Korean and African Americans who participated in the storytelling spoke and acted from the imposed experience of racism. . . . Racism is so much a part of our experience that we cannot always recognize those moments when we participate. As a corollary, if you experience racism as one marginalized by it, then you use racism to explain your relations with other groups and their members. (1584-85)

Both the mainstream media and the black and Korean presses in Pak’s story participate in circulating the dominant racial ideology.

The Burden of Representation and Identity Politics

By now it had definitely become a matter of our national reputation. . . . The victim was no longer Natasha Brook, but Moonja Joo and the entire Korean American community.

The mainstream media in Pak’s story is surely to blame for presenting all Korean immigrants as mercenary and ruthless. This kind of generalization illustrates the unfair burden of representation—whereby the action of one person is made to reflect on the disposition of her gender or race—imposed on people of color in the United States.⁷ In an essay titled “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” Peggy McIntosh points out that as a white person she can defy social etiquette “without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of [her] race,” and that she is never asked to “speak for all the people of [her] racial group” (293). By contrast, an atrocious crime committed by an African American or an Asian American seems to bring dishonor to everyone of African or Asian descent. In Du’s case, both the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *Los Angeles Times* chose

to underscore her ethnicity, with headlines such as "Korean Shopowner Freed" and "Korean Grocer Receives Probation" (cited in Cho 204), as though her provenance and behavior were linked. The entire Korean American population was stigmatized over the action of one woman.

Members of racial minorities, themselves victims of such guilt by racial association, are not exempt from meting out similar treatment to other minorities:

Shortly after the killing of Latasha Harlins [a] Korean girl who was in her parents' store was shot and critically wounded; the attacker reportedly said, "This is for Latasha." In the year following the shooting, 48 murders and 2,500 robberies were reported in L.A.'s Koreatown, and the number of hate crimes against Korean Americans topped all other anti-Asian incidents. (Zia 178)

This burden of representation often is imposed both externally and reflexively. In reaction to negative racial profiling, members of an afflicted minority—be they writers, actors, or students—are intensely conscious that their performances reflect not just on themselves but also on their ethnic group in toto.⁸ The interpreter in Pak's story feels this onus acutely: he believes that he is not just representing his client but his ethnic constituency at the trial. His sense of mission bears out the correlation between collective representation and identity politics.

In the story, and in life, group allegiance is in part a reaction to the burden of representation. If an entire ethnicity is under attack, members of the group are likely to rally and to identify with one another. The term "identity politics" emerged in the late sixties when marginalized groups felt that they had to ally with other women or people of the same race in order to secure their rights in a society dominated by white men. The concept has given rise to important programs in women's and ethnic studies, and in legislation throughout the United States. Ethnic consciousness played a definite role during *sa-i-gu*. Elaine Kim notes its impact:

Korean national consciousness, the resolve to resist and fight back when threatened with extermination, was all that could be called upon when the Korean Americans in Los Angeles found themselves aban-

done. They joined together to guard each other's means of livelihood with guns, relying on Korean-language radio and newspapers to communicate with and help each other. . . . It is far easier for Anglo Americans to call for an end to cultural nationalisms than for Korean Americans to give up national consciousness, which makes it possible to survive the vicious racism that would deny our existence as either Korean Americans or Americans. (229-30)

Kim's emphasis on the indispensable sustenance offered by Korean Americans to one another during the crisis is well taken. There are occasions, however, when collective consciousness can cloud one's judgment. When two federal mediators—one Korean American and the other African American—were asked to review the videotaped shooting of Harlins that had been captured on the store's security camera, their conclusions could not have been more different. The Korean mediator, Jan Jung-Min Sunoo, reported, "I watched the video and saw a frightened Korean American woman whose gun went off accidentally. My black colleague watched and said, 'That settles that. She shot the girl in cold blood'" (quoted in Zia 176). These antithetical responses make us wonder whether judgment can be independent of race and group allegiances. Even years later, when I showed a copy of the same grainy clip to over a hundred UCLA freshmen in 1999, a similar split in opinion according to racial background took place: several African American students saw Du as an unblinking murderer while Korean American students countered that view by zeroing in on the mitigating circumstances (previous African American harassment of the grocer's family, Harlins's attack on Du prior to the shooting, Du's nervousness, etc.).

Reception to the videotaped beating of Rodney King was no less divided. While many viewers were shocked by the police brutality, the jury in Simi Valley saw the case differently. One reason for their "not-guilty" verdict is suggested by Melvin Oliver et al.: "Simi Valley. . . is a predominantly white community known for its strong stance on law and order, as evidenced by the fact that a significant number of LAPD officers live there. Thus, the four white police officers were truly judged by a jury of their peers" (119). Identity politics obviously was not confined to women and people of color alone. Darnell Hunt, through his analysis of various

audiences' responses to the television coverage of the L.A. "riots," has demonstrated the extent to which "race shapes the reception experience." He asks, "Is it not possible that the 'veracity' of *all* images. . . is to some degree determined by what people want or are socialized to see?" (11, 2).⁹

Both the African American and the Korean American characters in Pak's story allow identity politics to govern their perceptions. At Joo's arraignment, the prosecutor produces twelve black eyewitnesses, all swearing to have seen Joo shoot the victim "pointblank" in the back. However, upon cross-examination it is obvious that some of these witnesses could not have watched the scene. The narrator believes that "if allowed, the whole town of South Central Los Angeles would have queued up to swear to the same" (104), implying that any black person is likely to testify automatically against the grocer regardless of the actual circumstances.

But the narrator's hypothesis gives away his own bias. While he resents the blanket defamation of Koreans, he does not scruple to homogenize the people, presumably black like the eyewitnesses, in South Central (where about half of the residents are in fact Latinos), configuring them as a monolithic bloc that puts race ahead of moral judgment. His racial innuendo reverberates with the American legal legacy—vestiges of which still persist—of writing off testimony by people of color, especially African Americans. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller, it was precisely such continued discrediting of black testimony that made viewers valorize the so-called "objective proof" of the videotaped beating of Rodney King: "There has always been available the witness and testimony of hundreds of thousands of victims of police brutality who can attest to the practices of the L.A. police. . . . The emphasis on the objective proof of the videotape. . . marginalizes as merely subjective all those whose reality is devalued" (66). The narrator likewise impugns the black witnesses' credibility.

Ironically, the narrator is himself guilty of placing ethnic allegiance before personal conviction. Prior to the African American backlash against the shooting, he had expressed "shame and outrage over the seemingly senseless killing by one of our number" and even had considered collaborating with a Korean pastor by writing to the *Los Angeles Times*, "apologizing to the victim's fam-

ily and friends, to the American society at large, explaining that as a people we were not given to such violence” (90). Irritated by the unfair denouncement of all Korean Americans by black demonstrators and by the media, however, he decides against his better judgment to re-present Joo with his utmost effort. For him, the case concerning her has “definitely become a matter of [Korean American] national reputation” (91), which he is anxious to repair. In this instance, the burden of representation occasions identity politics: because the mainstream media and the black press render Joo as a “typical” Korean, the narrator—along with other Korean immigrants—moves from shame to rancor, from reproving Joo to lionizing her:

Our corporate guilt. . . soon gave way to dismay and anger as the smear and hate campaign against Koreans escalated. . . the blacks marched the streets waving banners and placards that read, singular shifted to plural, “Go Home Killer Korean Grocers,” “Deport Murderer Immigrants.” . . . We had to exonerate the accused, who had by now become a folk hero. . . . We had to fight back and reclaim our tarnished national honor. (90, 92)

The incendiary placards will be discussed later. Let us focus first on the narrator’s response. As a result of the indiscriminate slurs against Koreans, the narrator—speaking in the plural “we” himself—believes that Korean Americans must now stand beside the grocer: “I had to make Moonja Joo credible, show her as the victim, not assailant. . . outrageously and brutally attacked and abused” (107). Trying to exculpate Joo on account of her ethnicity, however, the court interpreter is in a sense almost as reprehensible as those African Americans who deem all Korean Americans guilty by (racial) association. These instances illustrate how racial profiling and identity politics can further fracture estranged minorities. Self-criticism within both the Korean American and African American communities might have been more effective in encouraging open dialogues between these two subjugated groups and in combating a static conception of race.¹⁰

Disaggregation and Racial Stratification

We could only wring our hands in helpless fury, realizing that we didn't come across as eloquently and effectively as the blacks.

Communities of color may be too encumbered by identity politics and the burden of representation to regard impartially the "other." But the judicial system does purport to be "color-blind." Scholars of Critical Race Theory have observed from different angles, however, that the court is far from neutral in its insistence on formal justice. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Gary Peller argue that it was in part the sidestepping of racial considerations that led to the "not guilty" verdict in the King beating. In addition to the problem of venue discussed by Oliver et al., Crenshaw and Peller believe that a process of *disaggregation*—"isolating [an event] from its meaning-giving context" (61)—was responsible for persuading the Simi Valley jury that the use of force on Rodney King by the four police officers was "reasonable," a case of necessary "restraint" (59). At that trial, *disaggregation* consisted of dissecting the videotape into still images:

Once the video was broken up. . . each still picture could then be reweaved into a different narrative about the restraint of King, one in which each blow to King represented. . . a police-approved technique of restraint complete with technical names for each baton strike (or "stroke"). The videotape images were *physically* mediated by the illustration board upon which the still pictures were mounted, and. . . they were *symbolically* mediated by the new narrative backdrops of the technical discourse of institutional security and the reframing of King as a threat rather than a victim. (59)

Crenshaw and Peller uncover the flagrant suppression of racial considerations in a case in which racial power was being exercised. The very videotape that seemed to corroborate the charges of police brutality was used by the defense to incriminate the victim: "what many took to be incontrovertible evidence *against* the police was presented instead to establish police vulnerability" (Butler 15). As Judith Butler observes, "This is a seeing which is a reading. . . a *contestable* construal, but one which nevertheless passes as 'see-

ing” (16). Oliver et al. further note how stereotypes facilitated the conversion of King into a potential assailant: the defense attorneys described King as “unpredictable, dangerous, and uncontrollable”; even the news media contributed to the metamorphosis by referring to the case as the “Rodney King trial” (Oliver et al. 119). The role of interpretation was everywhere manifest but, according to Crenshaw and Peller, was by no means confined to this case: “law, in general, and the courtroom, in particular, are arenas where narratives are contested, and the power of interpretation exercised” (59).

James Boyd White likewise observes that “the law is at its heart an interpretive and compositional, and in this sense a radically literary, activity” (394). He adds:

When we turn to judicial opinion. . . we can ask not only how we evaluate its “result” but, more importantly, how and what it makes that result mean. . . for each case is an invitation to lawyers and judges to talk one way rather than another, to constitute themselves in language one way rather than another, to give one kind of meaning rather than another to what they do, and this invitation can itself be analyzed and judged. (395)

Gotanda answers the call to one such “invitation” when he subjects Judge Joyce A. Karlin’s sentencing colloquy (the statement explaining a sentence) in *People v. Soon Ja Du* to critical scrutiny. He argues that contrasting stereotypes about Asian Americans and African Americans inform this colloquy. While Judge Karlin avoids specific reference to race, she uses cultural markers that “extend existing racial stereotypes” (379, 380). Her characterization of Du as a good wife working in a family store, a good mother volunteering to work there on the fatal day to protect her son, and an “innocent shopkeeper” conforms, Gotanda notes, to the stock image of the family-oriented, successful, and industrious model minority. By contrast, the judge casts Harlins as a delinquent associated with gang violence and connects “gangness” with African Americans, “ignoring the widespread presence of gangs made up largely of Asians” and eliding a number of facts brought to light by the court of appeal that would have aroused sympathy for Harlins—such as her being a good athlete and an honor student (382).

In a move reminiscent of the defense in the police-brutality trial, Judge Karlin goes so far as to transpose the roles of the perpetrator and the victim: "Had Latasha Harlins not been shot and had the incident which preceded the shooting been reported, it is my opinion that the district attorney would have relied on the videotape and Mrs. Du's testimony to make a determination whether to file charges against Latasha" (26 of the Sentencing Colloquy; included in Gotanda 387). Gotanda believes that the constant comparisons between Du and Harlins throughout the colloquy turn the individuals in question into "*representatives* of communities in conflict" (380; my emphasis). He further notes that the Judge, in "humanizing" Du and "demonizing" Harlins, stratifies the two minorities and subordinates them to an invisible "white majority and its position of white racial privilege" (380-82). Through disaggregation and racial stratification in the courtroom, both Rodney King and Latasha Harlins morphed into aggressors who deserved to be harshly disciplined.

With few exceptions, scholars of Critical Race Theory, including Crenshaw, Peller, and Gotanda, have focused on the operation of white power in the courtroom. As Ikemoto has demonstrated, however, persons of color are not immune from deploying similar mechanisms to replicate the divisive interpellation of the white mainstream. The judicial blind spots detected by the aforementioned legal scholars have numerous parallels in Pak's tale. While some of the partial perspectives in the short story can be attributed to the unreliable narrator rather than to the author, the author must be held responsible for the polarization of the two ethnic groups and for the tendentious alteration of facts in the narrative. Pak maintains a satirical distance from the narrator vis-à-vis the latter's implicit faith in the American Dream, but he seems to share the interpreter's stereotypical views of African Americans as deviant and intimidating, and of Korean Americans as industrious and economically driven.

Crenshaw and Peller have observed that once a social event is decontextualized, it is possible to assemble an alternative narrative: "In the Rodney King brutality case, the stills were reconnected through a story of King's power and agency—his body could become 'cocked' and could appear 'in a trigger position'" (61). Simi-

larly, by ignoring the material conditions—especially the economic deprivation—of people of color in South Central, Pak constructs, through the narrator, a tale in which the problem facing Korean immigrants is predominantly the enmity of African Americans. The narrator charges the “whole of black Los Angeles” with “clamoring for their pound of flesh” (89), displacing the negative image of Shylock from Korean merchants onto African American protesters. The latter consistently are depicted as having much greater political clout than do Korean Americans, and as racists rather than as victims of racism. The narrator claims that some politicians pandered to African Americans by advocating a life sentence for the Korean grocer because “after all the blacks had the head count, the votes” (91). Upset by the odious portrayal of Korean Americans by the black press and the mainstream media, he laments, “We could only wring our hands in helpless fury, realizing that we didn’t come across as eloquently and effectively as the blacks, that we didn’t have their native English, their orators, artists, athletes, politicians, TV personalities, and other resources” (92). Although blacks do outnumber Asians and have a much greater media access and communication network than do Korean Americans, the attribution of an effective supply of “resources” to African Americans as a group flies in the face of civic reality. As Kwang Chung Kim points out, while African American residents in the inner city may be politically stronger than Korean merchants, the latter are “economically active and powerful as sellers and employers” (6); furthermore, “when compared with the white dominant group, both Korean merchants and African American residents are weak in both economic and political dimensions” (6).

Since there is nothing in Pak’s text to contradict the narrator’s invidious comparisons, the reader cannot simply dismiss the lopsided description to the limited point of view of an unreliable narrator. Elsewhere in a piece entitled “Korean American Identity,” Pak has bemoaned the precariousness of Korean American identity: “the ultimate, inescapable separateness of us from them, from the American mainstream, from the American white and black majority” (40). In fiction and nonfiction alike, Pak sees blacks as part of the powerful American mainstream rather than as fellow members of a racial minority. Disaggregated from the history of racial

subordination, the African Americans in Pak's story come across as consistently having the upper hand. Like the "formal legal equality" employed in court to "obscure the everyday character of racial power" (Crenshaw and Peller 62), Pak's articulation of the Black-Korean conflict disregards the continuation of black disenfranchisement and white control.

"The Court Interpreter" bears the imprint of what Gotanda describes as "racial stratification" and what Lisa Ikemoto calls the "master narrative." As suggested earlier, the stereotypes of the model Asian and the delinquent black tend to operate in tandem—assenting to the one often involves subscribing to the other. This perilous coupling is conveyed, with withering sarcasm, by Chang-rae Lee in *Native Speaker*: "we [Korean immigrants] believed in anything American, in impressing Americans, in making money, polishing apples in the dead of night, perfectly pressed pants, perfect credit, being perfect, shooting black people, watching our stores and offices burn down to the ground" (53). The passage intimates that being a model minority entails not only pleasing the white majority (by being impeccable, hardworking, and uncomplaining), but also sharing the dominant culture's prejudice against African Americans.

The narrator of "The Court Interpreter" obviously betrays such a slanted vision. The racialized images detected by Gotanda in Judge Karlin's colloquy wax explicit in Pak's story. Here, it is the court interpreter (and not the judge) who consciously encodes the defendant as a member of the model minority: "I had to make Moonja Joo credible. . . a law-abiding, hardworking individual" (107). Not that this portrait is entirely askew, for both of the principal Korean characters in the story conform or subscribe to the stereotypical image, especially in the sense of making it economically. The defense lawyer commends Joo as "quite a woman. She and her husband could get together a million dollars to qualify under the new US immigration policy for foreign investors. That's quite an accomplishment anywhere but especially in Korea" (96). The lawyer, intent on presenting her as a "refined" lady, finds a complaisant partner in the court interpreter, who is equally determined to make the defendant as appealing as possible. The concerted effort of the lawyer and the narrator at once brings out the

constructed nature of Joo's image and its indisputable sway in the courtroom: the construction prevails in court because it fits in so well with the existing template. Pak's story does at least make it clear that the grocer's makeover from a killer to an exemplary citizen is a deliberate contrivance on the parts of the attorney and the narrator, not judgment in the name of formal equality—as in Judge Karlin's sentencing colloquy.

The narrator himself, a self-made man, embodies model minority *par excellence*. Once a starving boy in Korea, he became a professor of English in Hawaii and subsequently a successful florist as well as a court interpreter in Los Angeles, with two children who attend Harvard and MIT (93). He accepts the assignment to interpret for Joo because of the handsome fees promised, which make his “heart skip a beat” (77). He wishes that the trial would last for a long time so that he could “earn enough to make. . . mortgage payments for some months without dipping into [family] savings” (95). For him, and implicitly for other Korean immigrants, the American Dream is no bigger than “acceptance and advancement in the American mainstream, the dream of [their] children. . . making headway in their various professions and occupations” (91). These goals, to be sure, are also shared by many other Americans and I may seem unfair in subjecting the narrator to a higher standard. But the American Dream, with its stress on personal and familial enhancement, rather than communal betterment, does have particularly ominous implications when embraced blindly by Asian Americans, for the qualities seen as instrumental to its fulfillment also dovetail with the preconceptions about the model minority. Living up to the stereotype can lead to either condescending approbation or open denouncement, and lend credence to the common perceptions of Asian Americans as deferential conformists desirous to be “perfect” in the eyes of whites, as political conservatives concerned only with the prosperity of their own families and children, or as “crass materialists. . . obsessed with the goal to get rich quick, taking never giving” (91).

It would have been tempting to read the narrator's wholesale endorsement of the model minority tenets as part of Pak's satire on the American Dream had they not been promulgated by Pak himself:

I have absolutely no doubt about our people reaching the top. We have this demon driving us, this restless energy, that won't leave us alone, until we get there. Koreans are congenital workaholics. They think nothing of holding down two or three jobs at the same time. . . . Then there is our compulsion to educate our young. . . sending [our children] to lessons, private tutors, SAT prep classes, to Ivy League or other top schools. Of course formal education is not everything and plenty of great men and women are self-taught, self-made, but the law of averages favors the formally educated and we seem to be betting on the right horse. Let's keep up the good work. ("Korean American Identity" 56)

Aside from homogenizing Korean Americans, Pak's statement staunchly upholds the myth of the model minority. Just as the author and the narrator profess similar values, allegedly held by Korean people en masse, it is difficult to separate their views vis-à-vis African Americans. The seamy corollary to the desire to be accepted by the white mainstream, as hinted at by Chang-rae Lee, is played out with a vengeance in "The Court Interpreter," which is replete with negative characterizations of African Americans. The narrator is so intent on assimilation that he has fully absorbed the racial ideology of the dominant culture. Yet the negative portrayal cannot be imputed to the untrustworthy narrator alone since some of the most egregious detail about the black teenager's family are, as noted earlier, presented as "facts" from the Korean press and are uncontested within the story. As a fiction writer, Pak admittedly has the right to deviate from the actual occurrence for narrative purposes. In a tale that adheres closely to the news event, however, it is vexing that his most blatant inventions serve to accentuate black depravity.¹¹

Pak, like Judge Karlin, implicates the black teenager and passes over her positive traits. As noted earlier, Brook, the fictionalized counterpart of Harlins, is depicted with animalistic imagery as an overweight "mother of two children already" (92), in stark contrast to the court of appeal's description of Harlins as "a good athlete and an active church member" and "an honor student. . . involved in activities at a youth center as an assistant cheerleader" (quoted in Gotanda 382). Whereas Harlins was motherless, her fictional counterpart has an abusive mother who had "beaten and abused her

daughter and turned her out of her house” (92).¹² In watching the clip from the security camera, the narrator describes the black teenager as “a hulking figure, tall and big” who, after punching the Korean grocer, “turned to walk off like a gladiator who had just vanquished her opponent” (103, 104). The black victim is here coded as a formidable assailant. In the actual event, the teenager did not try to walk away with the orange juice, as in Pak’s narrative, but approached the cash register with the money in her hand to pay for it, having already put the juice in her backpack. Du grabbed the backpack and accused her of stealing. It was Du’s false accusation of theft—“a provocative charge that underscored persistent complaints of disrespect and scrutiny of African Americans by Korean merchants”—that led to Harlins’s attack on her (Zia 176). Pak’s alterations have little narrative function except the ossification of stock images such as the unwed and single black teenage mother, the dysfunctional black family, and the black criminal. Instead of using his poetic license to undermine common misconceptions, Pak reprises the popular imaginary of model Asians and aberrant blacks.

The role of the Asian American artist has been a particularly sensitive issue since 1998 when the perennial debate about artistic freedom and social responsibility split the Asian American intellectual community over the selection of Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s novel *Blu’s Hanging* for the Association for Asian American Studies Fiction Award (see Fujikane, Nguyen 160-66; Chuh 140-45). Defenders of the award focused on Yamanaka’s artistry, especially the use of a naïve narrator, while protesters maintained that the novel perpetuated negative stereotypes about Filipino Americans. It is beyond the scope of this article to enter fully into this controversy. But I believe we must apply the same critical yardstick to white authors and writers of color regarding negative stereotyping in interracial or interethnic representation. A work that is artistically sophisticated or self-consciously ironic can still be criticized for its interethnic bias and hurtful effect, and a hyphenated American writer who is acutely sensitive about alienation from the mainstream can still echo dominant ideologies about other minorities. I also agree with Viet Nguyen and Kandice Chuh that works that are resistant on one level can be accommodating on another. To me,

Pak's story reveals the tantalizing pursuit of the American Dream by Korean Americans at the expense of reifying the contrary images of blacks and Asians, and the biracial conflict.

Like the mainstream journalistic accounts that blow up the discord between blacks and Koreans but downplay their collaborative efforts, Pak's narrative filters out non-confrontational contact between the two groups. In *People v. Soon Ja Du* Charles Lloyd, the defense attorney, was African American. The ethnicity of his fictional counterpart, Bill Samuels, is unspecified, though we are told that his wife is Korean. Because elsewhere Pak takes pains to spell out the ethnicity of his black and Korean characters and because of the prevalence of interracial marriage between white men and Asian women, the reader is led to assume by default that the lawyer is white. Changing the attorney's ethnicity from black to white has the effect of setting off the face-off along racial lines. In framing the problem facing his ethnic community as one of unremitting contest with the black minority, Pak's narrative falls prey to the "divide and conquer" strategy denounced by sociologists and legal scholars in connection with the 1992 explosion.

A more subversive way to give voice to the Korean community could have been to restore the sociopolitical context and to assign responsibility where it is due. Rather than merely blaming African Americans, Pak could have exposed the mainstream media's partial and inflammatory coverage—one which juxtaposed King's beating with the shooting of Harlins; dramatized the shooting of a black teenager by a Korean woman while ignoring the numerous assaults on Korean American merchants by African Americans; and spotlighted black-Korean friction while discounting incidents of cooperation. Instead, Pak gives voice to Korean Americans at the expense of degrading blacks. "The Court Interpreter," though a well-crafted and compelling tale, falls short of providing a counter-narrative, an alternative vision.

Ikemoto cautions: "To the extent that we interpret our experience from within the master narrative, we reinforce our own subordination" (1597). Recycling stock images and pitting Korean Americans against African Americans, as Pak does in his narrative, is likely to escalate biracial dispute, and even to bring about a self-fulfilling prophecy. Sa-i-gu manifests the grave material ramifica-

tions of stereotypes, of myths about different peoples of color. As Cho points out, “If. . . the Willie Horton [a notorious black criminal] imagery is the myth and Rodney King’s beating the practice, then likewise, the casting of Asian Americans as a model minority is the myth, and the looting and burning of Koreatown and Korean-owned stores is the practice” (197). The beating of King, the initial acquittal of the LAPD officers, the killing of Latasha Harlins, and Du’s light sentence all add up to tell the American public that black people are expendable, that their lives—associated with gang violence and criminality—are not worth saving.¹³

Korean Americans, on the other hand, have paid dearly for the portmanteau conception of Asian Americans as exemplary. Helen Zia looks back on the losses sustained by Korean Americans:

The “model minority” was taking a beating from blacks, whites, and Latinos who seemed only too glad to deliver their comeuppance. The extreme severity of the punishment meted out to Korean Americans suggested that *sa-i-gu* was not just for Latasha Harlins and Rodney King but also for Rockefeller Center, for Toyota, and for being the “success story.” Korean Americans had taken the hit for all Asian Americans. (184)

What seems a “positive” or flattering stereotype can exact a deadly toll. Asian Americans are not being “oversensitive” when they urge the media or writers to refrain from propagating the myth of the model minority. Narratives—whether in the legal, political, or cultural realm—can burn and kill.

The Master Narrative and the English Language

English, the language of the Americans, the liberators, was the open sesame.

In “The Court Interpreter,” disaggregation—the omission of sociopolitical context—is coupled with brazen alteration of facts to render the problem in South Central as a bitter strife between blacks and Koreans. The way the narrator dramatizes the dissension between these two groups reproduces, almost to the letter, the peculiar “traces of the master narrative” described by Ikemoto:

I note that the master narrative defines race and racial identity oppositionally. Here, a Black/African American racial identity is located in opposition to an Asian/Korean American identity, a strategy that merges ethnicity, culture, gender, and class into race. With respect to African Americans, the master narrative tells us that Asians are Koreans who are merchants and crime victims. The assumption that Asians are foreign intruders underlies this description. With respect to Asian Americans, the narrative tells us that African Americans are Blacks who are criminals who are poor. All of these identities replicate the dominant society's understandings of blackness and Asianness. (1582-83)

This racial ideology is so well inculcated in the affected groups that members of one racial minority often echo white exclusionist discourse in casting another minority as rivals. Both blacks and Koreans, according to Ikemoto, align themselves with whites and malign the other group by invoking white American lore. Specifically, blacks use nativist rhetoric to condemn Korean immigrants as foreigners, and Koreans cast themselves as actors in the "American Dream" to implicate blacks for not working hard enough:

When African Americans made nativist charges, they positioned themselves as whites relative to Asians. When Korean Americans responded by placing themselves within the American Dream—a dream produced and distributed by the dominant society—they positioned themselves as white. . . relative to Blacks. The rule underlying this racial positioning is white supremacy. Racial positioning would not be coherent, could not take place, but for racism. (Ikemoto 1589)

The African Americans and Korean Americans in Pak's story not only deploy the tropes of nativism and of the American Dream respectively, but evoke them in conjunction with the English language. Both the black rap artists described in the story and the narrator put a premium on American English despite the fact that they themselves have been marginalized by it. In light of Ikemoto's analysis, it is noteworthy how aforementioned placards such as "Go Home Killer Korean Grocers" and "Deport Murderer Immigrants," besides marking Koreans as "grocers," echo white nativist

slogans against Asian immigrants (the “yellow peril”) over a century ago. Words such as “immigrants” and “go home” highlight the alien position of Koreans and Asians generally, while “murderer” and “killer” project them as a menace to civil society (when in fact many Korean merchants have been crime victims).¹⁴ These slogans insinuate that Koreans are “foreign intruders” as opposed to the blacks, who *belong* in the United States. Even more inflammatory are the rap lyrics that taunt Korean immigrants: “Gooks, not born here, *not speaking English*, looking down on us, killing our kids” (90-91; my emphasis). English—both as a medium and as a perceived lack in the Asian Other—is here used as a weapon by African Americans against Korean immigrants.¹⁵ The charge of “not speaking English” apparently epitomizes their un-American status.

These signs bring out a long-standing contradiction about the United States—its inclusive ideal and the practice of exclusion. Although this country prides itself on being a “nation of nations,” immigrants, particularly non-Anglophone and racially marked ones, have always encountered inhospitality (see Behdad). Although many languages are spoken within the US border, English alone qualifies as “the language of the Americans” (106). It is especially ironical that African Americans—whose forefathers had been forcibly transplanted from another soil and denied English literacy—are now the inscribers of these exclusionist signs.

The narrator, on his part, evokes the American Dream and American English to stake his claim in the adopted country. I have suggested earlier that his dutiful embodiment of the model minority and his vilification of African Americans should be read contrapuntally as the two-pronged prerequisite to his assimilation into the white mainstream—a condition that he sees as the *sine qua non* of the American Dream. No less instrumental to its fulfillment, the narrator maintains, is his proficiency in American English, the “open sesame” warranting his right of entry into the sanctum of the United States. His devotion to the language started early in his life. He recalls how, when he was a starving child in Korea, English had made the difference for him between life and death, as he was able to obtain food from American soldiers by speaking their language. No doubt, he values it all the more after his immigration on account of the nativist slurs against Korean immigrants in the wake

of the shooting. In elevating American English, however, he disavows its complicit role in marginalizing non-native speakers. The very language that he sees as providing direct access to the American Dream also is used to subordinate people of color and to thwart their Dream. The narrator's own "success story," in fact, is undercut by his revelation that despite his rank as professor of English at the University of Hawaii, he was snubbed by his colleagues because of his Korean accent, making full assimilation elusive.

As indicated earlier, the narrator believes that language is also a domain in which blacks have domineered over Koreans. The narrator envies above all "their *native English*, their orators" (92; my emphasis). This view may accurately reflect those belonging to the immigrant generation who are not native English speakers. In contrasting Korean inarticulateness and black verbal felicity, however, he obscures the fact that the vernacular English spoken by some African Americans, far from being the efficacious tool depicted in the narrative, is subject to discrimination in both the school room and the courtroom. Like his exaggeration of black ascendancy elsewhere, the narrator's ascription of "native English" to African Americans (thereby aligning them with the mainstream) is belied by lived experience. Many African Americans—no less than Korean Americans—are at a linguistic disadvantage in the US legal and educational systems. Many black children, for example, are deemed remedial cases because their speech and writing do not measure up to "Standard" English. As Crenshaw and Peller assert, "once race is divorced from its social meaning in schools, workplaces, streets, homes, prisons, and paychecks and from its historic meaning in terms of the repeated American embrace of white privilege, then all that's left, really, is a hollow, analytic norm of 'color blind'" (63).

If the courtroom is governed by the narratives that prevail, as Gotanda, Crenshaw and Peller have demonstrated, then the importance of language—the narrative medium—in determining judicial outcome cannot be overestimated. Yet scholars of Critical Race Theory have overlooked this medium, especially in the form of court interpretation. The narrator's paean to English in the courtroom is especially telling. He believes he has reached the pinnacle of his career when he interprets for Joo during the trial:

My hour had come. . . . Now the whole world would hear her side of the story through my voice. This was the supreme moment, the culmination of my years of obsession with English. . . English, the language of the Americans, the liberators, was the open sesame, and the interpreter, the high priest dispensing sacred rites. (106)

In this passage the narrator splices the childhood scene of deprivation in war-torn Korea and the immediate scene of self-styled triumph in the American courtroom. What connect the two are the hegemony of the English language and its ability to disguise and underpin asymmetrical power relations. The narrator's designation of the American soldiers as "liberators" conceals the ideological and imperial interest of the United States in Asia during the Cold War era. Pak himself has described the division of Korea as "Russian- and American-imposed," precipitating "the most vicious of civil wars" fought "under borrowed foreign ideologies" ("Korean American Identity" 40). Just as the narrator elides the role of English in buttressing political and cultural imperialism in Asia, so he glosses over his own complicity in a courtroom that recognizes only the authority of the English translation and that marginalizes non-Anglophone defendants, plaintiffs, and jurors.

The narrator's grandiose conceptions of English and of his vocation prevent him from recognizing two problems pertaining to his performance and to the courtroom at large: the silencing of the "other" voice and the lack of transparency in any translation. The passage suggests that the Korean language is utterly incomprehensible in the US courtroom, so that the defendant's story must be told through the voice of an intermediary. Here I do not mean to gainsay the imperative of having a common language in the United States or the need for immigrants to learn English, but merely to point out how the complete inattentiveness to "other" languages can lead to inequities. Werner Sollors, who recommends referring to the many languages spoken in the United States as "American tongues" rather than "foreign languages" (4), has also questioned the "ideal of monolingualism" in this country:

No matter how many American citizens may look back to different linguistic pasts and family documents, or be fluent in other languages

now, U.S. politicians and educators have supported the steady scaling down of required language education. . . . World citizenship as an educational ideal is believed to be attainable in English alone. . . and the word "bilingualism" carries the association of a social burden. . . as if it were a bad but fortunately only transitory alternative to "proficiency in English." (2)

The narrator, in complaining about the lack of appreciation of his professional skills, has echoed Sollors's words and sentiments: "In the popular conception bilingualism was a social problem, like poverty, endemic to the ethnic ghettos" (95). He has also implied that African Americans' "native English" (92) stumps Korean immigrants' "English as a second language" (117).

Yet the narrator is deaf to how his English interpretation subsumes the voice of his client. Non-native speakers of English like the Korean storekeeper can speak only through an interpreter and they are judged not by their own accounts but by someone else's English translation, the accuracy of which is unmonitored by anyone else. The narrator's inflated view of the role of the certified interpreter as "a high priest dispensing sacred rites" is in a sense sadly accurate. Only the English translation of the interpreter is sanctioned in the courtroom, only his version can be considered definitive and incorruptible, so much so that the Supreme Court, in *Hernandez v. New York* (1991), affirmed that the prosecution and the defense have the right to strike bilingual potential jurors, lest they refuse to "accept the translator as the final arbiter of the witnesses' responses." Bilingualism in the jury is deemed a liability rather than an asset because of its potential to challenge the certified interpreter's authority.¹⁶

The narrator's remarks also divulge the slippery role of the interpreter and the contingencies of translation. Though aware of "the interpreter's fundamental duty of fidelity to the original" (96), the narrator has chosen to *interpret* his job differently, opting for the other meanings of interpretation—freely giving his own *reading* of his client and declaiming his lines in English as though he were both a literary scholar and an actor on stage. He is much more vested in his pocketbook, in the excitement of discovering the right word, and in reclaiming his "tarnished national honor," than in the cause of justice. The two problems noted above are intertwined:

the opacity and implicit irrelevance of the Korean language in the courtroom allows the narrator to wax freely in the English language. One wonders how widespread are such hermeneutic sleights in the actual court of law.

The narrator believes that it is largely because of his linguistic legerdemain that the defendant is allowed to get off easily. But the feat of interpretation in which he has taken so much pride haunts him in the wake of the civil disorder. Upon witnessing the ravages in South Central, he has a literally sickening realization:

Suddenly it became as clear as day: I had caused it all with my English as a second language. . . . I was the arson and looter responsible for the billions of dollars in property damages, the mass murderer of Chanho [his brother-in-law] and 52 others, who would still be alive, had it not been for my contemptible bilingual manipulation. (117)

The narrator, whose vanity is apparent throughout the story, undoubtedly overestimates his role in the trial and in the aftermath, but the power of English in the story, as in life, is undeniable. Although the United States is a multicultural and multilingual nation, non-English voices, especially Asian ones, are often unheard, untaught, and unrecognized. As Angela Oh observes, “non- or limited-English speakers are at a disadvantage in the criminal justice system” (1648). In American society at large, immigrants who speak English with an accent often are treated with disrespect even though they may be bilingual or trilingual. Linguistic markers, especially when coupled with the class and racial markers, clearly can be used to subordinate persons of color.

The narrator goes from vaunting his English to inveighing against his virtuoso verbal performance. In blaming himself for having “caused it all,” he remains to the end true to form as a model minority, for one of the cherished attributes of this stereotype is that Asian Americans blame not the social system but themselves if they fail to succeed. In chastising himself alone for his dubious translation of the defendant’s testimony, he excuses the criminal justice system that enables his “bilingual manipulation” and deploys racial stratification. Commenting on the actual incident, Kyeyoung Park argues, “In the Harlins-Du case, as in countless others, the judicial system applied a racialized formula. As a

consequence, black-Korean tension was more drastically intensified by state intervention and media coverage than by the actions of blacks or Koreans" (71). Even in the wake of the conflagration, the narrator cannot see the insurgence as a form of protest against social injustice and economic deprivation. Nor does he take the LAPD to task for its intentional neglect in failing to respond to the initial outbreak of rioting in South Central Los Angeles and Koreatown. He views Joo's light sentence not as a devaluation of a black life, not as a miscarriage of justice, but merely as "a slap in the face of black pride" (113).¹⁷ But his assiduous performance as model minority exemplar finally takes its toll: the story ends with his suffering a crippling pang of guilt, a debilitating headache (118).

"The Court Interpreter" can be read as a satire on the American Dream, and on the overstated self-importance on the part of an Asian American obsessed with integration into the mainstream. Pak, unlike the narrator, despairs of full assimilation and finds the American Dream elusive: "Now, after 20, 30 years of citizenship, of determined but futile efforts at integration and assimilation. . . we can no longer ignore the boundaries, fences, no trespassing signs, guard dogs that bare their ugly fangs at us" ("Korean American Identity" 40). But he seems to share the narrator's perspective regarding the deadly opposition between blacks and Koreans. Ikemoto notes that although the black/Korean fray, as constructed by the media, circumvents the dominant white society, "it arranges the various racial identities so as to preserve the authority of whiteness and devalue difference" (1583). Like the creation of contrasting stereotypes discussed earlier, the construction of oppositional racial identities rend fissure inevitable and coalition unimaginable. In accordance with the master narrative, Pak's story locates the causes of the uprising in "problems originating within and bounded by communities of color," thereby denying the possibility of "embedded, culture-wide racism" (Ikemoto 1593). One repercussion of such racial positioning is that "whiteness becomes symbolic of order and race becomes symbolic of disorder" (Ikemoto 1595).

Pak also recognizes how the rupture between Koreans and Blacks entrenches the status quo. The narrator observes that during jury selection both the prosecution and the defense are "intent on

eliminating those who belonged to the race of the opposite party. . . . The last survivors were. . . all white, Anglo white” (101). It dawns on him that “this was the secret of white success in the US. By default, because the minorities could not trust each other” (101). The scenario depicted here encapsulates the divisive and containing power of the master narrative. Pak’s story brings to the fore the mutual stereotyping of two communities of color and its internecine consequences. The Asian American and African American characters vent their frustrations on each other instead of taking to task the American social and legal system that accords unequal treatment to the two groups. In implying that distrust between racial minorities is natural and in consigning white success to “default,” however, the narrator disavows “the master hand [that] tailors stories about identity and conflict. . . in ways that make Asian-ness the subordinator of Blackness and vice versa, and in ways that isolate the conflict from whiteness” (Ikemoto 1597). Pak seems equally unmindful of his own collusion. In bracketing the Korean American and African American communities as nodes of disorder and in distancing their dissension from whiteness, his tale validates the master narrative and bolsters a social structure founded on “divide and conquer.” Unless we continue to expose tendentious interpretations in both official and artistic circuits by producing competing accounts, and until we desist from stratifying the variegated citizenry of the United States by color or accent, it will remain difficult for all of us to get along.

Notes

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1. In the actual upheaval Korean Americans suffered most of the damages: “When the smoke cleared from the three-day uprising in Los Angeles, 54 people had died and some 4,500 shops were reduced to ashes. More than half of the destroyed or damaged businesses were Korean-run. . . . Nearly half of the city’s total financial loss of more than \$1 billion in damages was suffered by a single

group: the Korean American mom-and-pop storekeepers." Edward Lee, a Korean American college freshman, was killed, "apparently in crossfire from other Koreans" (Zia 171-72, 182).

2. Park has also analyzed, from a sociological point of view, the "instigating role of whiteness in black-Korean conflict" (65).

3. In the 1980s "18 citizens of Los Angeles died as a result of LAPD officers' use of the choke hold; 16 of them reportedly were black" (Oliver et al. 121). See also Davis and Lipsitz for detailed analyses of police maltreatment of blacks and the structural inequality in Los Angeles.

4. As Oliver et al. have shown, Latinos also shared the attitudes of blacks toward Korean merchants and played a large part in the Los Angeles uprising. Because Pak's story focuses on the black-Korean conflict, I confine my analysis to these two groups.

5. There are several problems associated with such reasoning. First, most recent Asian immigrants have brought with them considerable economic and cultural capital, unlike African Americans who had suffered centuries of slavery and attendant poverty and illiteracy. Second, just because Asian Americans have not sought welfare or medical aid from the government does not mean they have no need of such help; they simply lack the wherewithal (such as fluency in English and knowledge about the US social system) to seek it. Third, the myth of the model minority homogenizes all Asian Americans, when many Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Cambodian Americans still live below the poverty level.

6. All the epigraphs are from "The Court Interpreter" unless otherwise stated.

7. Stigmatizing and persecuting Asian Americans (as Native Americans and African Americans before them) on account of their race has been an American legacy, bolstered by laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Executive Order 9066 authorizing the Japanese American internment. The rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans in the 1980s and 1990s was not unrelated to these invidious laws that cast all Asian Americans in a negative light.

8. Writers of color are especially susceptible to this burden. Writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan are highly controversial within Asian American literary circles because many readers think that their works represent Asian American experience generally. On how this burden influences student performance, see Steele.

9. For a detailed account on how different racial groups reacted to the screening of the Los Angeles civil disturbances, see Hunt.

10. Before *sa-i-gu* there were actually advocates of intra-ethnic criticism and interracial conciliation in both the black and Korean communities, but they were reviled as "race traitors" by the respective communities. Bong Hwan Kim, a member of the Black-Korean Alliance, was heavily attacked for suggesting that Du deserved a tougher sentence. While the Korean news media accused Kim of betraying his community, the mainstream media did not even bother to report his comment (Zia 180-81).

11. In my experience of teaching the short story, even students who remembered the news coverage of the Harlins-Du incident assumed that all the details about the fictional teenager are true of Harlins; the mythos created by Pak can themselves be mistaken for “facts” because the story seems so close to the news reports in most other aspects.

12. The “fact” of an abusive mother should have generated sympathy for Brooks, but it evokes only “revulsion and indignation” in the narrator and his compatriots (91).

13. John Edgar Wideman has observed that the police who arrived at the scene of the shooting of Harlins did not even bother to check her pulse (Frontline Episode).

14. Here I differ from Ikemoto, who contends that the master narrative portrays Koreans/Asians only as “crime victims” (1583). I believe they are just as often depicted as aggressors, as in the frequent replay on major television networks of the gun-toting Korean store owners during the L.A. riots.

15. Even before sa-i-gu, Ice Cube—the popular black rap artist—admonished Korean owners to “pay respect to the black fist, or we’ll burn your store right down to a crisp” (*Death Certificate* album); his inflammatory lyric is believed by many to have fueled racial tension.

16. Disqualifying bilingual potential jurors would most likely also eliminate many racial others. In view of the xenophobic climate after 9/11, such a legal policy is likely to work against defendants who look and sound “alien.”

17. These words are echoed by Pak himself in his summary of the story: “The [interpreter] does such a good job that [the shopkeeper] gets off with a suspended sentence. Enraged by this slap at their national dignity the black population rises up, burns and kills in Koreatown” (“Korean American Identity” 56).

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