

*Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

**Nancy Ablemann and John Lie. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riot.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 272 pp., \$29.95.**

Beginning with a poetic title, *Blue Dreams*, the authors recount in depth as to how the *Blue Dreams* of the Korean American merchants in the East Los Angeles had shattered in the midst of 1992 riot that turned out to be “elusive dreams” in America (*Blue* symbolizes color of heaven, sky, and hope for Koreans).

The book not only portrays the Los Angeles riot surrounding the Korean merchants but also characterizes diaspora of the Koreans in America. The authors have also examined with scholarly insights the more complex socio-economic and political underplay the Koreans encountered in their “Promised New Land”: motives for emigration, class distinction, ethnic solidarity, micro-economic entrepreneurship, occupational downward syndrome, etc.

In the context as outlined in the foregoing, the authors engage themselves in comprehensive interviews and conversations with the victims, counselors, and social workers in order to obtain vast arrays of undistorted information, some of which have not been reported in the media. Moreover, the authors poignantly point out that the ongoing conflicts between the Korean Americans and the African Americans had not been newly rooted in the Los Angeles riot in 1992 but sprung up from the white resentment of the Blacks in America and was magnified by Korean’s discrimination against them which they had acquired in Korea prior to coming to the United States.

The authors have also observed insightfully that Korean Americans not only reveal discriminatory and provincial attitudes against other ethnic minorities in the United States, but also among the Koreans themselves based on their socio-economic status and the regional origins in their native land.

There have been numerous newspaper and journal articles on the Los Angeles riots. To this reviewer, however, this is the first book in America which has accounted for the many unspoken circumstances and issues surrounding the riots.

The language and the style of writing in the book are profoundly scholarly. Some readers, however, may find the two chapters “Diaspora Formation: Modernity and Mobility” and “American Ideologies on Trial” to be unnecessary for inclusion in the book, presupposing the main focus of the book to be on Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots as such. Some readers may also find the “Conclusion” in the book to be somewhat lengthy with reiterations of some of the theories and issues previously argued. It may be more powerful if the authors had recapitulated the salient points they intended to emphasize.

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

In reviewing references, it appears that the authors do not include Korean newspapers published in America dealing with the riots (*The Korea Daily*, *The Korea Central Daily News*, *The Dong Aha Daily*) and the documentary videos ("L.A. Is Burning: Five and "Sa-I-Gu" [April 19, 1992], [National Asian-American Tele-Communication Association, San Francisco, 1994]).

Undoubtedly, the authors put together the book with enormous perception of and empathy toward the *Blue Dreamers* and the realities which transformed into "Elusive American Dreams." As K.W. Lee, a noted Korean journalist and the Freedom Forum awardee of 1994 put it, "*Blue Dreams* is a welcome exploration by outsiders into the vexing and largely invisible Korean American predicament in Los Angeles and the nation."

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**Sherman Alexie. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993) 223 pp., \$21.00 cloth.**

A member of the Spokane tribe, Alexie writes the heart of a community that is joined through hardship, hope, land, and story. On and off the reservation, from the storytelling of Thomas Builds-the-Fire to Norma's fancydancing, a drumbeat of home follows everyone.

Alexie deals with what many Indian people in cities and on reservations across America experience everyday—pow-wows and all-Indian basketball games that are just as real as alcohol and other common tragedies like car accidents and the U.S. government's broken promises. With his poet's eye for vivid detail, Alexie pulls readers into the text, making us experience reservation life and, especially through his exceptional characterizations and poignant humor, inviting us to make an emotional investment in this community. The reader becomes both participant and observer via the different stories' first-person and third-person points of view. Also, throughout the book, reader and reappearing characters keep crossing each other's paths, as if the reader were a part of the community and thus fated to receive these fragments of community members' lives.

The reader identifies with the characters' ordinary situations, but we go deeper than identification when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, as it often does in this magical collection. "The ordinary," one of Alexie's narrators says, "can be like medicine." In the chapter for which Alexie takes an epigraph from Kafka's *The Trial*, we experience the eerie truth of the wonderful lies of storyteller Thomas Builds-the-Fire. Placed on the witness stand, Thomas confesses to the 1858 killing of two U.S. soldiers; he confesses to history. Thomas holds himself responsible