Where do we put the Chicano fathers who forced their mischievous children to return stolen articles to a Sears store in East Los Angeles? The article in *US News and World Report* on the riots skipped that piece of drama, opting instead for a picture of a desperate Salvadoran, loaded with food and detergent, standing in a grocery store. The caption tries to say enough: Latino looter.

— Ruben Navarrette Jr.

"Should Latinos Support Curbs on Immigrants?"

In the film *Falling Down* (1993) the main character, William “D-Fens” Foster, an unemployed Anglo American who is angry and about to get even, is depicted sitting with his briefcase on graffiti-covered cement stairs that once served as an entryway to a structure that is no longer there. From the vantage of this ruin, he surveys the skyline of downtown Los Angeles through a hole in the sole of one of his shoes, then turns to look through the want ads in the newspaper he is carrying. As he tears off some of the paper to cover the hole in his shoe, a shadow emerges on the ground in front of him. Two Chicano gang members approach him and begin to circle the cement structure.

**LATINO GANG MEMBER 1 [LGM1]:** What you doing mister?
**D-FENS [DF]:** Nothing.
**LGM1:** Yes you are. You’re trespassing on private property. You’re loitering too, man.
LGM2: That's right. You're loitering too.
DF: I didn't see any signs.
LGM2: What you call that? [He points to the gang taggings on the cement structure.]
DF: Graffiti?
LGM1: No, man, that's not fucking graffiti. That's a sign.
LGM2: He can't read it, man.
LGM1: I'll read it for you. It says, "This is fucking private property. No fucking trespassing." This means fucking you.
DF: It says all that?
LGM2: Yeah.
DF: Well, maybe if you wrote it in fucking English, I could fucking understand it.
LGM2: Thinks he's being funny.
LGM1: I'm not laughing.
LGM2: I'm not either.
DF: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Hold it. Hold it, fellas. We're getting off on the wrong foot here. OK. Um. This is a gangland thing, isn't it? We're having a, a territorial dispute, hmm? I mean, I've wandered into your pissing ground, or whatever the damn this is, and you've taken offense at my presence. I can understand that. I wouldn't want you people in my backyard either.

Why begin the history of the production of the "transnational gang crisis" with media coverage of and reflection upon the 1992 Los Angeles riots and Hollywood's mediation of the racial, social, and economic tensions brought to the fore by those riots? To be sure, both examples bring into view images of mischievous youth and violent gang members. But it is to the other two figures, the Latino looter and the unemployed Anglo American, that I wish to draw attention. The juxtaposition of these two seemingly disparate figures involves more than the same contemporary moment or the empirical fact of the riots. It also invokes a prior historical connection. Together, they bring into view Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century and its reconfiguration in the aftermath of the cold war and the Salvadoran civil war as funded by the United States.

Let's accept, for the moment, the more sympathetic depictions of the Latino looter as a Salvadoran refugee desperate for basic necessities, and the angry American as a middle-class white guy who has recently lost his job to the downsizing of the defense industry and who has become an exile in his own country. Building on the notions of contrapuntal histories and complex patterns of cultural interagency, both the Salvadoran refugee and the unemployed Anglo American defense worker live within, albeit at different ends of, the same global and local processes. Although they occupy different levels of displacement at the wane of the cold war, both are migrants whose everyday movements—life paths through time and space—have been disrupted, the Salvadoran's by militarization and the Anglo American's by demilitarization. Both journeys are produced and undone by the instrumental spatiality of the cold war and the defense industry.

The journeys also mark a particular historical juncture when the primary threat to national security is no longer encoded in communism but rather in the intersection of criminality and immigration. This moment marks a new stage in the production of the securitization in and between the United States and El Salvador. The project of law enforcement (by police and immigration officers) now has primacy over global defense (by the military and weapon manufacturers). The triumphant project "to make the world safe for democracy" gives way to the more timely project "to protect and to serve." This shift signals the subsequent convergence of immigration and criminal law that will prove so central to the production of the "transnational gang crisis."

The Latino Looter

When the movie cameras on the set of Falling Down shut down during the riots, those of the nightly local news were working overtime to capture and give name to what was unfolding in the streets of central Los Angeles (including downtown, South Central Los Angeles, Pico Union, Koreatown, and Hollywood) that were, for the moment, off limits to the movie's cast and crew. The sections following offer a composite of that coverage as drawn from fourteen hours of home-taped video footage of the local news coverage of the riots. The local viewer who taped the footage during the riots employed the typical contemporary viewing practice of surfing between channels. The resulting video footage of the riots, which is broken up absurdly and jarringly by commercial advertising and sitcoms, actually comes close to the viewing experience of many who frantically shifted from channel to channel to try to make sense of the events unfolding around them. Television viewers, who were taken out into the streets and up into the air with
the media, were encouraged to see from the point of view of the media, reporters, and news anchors. Not only was this coverage framed in a law-and-order narrative but also as a direct appeal and demand for the deployment of law enforcement. What follows is my composite of excerpts from that coverage, compiled after the event and with a narrative frame not available to the viewer at the time of watching.

**WHERE ARE THE POLICE?**

The not-guilty verdict in the Rodney King beating case was pronounced less than two hours ago. The television set is tuned to local live coverage of the Los Angeles riots. The screen switches from one image to another and from one channel to another. The action unfolds through this series of images: First, on the ground in front of Los Angeles Police Department’s headquarters (LAPD), a peaceful political demonstration turns into a violent flame-and-rock-throwing protest. Next, the camera soars high above this scene, travels several miles south to the intersection of Florence and Normandie, the famous flash point of the riots. This is the corner where Reginald Denny is soon to be pulled from his truck and severely beaten by an angry mob in an eerie replay of the brutal beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers. National networks already have crews covering the unfolding events out of the First American Methodist Church in South Central Los Angeles, and from the intersection of Florence and Normandie. A panoramic view of the geographic path of the riots is being fed unedited by Skycam 5 Live, Telecopter 4, and Newscopter 7, among others. These newscaptors fly over one burning shopping center after another, while their mobile newscasters shout out a running commentary over the whir of the propellers: "I can see one, two, three... eleven, twelve... I can see about fifteen fires from this location."

The camera pans across the monotonous grid of the asphalt parking lots bordering commercial establishments yet to be torched. The viewer’s attention is drawn to small groups of people “just walking into the Payless [the Thrifty, TJ Maxx, the Korean liquor store, the Boys Market, the Pep Boys, the Circuit City]... and taking whatever they want.” Some of them are even stopping to try things on for size... and others actually leave to fill their cars and then come back in for more merchandise. “There’s no police down there... There is no police presence at all.” The media has deployed its forces where the police have not, and between the newscaptors in the sky and the cameras on the ground, the viewer has a near panopticon view of these activities—rioting and looting. Inside the newsroom, far away from the scene, the anchormen and women comment upon the “this” (hand gesture)—the events that have not yet been named. They are unaware perhaps of the power that they will have, not only in representing but also in producing the “this” as riots and as media spectacle.

Newscasters, groping for words, struggle to frame and to contain the raw footage within the law-and-order narrative generally employed for nightly crime news. This is all the more ironic, and indeed necessary, given the noticeable and curious absence of police on the streets for the first several hours of the riots. Early on, the fire captains deploy the newscaptors to scan the horizon for new fires. Fighting alongside firefighters in this way, the newscasters begin to speak for them and, indeed, for everyone. The “fire officials are just looking so disgusted and so angry—something that everyone is feeling right now.” Without recourse to the routine techniques of editing, the language seeping in from the streets through the television is rough, heated, and filled with expletives. The newscasters are clearly uncomfortable with the emotional and political tone of their footage and with their relatively unmediated engagement with the streets. Disconcerted, they clear their throats to apologize to the viewing public for the “foul language” over which they “have no control.”

The audience is told that the “this” is “senseless violence.” To the images of everyday folks darting in and out of the stores, the newscasters explain: “These people are gangbangers, thugs, and hooligans” who “have nothing to do with what took place in the Simi Valley courtroom.” An African American man shouts at the camera, with his arms full of stolen goods, “We’re doing this for Rodney.” The news anchors respond, “These people are absolute criminals, lawless people who have chosen to take advantage of a terrible situation.” A young black woman shouts with tears of anger, “The system doesn’t care about us black people... Black people have no rights in this country... This is about the extinction of the black male.” The news anchor turns away from the footage, toward his coanchor, and states: “We have, after all, a system of justice in this country, and it’s called being judged by your peers. That means that the four officers were judged by what were said to be twelve of their peers, and the decision was rendered, and that’s the way it works.” The cameras turn back to the crowd scenes, “These people have absolutely no fear of us or the authorities. There’s a traffic jam of looters here.” In comes more aerial feed from the newscaptors, “There’s no border to it anymore...”
“Where are the police? There are no police down there.” Reports come in that chief of police, Daryl Gates, is at a fund-raiser in the exclusive Westside neighborhood of Bel Air. “You’ve got to wonder,” responds the newscaster, not wanting to judge the authorities or police too quickly. Still the insinuations grow. “Why the police have not been deployed. . . . Why it’s taking so long. . . .” It is not until the next day that the business of newsmaking shifts to normal. Television cameras take their positions at a press conference in front of the talking heads of Los Angeles leadership, Daryl Gates included. Questions fly about the delayed police response and whether the National Guard will be brought in. The media begins to frame the action in more insidious ways. Reporters begin to infer culpability and cause and effect with seemingly innocent speculations such as, “I don’t want to make any comments about the group we see here in front of us, but, um, coincidentally, that’s when it [the damage to Parker Center] started.”

Once the police are deployed, on this second day of the riots, the cameras on the ground relinquish the frontline to the police and retake their positions behind that police line. At the same time, however, the cameras in the sky continue to film what is not visible to the police in front—looters coming into the buildings from the back. The news coverage is increasingly punctuated with remarks such as: “One of our helicopters just spotted someone coming out of a flaming mini-mall, and they followed him to his residence, and the police are now headed in that direction” or “He was in full view [of us] . . . I think that video is going to surface somewhere—in court and with the police no doubt.” As the riots progress, the newscast audio begins to mix intermittently with the interference of the police audio.

Finally, the police, along with the assistance of the National Guard and its armored tanks, start taking back control of the streets. While in the earlier footage, people came in and out of the stores with seeming impunity, now the streets were beginning to fill with other images: lines of black and brown bodies lying face down (or in a “prone-out” position) with their hands cuffed behind their backs. By this time, the television crews have resumed their roles as observers, crouching behind the black-and-white squad cars of the Los Angeles Police Department.

But something new has entered this frame. Just beyond the police cars is a sport utility vehicle belonging to the U.S. Border Patrol. Not far up the street, at Vermont and Third, the parking lot of a Vons supermarket is now filled with an entourage of Immigration and Naturalization Services buses—“waiting to give these folks a free ride back to [their] country.”

HOW THE RIOT STORY BECAME AN IMMIGRATION STORY

With the riots unfolding onscreen, the KABC reporter Linda Mour is back in the television studio discussing with her anchor whether or not the looters are “illegal aliens.” In KABC’s rendition of the riots, Latinos quickly become interchangeable with illegal aliens. As the Los Angeles Times television critic Howard Rosenberg later mused: “Perhaps Mour was able to identify them as illegal because some of the looters had that stamped on their foreheads. Or—a much better bet—perhaps both she and [news anchor] Greene were predisposed to believe that illegal immigrants automatically commit crimes. If so, their predisposition was transmitted across the airwave as fact.” It is precisely at this point that the association between the terms looter, Latino, and illegal is sealed in the viewer’s imaginary as the Latino looter. The Latino looter becomes a packed sign through which immigration from the southern border becomes an increasingly dominant narrative frame for explaining the riots in much of the subsequent local media coverage and some of the national coverage.

While local news channels babble on in the moralizing law-and-order narrative of nightly crime news, the more liberal, analytical national news coverage frames the event within a “Watts II” paradigm and thus racializes the event as black. For instance, Ted Koppel of the ABC news show Nightline locates his television coverage out of the First American Methodist Church in South Central Los Angeles, and at the intersection of Florence and Normandie. Ted Koppel’s forays into South Central Los Angeles and his town meeting inside that venerable African American institution from the civil rights era casts African Americans as “event insiders.” Koppel frames the events as a consequence of the Rodney King verdict only, thereby ignoring other causes for the rioting: namely, the impact of post-Fordist structural adjustment programs and the globalization of inner-city communities, along with the unacknowledged fact that Latinos were covictims of racist policing. It is certainly true that the media, particularly at the national level, took the 1992 riots as time to reflect on what had indeed been and not been achieved with race relations since 1965. But the riot coverage rendered Latinos “voiceless, but not invisible,” and it could not blot out the obvious difference between Watts and 1992—the appearance of Latinos on TV screens as looters. Neither could it suppress scenes like the one that was featured in an op-ed published in the Los Angeles Times about a week after the riots died down. Writing from the same church from which Ted Koppel conducted his riot coverage, Niels Frenzen, a local immigration attorney and law pro-
fessor, and Frank Acosta, then director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA), offered a very different perspective: “The sight of one our city’s leading African-American churches converting its basement meeting room into a temporary shelter for displaced people who were majority Latino and mono-lingual Spanish speaking was on the one hand, striking evidence that the face of our city has been changed irrevocably, and on the other hand, a powerful symbol of the common issues and problems which tie together the Latino, African and Asian-American communities.” That is, the riot revealed that the historically African American area of South Central Los Angeles—the epicenter of the Watts riots in 1965—was majority Latino by 1992. More than that, the rioting very quickly spread beyond even those geographic borders to neighborhoods like Pico Union, Koreatown, and East Hollywood. These neighborhoods were also now heavily populated by Mexican and Central American immigrants. The riot coverage thus may have “rendered Latinos voiceless,” but not invisible. It could not blot out, as pointedly stated above, “the obvious difference between Watts and 1992—the appearance of Latinos on TV screens as looters.”

Héctor Tobar, a crime reporter for the Los Angeles Times at the time of the riots, recalled the unfolding of events in an interview with me several years after the event. We talked over lunch in a restaurant on Sunset Boulevard—which had, seven years earlier, been the northern front, if you will, of the riots. I had asked to meet with Tobar after reading his novel The Tattooed Soldier, which was set in the same transnational urban geography of my ethnographic research. Tobar responded to my question about the Latinization of the riots, as follows: “It was in fact the African American riot that started first. And I lived this personally because . . . I remember that night I was assigned to do a rewrite on a story about the police reactions to the Rodney King verdict, and we started to see it unfold on TV. Florence, Normandie, etc., etc., the protest downtown—that was the first part. Then later the next morning, I was sent out to go to the area where things had burned down and talk to people. So I started off in South Central Los Angeles.” But as Tobar explains, the geographical progression from south to north marked the progression of an African American event to a Latino one:

They [the Los Angeles Times] thought the riot was over. As we all know, the riots started up again and really got going the second day. I ended up following the progression along with the photographer I was with, the progression of it northwards.

I think we started out by Washington, south of Washington, like Vernon, and I ended up following it up north, and at the end of the day I ended up in Echo Park. Yes, I ended up on Sunset Boulevard. Yes, because it spread from East Hollywood, all the way up to Santa Monica Boulevard, the real Central America in East Hollywood, where KCET is . . .

That progression of the riot northwards was parallel to the progression of the riots from an anti-police, African American echo of Watts in 1965 to sort of the modern-day poverty riot in a city that had become a Latin American city, and that was having this Latin American vent take place . . . [with] masses of people storming the markets.

There is no question that Latinos, immigrants in particular, were victims, bystanders, and participants in the events unfolding in front of them. The point here is how this Latinization of the riots was interpreted through the trope of the Latino looter. That trope was eventually absorbed into national post-riot coverage in quotes such as “Over 61% of arrested looters were Latino” and “Nearly one-third of riot suspects were illegal aliens.” It was as if in these two statistics lay the real explanation for the riots: an unguarded southern border.

In the full-length articles on the riots that emerged in national magazines in the following months, the riot story quickly became an immigration story, with titles such as “Blacks vs. Brown: Immigration and the New American Dilemma” by Jack Miles, a liberal Los Angeles Times editor. Peter Brimelow, a right-wing journalist and English immigrant to the United States, referred to these riot statistics in his essay “Time to Rethink Immigration,” in which he urges the reestablishment of Anglo American cultural hegemony. While Miles’s story about the riot quickly becomes a story about immigration, Brimelow’s story about immigration ends with the riot story. In either direction each writer constructs a powerful frame, which successfully naturalizes the association between the two stories. Thus both liberal and conservative depict Latino immigrants as a threat to American national sovereignty. Miles argues that “because the world has shrunk, [these] emigrants . . . don’t have to cut all ties to home and cast their cultural and economic lot with us as they once did.” Indeed, he sees within the reluctance of Mexican immigrants to choose American citizenship the potential for foreign interference in domestic political affairs. With so many Mexican citizens living within U.S. borders, “some future Carlos Salinas de Gortari could become a factor in U.S. domestic affairs as the powerful extraterrestrial leader of millions of
of the Rodney King beating in the Simi Valley courtroom argues that the
defense positioned Rodney King’s mobility—driving at an excessive speed on
the freeway (that sign of free circulation) and his refusal to be still while
being beaten—within a larger system of representation, which character-
izes the dangerous person as hyperactive and subversively mobile. Similarly,
the transgressive mobility of the looter was linked to a preexisting and larger
system of representation of boundary transgression. The brazen looter—
under the eye of the camera, in the full light of the helicopter’s nightscope,
and even in view of the police—took the time to try on his or her loot for
size, or to make several runs to the store until his or her car in the parking
lot or on the street was full to capacity. This brazen looter comes to stand as
a sign from the “brazen border crossed,” who dares to sneak across the bor-
der without papers, sin permiso (without permission).

Indeed, on my first trip to the California-Mexico border in 1989 I accom-
panied a border patrol officer down into a gully called the “soccer fields.”
It was dusk. From the vantage of the van, we could see the Mexican side
where people were gathering to cross. The fires of the taco and corn stands
were burning. It was a lively social scene. Suddenly, there was a cheer from
the crowd. The border patrol officer explained the uproar to me this way:
“They’re cheering the group that just made it across. It’s like scoring a goal.
That’s why we call it the soccer fields.” Whether this depiction of what was
really behind that cheer was accurate or not, I don’t know. But the image of
that “brazen border crossed” was clearly fixed in the imaginary of this offi-
cer, or in the imaginary he wished to impart to me.

CHAINS OF BLAME
What does the Latino looter as brazen border crossed have to do with Salva-
doran migration per se? After all, the Latino immigrant population in Los
Angeles is still largely Mexican. At the time of the riots, all Latinos, immi-
grants or not, were presumed by the general population to be of Mexican
origin. While the term Latino may not capture the specificity of Salvadoran
or even Central American migration, the trope of the Latino looter came to
do just that, at least within the context of local Latino politics.

Through a perverse chain of blame, whites pointed at blacks, who pointed
at Latinos, who in turn pointed at Central American immigrants. Much of
the looting took place in neighborhoods heavily populated by recently arrived
Latinos, a growing number of whom were Central American and, primarily,
Salvadoran. To quote from the Economist: “Tellingly, when the riots swept through the city, Latino East Los Angeles remained relatively untouched… The worst-hit Latino areas were those such as Hollywood, where most of the immigrants were new arrivals from Central America. They appeared to make up a high proportion of looters, but a much lower one of burners and killers.” As illustrated at the opening of this chapter, journalist Rubén Navarrette Jr. argued that when Mexican Americans saw photo captions such as the Latino looter in media coverage of the riots, they began to question their political strategy of aligning Latinos of various countries under a single ethnic label. The Latino looter caption, he suggested, led to a frantic effort by Mexican Americans to distance themselves from the “desperately poor Central American and Mexican immigrants depicted in the photograph.” Thus the Latino looter was, at the local level, further inflected as a Central American immigrant.

In the same article, “Should Latinos Support Curbs on Immigration?” Navarrette writes: “A week after the riots, Jesse Jackson addressed a Senate subcommittee considering an urban-aid package. Overnight polls showed that the object of America’s moral outrage had, in 48 hours of mayhem, shifted from the verdict in the Rodney G. King beating trial in Simi Valley to arsonists and looters in South Los Angeles. Jackson strained to absolve African-Americans of total responsibility for the lawlessness. He pointed fingers at another ethnic group: ‘Fifty-one percent of arrested looters were Latino.’ Once again, the point here is not that Latinos or Central Americans did not loot but rather that these facts were emphasized with a particular political agenda in mind.”

Navarrette goes on to make a similar move to Jackson’s attempt to deflect criticism away from African Americans: “Yes, Central-American immigrants and Chicanos might both be termed ‘Latino.’ But the ethnic link between the two groups is thin—no more pronounced than the one joining dark-skinned African Americans with dark-skinned Haitian.” His effort to unpack the term Latino as a homogeneous entity, while certainly justified, is also an attempt to redirect the public gaze away from the sympathetic Other (Mexican American) toward the offending Other (Central American immigrant). Finally, given the degree of racial profiling conducted by police, it is highly unusual for African American and Latino public spokespersons to assume that arrest is proof of actual culpability.

The Angry Anglo American

The production of the film Falling Down resumed after the rioting stopped, and the film was released the following year. There is ample evidence that its reception was colored by the post-riot climate, particularly given that the riots brought to the fore the issues of racial, social, and economic tensions portrayed in the film and vice versa. In a post-riot interview with the film’s director, Joel Schumacher, a journalist wanted to know if Schumacher didn’t consider the riots to have been a lucky break for the promotion of his film.

Falling Down is a sophisticated allegory about an angry Anglo American, D-Fens, who is mad as hell with the state of things, in Los Angeles in particular and with the United States of America in general, and is about to get even. The Latinization of Los Angeles is subsumed with discourses on the “third world” and “brownings” of the face of the city and the nation. D-Fens has had all he can take of the city’s democratic promiscuity and its clash of formerly distinct cultures. While Latino immigrants feature in the film’s backdrop, as with the live coverage of the riots, their mute but visible presence nonetheless does the ideological work of pointing to the Latinization of Los Angeles as a particularly marked aspect of discourses on urban blight, moral decay, and national decline.

The film is a dramatic reenactment of the vigorous attempts then underway in Californian cultural politics to reterritorialize this disorderly and disruptive cultural flow by remapping the boundaries of what constitutes the official and legitimate public sphere. This entails reasserting the cultural and racial hegemony of the Anglo American male over a disconcerting proliferation of multiple counterpublics. This filmic manipulation of the face of the nation mimes an important aspect of the national project: to topographically reform the civic body. The following composite is drawn from the opening scene of the film:

Begin with a sharp intake of breath, the sound of life hooked up to a ventilator. Fill the screen with a man’s parted lips, beaded with sweat. Move like a fly along the bridge of his nose.

Stare into the eye, which stares out through a foggy lens at steam rising from car’s engine. The outside world comes first as noise filtered, its base tones heightened, through water. The objects in the landscape come into view, one by one: a Latina child clutching blonde bombshell doll, her empty stare fixed on the viewer; a woman painting her protruding exaggerated lips scarlet red; a school bus of screaming children—multiculturalism wrapped
in American flag; Hollywood hustlers, smacking chewing gum, clinching a
deal loudly by cellular phone.

You are imprisoned amidst all of these fragmented worlds of the metropolis in this impossible space—the hardened arteries of the Los Angeles freeway. The air conditioning fails. A fly buzzes, invisibly but insistently, around your head. Repeat, close-up and frame by frame, at greater and greater speed—Garfield’s barred teeth; “Jesus Died for Our Sins”; the American flag; “DELAY ... DELAY ... DELAY”; “How’s My Driving? Call 1-800 Eat Shit”—to this music, a Caglian urban cacophony, an unbearable, shrift crescendo.

The car door flies open. The protagonist, D-Fens, abandons his car to the highway. “Hey, where do you think you’re going? Hey! Hey!” an angered man parked behind D-Fens’s car shouts, fist in air, horn honking. Running for the embankment, D-Fens returns the volley, “I’m going home.” Disengaging from the high ground of the highway, his normal life path through space, D-Fens enters the low ground of the inner city on foot to begin his epic journey across the postindustrial wasteland of Los Angeles.

Falling Down begins thus, with an assault on the nervous system and with a powerful evocation of the sensory and emotional tone of Los Angeles at a particular historical juncture. In so doing, the film draws us in with an exploration of the psychic disturbances associated with the contemporary recomposition of space-time-being in post–cold war and hin de siècle Los Angeles. Signifying chains have snapped, and D-Fens is left without a frame of reference with which to make sense of this changed grammar of urban life. He temporarily loses his capacity to organize his immediate surroundings perceptually and to map his position in relation to the external world.

The earlier modernist frame, which gave meaning to action in this Los Angeles context—the freeway commute between the bourgeois private sphere (the nuclear family) and the capitalist public sphere (the Fordist-era workplace)—has been disrupted. As the film unfolds, we discover that D-Fens’s odyssey is set between two receding horizons. He navigates between a job lost to the downsizing of the defense industry and a home broken by domestic violence and divorce. D-Fens, in truth, has nowhere to go: he is a migrant in postmodernity. The film offers a potentially insightful exploration of a specific phenomenology of late capitalism, its changed structures of feeling, and one level at which the economic and social transformations of regional integration are being felt by the downsized worker.

D-Fens could well serve (and does to some extent) as an intriguing foil for the examination of a distress and unease that some would argue as being particular to the late twentieth century: namely, place-panic or an insecurity of territory.

In the opening scene, D-Fens, “a white guy in a white shirt and tie” (so described in the film), is caught in a traffic jam on the Los Angeles freeway. The standstill traffic and the shocking diversity of barbarous commuters are all symptomatic of decline and fragmentation. This grotesque social body clogs the arteries of progress and individualism that the freeways once represented—at least, to our protagonist. That American dream—so thoroughly propagated by the Hollywood dream machine—is now re-presented as having come to a careening and inelegant halt. Los Angeles is falling down and apart.

D-Fens’s transformation from commuter to pedestrian, his disengagement with the highway and engagement with the urban landscape of Los Angeles, mark a potentially powerful encounter with the changed cultural cartography of Los Angeles. By mounting the concrete barrier that separates the highway from the lived spaces hidden on the other side, D-Fens brings into our field of vision the spatial apartheid of Los Angeles. The unfamiliar cultural landscape that D-Fens enters is littered with the signifying scars of the inner city: gang graffiti, “Homeless, will work for food,” “We are dying of aids,” Latino street vendors selling oranges and peanuts, “economically unviable” African Americans, and the like. D-Fens’s journey maps Los Angeles and its “ecology of fear” as deconstructed by Mike Davis: a downtown financial core surrounded by a ring of barrios and ghettos that give way to wealthy gated communities “on the distant metropolitan frontier.” In this regard the film is what it claims to be, “a tale about urban reality.”

By turning his world upside down and entering its reverse side D-Fens has the opportunity to come into free and familiar contact with people who in life are separated by impenetrable barriers, and to explore a new mode of interrelationship between individuals. But the disruptive potential of the foregoing destabilizations is lost on these fronts: the reassertion of white male power and authority; the failure to account for the role of the defense industry; U.S. foreign policy; economic restructuring in transforming the face of Los Angeles; and the film’s redemptive law-and-order narrative.

As an urban folktale of sorts, Falling Down serves as an ideologically orienting framework for the production, reception, and interpretation of “middle-class folk” discourses about “inner city” and “third-world folk.”
Or to draw upon Clifford Geertz, it is a tale that middle-class folk tell themselves, not simply about others but about themselves and their fear of falling from their privileged race-class position, a metaphorical fall into this black hole, the abyss that the inner-city jungle is taken to represent. As a result, the important class subject of the downsized worker is recast as the angry Anglo American male.

D-Fens’s tragic journey from a job to a home that no longer exists employs the inner city of Los Angeles as a contemporary Hades. Our hero, like countless Western heroes beginning with Odysseus, must traverse a dangerous territory filled with lost and desperate souls in order to prove his strength and cunning. In making his way through the immigrant neighborhoods that comprise the inner city, D-Fens reasserts his hierarchical race-class position and his authority over greedy Korean grocers, irrational and violent Chicano youth, and undeserving homeless poor. Here, the inner city is little more than a macabre hyperviolent world through which D-Fens roams freely, shooting at the obstacles in his way.

The inner city is thus a symbolic frontier for the reconstruction of the white masculine norm threatened with extinction. As such, Falling Down merely shifts the ethnic marking of Hollywood’s convention of the urban jungle from Chinatown and South Central Los Angeles to Koreatown and Little Central America. These “inner-city folk,” therefore, serve as little more than a textured backdrop to the Anglo American protagonist’s journey. Their fallen state is an underprivileged but necessary backdrop to the central tragedy of the privileged fall of the middle-class Anglo American.

NATIONAL DEFENSE

After D-Fens leaves the freeway, his first stop is a convenience store run by a Korean immigrant. He needs change to make a phone call to his ex-wife to inform her that he intends to come home for his daughter’s birthday. The storeowner insists that D-Fens buy something if he wants change for his dollar. D-Fens chooses a can of Coke. When he discovers that it will cost him eighty-five cents, leaving him without sufficient change to make his phone call, he goes ballistic.

ANGRY ANGLO AMERICAN (AAA): You don’t got no “Vs” in China?
KOREAN IMMIGRANT (KI): I’m not Chinese, I’m Korean.
AAA: You come to my country. You take my money. You don’t even have the grace to speak my language. You’re Korean?

D-Fens is, of course, referring to the Korean War and central role played by the United States in warring off communists in North Korea from taking over South Korea. D-Fens grabs the baseball bat that the store owner has picked up to protect himself from D-Fens’s ire and begins to destroy entire shelves of merchandise, while taunting the man to turn his prices back to the 1950s (ironically enough, the era of the Korean War, when Koreans began to come to Los Angeles in large numbers). After getting what he wants, a Coke for fifty cents and fifty cents in change, D-Fens leaves the now-destroyed convenience store. With baseball bat in hand, he begins to roam through a world he doesn’t recognize as America. How is it, he wonders, that this country has come to look like the third world?

Falling Down is a complex example of a middle-class defensive reaction to the changing cultural cartographies of continental American landscapes and its concomitant phobic representations of the mass migration stream from South to North. It is a piece of popular culture that springs from and feeds into the cultural movement afoot to reterritorialize its place in the new global world order. But it fails to interrogate the role of the project to defend American “national security” in the “third world,” of the American city. As a result, the film misses the opportunity to fuel what Edward Soja argues is urgently needed in mapping (postmodern) geographies—namely, the “awareness of our personal political responsibility for the social production of space as something we have collectively created.”

What might U.S. foreign policy in the cold war have to do with this changed landscape? And what does the Korean War have to do with Salvadoran refugees? Indeed, the defense industry is a subtext that never comes fully into view and is never located in the urban ecology through which D-Fens travels to his fateful end. This is a glaring omission in the landscape of a city like Los Angeles—a city built on two industries, the military-industrial complex and Hollywood, and one in deep economic crisis over the apparent dismantling of the former in the post-cold war era. Perhaps the most underread signs in the movie, and yet surely a most compelling empirical residue, is “D-Fens,” the license plate and my pseudonym for the protagonist as well as the Nortec parking permit on his windshield. The latter is an obvious abbreviation of Nortech, a Los Angeles–based engineering company that has,
to quote from its current Web site, provided forty years of service to the defense and aerospace industries. Foreign intervention by the United States has played a large role in producing refugee and immigrant flows to cities such as Los Angeles.

The role of the defense industry in the production of the Salvadoran refugee could not be more pronounced. As I outlined in the introduction to this book, during the twelve-year Salvadoran civil war, the United States funded the Salvadoran government with $6 billion in economic, military, and covert aid. That war resulted in over seventy-five thousand deaths and the flight of one-sixth of the Salvadoran population. Yet D-Fens is unable to reconcile his work to defend American national security with the alien environment in front of him. He fails to understand the role his work in that industry has played in reshaping the spatial, economic, political, and personal geographies of the city in which he is now an exile. In fact, if anything D-Fens misrecognizes his role when he threatens the Korean immigrant grocer with his baseball bat while saying, “Do you know how much money this country gave your government?”

Thus, while Falling Down does engage the contemporary recomposition of space-time-being through D-Fens’s dislocation from the economy and his disorientation in the cultural and physical landscape, this “tale about urban reality” ultimately veils the reality of (de)militarization. D-Fens does not recognize the synchronism of the urban crisis in the world that surrounds him with the global crisis in the world out there, and thus the relationship between his exile in his homeland and the exodus of Central Americans from their homeland. D-Fens and the Salvadoran refugee are expendable surplus labor in the wasteland of industrial capitalism and the post-cold war era. The film’s refusal to bridge the gap between the urban geography and the cultural landscape with the political economy of the military industrial complex masks the “changed look of things” as an effect of immigration and crime rather than the effect of militarization and demilitarization. Indeed, the biographies and spatial journeys of both the downsized defense worker and the Salvadoran refugee are linked precisely around the cold war and the role of the United States in the Salvadoran civil war. But Falling Down fails to bring these subject positions into an empathetic relationship to one another because of the defensive cognitive map that undergirds its narrative.

TO PROTECT AND TO SERVE
While Falling Down depicts a world falling apart, the problem is how it attempts to put that world back together. The film reframes a polyphony of contemporary discourses on immigration, economic decline, inner-city violence, racism, capitalist greed, and government waste into an ordered law-and-order narrative. The film’s neglect of global militarization is carried through to its concomitant notion, the militarization of the local landscape. The low-intensity warfare tactics of the cold war have found their way to the criminalized inner city.

While Falling Down is one more installment in a long tradition of the white male journeying across a terrifying landscape to get home, D-Fens isn’t the hero upon arrival. Falling Down is billed as a story about a “man at war with everyday life [who] is about to get even.” But it is as much a story about a cop, Detective Prendergast, who regains his agency and the courage to restore law and order. He does so in a shootout with D-Fens, in which D-Fens is eradicated and falls into the abyss of the sea. It is, in fact, the cop who is ultimately reconstructed as the white masculine norm.

At the same time, polyglot Los Angeles and the diversity of the inner city are mirrored in the composition of the staff at the local police headquarters. It is only there, within the boundaries of law enforcement, that the possibility of a new mode of interrelating between groups formerly separated by racial and national hierarchies is realized. The operative mode is policing. D-Fens’s triumphant but now defunct project “to make the world safe for democracy” is conceded to the cop’s more timely project “to protect and to serve.” Discourses about immigration, racism, and inner-city violence are all subsumed within this ideological frame of criminality. The project of local law enforcement (Prendergast) now has primacy over global defense (D-Fens). National security is encoded in a new dominant mythology that is no longer communism but criminality.

The nostalgic portrayal of local law enforcement as the kindly and gentle grandfather figure of Prendergast is a remarkable one for a city that is home to the likes of former police chief Daryl Gates and convicted police officers Stacey Koon and Mark Fuhrman, and a city that had only recently come under the critical gaze of international human rights and local civil rights monitors alike. The film reads rather like a redemptive narrative for the bruising that the police force took in the wake of the beating of Rodney King, and as such it is an erasure of King’s baton-bruised body. However, given the period of its production (post-Rodney King beating) and the timing of its
release (post-1992 riots), the choice to frame *Falling Down* within a cops-and-robbers genre, and Los Angeles within a law-and-order discourse, invokes those events. Rodney King is an absent presence.

Let’s return to those events and to the figure of the Latino looter, whose arrest was taken even by African American and Chicano spokespersons as proof of actual culpability. In fact, the Los Angeles riots in 1992 had provided a particularly instructive moment to observe the deployment of law enforcement against Latinos. Both the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) released reports denouncing the widespread civil and human rights abuses against Latinos during the riots. The reports charge that law enforcement failed to protect city residents without regard to ethnic or national origin and violated constitutional protections that mandate that interrogations and arrests be made on probable cause and not on ethnic appearance. This situation was further inflamed by the chief of police and the U.S. attorney general, who singled out Latino and Central American immigrants as a major cause of the uprising.

Moreover, the same year a report by Amnesty International, “Torture, Ill-Treatment and Excessive Force by Police in Los Angeles,” found that in Los Angeles human rights violations of low-income minority populations, including immigrants, were a systematic feature of the “war against crime.” The full deployment of these multiple agencies of law enforcement (LAPD, LASD, INS, Border Patrol, National Guard) during the riots was thus only a hyper-intensification of activities that occur under normal conditions. D-Fens thinks America has come to resemble the “third world” by virtue of its “changing demographics,” code for “immigration crisis” and “browning of America.” The Los Angeles police department’s “disturbing patterns of impunity” with regard to frequent police abuse of black and Latino residents suggests resemblances with the “third world” at another level, a police force itself exempted from law and order. The inner city in *Falling Down* stands as the “free fire zone” that it is, but absent from this portrayal is an interrogation of how the violent social body is violently produced as a criminalized third world by a local low-intensity warfare—the war on the racialized poor and immigrants.

We can’t help others up, if we are *Falling Down*

As a filmic representation of a particular historical juncture in the development of the American city, Los Angeles in particular, *Falling Down* hit a raw nerve and entered a zone of heated cultural debate about crime, urban decay, and immigration. The conservative populist radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh, a fierce proponent of the anti-immigrant and anti-crime legislation proposed in the aftermath of the riots, was repeatedly likened to D-Fens. Limbaugh felt compelled to defend his “good name,” which had been “besmirched countless times in discussions and reviews of the movie *Falling Down*.” Electronic mailing list discussions on Proposition 187 picked up the question haunting the film, “Are we falling apart?” with retorts like, “We can’t help others up, if we are falling down.”

In the aftermath of the riots, the image of D-Fens looking through the want ads as he sits on a ruin of an old cement structure against the backdrop of downtown Los Angeles, only to discover that he is trespassing on gang territory, captured a feeling of radical instability. In this post-cold war and post-Fordist landscape, both D-Fens and the Chicano gang members who confront him, demanding a toll in the form of his empty briefcase, are scavengers of a “future already looted,” by the immanent forces of an emerg-
ing neoliberal regime and its attendant securitoscapes. If in this chapter I have tried to evoke something of the affective dimensions of this historical juncture and its politics of fear and enclosure, in the next chapter I consider how this new mode of production secretes a new kind of space in the ruined landscape of the inner city of Los Angeles and its immigrant barrios.

In August 1992, three months after the Los Angeles riots, the city's Central American immigrant leadership, which had emerged from the solidarity movement of the 1980s, held a press conference in front of the ruined mall at the corner of Pico and Alvarado streets. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the aftermath of the riots, the media and the anti-immigrant movement had been mining ruins such as these for nationalist narratives, for which the body of the Latino looter was fast becoming a powerful political text. The Central American leaders at the press conference hoped to construct something else out of the loosened building blocks of the ruin, and to very different ends.

Standing between the ruin and the cameras, these activists offered the following rereading of the production of the ruin. Against the media-generated image of the Latino looter that was burned into popular (televisual) consciousness as illegal Central American immigrants, these spokespersons pro-