

III. FROM SINGLE-STRANDED TO BRAIDED HISTORIES OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA QUARTERLY

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ABSTRACT: This article finds an emphasis on “foreignness” in early SCQ articles on the Asian American experience. Early twentieth-century authors explored changing racial identities. By the 1960s, articles in the *Southern California Quarterly* were comparing the evolving racial identities of various racial groups and exploring the transnational stigmatization of immigrant race and culture. The “new” social history shifted focus to the powerless and the analysis of racial power structures. By the 1990s authors were utilizing a relational analysis of multiple racial and cultural groups’ experience. Recent scholarship has examined oppressed communities taking agency and challenging power structures in multilayered contexts, pointing the way to the braided interactions of racialized groups.

Keywords: braided history; multi-layered history; Asian American history; New Social History; transnational histories

Tracing the theme of race and ethnicity through the *Southern California Quarterly* reveals a dynamic mapping of the development of racial identities through California history. Understanding this theme in the history of immigration can bring possibilities for new conversations of interrelated and concurrent

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histories. This essay leans towards the Asian American experience in the first seventy-five years of this publication as this aspect of California history was central to the development of exclusionary legal practices that came to affect immigrants and racialized groups from different backgrounds. The essay then looks at articles published from 1945 to 2000 to show the imprint of the “new” social history, the cultural turn, and transnationalism as it relates to this theme in the SCQ. Then, with a discussion of more current works, I make suggestions for future work on the history of race, ethnicity, and immigration in California.

In early issues of the journal, articles on the Asian American experience emphasized *foreignness* as a fixed trait. C. P. Dorland’s 1894 article, “Chinese Massacre at Los Angeles in 1871,” blamed the conflict that led to the violent riot as “originat[ing] among the Chinese themselves.”¹ According to his sources—primarily the local newspapers and the county court records—two powerful Chinese merchants, Sam Yeun and Yo Hing, used the legal system to obtain possession of a sex slave, a woman named Ya Hit. When she had attempted to escape, they cunningly used the legal system to “regain possession of their lost chattel.”² Sam Yeun tried first through a false arrest, but then Yo Hing, through marriage, “came into lawful possession of her, [and] had the law and the sanctity of marriage rite to strengthen his title.”³ The internal conflict turned deadly when law enforcement attempted to intervene. An “infuriated mob” rioted, leaving nineteen Chinese men dead and thousands of dollars in damages to Chinese businesses.⁴ The angry mob, Dorland quoted from a letter to the editor, would put an Apache, “who makes murder a trade and robbery a pastime,” to shame.⁵ But he gave no account of who the rioters were, only that there was “not a man of any respectability or standing” amongst them, and made no connections between the violence and racial animosity.⁶ Rather than addressing the massacre as an issue between the mob and the Chinese or contesting the racist

1. C. P. Dorland, “Chinese Massacre at Los Angeles in 1871,” *Annual Publication Historical Society Southern California Los Angeles* 3, no. 2 (1894): 22–26.

2. *Ibid.*, 22.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 24.

5. *Ibid.*, 25.

6. *Ibid.*

stereotyping of the Apaches, Dorland pointed to the internal feud which he attributed to the foreignness of the Chinese culture, and warned of their cunning use of the legal system with violent and devastating results. The narrative set in relief the legacy of *foreigner*, or *sojourner* (that is, a foreign person only temporarily in the United States), while obscuring the racialization of Chinese in nineteenth-century California. Both of these features remain embedded in the evolution of racial identities.

Two articles that attempted to grapple with the changing racial landscape and questions of national belonging were published in 1912: Mildred Wellborn's article "The Events Leading to the Chinese Exclusion Acts," and Roy Malcolm's "Anti-Japanese Legislation in California, and the Naturalization of the Japanese."⁷ Wellborn acknowledged that although exclusionary practices toward Chinese immigrants stemmed from economic tensions, it was racism that most influenced early policies.⁸ Racial violence against the Chinese laborers perpetrated by white working-class individuals prompted state and federal responses that led to the Chinese Exclusion Acts, the first of which was passed in 1882. Wellborn recognized but did not criticize the racial animosity and concluded that the differences between the Chinese and Americans made "amalgamation" between the groups "unwise, at least, perhaps impossible."⁹ Because of these long-standing differences, Wellborn concluded that "exclusion may be the only wise policy for the United States to pursue," although, she lamented, excluding Chinese also meant that they could not be exposed to nor take with them the best of American ideals to influence and guide China as it was forming a new republic.¹⁰ The desired effect, which was to decrease Chinese immigration to the U.S., had been accomplished and Wellborn noted that the social and legal focus was shifting to the questions of Japanese immigration.

While Wellborn focused on legislative responses to racial violence against Chinese immigrants, Malcolm approached questions

7. Mildred Wellborn, "The Events Leading to the Chinese Exclusion Acts," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1-2 (1912-1913): 49-58; Roy Malcolm, "Anti-Japanese Legislation in California and the Naturalization of the Japanese," *Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California* 9, no. 1-2 (1912-1913): 97-103.

8. Wellborn, "The Events," 49.

9. *Ibid.*, 58.

10. *Ibid.*

of Japanese naturalization by looking at the legality of defining “whiteness.”¹¹ He wrote that Chinese, Burmese, and Japanese individuals had been legally defined as belonging “to the Mongolian race” but the same legal system was exploring whether Japanese individuals could be “included within the [legal] term ‘white persons.’”¹² Affecting this debate was the fact that “a score of Japanese had been admitted to American citizenship by the Courts,” establishing a precedent that could be utilized in other court cases. Malcolm distinguished the differences between the Chinese and Japanese immigrants as legal and “ethnological” differences. The contested issue was debated through legal cases such as *Saito vs. United States*, which resulted in a denial of citizenship of Shebato Saito in 1893, and in contrast the case of Ulysses S. Kaneko who, in 1896, was granted citizenship. Although Chinese and Japanese immigrants were both categorized as belonging to the “Mongolian race” and the Chinese Exclusion Acts were already in place, Malcolm did not acknowledge this connected history but dealt solely with Japanese exclusion.¹³ These articles relied on the rhetoric of foreignness and ethnographic differences in contrast to whiteness and struggled to make sense of the evolving legal definition of racial and ethnic identities.

After little attention in the journal to Asian Americans for half a century, William R. Locklear revisited the Chinese Massacre in 1960 to address questions of race and racism in his article “The Celestials and the Angels: A Study of the Anti-Chinese Movement in Los Angeles to 1882.”¹⁴ In short, Locklear reviewed Dorland’s 1894 conclusion that anti-Chinese racism was not the underlying cause of the violent riot of 1871. Locklear acknowledged that California had

11. Malcolm, “Anti-Japanese Legislation,” 101, 103.

12. *Ibid.*, 101.

13. *Ibid.*, 103.

14. William R. Locklear, “The Celestials and the Angels: A Study of the Anti-Chinese Movement in Los Angeles to 1882,” *Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (September 1960): 239–56. A handful of articles published in the SCQ address the history of Asian Americans in California but do so only in passing. Two of these articles focus on the contribution of Chinese immigrants to the social and cultural life of Los Angeles. See Christina Wielus Mead, “Las Fiestas de Los Angeles: A Survey of the Yearly Celebrations 1894–1898,” *Quarterly Historical Society Southern California* 31, no. 1–2 (March and June 1949): 60–113, and Marco R. Newmark, “La Fiesta de Los Angeles of 1894,” *Quarterly Historical Society Southern California*, 29, no. 2 (June 1947): 100–11. In addition, Marco R. Newmark revisited the Chinese Massacre of 1871 in a short article about the street where the massacre occurred. See Marco R. Newmark, “Calle de los Negros and the Chinese Massacre of 1871,” *Quarterly Historical Society Southern California* 26, no. 2–3 (June–September 1944): 96–98.

“fertile soil,” or rather, the potential to develop anti-Chinese racism given the long history of treatment towards Indians, Mexicans, and African Americans.¹⁵ However, because there was an insignificant presence of Chinese in Los Angeles during this precise time period, he concluded that racism towards this group had not yet taken root.¹⁶ His aim was to decentralize the massacre as the pinnacle of racist violence in early California history and turn the focus to the city of San Francisco where the rhythms of racism were part of everyday life for Chinese immigrants. A focus on persistent racism in San Francisco could indeed be useful in understanding the constructed racialized identity of Chinese immigrants in early California but this claim could be made while also acknowledging the growing racialization of Chinese immigrants in the context of evolving racial identities of other racial groups.

Although writers of Asian American history in California continued to rely on the trope of foreignness, Gunther Barth used ideas of being *unrooted* in a transnational approach in his 1964 article, “Chinese Sojourners in the West: The Coming.”¹⁷ Barth disentangled the different labor systems that stitched together Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, and San Francisco for thousands of Chinese men. These included the indentured servant system that brought mostly men through debt bondage, the credit-ticket system that provided a service contract and was mediated through Chinese middlemen, and the coolie labor system, the most extreme form of contract labor, that carried racial stigma and questions of illegality. Barth argued that Americans came to understand all forms of labor system through the coolie labor system which stigmatized the already vulnerable immigrants, gave rise to discriminatory laws, and prevented Chinese immigrants from integrating or assimilating.¹⁸ What emerged was a “Chinese California” where clandestine transplanted cultural acts on U.S. soil such as the repugnant “possession” and sale of human

15. Locklear, “The Celestials and the Angels,” 243.

16. *Ibid.*, 242.

17. Gunther Barth, “Chinese Sojourners in the West: The Coming,” *Southern California Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (March 1964): 55–67. I use the term “unrooted” rather than “uprooted” to imply that Chinese immigrants were seen as being unable to assimilate in contrast to Oscar Handlin’s “uprooted” European immigrants who, though experiencing the pain and longing of migration, could be integrated into American society.

18. Barth, “Chinese Sojourners,” 60.

beings were possible years after the end of the Civil War.¹⁹ Barth's main contribution to the theme of race and ethnicity is a transnational understanding of illegality, victims, criminals, and race in the complex labor systems at the turn of the twentieth century.²⁰

The "new" social history that took shape starting in the 1960s took on new narratives and unlikely sources to center the voices of the powerless, address questions of power in race and ethnicity, and challenge master narratives. Two essays that powerfully demonstrate the shift in historiography focus on the anti-Filipino riots in Watsonville in 1930. The first, written in 1979 by Howard A. De Witt, traces the tensions as stemming from fear of sexual and social interactions between white women and Filipino men and the political use of newspapers to instigate racial violence.²¹ Five days of rioting took place in January 1930 when an angry mob of young, mostly Anglo, men began indiscriminately beating Filipinos and destroying property in Watsonville. During the riots one Filipino man, Fermin Tobera, was killed and many were wounded. De Witt relied on newspapers such as Watsonville's *Evening Pajaronian*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and, on a more limited basis, the Filipino newspaper *Ang Batay*, to understand the response of the Filipino community. He found that police officials colluded with powerful men in the city, with the result that Tobera's killer was never brought to justice. De Witt argued that Filipinos were at a disadvantage because they "made no attempt to assimilate" and had weak political leadership.²² Although De Witt recognized race as a contributor to the violence, he failed to acknowledge race in the power structures that racialized and marginalized the Filipino community. In 1989 Michael P. Showalter challenged De Witt's argument that weak leadership in the Filipino community was to blame for denying justice for Tobera. In addition to local newspapers and government reports, Showalter also relied on the 1984 film, *Dollar A Day, Ten Cents a Dance: A Historic Portrait of Filipino Farmworkers in America*, by George Ow, to

19. *Ibid.*, 63.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Howard A. De Witt, "The Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riot of 1930: A Case Study of the Great Depression and Ethnic Conflict in California," *Southern California Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (Fall 1979): 291–302; Michael P. Showalter, "The Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riot of 1930: A Reconsideration of Fermin Tobera's Murder," *Southern California Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (Winter 1989): 341–48.

22. De Witt, "Watsonville," 292.



This May 2, 1985, news photo recorded a UCLA campus sit-in by nearly 800 students demanding that the University of California Board of Regents divest its holdings in companies doing business in South Africa over the issue of that country's Apartheid policies. The photo captured brown, black, and white faces, conveying complex meanings to this multi-racial activism to bring about social and political change on a transnational level. Imagine what different meaning this protest would have had if all the participants had been of a single racial identity.

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illuminate the violent racial structures the Filipino community faced.²³ By leaning on the oral histories documented in the film, Showalter placed racism dead center in this debate. This utilization of oral histories is both a hallmark of the “new” social history and a shift in understanding more fully the racial power structures embedded in California history.

Thanks to the scholarship of historians during this historiographical turn, the works published in the *SCQ* in the last fifty years have been instrumental in broadening the focus of race, ethnicity, and immigration to one that explores power structures; that is, it takes on a relational approach. Rather than viewing racialized groups in isolation, a relational lens examines how, when, where, and to what extent groups intersect and, more precisely, how this contributes to

23. Showalter, “The Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riot,” 343.

the construction of racialized groups.²⁴ Linda Parker's 1992 article, "Superior Court Treatment of Ethnics Charged with Violent Crimes in Three California Counties, 1880–1910," is an example of this approach. It is a scrupulous review of court and penal records placed in conversation with the social and cultural norms that influenced racial thought in early California history.²⁵ Parker's genius is in aligning the ethnic stereotypes of the period with the contemporary cultural and scientific knowledge used to justify them. This, Parker argued, resulted in the criminalization and the unevenly punitive prosecution of African Americans, Mexicans, American Indians, and some European white ethnic groups. More specifically her findings showed a shared experience between Hispanics, Indians, and non-English speaking Europeans, identifying that at least in the criminal justice world in California, the histories of these groups were interrelated through the legal system.

Another important article in this time period is Wendy Elliott's 1996 article, "The Jews of Boyle Heights, 1900–1950: The Melting Pot of Los Angeles," which brought to light the textures of everyday life in the multi-racial Boyle Heights community.²⁶ This article centered the first-person accounts of Jews who historically settled in Boyle Heights, which was also home to Japanese, African American, Mexican American, and Armenian communities. Elliot makes no attempt to smooth over edges of racial tensions between groups, noting that the height of racial tension between Mexican American and Jews came before and during World War II. This article demonstrates the shared memories of social and cultural life of a multi-racial Boyle Heights community and highlights racial and ethnic identities in a Los Angeles neighborhood. And H. Mark Wild's work published in 2001, "If You Ain't Got that Do-Re-Mi: The Los Angeles Border Patrol and White Migration in Depression-Era California," demonstrates that racial categories were translated to fit destitute whites excluded from

24. For more on the "relational approach" to the themes of race, ethnicity, and immigration history see Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

25. Linda S. Parker, "Superior Court Treatment of Ethnics Charged with Violent Crimes in Three California Counties, 1880–1910," *Southern California Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 225–46.

26. Wendy Elliott, "The Jews of Boyle Heights, 1900–1950: The Melting Pot of Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 1–10.

California during the Depression years.²⁷ Wild argued that the same stigma previously attributed to free African Americans in early California, Chinese immigrants in the 1880s, Japanese immigrants in the early 1900s, and Mexican and Mexican Americans during the Depression years was translated through the lens of the Protestant work ethic as a “cultural deficiency” in poor whites.²⁸ This translation made possible the social acceptance of the exclusion of poor whites in California in the mid-1930s. Both of these articles introduce new conversations around questions of class and interrelated histories as they relate to race and ethnicity.

More recent works continue to demonstrate trends towards a relational lens by bringing to light cross-community work. Kenneth C. Burt’s article published in 2003, “The Power of a Mobilized Citizenry and Coalition Politics: The 1949 Election of Edward R. Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council,” and Leonard Pitt’s 2004 article, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’: A History of Neighborhood Empowerment in Los Angeles,” aptly address how marginalized communities have struggled to harness political power and effect change.²⁹ George J. Sánchez also addressed Roybal’s election to the Los Angeles city council in his 2010 article, “Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism,” with a more nuanced approach than Burt had made just a few years prior.³⁰ While Burt focused on the work of the Mexican-American-oriented Community Services Organization and its liberal-left-leaning ideology that appealed to a broad community, Sánchez argued that indeed it was the CSO *and* a multi-racial, city-wide activism rooted in Boyle Heights that made possible Roybal’s city council win. These three articles focus on multi-racial and multi-neighborhood working-class people of color engaged in activism to bring about social and political change.

To conclude, Hillary Jenks’s 2011, “Bronzeville, Little Tokyo, and the Unstable Geography of Race in Post-World War II Los

27. H. Mark Wild, “If You Ain’t Got that Do-Re-Mi: The Los Angeles Border Patrol and White Migration in Depression-Era California,” *Southern California Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 317–34.

28. *Ibid.*, 318–19.

29. Kenneth C. Burt, “The Power of a Mobilized Citizenry and Coalition Politics: The 1949 Election of Edward R. Roybal to the Los Angeles City Council,” *Southern California Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 413–38; Leonard Pitt, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’: A History of Neighborhood Empowerment in Los Angeles,” *Southern California Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 65–82.

30. George J. Sánchez, “Edward R. Roybal and the Politics of Multiracialism,” *Southern California Quarterly* 92, no. 1, (Spring 2010): 51–73.

Angeles”; Andrea Geiger’s 2014, “Reframing Race and Place: Locating Japanese Immigrants in Relation to Indigenous Peoples in the North American West, 1880–1940”; and Stacey L. Smith’s 2018, “*Dred Scott* on the Pacific: African Americans, Citizenship, and Subjecthood in the North American West,” are excellent examples of emerging shifts in the historiography.³¹ Jenks maps how African Americans and Japanese navigated the landscape of race to fight for place and belonging in post-World War II Los Angeles. African Americans who had been excluded from other parts of L.A. through restrictive policies made place in Little Tokyo by creating successful businesses, a thriving social life, and deep neighborhood connections after Japanese Americans had been removed and interned during the war. Although the struggle was between returning Japanese Americans and African Americans vying for place, Jenks exposed the structures of power that determined the final outcome. It was the Anglo business and property owners who would have the last word on who would rent homes and businesses in the area. African Americans were pushed out while new agreements were signed for returning Japanese former tenants. This article interrogates place-making and questions of power to demonstrate the shifting views of a racialized hierarchy in California.

Andrea Geiger, on the other hand, takes the readers to the North American West to examine how, at the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese immigrants sought to make place in the U.S. and Canada by distancing themselves from American Indigenous peoples. Since Japanese immigrants understood Native Americans through their understanding of Japan’s own aboriginal people, they saw them as relics of the past and destined for extinction. Because of this, even while American and Canadian laws were meant to limit Japanese immigrants’ full participation in settlement and colonial projects, Japanese immigrants strove to set themselves apart from American Indigenous peoples. Geiger presents the need for concurrent and “braided”

31. Hillary Jenks, “Bronzeville, Little Tokyo, and the Unstable Geography of Race in Post-World War II Los Angeles,” *Southern California Quarterly* 93, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 201–35; Andrea Geiger, “Reframing Race and Place: Locating Japanese Immigrants in Relation to Indigenous Peoples in the North American West, 1880–1940,” *Southern California Quarterly* 96, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 253–70; Stacey L. Smith, “*Dred Scott* on the Pacific: African Americans, Citizenship, and Subjecthood in the North American West,” *Southern California Quarterly* 100, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 44–68.

histories to fully understand the critical moments in the development of racial hierarchies in both Canada and the U.S.³²

Smith's article interrupts a familiar narrative of African American migration to the West by showing how "citizen[s] of nowhere," that is, rightless freed slaves, geographically repositioned themselves to make use of albeit limited legal power to gain political rights. Smith highlights individuals such as Archie Lee, who took his family to British Columbia in 1856 to take advantage of citizenship and political belonging. Lee joined other black Californians who made strategic moves to access political power, then, later, returned to the U.S. to make use of American citizenship when it became available to them. Smith challenges historians to examine African Americans as agents in westward expansion in the early twentieth century.³³ These articles demonstrate an interrogation of power within racial groups and within oppressed communities and orient us to necessary future work.

From accounts depicting ideas of fixed foreignness and single histories to histories that describe the braided interactions of racialized groups across space, this paper has focused on the development of racial identities through California's history as discussed in the *Southern California Quarterly*. What is most promising in the last six articles mentioned here is the emergence of a focus on how groups of ethnic, racial, or immigrant "others" have accessed and built power to bring about change in neighborhoods, in cities, in politics, and across national borders, even if these collaborations haven't always been smooth. By addressing issues of race as political, and therefore, as issues of power, these articles show the entangled nature of these histories and move towards understanding the complexities of political history as they relate to the racializing and ethnicization of immigrant and Native communities.

32. The terms "braided histories" or "multilayered histories" are exemplified by Natalie Zemon Davis's books *Trickster Travels* (Hill & Wang, 2007) and *Women on the Margins* (Belknap Press, 1997).

33. Smith, "Dred Scott on the Pacific," 44-68.