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pg. 531

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If, as George Lipsitz suggests in his essay, Los Angeles is a street corner, taking a trip along the streets that lead to and from this intersection might trace a larger world in which it, and this place called “America,” is embedded. Like many before, I have come to Los Angeles from elsewhere and now call it home, but instead of seeing myself at the end of a one-way journey that has ended in Los Angeles, a migrant to this place from somewhere else, I think of Los Angeles as an intersection on a larger grid. In this world, migration is a process without end, comings and goings rather than the singular leaving of one place and arriving at another by which we mythically understand the immigrant’s story. Los Angeles is one street corner, one intersecting node for many journeys, and if we follow the roads outward we find ourselves navigating the well-worn paths of a much larger world, where people riding buses and buggies (and planes and trains and automobiles), or finding passage in the holds of trans-Pacific ocean liners, or hidden in the back of a pick-up truck, come to and from and through Los Angeles. Each of us in Los Angeles is tied in long links to other people in other places, drawing a map dense with the scrawling lines of our journeys.

Is Anybody in L.A. Actually from Here?

The strange thing about Los Angeles in its incarnation as the entertainment capital of the world is that the celebrities so powerfully associated with Los Angeles are usually not from here, fueling an impression that nobody is ever actually from Los Angeles. Of course, Los Angeles, like any place, can claim plenty of people who were born and raised here, but its image is strong as a city in which everybody is from somewhere else. What if we were to export this particularly Los Angeleian sense of imagined spatial belonging to the rest of the world? Rather than talk about how rooted the citizens of Los Angeles are to the physical space of the city, we could instead talk about how other metropolitan sites in the United States, North America, and perhaps around
the world are actually more like Los Angeles in this aspect. Los Angeles, in other words, might not be the exception but the rule if we understand the history of the last two centuries as dominated by migration. First of all, we need to think about how we narrate migration. The actual movement of human bodies from one point to another has no inherent meaning, but is given meaning through the classifications of those movements. We imagine that going to work each day is one kind of movement, whether we walk two blocks to work or get on an airplane and fly across the continent. But if we get on a plane and “immigrate” to another country, even for job-related purposes, then this is a different kind of movement. My purpose is not to erase all distinctions between different forms of movement and migration, but to highlight how we categorize such differences. We should give more thought to the origins of our categories, and whether we should recategorize movements to achieve other political purposes. One of the most important benefits for American studies in placing migration to and from the Americas at the center of our scholarship, it seems to me, is to escape nationalism as our rationale.

So much of social scientific scholarship on migration for the last century has concentrated on “immigration,” the influx of human bodies defined as foreign in origin to a nation. As Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller have argued, this “methodological nationalism” has created generations of scholarship that have assumed the political interests of nation-states as the reason for the study of migration. Consequently, the question of assimilation into the host society dominated immigration scholarship from the earliest studies of the University of Chicago’s sociology department, the foundational school for training social scientists in the United States. Scholarship centered on national concerns has subsequently emphasized the crossing of national borders as the essential definition of what counted as immigration. The distance traveled or the existential experience of migration rarely determined the importance of migration. Michael Williams has labeled this a “border guard perspective,” mocking how the study of migration so often took security and the control and incorporation of bodies as fundamental questions.

There were many migrants at the turn of the twentieth century whose movements into the United States, for instance, provoked little concern: white, English-speaking Protestants from Canada were of little interest to most immigration scholars. Instead, immigration studies focused on groups that came to be defined as being a “problem” to the nation. Migrants from Asia, Latin America, and Southern and Eastern Europe needed to be studied and their movements observed. By the mid-twentieth century, the prevailing
scholarship moved from a focus on these migrant groups as a problem to a study of their distinctive “cultures,” shifting the question away from their desirability as foreigners to examinations of their lingering ethnicity within America. As exclusionary laws such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1924 Reed-Johnson Act created categories of “illegal” immigrants, many migrants also assumed a “legal” identity defined by ever-changing legislation on citizenship and national status.⁵

Against this legacy of misapprehending migration, how should we instead understand it, and what might American studies learn from how Los Angeles has been shaped by migration? Following the authors of Nations Unbound, many scholars turned to the point of view of the migrants themselves to understand how the experience of migration is often a transnational process that ties together local places in more than one nation. Additionally, scholars traced the historical effects of colonialism in creating these linkages, recognizing how national belonging is no longer synonymous with residence in the geographic territory of the nation-state.⁶ Other scholars have focused on the often circular networks created by labor migrants, with multidirectional flows that support national imaginings and nationalist political movements far away from “home” countries.⁷

The decentering of the nation within migration studies has helped release scholarship from the holding cells of the border guard perspective but can we go farther? There has been a tendency in studies of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, for instance, to analytically blur the distinction between the “internal migration” within the Chinese nation-state and the “external” migration of Overseas Chinese, emphasizing how the phenomenon of a laborer moving from an agricultural village to a nearby market town to find work is linked to the out-migration of the same kinds of laborers to Southeast Asia and across the Pacific to the Americas. The distinction of internal versus external migration is thus shown to obscure how the two rely on the same migration networks.⁸ How are we to study migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, periods marked by the expanding power of nation-states and of their control of migrating bodies, without assuming the analytical centrality of the very borders that such nation-states created? The distinctions between internal and external migration, between plain old moving around and immigration/emigration, between legal migration and illegal smuggling, have also been the product of the border guard perspective. While they have powerfully shaped migration patterns, we should avoid seeing migration exclusively through these categories.
What if we considered not just the migration of human bodies across national boundaries, but the movement of bodies throughout space as the basis of our studies? If we thought, for instance, of Los Angeles and Vancouver, British Columbia (two local sites in which I am particularly interested), as two nodal intersections, two street corners in a larger set of crisscrossing paths, we would see how these places connect with each other and with myriad other sites around the Pacific and the Americas. There would be some nodes that would be denser than others, cities and ports and gathering places, busy intersections with people coming and leaving and going through. “Illegal migration,” rather than a category that extends outward from the moment of border crossing, infecting the way we understand the whole experience of the migrant, would become only one of the ways that migration has been shaped in the last two centuries. We would see how it intersects with other processes. For instance, after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese workers shifted to Canada, Australia, and Mexico as destinations. They also continued to come into the United States, but the process had been changed—curtailed and constrained, driven into illegality. Their movements, however, remained embedded in larger networks of migration that continued to exist and in which the United States was only one location.

If we saw the world through the eyes of my great-grandmother, how different would it look? Lee Choi Yee was in her eighties when she left China in 1965. She had already been entwined in a network of family labor migration that had connected her home village in Guangdong province with Sydney, Australia, and Honolulu, Hawai‘i, and all up and down the west coast of North America for almost a century. Generations of young males had left similar rural villages in Guangdong province to labor in distant places, sending money back to support families and occasionally returning home to find wives and sire children. If they were lucky, they retired wealthy men. My great-grandmother’s husband spent his entire adult life in Australia, and although he had asked for her to join him and the Aboriginal second wife he had married in Sydney, she never did. He spent two extended trips to China with her, once between 1908 and 1911, and another between 1918 and 1919, each time fathering a daughter. After he left the second time, she would never see him again. Replicating her own married life, my great-grandmother would marry her youngest daughter off to another overseas laborer in 1937, this one in North America, who, along with his brothers had looked for their fortunes in the Pacific Northwest borderlands that straddled the U.S.–Canada boundary.
To see the world through my great-grandmother’s eyes is to see a world both intimate and local—a farm, a village, your children and husband’s relatives around you—as well as vast and linked to far-flung places. For years, her husband would send back, along with regular monetary remittances, fresh apples and oranges from his grocery in Australia. Her daughter married in anticipation of similar remittances from her own husband, who worked for much of his life as a butcher on an Alaskan cruise ship. When my great-grandmother mortgaged some of the family farmland to pay the passage for her brother to Trinidad, she continued the practices of borrowing and lending that girded a family economy of migration. His voyage was an investment, to be repaid with returns in long years of labor on plantations and then in a corner store. Well before my great-grandmother crossed the ocean to join her relatives in the Americas, she had been linked by migrant chains that anchored her existence there. When she went with my mother and my grandmother to join my grandfather in 1965, she traveled a route that was well worn, albeit traced across water. For generations her relatives had traveled trans-Pacific shipping lines; she flew in an airplane.

In the decades before her death, she continued to live in a world whose mental geography spanned great distances, celebrating grandchildren’s birthdays in the United States, in Canada, in China and Hong Kong. My brother was the first to travel to Los Angeles, as an architecture student at UCLA and then an architect based in L.A., creating an initial space in my great-grandmother’s imagination for “Loh Sung” as she called it, so that my decade here can trace its genealogy back through his presence and mine and tie her whole long history of migration to a place she has never been. Of course, Los Angeles has a history of Chinese migration, going back to its origins as an urban settlement. The original Los Angeles Chinatown was populated by people very much like my great-grandmother, peasants from rural areas of southern China near Hong Kong and Macau. More recently, just as in Vancouver, waves of migrants to Monterey Park and the San Gabriel Valley east of downtown L.A. have created new settlements that connect Los Angeles with Hong Kong, Shanghai, and Taiwan. The Chinese of Los Angeles are now linked with the migratory networks of people who have come from other areas in the United States and with places all through the Americas and Europe and around the Pacific and Asia.

What lessons can we learn from such a life? Was my great-grandmother typical or not? Certainly she was representative of many women embedded in the migratory labor networks that tied the developing economies of the Americas to places of origin all around the Atlantic and the Pacific. The west-
ern coast of North America was not exceptional in this regard, attracting opportunistic migrants and laborers just as Argentina, Australia, South Africa, and the eastern United States had in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This period was marked by global flows of migration, and the chains of migration that linked disparate sites in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Today, as my grandfather did decades ago, young Indonesian and Filipino cooks and waiters on Alaskan cruise ships spend long years away from their families, sending home remittances and connecting the places they visit to women and children in rural villages outside Jakarta and Manila. In Queens and Flushing, New York, workers from Fujian province in China mingle with those from Mexico, Pakistan, India, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Guatemala, just as they do in downtown Los Angeles.

My great-grandmother's life was both typical and not, but the historical context of the migration networks in which she lived was and is a widespread phenomenon. Increasingly by the late nineteenth century, nation-states expressed their sovereignty by marking the bodies of those who crossed their borders. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 necessitated a whole new bureaucracy to issue identification papers and control the movements of this newly created set of unwelcome migrants. Thus began a long process of differentiation between citizens and a class of perpetual foreigners that invested some bodies with privileges of national belonging while denying them to others defined as "aliens" and "ineligible to citizenship." This process of national marking, with its demonization of some migrants as undesirable and the cementing of others into a common citizenry, paralleled similar processes in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Practices of white supremacy and new techniques of racialization helped legislate the uneven contours of national belonging around the globe.

In the United States, many of those who were defined by legislation as "aliens"—Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, East Indian, Mexican—found themselves, in the words of Mae Ngai, in the position of being "impossible subjects." However, we should be careful not to diminish the richness of these migrants' lives by seeing them only through the categories of their exclusion. They struggled despite the harshness of laws, defining in their own ways lives only partially encompassed by the category of "illegal" migrant. From the point of view of border guards, they were engaged in smuggling and deception, telling lies in order to cross national boundaries. For those who saw immigration laws as unjust and discriminatory, breaking such laws involved no moral evasion, and the fictions they created became a part of the everyday fabric of their lives. Because of quirks in the exclusion laws, some Chinese
were allowed to migrate even after 1882: merchants and scholars could still enter and leave, and those born in the United States were accorded citizenry and the privileges of border crossing. Acquiring the paperwork of a “legal” migrant became a route to the United States, and a lively trade in identity papers developed. The man my great-grandmother chose as her daughter’s husband bought a fictive identity to enter the United States. For the rest of his life, his official name in English would be Low. The first time his real name, Yeung, appeared in English was on his headstone.

The granting of instant citizenship to those born within the geographic borders of the United States has had a tremendous effect on static conceptions of spatial belonging. For the first half of U.S. history, the possession of U.S. citizenship bore little relationship to the privileges of traveling across its borders—almost anyone was allowed in, and so citizenship was superfluous. As Erika Lee argues, excluding the Chinese forced the development and expansion of federal immigration law, so that what began as legislation aimed at restricting the border crossings of a specific group became entangled with definitions of national citizenry. In the Supreme Court case *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* in 1898, national belonging through nativity became automatic for everyone, even the Chinese. American-born Chinese possessed rights as citizens, including the privileges of border crossing, that were more important than their legal identity as a race “ineligible” for citizenship.

This automatic citizenry through nativity has reinforced birthplace as the most basic legal form of spatial identity, but it has also informed spatial identity in general. Native-born Angelenos, that seemingly rare breed, have staked a claim to belonging over those who have moved to Los Angeles. Being “raised” in a place is a secondary form of belonging, one that can be measured in multiple ways, from an emphasis on schooling and youth as formative stages, to others that mark the passage of time—how many years of living in a place does it take before you can call yourself a native? What if you never do? Sometimes claims of belonging are produced by longing and desire, a need to feel at home here, or a feeling of exile that longs for a home elsewhere. Spatial belonging can even be against someone’s wishes, propelled by the need of others (or of nation-states) to claim someone even if he or she never felt at home, or to exclude someone despite that person’s desire to belong.

If we move away from categories of belonging that emphasize static definitions of place and legal regimes of citizenry, we can see spaces not as geographically bounded (mirroring the territorial claims of nation-states), but connected in fascinating ways by the movements of human bodies. And if we
follow the bodies, Los Angeles as a site of intersection leads us away from the East Coast, Atlantic-centered perspective of so much U.S. scholarship. We would see the United States embedded in a world in which the Americas are a part of both Pacific and Atlantic migrations.

**Los Angeles and Regional Migrations**

If we begin with Los Angeles, we will see how regional distinctions are so powerfully the consequence of regional migration networks. For instance, patterns of racialization and white supremacy are almost directly tied to regional migration flows. The vast bulk of scholarly work on racialization in the United States has been focused on the historical creation and maintenance of the dichotomy between black and white. However, if we understand migration flows as regional, we see that the American South might be better understood as a southeast region connected to the slaveholding societies of the Caribbean and the trans-Atlantic flows of enslaved Africans that populated the region. In the Northeast, a region dominated by large-scale European migration, the demonization of blacks helped mold together a diverse array of European migrants through the promised benefits of white supremacy. This was despite the fact that migrant flows of African Americans northward were relatively small until the twentieth century, but antiblack practices served a different purpose than in slaveholding regions in the Southeast. Understanding the dynamic of racialization in the Northeast as an outgrowth of the particular challenges of its migration history is crucial. Anti-Semitism and anti-Catholic practices dominated the region in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the expansion of a generic Judeo-Christian whiteness to embrace Jews and Catholics was accompanied by a heightening of the racial divide between white and black, not its lessening.

The rise of ethnicity as a category was rooted in the migration patterns of the northeastern United States. Ostensibly, when W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Strole used the concept of ethnicity for the first time in the 1940s, it was to claim that racial groups were just one form of ethnicity. But the irony of the rise of the term *ethnicity* was that it came to describe migrant groups such as Irish, Italians, Slavs, and Jews that so recently had been vilified in the Northeast as inferior races. In separating out the intractable problem of African Americans as the primary remaining “racial” problem, Warner and Strole unwittingly recognized the process under way by which race as a concept was shifting in meaning in the Northeast; the expansion of white supremacy in the mid-twentieth century now allowed those willing and able to embrace it to erase problematic origins. Changes in clothing and manners,
the adoption of English, the erasure of overt “ethnicity”—all created the illusion that ethnicity was somehow a choice, leaving behind those who could not pass for white in the dark cellar of a newly constricted category of race.

That this process was primarily focused in a northeastern region tied to trans-Atlantic flows of European migrants is quickly apparent when we compare it to the Northwest and the Southwest. These two regions were tied to trans-Pacific migrations and the conquest of formerly Spanish and American Indian territories. In the Southwest, the westward migration of European colonizers and the enslaved Africans brought along by the expansion of slavery crossed paths with Native Americans and the northern settlers of Spanish America. Most important, for much of the history of both the Northwest and the Southwest, Native American genocide and the labor politics of anti-Asian agitation, not antiblack practices, dominated processes of racialization. Early African American migrants who came to the western United States saw that another set of migrants was considered the primary problem, and before large numbers of African Americans arrived during World War II, it was the “Oriental problem” that dominated the racial politics of western cities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle. By the mid-twentieth century, Mexican labor migrations had come to replace the supply of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Punjabi, and Filipinos cut off by exclusionary policies, and the racialization of Mexicans as eternal foreigners and cheap labor grafted onto similar representations of earlier Asian migrants. In similar ways that antiblack politics helped amalgamate various Europeans into a common white supremacy, anti-Asian and anti-Mexican politics achieved a parallel result. Without an understanding of the consequences of regional networks of migration that brought migrants from Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the eastern United States to the Pacific coast, the very different patterns of regional racialization in the United States do not make sense.

More recently, scholarship focusing on imperialism and territorial expansion has placed areas such as the Southwest and overseas colonies such as Hawai‘i and the Philippines at the center of U.S. history, in particular for the fifty years before and after the crucial date of 1898. The question of empire, it seems, has placed the West and the Pacific on the map. The current scholarship of Vicente Diaz, Amy Stillman, and Damon Salesas at the University of Michigan, for instance, has the potential of reimagining the way that the United States has been engaged in the imperial contests of the region. Pacific studies scholars offer us a way of seeing the United States on the eastern edge of a world that has its own history, not autonomous and separate from the United States, but integral and intersecting, blending local and global connections.
Most acutely, a century of recurring U.S. wars in Asia, from the conquest of the Philippines and Hawai‘i through the conflict with Japan, with China in Korea, in Southeast Asia, and again in Central Asia now, has created a vicious dehumanization that sees in recurring cycles an Asian face of the enemy. We rarely consider military personnel migrants, but they are akin to the missionaries and civil servants who accompanied empire and in their own descriptions often described their travels in ways that any traveler going to a new land might. It is not surprising that the militarized migration of Americans into the Pacific created the mass tourism that would dominate sites such as Hawai‘i, Bangkok, and Manila. Military expansion has been a particularly gendered form of migration, spawning a violent masculinity and accompanied by a sexual tourism replete with alluring images of Asian women as willing commodities. Between 1945 and 1965, when anti-Asian exclusion kept the borders of the United States closed to most Asian migrants, it was U.S. wars in Asia that were the direct source for many of those who did come: refugees and orphans from the Korean conflict or war brides of military personnel stationed in Japan and South Korea.

Differential migrations, in a sense, created the distinctiveness of the major regions of the United States by tying them into regional flows of human bodies. By following migrants as they move, we discover the local worlds in which they lived and see these sites of intersection as particularly generative places, with the capacity to create encounters and ideas and forms of social life that are bewitching in their complexity. Migrants create geographic space. Spatial imaginings are the product of movement, not of the static relationship between a body and the ground where it appears to root. Settlers are migrants who fantasize about stopping and making an organic tie between themselves and the land they occupy. A region is an act of imagination, an organizing and categorizing of a smaller subset of the ideas generated at these nodes of intersection, reflecting the density of migration routes and the pattern of connection between places. We might think of racial ideologies as one set of ideas generated at such sites, and nationalism as one particularly powerful mobilization of such regional cognition, produced by some migrants attempting to create and institute a shared sense of community with each other. In the historical case of the United States and other settler colonies, this often comes at the expense of other migrants or of aboriginal peoples. If we were to envision the Americas as a collection of intersecting nodes, connected with others around the world, we could reimage this historical construct called “America” as the product of a limited number of these dense intersections.
Seeing American studies through the lens of migratory processes, then, foregrounds both the experience of individual migrants and the networks in which they are embedded. It also allows us to see how the ideas of “America” have migrated along these routes. If the question of “what is America” has been at the heart of American studies since its inception, here is a way that we can escape the parochial exceptionalism of too constrained a focus. If we see this imagined nation, and the border practices by which it is enacted, as the creation of the migratory networks that embed the Americas in a larger world, then the United States as a subject will not drive our scholarship like the administration of a citizenship oath. We can follow its travels, its appropriation and its reimagining, and recognize that it is just one of many ideas created out of the dense interactions that have occurred at nodal intersections. It might be one way by which we can truly forsake the political interests of nation building as the narrow rationale for scholarship.

“Life Differs from Death in the Matter of Movement”

I will end by getting back to the places I live. After my great-grandmother migrated from her natal village to her husband’s village in Zhongshan county, then to Shanghai, where her daughter worked in a textile factory, then across the Pacific to Canada, she embedded herself in her backyard garden in Vancouver. In this garden, she grew the vegetables of a time and place far away, offering them with friendly gestures to new neighbors who spoke English (or not) with Italian and Romanian and Punjabi accents. Afterward, she would watch wrestling on TV and mutter in frustration at the underhanded tactics of the bad guys (even in another language the simple dichotomies of professional wrestling are clear). Sometimes, after eating her daily dinner of salted fish, vegetables, and a bowl of rice, she would sit in her room patiently folding paper money festooned with bright gold and silver paint. She would fold paper for an hour here and an hour there, filling giant empty Pampers boxes that she had asked my mother to keep from the grocery store we ran. One day, in her late nineties, she decided to learn English. Day after day she repeated simple phrases such as “Good day” and “How are you?” When asked why she was trying so hard to learn a new language at her age, she replied that if she was going to be buried here, she wanted to know how to speak to her neighbors, just in case they did not speak Chinese. After she passed away, we opened up the dozens of densely packed Pampers boxes and burned all the hand-folded paper, sending to her the special ceremonial money that had value only in the afterworld.
We live here, in this world, but at any moment we don't know if this street corner that we call home will be the place we stop. There are roads that lead to other places, and people come and people go. We make friends and meet neighbors, and try to make our little corner a better place to live. All we can ask is that those who follow us remember the journeys we took, the people we knew, the places we were, and, if you're my great-grandmother, to send her some money at the end of the road so she can go hang out with her neighbors. Perhaps if historians followed these struggles and built their histories out of them rather than out of the abstraction called America, we might see a history of lives lived well and stories worth telling.

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Los Angeles and Pacific Migration | 543


6. See the pioneering work of G. William Skinner on overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, as well as that of Wang Guoguang, Anthony Reid, and Edgar Wickberg.


