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YU TOKUNAGA

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TRANSBORDER  
LOS ANGELES

An Unknown Transpacific History  
of Japanese-Mexican Relations

Transborder Los Angeles: An Unknown Transpacific History of  
Japanese- Mexican Relations, by Yu Tokunaga

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# Introduction

## *Exploring Japanese-Mexican Relations in Los Angeles and the US-Mexico Borderlands*

This book explores the social history of interethnic relations between Japanese and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County from 1924 to 1942 by paying careful attention to international relations between Japan, Mexico, and the United States. In this period, Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans in Los Angeles developed mutual relations, which were not always rigid and dominated by domestic racial and economic factors but were rather fluid and situational due to the immigrants' agency to negotiate interethnic relations and international factors around the Pacific Ocean and across the US-Mexico border. This study focuses on farmland in Los Angeles County as a site of particularly close Japanese-Mexican interactions and of overlapping experiences as immigrants. Japanese and Mexicans played a significant role in developing local agriculture, one of the major industries of Los Angeles County before World War II. By looking at the Japanese-Mexican interactions within the correlations of their experiences as racialized minorities in this turbulent period, we can see the Japanese immigrant experience, such as the ban on Japanese immigration and the wartime Japanese relocation and internment, and the Mexican immigrant experience, such as agricultural strikes in the 1930s and the Bracero Program, not in isolation but in a single narrative of transpacific history.<sup>1</sup>

In this eighteen-year period, Japanese-Mexican relations in Los Angeles farmland became fully incorporated as an integral part of local agriculture along with two socioeconomic and geopolitical relationships developing particularly after the implementation of the Immigration Act of 1924. The first relationship is the development of a unique triracial hierarchy in which Japanese tenant farmers leased lands from white landowners and hired Mexican farmworkers, which was

the consequence of the upward mobility of Japanese immigrants into land tenancy and the increase of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County, particularly after the 1920s. Although this tri-racial hierarchy functioned to strengthen racial and class divisions and conflicts among Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans, their regular interactions resulted in efforts toward mutual understanding and interethnic accommodation in unexpected ways even during the periods of Japanese-Mexican labor conflict during the 1930s and strong anti-Japanese sentiment during the Pacific War. The other relationship is the development of a trans-border ethnic Japanese community in the US-Mexico borderlands in which the experience of Japanese immigrants in Mexico affected that of their co-ethnics and their relations with Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County. By taking these two important factors into consideration, this book describes the development and sudden demise of Japanese-Mexican relations in Los Angeles farmland from 1924 to 1942, providing a better understanding of why and how interethnic and international relations played into not only racial and economic inequalities but also interethnic accommodation in a multiethnic Los Angeles, a global meeting place located at the historical intersection of Asia, Latin America, and the United States.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the ethnic Japanese and Mexican populations in Los Angeles County increased dramatically.<sup>2</sup> In Los Angeles County, the number of ethnic Japanese residents rose from 209 in 1900 to 35,390 in 1930 and the Mexican counterpart from 1,618 (as a foreign-born population) in 1900 to 167,024 (as a racial group) in 1930, together constituting 9 percent of the total population and 78 percent of the whole nonwhite population in Los Angeles County in 1930. Japanese and Mexican minorities made up the majority of nonwhite Los Angeles before World War II.<sup>3</sup>

In early twentieth-century Los Angeles, Japanese and Mexicans were major racialized minorities. With the development of scientific racism such as eugenics, American racial nationalism reinforced the idea of Anglo-Saxon superiority and materialized in the Immigration Act of 1924.<sup>4</sup> This new immigration policy prohibited Japanese immigration altogether. The law banned the entry of immigrants who were ineligible for naturalization. The ineligibility of Japanese immigrants to become US citizens was the legal basis for the California Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 that prohibited Japanese from purchasing and leasing land. The *Ozawa v. United States* case in 1922 firmly established the nonwhite racial status of Japanese as ineligible for naturalization by rejecting an appeal filed by a Japanese immigrant Takao Ozawa who applied for naturalization. The 1924 Immigration Act reaffirmed the racial status of Japanese as undesirable and ineligible to become part of the American nation. On the other hand, Mexicans were legally regarded as white based on the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848 and exempted from the numerical restriction institutionalized by the 1924 Act largely due to growing

demands for Mexican labor in the Southwest. However, new entry requirements imposed by the 1924 Act and the establishment of the US Border Patrol in the same year functioned to racialize Mexicans increasingly as nonwhite and illegal immigrants.<sup>5</sup>

Although the US state power and its racial nationalism considerably affected the lives of Japanese and Mexican immigrants, these immigrants were also under the influence of the new international regime of the post-World War I period and the development of racial ideology in their respective home countries, Japan and Mexico. Looking at the international context of the 1920s, Japan emerged as a new leading power and competed with the United States in the world following the devastation of Europe.<sup>6</sup> During this decade, Japanese nationalism took a Pan-Asianist framework in justifying its imperial expansion in East Asia, positioning the Japanese as a leading *minzoku* (race or ethnicity) in Asia in competition with the West.<sup>7</sup> On the other side of the Pacific Ocean in Los Angeles, Japanese nationalism provided emotional support to Japanese immigrants who needed to survive the anti-Japanese environment.<sup>8</sup> The 1920s was also an important period for Mexico to modernize as a nation. After the Mexican Revolution, the Mexican government sought to modernize and unify the diverse Mexican population. In the 1920s Mexican cultural nationalist movement, post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism envisioned *mestizaje* (racial mixing) as the basis of the greatness of the Mexican nation.<sup>9</sup> Again in Los Angeles, located on the other side of the US-Mexico border, Mexican nationalism and government intervention occasionally empowered Mexican immigrants who identified themselves as *mexicanos* or *raza* (race or people) and transformed local labor conflicts in Los Angeles into international issues that affected both sides of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>10</sup>

Japanese and Mexican immigrants were not simply passive victims of American racialization but, as this book clarifies, were also positive agents who could utilize their racial and national identities to survive a Los Angeles society dominated by white Americans. Furthermore, in order to understand the political and emotional connections between Japanese and Mexicans with their respective home governments, this study pays special attention to the role played by the Japanese and Mexican consulates in Los Angeles, established in 1915 and 1885, respectively. Particularly in times of Japanese-Mexican interethnic conflicts, the Japanese and Mexican consulates played a significant role as the proxy of the respective immigrant communities as well as of their governments. The consulates, however, did not always work for the sake of immigrants per se and immigrants did not always follow the instruction they gave. By doing archival research in Japan, Mexico, and the United States and analyzing primary sources written in three languages, this book illustrates the transpacific dimension of local Japanese-Mexican relations in Los Angeles agriculture.

## LITERATURE ON INTERETHNIC RELATIONS

An increasing number of scholars have explored interethnic relations in California, particularly in Los Angeles, to understand the history of immigration and racial dynamics. Yet, no one has detailed the relations between ethnic Japanese and Mexicans. I regard this as a major hole in the literature, given that in 1930 these two groups combined constituted the majority of nonwhite population in Los Angeles County. I also agree with Natalia Molina, who argues that “there are limits to examining racialized groups in isolation” because the experience of one nonwhite group affected the other.<sup>11</sup> As far as the history of Japanese immigration is concerned, much scholarly attention has been paid to growing US-Japan conflict generated through early twentieth-century crises over Japanese immigration to the West Coast. But the Mexican dimension to this conflict remains largely unknown. What role did Mexico and Mexican immigrants play in the Japanese immigrant experience including various acts of anti-Japanese discrimination, immigration exclusion, and the removal and internment of the ethnic Japanese population during World War II? How did the influx of Mexican immigrants shape the development of the ethnic Japanese community? *Transborder Los Angeles* explores these questions through a largely unknown transpacific history of Japanese and Mexican agricultural and labor relations that highlights the emergence of Southern California as a transpacific meeting place among peoples from the East, West, and South.<sup>12</sup>

This book takes a *relational* approach to examine Japanese-Mexican relations, paying special attention to their labor and political interactions in Los Angeles farmland. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of studies on interethnic relations in existing scholarship: comparative studies and relational studies. Comparative studies look at several ethnoracial groups separately, compare them with each other, and obtain a relational understanding on these groups. In this way, they reveal a larger picture of immigration and racial dynamics in a city like Los Angeles or in a larger area such as the US-Mexico borderlands. Such studies are important and effective in revealing the dominant institutional power structures that situate ethnoracial minorities in disadvantaged positions in the United States.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, comparative studies are not much concerned with actual interactions between ethnoracial groups in the area. On the other hand, relational studies shed light on actual interactions between ethnoracial groups, rather than comparing their experiences independently.<sup>14</sup> Interethnic interactions can be observed within different spaces such as the family, neighborhood, and workplace. For example, Karen Isaksen Leonard’s work on Punjabi-Mexican families in the Imperial Valley provides a great example of intimate interethnic relations, while George J. Sánchez’s study on Boyle Heights, Los Angeles, teaches us about the importance of the multicultural neighborhood relations in creating interracial harmony.<sup>15</sup> The current book highlights interethnic relations in the workplace and



provides a clear picture of Japanese-Mexican interactions in Los Angeles farmland in contrast to previous works that have focused on one ethnic group, either Japanese or Mexican, or examined these groups comparatively.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, it situates Japanese-Mexican relations in the intersection of the Pacific Ocean and the US-Mexico borderlands and weaves the local history of Japanese-Mexican relations with the history of international relations involving Japan, Mexico, and the United States. Immigration history is almost inevitably transnational history.<sup>17</sup> This book examines the transnational processes in which the triangular relationship between peoples and governments of three Pacific Rim countries generated not only racial and economic inequalities but also efforts toward mutual understanding and interethnic accommodation. In this regard, Grace Peña Delgado's study of ethnic Chinese residents in the Arizona-Sonora borderlands provides an important insight into the question of the historical intersection between the US-Mexico borderlands and the Pacific Ocean. Her work has contributed to the making of a transnational turn in the historiography of interethnic relations. Peña Delgado illuminates the US-Mexico borderlands as "trans-Pacific-borderlands," as a space in which Chinese residents built socioeconomic and legal relationships with Mexican neighbors and officers while local and transnational factors of China, Mexico, and the United States operated simultaneously and helped create US and Mexican immigration policies in the region at around the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

This book adopts Peña Delgado's conceptualization but focuses more specifically on Los Angeles farmland as a central site of the transpacific borderlands. Los Angeles is of great significance to historians interested in exploring multiethnic relations in the American West, in which Asians and Latin Americans began to interact with each other as minority groups from the late nineteenth century. In other words, the historiography of this region tells us how scholars have understood multiethnic relations over time. This book shows that Los Angeles witnessed significant and extensive triracial negotiations between Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans for the first time in US history, providing a new understanding of multiethnic relations in Los Angeles and the American West. The history of the American West and US-Mexico borderlands cannot be fully understood by looking only at biracial relations between one nonwhite minority and the white majority because many communities in this region were multiethnic. We have yet to fully explore these ethnoracially diverse communities in the international context around the Pacific Ocean.

Similar to Peña Delgado's, Eiichiro Azuma's work is important in terms of the transnational turn in the multiracial historiography of the American West. Azuma has examined triracial interactions between Japanese, Filipinos, and white Americans in 1930s Stockton in Northern California and provided a historical perspective indispensable for us to understand the Japanese immigrant experience. Azuma



adeptly describes the dual status and transnationalism of Japanese immigrants as simultaneously citizen-subjects of imperial Japan and resident members of white America. With this understanding, Azuma examines the world view of Japanese tenant farmers and merchants who “envisioned a simple, three-tiered, overlapping race and class hierarchy, where white elites, Japanese entrepreneurs, and Filipino union laborers formed the pyramid in descending order.” He argues that Japanese immigrants “appropriated the ruling ideology of white supremacy as their own and endeavored to turn perceived social relations into real ones.” Therefore, being a proper Japanese national was compatible with becoming a good American resident who would understand the dominant white racial ideology.<sup>19</sup> Azuma applies a similar perspective to the Japanese immigrant experience in the US-Mexico borderlands. In understanding the Japanese immigrant world view in relation to Mexicans, Azuma emphasizes California Japanese as settler colonialists who thought it “easy to dominate” Mexicans and become a “master” race in Mexico when they faced the anti-Japanese movement in 1890s California.<sup>20</sup>

Azuma’s work has made a significant contribution to our understanding of multiracial relations in California, particularly showing the compatibility of Japanese imperial nationalism with white supremacy in multiracial California. However, his work describes the triracial hierarchy of Japanese, Filipinos, and white Americans as a stable and rigid social structure divided along existing racial and class boundaries under the influence of white supremacy. It downplays, however, the social dimension that was not totally dominated by white supremacy and overlooks the agency of minority residents and white people who did not always fit in the dominant triracial hierarchy. In contrast, by looking at the triangular relations between Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans on Los Angeles farmland, this book demonstrates their triracial hierarchy as an unstable and fluid relationship, not simply dominated by existing racial and class factors. I would argue that the social factor of working together in Los Angeles farmland over a long time despite their racial and class differences played an important role in changing the dominant racial and class structure. This change was substantiated by the efforts and compromises of some Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans who cooperated with each other even in periods of serious Japanese-Mexican labor conflicts in the 1930s and very strong anti-Japanese sentiment following the Pearl Harbor attack in the 1940s. To understand the nature of triracial interactions, we need to look conceptually beyond white supremacy and geographically beyond the Pacific Ocean and the US-Mexico border and take a different methodological approach by drawing on primary sources in three languages. By doing so, we can get a fuller picture of triangular interactions between Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans in prewar Los Angeles agriculture.

I regard Los Angeles farmland as a *transpacific workplace* that functioned as a contested site in which their local relations operated within the context of

increasingly precarious international relations around the Pacific Ocean from 1924 to 1942. The *transpacific workplace* concept helps us to identify specific sites where Asian and Latin American immigrants interact with one another as racialized minorities in white-dominant US society and where their interactions were partly a product of international relations between their home countries and the United States. As shown in this book, in the 1920s, Los Angeles farmland transformed into a *transpacific workplace* on a full scale along with the rapid economic development of Los Angeles as a major American city.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK: TRANSBORDER LOS ANGELES

Today we can find many *transpacific workplaces* where Asian and Latin American immigrants interact with each other largely due to the implementation of the Immigration Act of 1965 that abolished the exclusionist quota system. We can better observe their lives not simply in a domestic context but also in a larger global context in which local and international factors around the Pacific Ocean influence each other to shape their immigrant experiences. This social history of Japanese-Mexican relations speaks of the contemporary importance of understanding increasingly complicated multiracial relations in the international context around the Pacific Ocean and of grasping their workplace not simply as a site of conflict and exploitation but also as a site of mutual understanding. In Los Angeles farmland, Japanese, Mexicans, and white Americans together formed interethnic relations beyond racial and class boundaries in both local and transnational contexts. In other words, this study is about transborder Los Angeles. By paying close attention to this situational and fluid nature of race and class relations, we can see Los Angeles farmland as a formative site of transborder Los Angeles.

Chapter 1 briefly explains the local history of Los Angeles. To provide background for what would happen in Japanese-Mexican relations in Los Angeles farmland, it starts by looking at the pre-1924 period from a global perspective. It then explores the impact of the Immigration Act of 1924 on Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles County and the subsequent development of a transborder ethnic Japanese community in the US-Mexico borderlands. Japanese exclusion made Los Angeles Japanese seriously concerned about their future in an anti-Japanese US society and increasingly interested in migrating southward to Mexico where no anti-Japanese laws existed. At about the same time, people in Japan felt the same way and began to talk about Mexico as a hopeful destination for future Japanese emigrants. While most California Japanese remained in the United States, newly arriving immigrants from Japan substantially increased in Mexico and developed an ethnic Japanese community in Baja California, which became firmly incorporated into a southern part of a transborder ethnic Japanese community

in the US-Mexico borderlands with Los Angeles as its nucleus. Chapter 1 details the development of the transborder ethnic Japanese community, an unintended consequence of the 1924 Act, which provided an important historical setting that led to local Japanese-Mexican interactions in Los Angeles farmland having international repercussions in the 1930s.

Chapter 2 demonstrates the increase of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles County after Japanese exclusion as an indispensable factor in the development of a triracial hierarchy in the Los Angeles agriculture of the 1920s. After Japanese exclusion, white nativists quickly replaced the “Japanese Problem” with the “Mexican Problem” (and the “Filipino Problem”) as their major target, while white agribusiness leaders opposed any immigration restriction by racializing Mexicans as inferior but also as a very “safe” source of labor. Meanwhile, Japanese tenant farmers continued to lease lands from white landowners and increasingly relied on Mexican workers, stabilizing the triracial hierarchy of Los Angeles agriculture. Under this localized immigration regime, Japanese and Mexicans were fully incorporated in growing capitalist agriculture despite the fact that they were deemed undesirable and deportable. In an increasingly multiethnic Los Angeles, Japanese immigrants often portrayed Mexicans as criminals and inferior to the Japanese. On the other hand, they deepened their relations in urban and nonurban areas to the extent that they invested in emerging ethnic Mexican businesses including the Spanish-language newspaper *La Opinión*, which would later play an important role in supporting Mexican strikers and criticizing Japanese farmers in the 1930s.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine interethnic conflicts between Japanese and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles farmland during the Great Depression years by focusing on two large-scale agricultural strikes launched by Mexican workers against Japanese tenant farmers. Chapter 3 examines the El Monte Berry Strike of 1933 and its international repercussions across the Pacific Ocean as well as the US-Mexico border. The El Monte strike became one of California’s largest labor conflicts in 1933. The strike evolved from a local interethnic conflict into an international problem in which anti-Japanese sentiment traveled across the US-Mexico border, merged with Mexican nationalism, and forced Japanese residents in Mexicali, Baja California to issue an unexpected pro-labor and pro-Mexican statement against their co-ethnics in Los Angeles. By focusing on the transpacific character of the Japanese-Mexican interethnic relations in Los Angeles agriculture, this chapter details the process in which Mexican nationalism trumped ethnic solidarity among Japanese immigrants in their transborder community and that the exacerbating situation in Mexico, rather than in California, played a decisive role in the settlement of the strike. The pro-Mexican action taken by the Mexicali Japanese destabilized the existing racial and class boundaries in Los Angeles farmland, forcing the Los Angeles Japanese to make a compromise with Mexican strikers.

Chapter 4 continues to examine the Japanese-Mexican conflict by looking at another large-scale agricultural strike, namely the Venice Celery Strike of 1936, and explores the growth of interethnic alliances in Los Angeles farmland. Unable to see improvements to their working and living conditions after the El Monte strike, Mexican farmworkers went on the Venice strike against Japanese farmers in 1936. Largely influenced by the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, Mexican strikers began to demand union recognition and some Japanese began to express sympathy toward Mexicans and their demand. While most Japanese farmers vehemently opposed union recognition that they thought would devastate their ethnic agriculture and sought to maintain the rigid racial and class boundaries, more than fifty Japanese farmers signed a contract with Mexican strikers challenging the existing norm of the triracial hierarchy. By exploring the Venice strike in the context of the New Deal pro-labor political climate, chapter 4 illustrates how the Japanese-Mexican interethnic conflict pushed Japanese immigrants to reconsider their position as a nonwhite minority in a highly multiethnic Los Angeles society and how Japanese immigrant nationalism responded to the growing need for interethnic accommodation in mid-1930s Los Angeles. Although those efforts to achieve mutual understanding and interethnic accommodation appeared more clearly in the actions taken by people in the Japanese side as documented in this book, it is crucial to understand that such actions, often followed by compromises, were generated through interactions with the Mexican side. In other words, without Mexican farmworkers going on strike and urging farmers to better understand their poor working conditions, Japanese farmers could not have had a chance to rethink their relationship with Mexican workers. In Los Angeles farmland, agricultural strikes played a significant role in prompting efforts for interethnic understanding from the Japanese side, while there were also moments where Mexican workers made compromises through interethnic negotiations.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the sudden demise of Japanese-Mexican relations as well as of the transborder ethnic Japanese community by analyzing Japanese relocation and internment as an agricultural labor crisis in California, particularly in Los Angeles farmland. Chapter 5 examines the economic impact of the Japanese Internment on California agriculture and political debates over food security versus military necessity. While Japanese Internment inflicted a grave injustice on Japanese immigrants and Japanese American citizens, it also resulted in the sudden loss of ethnic Japanese farmers in California. Just like the ethnic Japanese in Hawai'i, their co-ethnics in California were also economically vital as an integral part of local agriculture and an important element of wartime food security. Thus, the Japanese removal prompted voices sympathetic to the ethnic Japanese among federal agricultural officials and California Governor Culbert Olson, which questioned the necessity of the full-scale implementation of mass evacuation and also led to a growing demand for Mexican farmworkers who would come through the





MAP 1. Japanese farms in Los Angeles County, 1942. "Map Reveals Jap Menace," blazoned a March 4, 1942, headline in the *Los Angeles Times*. It was accompanied by a map indicating that Japanese farms were located suspiciously near strategic oil fields, defense industries, and the harbor. SOURCE: *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1942.

Bracero Program. Consideration of these processes helps us to better understand the Japanese Internment as not solely about race but also about economics in wartime, multiethnic California.

Chapter 6 continues to explore the agricultural labor crisis caused by Japanese removal by focusing on issues regarding tenant farmers in former Japanese farms. In Los Angeles, some white landowners were upset and concerned about how to find new tenant farmers to keep their Japanese farms operational without the Japanese. The Bracero Program was not designed to bring tenant farmers from Mexico. In fact, it was very difficult for some white landowners to find replacement tenants when many people were finding their jobs in booming war industries in Los Angeles County. The last chapter details the process in which Japanese farms were taken over by non-Japanese farmers in Rancho San Pedro, the site of an old Spanish rancho in Los Angeles County. It details how the sudden

loss of Japanese tenant farmers turned into an economic opportunity for Mexican “workers to take over the former Japanese lands and become tenant farmers themselves. In this last chapter, we see that the mutual understanding between Japanese tenant farmers and white landowners and even between some Japanese and Mexicans unsettled the hardening racial and political boundaries in wartime Los Angeles.

In March 1942, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article with the headline “Network of Japanese Farms Covers Vital Southland Defense Areas” and a map made by Los Angeles County authorities (see Map 1). The map showed in black the locations of Japanese agricultural settlements in order to sound the alarm on the alleged internal Japanese military threat following the Pearl Harbor attack. As the map’s caption states, “Depicting how Japanese landholdings are spaced throughout the Los Angeles County area in a manner to permit disastrous assaults on every military objective,” it reflected the alarm and suspicion among local authorities toward Japanese farmers, many of whom lived near the militarily important areas of Los Angeles County such as “dams, oil refineries and tank farms, bridges, aircraft plants and other defense factories,” unlike their fellow co-ethnics living in the downtown Little Tokyo. Over the coming chapters, *Transborder Los Angeles* explores the forgotten history of Japanese-Mexican relations that disappeared from this map in the summer of 1942.<sup>22</sup>