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# Examining Chicana/o History through a Relational Lens

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*This article argues that we should examine Chicana/os in relation to other racialized groups in order to develop a fuller understanding of how racial categories form and operate. The article highlights different models of relational work by examining key works in Chicana/o history that have employed such a relational methodology. In addition, the article demonstrates how we can use organizing principles besides race to find links between racialized groups. Lastly, the author revisits key events in Chicana/o history, examining them through a relational lens, to demonstrate what may be gained through this methodology.*

**Key words:** *Racial formation, Chicano history (or Mexican American history), Los Angeles, urban history, Zoot Suit riots, Carey McWilliams, Méndez v. Westminster*

I remember a graduate school conversation with a fellow Chicano student about how difficult it was to be one of the few Chicana/os in our department.<sup>1</sup> He argued that it was particularly challenging for us because we had grown up in predominantly

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It has been such a joy to participate in this forum and to exchange ideas with colleagues whom I have long admired. I would especially like to thank everyone who played a role in conceiving this special issue and to extend my appreciation to all those who provided feedback that helped to strengthen the piece, including Ernesto Chávez, Miroslava Chávez-García, Raúl Ramos, two anonymous reviewers, the audience members at the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association, Seattle 2011, and Mérida Rúa and Ondine Chavoya of the Latino/a Studies department at Williams College, who invited me for a visit where I presented an earlier version of this article in a talk. Thank you to the talented librarians at University of California, San Diego (UCSD), Annelise Sklar and Elliot Kanter, who helped me with the legal research. I am also grateful to Ian Fusselman who edited the piece at various stages. This article was written with the support of a UCSD Academic Senate grant.

1. I use the term “Chicana/o” throughout this article to refer broadly to Mexicans and Mexican Americans alike. I chose to use this term because it references the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and the development of the scholarly field of Chicana/o studies that arose out of it.

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Mexican, working-class *barrios*. He suggested that we were used to being members of a community where it was not necessary to explain our positions because of shared experiences. It was true that I had grown up in a working-class neighborhood, and it was home to a large Mexican community, but also to Chinese immigrants, Vietnamese refugees, Filipino nationals, and working-class whites. Growing up in such diversity, I was accustomed to finding commonalities with kids from backgrounds different from mine. We shared similar experiences as working-class youth. We got ourselves ready for school in the morning because our parents had already left for work, we rode the city bus together to and from school, and we let ourselves back into our homes in the afternoon because our parents worked late. When we hung out on the corner and the police, who drove by regularly, stopped to ask us questions, we *all* felt ill at ease. Being from a working-class neighborhood produced a kind of solidarity that cut across the color line.

But, of course, there were also differences. In school, my white counterparts were more likely to be tracked into programs such as honors classes, band, ROTC, and theater. I, on the other hand, despite completing the prerequisites and maintaining a high grade point average, was told explicitly that I could not enroll in Advanced Placement classes. The school took the position that, because English was my second language, I would likely have difficulty succeeding in these courses.<sup>2</sup> Together, my experiences in the neighborhood and at school provided some of my first lessons in intersectionality.<sup>3</sup>

It is probably because of these early formative experiences that, when it came time to write my dissertation, I chose to look at race relationally. Even after further work on my dissertation resulted in the publication of my first book, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939*, I continued my efforts to demonstrate the importance of placing Chicana/o studies in a relational

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2. Although English was my second language, the teachers and administrators had no way of knowing this. I had no accent, and, given that all of my schooling had been in English, by the time I reached high school, I spoke English better than Spanish.

3. The following are foundational works that explain the importance of looking at how concepts of race, class, and gender intersect: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, 1991).

framework in my second book, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts*.<sup>4</sup> By relational, I do not mean comparative. A comparative treatment of race compares and contrasts groups, treating them as independent of one another. It also can leave the construction of racial categories themselves unexamined, thereby, even if unintentionally, reifying them. A relational treatment of race recognizes that the construction of race is a mutually constitutive process and demonstrates how race is socially constructed, hence fighting against essentialist notions. Furthermore, it attends to how, when, where, and to what extent groups intersect. It recognizes that there are limits to examining racialized groups in isolation.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I discuss the advantages of a relational perspective and urge others to join me in looking at race relationally. I am certainly not asking scholars to jump ship and abandon Chicana/o history or its counterpart fields (e.g., Asian American history). These fields make an invaluable contribution, first by providing social and cultural histories of groups and second by documenting the buildup of structural discrimination, including the development and dissemination of cultural representations of these groups that have simultaneously hidden and facilitated such discrimination. What I am asking is that, recognizing race as a social construction, we zoom out as we research, write, and teach. We need to ask who else is (or was) present in or near the communities we study—and what difference these groups' presence makes (or made). This is no less than what Chicana/o historians have been asking those who study the mainstream to do for decades. Just as the prevailing version of U.S. history was incomplete without an examination of the influence of racialized groups, the study of any single racialized group calls for an understanding of the impact of the experiences of other similarly situated groups.

In the first section of this article, I examine the literature that has made a strong case for centering race in the American West. I then turn to key works that have moved in the direction of a relational understanding of race. The second section provides possible

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4. Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?: Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley, 2006); Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley, 2013).

5. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York, 1986).

directions and strategies for those who wish to engage in a relational project. I also revisit some well-known cases in Chicana/o history and bring in new primary sources from my research to read these cases through a relational lens in order to show what can be gained from such an approach.

### The relational turn in Chicana/o history

Earlier works in Chicana/o history have made possible the methodological and theoretical move toward a relational study of race. The authors of these earlier studies did history “from the bottom up.” They dug through community newspapers (*before* they were digitized!), combed through city directories, and compiled census data; they were the first to locate sources in the vast labyrinth of the National Archives. They also provided ways to think about the relationship among race and power, institutionalized racism, segmented labor markets, community formation, segregation in the urban landscape, and civil rights outside of a black-white binary.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these scholarly contributions, Chicana/o history continued to be marginalized. In an effort to gain a wider audience and create a more inclusive dialogue, some historians urged a rethinking of the paradigms and parameters of the field that would provide an overarching rationale for centering race in our historical narratives.<sup>7</sup> For example, in 1992, Antonia Castañeda made an early, but largely unheeded, call for studying race relationally. While more scholarship on women and communities of color had been produced in the 1980s than in previous decades, Castañeda argued that much of it

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6. Examples of these foundational works include Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900–1940* (Westport, Conn., 1976); Albert Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society: From Mexican Pueblos to American Barrios in Santa Barbara and Southern California, 1848–1930* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Los Angeles Barrio, 1850–1890: A Social History* (Berkeley, 1979); Mario T. García, *Desert Immigrants: The Mexicans of El Paso, 1880–1920* (New Haven, Conn., 1981); Ricardo Romo, *East Los Angeles: History of a Barrio* (Austin, Tex., 1983); and Rodolfo Acuña, *A Community Under Siege: A Chronicle of Chicanos East of the Los Angeles River, 1945–1975* (Los Angeles, 1984).

7. To place this shift in historical perspective, see David G. Gutiérrez, “Significant to Whom?: Mexican Americans and the History of the American West,” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 24 (1993), 519–539, and Vicki L. Ruiz, “Nuestra América: Latino History as United States History,” *Journal of American History*, 93 (2006), 655–672. See also Adrian Burgos *et al.*, “Latino History: An Interchange on Present Realities and Future Prospects,” *Journal of American History*, 97 (2010), 424–463.

tended to be descriptive, or looked only at people of color *vis-à-vis* whites, instead of in relationship to and with one another. Consequently, these works generally ended up replacing a black-white binary with another type of binary.<sup>8</sup> Castañeda asserted that we should center women of color in our studies, not for the sake of inclusion but because, by centering them, we would have to acknowledge the presence and importance of issues of power and decolonization. My call for a greater focus on relational notions of race, like Castañeda's, goes beyond arguing for a more inclusive narrative history. I maintain that the very framework that comprises our understanding of race is necessarily and inseparably drawn from the experiences of racialized groups *vis-à-vis* other racialized groups, and thus it is imperative that we pull the lens back even when examining the experiences of one racialized group.

Two books from the 1990s in Chicana/o history stand out, both for their relational perspective on race and for their success in going beyond a black-white paradigm. Neil Foley's *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture*, a study of race relations in central Texas, examined how Anglos who migrated from the southern United States to central Texas brought with them a racial ideology shaped by a Reconstruction discourse meant to preserve whiteness as a bastion of privilege. These whites' interactions with Mexicans alongside African Americans complicated their prior understandings of race and disrupted the binary racial stratification that had developed within a black-white paradigm.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Tomás Almaguer's *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California*, which focused on nineteenth-century California and the racialization of Native Americans, Asians,

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8. Antonia Castañeda, "Women of Color and the Rewriting of Western History: The Discourse, Politics, and Decolonization of History," *Pacific Historical Review*, 61 (1992), 510–511. Some works stand out as heeding this call, including Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza/La Frontera* (San Francisco, 1987); Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880–1940* (New York, 1987); Deena J. González, *Refusing the Favor: The Spanish-Mexican Women of Santa Fe, 1820–1880* (New York, 1999); Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York, 2000); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874–1939* (New York, 1990); Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington, Ind., 1999); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque, 1987).

9. Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997).

and Mexicans, showed that examining racial groups in a continuum sheds light on how the racial constructions of various groups affect one another. Almaguer's study of California empirically grounded Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's theory that region and historical period are key in understanding how we come to think of bodies as racialized.<sup>10</sup> Race relations in the nineteenth-century United States were heavily framed by the black-white paradigm, but the small population of African Americans in California, coupled with the diverse populations of Natives and immigrants, resulted in a racially stratified hierarchy among Mexicans, Asians, Native Americans, African Americans and Anglos that defied binary racialization.<sup>11</sup>

My own work is based on a similar recognition of the importance of the differential racialization of groups, a specific interest in California, and a commitment to moving beyond conceptualizing race in terms of a black-white binary. I chose to focus on Chicana/os and Mexican immigrants, hoping to contribute to this important literature. I was broadly interested in what went into constructing the category "Mexican" and decided to look at public health practices, institutions, and discourses to demonstrate the structural and cultural ways that public health helped shape what it meant to be "Mexican." I settled on Los Angeles as the place of study because of its large Mexican population. Historically, Los Angeles had once been part of Mexico (El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles de Porciúncula) until it was annexed, along with much of northern Mexico, in the aftermath of the United States-Mexico War (1846–1848). For the next six decades, the Mexican population in the United States declined rapidly. Beginning in the 1910s, fleeing the Mexican Revolution, lured by the many opportunities presented by the growth of large-scale farming, and facilitated by the ease of movement resulting from the completion of railroad networks, Mexicans immigrated to Los Angeles in large numbers. By

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10. Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

11. Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley, 1994). Other key studies of relational notions of race outside of this field include Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, Conn., 2000), and Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, 2005). In 1990, seeing the need for more comparative, relational, and interdisciplinary studies, Ramón Gutiérrez and others founded the Ethnic Studies department at the University of California, San Diego. Ramón Gutiérrez, "Ethnic Studies: Its Evolution in American Colleges and Universities," in David Theo Goldberg, ed., *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).



1930 Los Angeles could claim a Mexican population second in size only to that of Mexico City.<sup>12</sup>

But it was the ethno-racial diversity of Los Angeles that ended up having the most impact on my study. Early twentieth-century Los Angeles was a rapidly growing metropolis, fueled by the completion of railway systems, by the frenzy to build its iconic California bungalows for a burgeoning population, and by the ease of agricultural development achieved by importing water from the Owens Valley. The city needed laborers and attracted a diversity of groups, among them Japanese farmers, Mexican bricklayers, and Midwestern white-collar workers. The result was a segmented labor force. It became clear to me that it would misrepresent the experience of Mexican immigrants if I ignored the diverse racialized communities that comprised Los Angeles. Indeed, to be Mexican in Los Angeles meant to be just one part of a multi-ethno-racial setting that in no small part shaped how people understood the social, cultural, racial, and political meaning of “Mexican” in Los Angeles.

Reading about the nineteenth-century medical racialization of Mexicans convinced me that, in order to understand how the category of “Mexican” was shaped, I needed to look at other racialized groups. Even though, at the time, mine was a mainly twentieth-century study, I decided to follow the lead of Albert Camarillo’s precedent-setting *Chicanos in a Changing Society* to see if the experiences of Mexicans in the nineteenth century shaped their successors’ experiences in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> Yet Mexicans were eerily absent from the nineteenth-century science-based historical records, as if, in keeping with the precepts of Manifest Destiny, they had all dutifully died off. The Mexican population that continued to live in the United States after annexation did not come to the attention of scientists and health officials as other groups did.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the city health officer’s inaugural report in 1879 revealed that it was Chinese residents, not Mexicans, who were imagined as the greatest threat to the city’s well-being. In that first report, Health Officer Dr. Walter Lindley assured his listeners that Los Angeles had

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12. George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (New York, 1993), 179.

13. Camarillo, *Chicanos in a Changing Society*.

14. Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

“everything that God could give” a city.<sup>15</sup> Among the city’s many virtues, the doctor emphasized “the health giving sun [present] almost every day in the year[,] . . . the ocean breeze just properly tempered by hills and orange groves[,] . . . pure water pouring down from a mountain stream[,] [and] . . . the most equable temperature in the civilized world.”<sup>16</sup> In stressing the importance of improving sanitary conditions in Los Angeles, he called for the construction of a municipal sewer system and appealed to the city council to eradicate Chinatown, “that rotten spot [that pollutes] the air we breathe and poisons the water we drink.”<sup>17</sup> These comments mark the beginning of what became a long tradition among city health officials of tracing any blemish on the pristine image of Los Angeles—including all forms of disease and any manner of disorder—to the city’s marginalized communities, not solely Mexicans.

By the 1910s, with the increase of Mexican immigration, Mexicans increasingly captured the attention of health officials.<sup>18</sup> In the intervening years, between the United States-Mexico War and this new wave of immigration from Mexico, other immigrant groups had shaped the racial terrain on which Mexican immigrants would now be understood. They followed in the footsteps of the Chinese, who had immigrated in the mid- to late nineteenth century, and then the Japanese, who came as laborers after Chinese immigration was severely restricted following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Beginning in 1907, the Gentlemen’s Agreement curtailed Japanese immigration by allowing only non-laborers, workers already living in the United States, and their family members to immigrate. Decades before the influx of Mexicans, Los Angeles officials had used racial stereotypes and negative representations of Asian groups to guide their decisions regarding the distribution of city resources, including where they built (or failed to build) important infrastructure, such as water and sewer systems, and which people they let live and work in certain areas of the city. In

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15. Walter Lindley was the first head of the city’s public health department. He delivered the inaugural Los Angeles City Annual Health Officer’s Report on November 13, 1879. Los Angeles City Archives. The quote is from p. 1 of the report.

16. *Ibid.*, 3.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Unfortunately, the experiences of Mexican youth can also be found in the state of California’s sterilization records. See Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California’s Juvenile Justice System* (Berkeley, 2012).

short, by the early twentieth century, Mexicans became targets of the personal racism once directed at Asians and bore the burden of the structural racism embedded in the city.

My first book, *Fit to be Citizens?*, focused primarily on Mexicans, although I examined their connections to the experiences of the city's Asian residents, demonstrating how immigrants were racialized in relation to one another, which often resulted in the institutionalization of a racial hierarchy. How health officials came to view and treat Mexicans was directly tied to these officials' assumptions about and experiences with Asian residents in Los Angeles. Indeed, from 1869 until 1920, the city health departments used only two racial categories: Chinese and the rest of the population.<sup>19</sup> "Mexican" was a category constructed from what it was not: not white, not Chinese, not Japanese. A relational examination of all four groups clarifies how racialization projects can differ in their intent, application, and impact, depending on the specific group targeted.<sup>20</sup>

### Subjects vs. questions

By now you might be thinking, "That all sounds interesting but how would I go about thinking about race relationally?" A good way to start is to consider a few methodological principles and become acquainted with some model studies. It is important to recall a basic principle for doing research: How you define your research *subject* shapes your research *process and questions*. Thus, when it comes choosing your research subject, I advocate using units of analysis or organizing principles other than solely racial categories. If we choose to question the history of Chicana/os and, for example, their relationship to a specific institution (e.g., the public school system, the Catholic Church, or the police), we are likely to turn to well-known and heavily used sources. This in turn may lead us down only previously blazed trails.

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19. After 1920 the city health department expanded its categories to include Mexican, Japanese, and Negro; the county health department used white, Mexican, Japanese, and other to keep track of the populations under its jurisdiction.

20. In their highly influential study, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racialization as a "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (quote on p. 56). They emphasize the historically specific and socially constructed nature of racial categories by drawing attention to "*projects* in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (quote on pp. 55–56, emphasis in original).

Scholars of Chicana/o history know the “usual suspects” archives: for example, the Ernesto Galarza Papers at Stanford, the Carey McWilliams Papers at UCLA, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Records at Laguna Niguel, California, and Washington, D.C., and the Mexican Consulate records in Mexico City. There are very good reasons for using these archives, but doing so primarily because they are repositories of records on Chicana/os can be intellectually limiting. I almost fell victim to this hidden danger when I received a fellowship at the Huntington Library while researching my dissertation topic.

*Subjects or questions.* At the Huntington, I was consistently introduced as doing Chicana/o history and thus was repeatedly directed to the John Anson Ford Papers, a collection routinely mined by scholars of Chicana/o history because of Ford’s involvement with racialized communities in Los Angeles. It is a rich collection, but it contains relatively little that was relevant to my research *question* (how does public health inform our ideas about race); instead, there was a great deal of information about my research *subject*. Conversely, when I contacted the Los Angeles Department of Public Health, different staff members forewarned me that the department did not have many materials on Mexicans. Once I started digging into their records, however, I found they held a lot more of interest than my contacts realized. The staff’s lack of awareness reflected the fact that no one before me had used the department records for this purpose. Moreover, while the records did not include as many materials on my research *subject* as some of the well-known archives in Chicana/o history, they did contain a lot on my research *question*.

This example underscores the importance of finding more creative ways to locate new sources and of being tenacious when mining all sources. Particularly for our first major project, most of us tend to locate potentially relevant archives by following leads found in footnotes. If we are exclusively or mainly doing and reading Chicana/o history, we will follow the same leads and keep reproducing the same types of histories. We actually need to be reading LGBT, Native American, African American, and Asian American histories alongside Chicana/o history. We need to attend conference panels even if—no, *especially* if—we are not in these fields. If race is the only organizing principle in our research, we will miss the way other factors may affect the topic we are interested in. If we follow strategies that expand our horizons and take us into new areas, we

might find new information about the subject of our studies in unexpected places: African Americans' experiences are described in INS records, and histories of Native Americans in Japanese internment records, to cite just two real examples.<sup>21</sup>

*Reconsidering the unit of analysis.* Another way to approach the question of thinking about race relationally is to consider using an organizing principle other than race. Let's take space as a model and Boyle Heights, an East Los Angeles neighborhood, as an example.<sup>22</sup> Boyle Heights is known for having been a very diverse community from the early 1900s through the 1950s, after which it gradually became a predominantly Mexican neighborhood. During the first half of the twentieth century, other areas of Los Angeles deliberately buttressed the walls of segregation around their communities by writing deed restrictions into housing developments and permitting only segregated access to public facilities such as swimming pools. By contrast, at the railway station marking the entrance to their neighborhood, Boyle Heights officials hung a banner that read, "Eastside Greeting: We Welcome All."<sup>23</sup>

Historian George J. Sánchez's treatment of Boyle Heights showed us some of the advantages of a more expansive approach to race. By pulling the lens back and studying this neighborhood, rather than solely Mexicans, he was able to get at a host of their interactions and dynamics with other groups and institutions. Sánchez has long been attracted to this Los Angeles community. He examined the area in his multi-prize-winning first book, *Becoming Mexican American* (1993); he served as a consultant for the Japanese American National Museum's exhibition "Boyle Heights: Power of Place," mounted in 2002; and he has chosen Boyle Heights as the

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21. On the crossed paths of Native Americans and interned Japanese, see Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring Outside Ethnic Lines, 1925–1955* (Berkeley, 2008), 129–136. In my research using the Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service records, I have come across references to how best to racially categorize African Americans for naturalization purposes, to job competition between African Americans and Mexicans, and to lynching. See Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, Archives I, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

22. Another model study is Albert Camarillo, "Black and Brown in Compton: Demographic Change, Suburban Decline, and Intergroup Relations in a South Central Los Angeles Community, 1950–2000," in Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson, eds., *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States* (New York, 2004).

23. [www.janm.org/exhibits/bh/exhibition/exhibition.htm](http://www.janm.org/exhibits/bh/exhibition/exhibition.htm), accessed on July 16, 2011.

subject of his forthcoming book.<sup>24</sup> Sánchez is especially interested in how issues of diversity like those evident in Boyle Heights complicate models of Americanization and assimilation. His work also reminds us that, even when we focus on the local level, we still need to consider the impact of larger structural and institutional factors: For instance, in 1939 the Federal Housing Administration officially declared the celebrated diversity of Boyle Heights as “literally honeycombed with diverse and subversive racial elements,” which impeded funding to the area and had long-term implications for its development.<sup>25</sup>

*Collaboration.* A different example of Sánchez’s approach to looking at race relationally is evident in a 1994 article on Boyle Heights that he co-authored with Sarah Deutsch and Gary Okihiro.<sup>26</sup> Here we learn another valuable lesson about how to do relational work—collaborate! In this simultaneously accessible and insightful piece, the three authors, each drawing on distinct areas of specialization, worked together to portray this diverse neighborhood without resorting either to a simplistic melting-pot paradigm or a celebration of harmonious multiculturalism. Instead, in their examination of this community comprised of Mexicans, Jews, Japanese, and others, Deutsch, Sánchez, and Okihiro showed how the lived experience of one group dramatically affected the experience of others. Seventeen years after first reading this piece, I am still struck by these scholars’ treatment of Japanese internment and its effects on Boyle Heights Japanese and non-Japanese residents alike. The local high school lost one-third of its senior class due to internment. An English teacher at the school began a round-robin letter-writing campaign to encourage her students to write to their fellow classmates interned in the camps. In another notable case, a Mexican teenager

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24. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*; George J. Sánchez, *Bridging Borders, Remaking Community: Racial Interaction in Boyle Heights, California in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, forthcoming); Sánchez, “Disposable People, Expendable Neighborhoods,” in William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds., *A Companion to Los Angeles* (Chichester, U.K., 2010); Sánchez, “‘What’s Good for Boyle Heights Is Good for the Jews’: Creating Multiracialism on the Eastside during the 1950s,” *American Quarterly*, 56 (2004), 633–661.

25. Quoted in George Lipsitz, “The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the ‘White’ Problem in American Studies,” *American Quarterly*, 47 (1995), 373.

26. Sarah Deutsch, George J. Sánchez, and Gary Y. Okihiro, “Contemporary Peoples/Contested Places,” in Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor, and Martha A. Sandweiss, eds., *The Oxford History of the American West* (New York, 1994).

went to live in the camps to demonstrate solidarity with his friends. These stories add a different experience to the prevailing ones of racism directed against the Japanese in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Perhaps the difference here is that these folks lived in the same neighborhood, went to the same schools, shared favorite family foods, and thus were able to form ties more readily in the face of adversity.<sup>27</sup> Examples such as these are startling reminders that internment had profound reverberations beyond the Japanese community. In this sense, a relational study of race provides an impetus for ceasing to consider the experiences of specific groups the province of individual area studies, such as Asian American studies, and instead centering them squarely in U.S. history where they belong.

Being more creative in defining research questions is also likely to make us more open to and interested in potentially valuable new sources. For instance, life histories (e.g., oral histories, autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and journals) can provide ways to get at intersectionality.<sup>28</sup> Carey McWilliams, noted activist, journalist, and attorney, was well positioned, both in terms of his politics and his professions, to do relational work. His own life history offers a rich example of how an individual's biography can provide a window into relational notions of race. From 1939 to 1942, he served as the director of California's Division of Immigration and Housing, which oversaw the living conditions of migrant laborers. In this capacity, he criss-crossed the state, visiting farms and interviewing Mexican, Filipino, Japanese, and many other workers of various nationalities. His criticisms of then-Governor Earl Warren led the governor to dismiss McWilliams in 1942. Returning to his legal practice, McWilliams worked on some of the most pressing civil rights cases of the time, including serving as head of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee. Beginning in 1953, he took the helm at *The Nation*; for the next twenty years, he published many dozens of articles and editorials, often on issues of social justice.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, throughout his career,

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27. The oral interviews from the Japanese American National Museum's exhibition *Boyle Heights: Power of Place* suggest as much about solidarity in the neighborhood.

28. An innovative example of using life histories to discuss relational notions of race employs biographies of two women who fought for similar issues, but for whom no evidence exists of a friendship or alliance. Gaye Theresa Johnson, "Constellations of Struggle: Luisa Moreno, Charlotta Bass, and the Legacy for Ethnic Studies," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 33 (Spring 2008), 155–172.

29. Carey McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York, 1979).



McWilliams wrote monographs centered on various racialized groups: *Prejudice: Japanese-Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (1944); *Brothers under the Skin* (1943); and *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America*. His book *North from Mexico* (1949) is often credited as the first book-length study of Mexican American history.<sup>30</sup>

In all of these writings, McWilliams gave detailed accounts of each group's unique history in the United States and pointed out their shared struggles. But he also had an eye for seeing how the experiences of one group affected others, even when separated by space and time. He argued, for instance, that the "modes of aggression tried against Indians and blacks easily transferred to the Chinese" and that the immigration policies and restrictions first directed at Chinese were then directed at "brown" immigrants.<sup>31</sup> McWilliams's works are the first extended U.S. histories to center relational notions of race. Despite these especially fertile conditions, no one has yet used McWilliams to write a substantial study to shed light on relational aspects of race in California during and after World War II, underscoring the fact that there is still much work to be done in looking at race relationally.

*Reconsidering what we already know.* Of course, when thinking about race relationally, we do not always need to re-invent the wheel or mine new sources. We can take well-known historic moments and look at them in relationship to one another. We can search for areas of overlap, ask what the relationship of one event is to the other(s), and create a sort of timeline "mash up." Consider, for example, two momentous events in Chicana/o history: the August 1942 Sleepy Lagoon murder and subsequent events (including the trial and its appeal), and the Zoot Suit Riots that occurred in June 1943. The first was an altercation that broke out at a party and resulted in the death of a twenty-two-year-old, José Díaz. His body was found in a Los Angeles reservoir known as the Sleepy Lagoon. Consequently, police rounded up hundreds of Mexican youth and arrested twenty-two, all of whom were tried for murder. Everyone—the media, police, prosecution, and judge—blatantly discriminated against the young

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30. Carey McWilliams, *Brothers under the Skin* (Boston, 1944); McWilliams, *Prejudice: Japanese-Americans: Symbol of Racial Intolerance* (Boston, 1944); McWilliams, *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Boston, 1948); McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Hamden, Conn., 1969); McWilliams, updated by Matt S. Meier, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-speaking People of the United States* (New York, 1990).

31. McWilliams, *Brothers under the Skin*, 90, 96.



Mexican defendants. This racism provoked a backlash that resulted in widespread public support from both inside and outside the Mexican American community. A multiethnic coalition, the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, provided support and raised funds for the defense of the Mexican youth. In the second case, the Zoot Suit Riots, long-standing tensions between Mexican youth known as “Zoot Suiters” (because of the outfits they wore) and military servicemen erupted into a week-long race riot in Los Angeles. Mobs of white servicemen descended on East Los Angeles, aiming to attack Zoot Suiters and literally strip them of their zoot suits, which the military men viewed as un-American and unpatriotic. While the majority of Zoot Suiters were Chicano, African American and Filipino Zoot Suiters also were attacked.

A multiracial coalition of important leaders and supporters of the Chicana/o youth in the first case, aware that the racism directed at the defendants did not occur in isolation, strove to bring to the public’s attention the systematic discrimination occurring at the time. In their model studies of relational notions of race, historians Luis Alvarez and Scott Kurashige detail such coalitions. They also document the extent to which African American community members saw their fates as linked with those of Chicana/os, pointing to the outpouring of support by African Americans for the Sleepy Lagoon defendants.<sup>32</sup> I also found this was the case in my research into the coverage of the case. One African American newspaper, the *Los Angeles Tribune*, compared the treatment of the young men in the Sleepy Lagoon case to that of nine African American youth falsely accused of rape in Scottsboro, Alabama, in 1931. The paper referred to the Chicano youth as the “Mexican Scottsboro boys.”<sup>33</sup> In an opinion piece featured in the *Tribune*, columnist Alyce Keys wrote, “You don’t have to be a quiz kid to figure out why these boys were made the victims of such a travesty on [*sic*] American justice. Remember our Scottsboro case. It is the same pattern of fascist racism.”<sup>34</sup>

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32. Luis Alvarez, “From Zoot Suits to Hip Hop: Towards a Relational Chicana/o Studies,” *Latino Studies*, 5 (2007), 53–75; Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley, 2008); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Multiethnic Los Angeles* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

33. “Mexican Scottsboro Boys,” *Los Angeles Tribune*, Dec. 27, 1943.

34. Alyce Keys, “Key Notes,” in *ibid.*, Dec. 6, 1943.

In a timeline of the Sleepy Lagoon affair, Alice McGrath, an activist and executive secretary of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, listed events related to Chicana/os during this period, but she also reminded her audience that in April, just a couple of months prior to these landmark events, Japanese and Japanese Americans were relocated to interment camps.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Carey McWilliams commented, “it was a foregone conclusion that Mexicans would be substituted as the major scapegoat group once the Japanese were removed.”<sup>36</sup> Juxtaposing these events forces us to question what message this mass containment, displacement, and racialization of both Mexican and Japanese residents—actions that took place just months apart—was meant to convey. It reminds us that both groups were depicted as enemies of the state during World War II.

In addition to looking at important historical moments in relation to one another, we need also to revisit landmark events in Chicana/o history to see if using our relational notions of race yields a different understanding of these events. One good candidate for this kind of reassessment is the 1946 school segregation court case, *Méndez v. Westminster School District*. This case, fought at the state level and appealed at the federal level, challenged the practice of barring Mexican children from attending “white” schools. It argued that Mexicans were being denied equal protection under the law. Scholarly research suggests this largely forgotten case was actually an important precursor to the well-known 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and were therefore unconstitutional.<sup>37</sup> Thurgood Marshall, who submitted a brief on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in support of

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35. Alice Greenfield McGrath, “Sleepy Lagoon Case-Chronology,” 1983, Department of Special Collections, UCLA, [www.library.ucla.edu/special/scweb](http://www.library.ucla.edu/special/scweb), accessed July 29, 2011.

36. McWilliams with Meier, *North from Mexico*, 206, cited in Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 150.

37. *A Family Changes History: Méndez v. Westminster: Fiftieth Anniversary, 1947–1997* (Irvine, Calif., 1998); Philippa Strum, *Mendez v. Westminster: School Desegregation and Mexican-American Rights* (Lawrence, Kans., 2010); Vicki L. Ruiz, “‘We Always Tell Our Children They are American’: *Méndez v. Westminster* and the California Road to *Brown*,” *College Board Review*, 200 (Fall 2003), 21–27. Toni Robinson and Greg Robinson, “The Limits of Interracial Coalitions: *Méndez v. Westminster* Reexamined,” in Nicholas De Genova, ed., *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (Durham, N.C., 2006).

the plaintiffs, went on to argue *Brown v. Board of Education* before the Supreme Court just eight years later. As the NAACP's lead counsel, Marshall cited *Méndez* as a precedent during the *Brown* case. Establishing the links between these two cases helps bring attention to how segregation goes beyond black-white issues and encourages us to think about the shared interests between black and brown communities.<sup>38</sup>

*Méndez v. Westminster School District* is significant as a precursor to *Brown*, but my research suggests that it is also a good choice to revisit from a relational perspective. Let's take a look at the different ways in which the case makes connections with other racialized groups. Gonzalo and Felicitas Méndez (in conjunction with four other families) sued when their children were denied admission to a school in their local school district of Westminster. But the Méndez family was living in Westminster only because they had taken advantage of an opportunity to lease and run a farm there when its owners, the Munemitsus, were relocated to a Japanese internment camp.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, as the farm overseer, Méndez supervised a crew that included men contracted under the Bracero Program, a guest worker arrangement brokered between the U.S. and Mexican governments. From 1942 to 1964, the Bracero Program brought 4 million Mexican men to the United States to work in agriculture and other industries, such as railroads, initially as a way to fill World War II-induced labor shortages. While braceros came to the United States in search of opportunity, many complained of substandard room and board provisions and health care, as well as problems collecting their wages. In contrast, Méndez and the four other families involved in the lawsuit stressed their American identity, both legally and culturally. They emphasized their rights as American citizens to have access to public schools rather than questioning the validity of school district segregation practices. Comparing the status position of Méndez and the men in the Bracero Program reminds us of the multiple stratifications within Mexican communities along the lines of class, skin color, generation, citizenship status, and English language acquisition.

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38. Luis Alvarez and Daniel Widener, "A History of Black and Brown: Chicana/o-African-American Cultural and Political Relations," *Azilán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 33 (Spring 2008), 147.

39. Strum, *Mendez v. Westminster*, 36.

The *Méndez* case is rightly touted as a civil rights victory, but the circumstances surrounding the case get at the histories of other groups that did not fare as well. The Méndez family's opportunities were made possible by the foreclosure of opportunities for other groups, including Mexican nationals as well as Japanese landowners. This is not meant as a judgment on the Méndez family's personal choices. Rather, it demonstrates how viewing the various groups in relationship to one another throws into relief the unevenness of their racialized experiences.

The Méndez case drew the attention of groups not directly affected by it but nevertheless aware that the Fourteenth Amendment issues at stake in the case were linked to their lives and to those of all racialized groups. These groups submitted *amici curiae* ("friends of the court") briefs in support of the plaintiffs.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the NAACP, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), and the American Jewish Congress (AJC) all submitted briefs in support of Méndez. The JACL's decision to lend support seems significant, since it could be interpreted as a critique of the U.S. justice system, just a year after the end of World War II. As they returned to the West Coast from internment camps, Japanese and Japanese Americans were often viewed with suspicion and were sometimes victims of hate crimes. In light of this, the JACL attempted to portray Nikkei as loyal Americans; they stressed the wartime patriotism of the group as a whole by drawing attention to the U.S. military veterans in their community who had fought to defend the United States during the war.<sup>41</sup> In their brief, the AJC explicitly explained how the interests of Jewish Americans were intertwined with those of the Mexican American community: "We believe, indeed, that the Jewish interests are inseparable from those of justice and that Jewish interests are threatened whenever persecution, discrimination, or humiliation is inflicted upon any human being because of his race, creed, color, language, or ancestry."<sup>42</sup> The AJC contended that the segregation of Mexicans into separate schools amounted to the creation "of a legally sanctioned

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40. *A Family Changes History*, 8.

41. Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race*, 190–195.

42. "Brief for the American Jewish Congress as *Amicus Curiae*" in U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, *Westminster School District of Orange Country, et al. vs. Gonzalo Méndez*, filed Oct. 28, 1946, p. 1.

political inequality.”<sup>43</sup> In short, the groups that submitted friend of the court briefs viewed segregation as a violation of democratic principles, an act that affected them all, and not just as a transgression against a single racialized group.

One of the ways the *Méndez* plaintiffs established their children as worthy candidates for non-segregated schools was by presenting them as able-bodied. In their petition, they argued that “All petitioners are taxpayers of good moral habits, not suffering from disability, infectious disease, and are qualified to be admitted to the use of the schools and facilities, within their respective districts and systems.”<sup>44</sup> On the one hand, there existed a real and pressing need for the plaintiffs to pursue this line of argument. Since the mid-1800s, with the rise of Manifest Destiny as a discourse and ideology, Mexicans and Indians had been portrayed as biological inferiors who would eventually die off. This cultural representation followed them through the twentieth century. In the 1910s and 1920s, Mexican immigrants were viewed as such a danger that the U.S. Public Health Service deloused Mexicans who crossed at the U.S.-Mexican border and bathed them in kerosene to ensure that they would not bring disease into the United States.<sup>45</sup> From the 1920s to the early 1940s, notions of race, biology, and crime worked to pathologize Mexican and black young men of color as “deviant” with institutionalization and forced sterilization seen as the solution.<sup>46</sup> During the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943, Los Angeles Sheriff Edward Ayres laid responsibility for the violence on “the inborn characteristics” of “the Mexican element,” which had a “desire to use a knife or some [other] lethal weapon.”<sup>47</sup> Three years later, the school district superintendent in the *Méndez* case made the argument that Mexicans needed to be

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43. *Ibid.*, 7. For more on Jewish and Mexican alliances in Los Angeles during this period, see Shana Bernstein, *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (New York, 2010).

44. *Westminster School District of Orange County et al. v. Méndez et al.*, No. 11310, U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit 161 F.2d 774; 1947 U.S. App. Lexis 2835, April 14, 1947, p. 2.

45. Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley, 2005), chap. 2.

46. Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency*.

47. “Statistics: The Nature of the Mexican American Criminal,” Sheriff Edward Duran Ayres, Foreign Relations Bureau, Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee Records, Department of Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles, available through [www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb6m3nb79m/?brand=oac4](http://www.oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/hb6m3nb79m/?brand=oac4), accessed Oct. 25, 2011.

segregated because they had “lice, impetigo, [and] generally dirty hands, face, neck, and ears” and they did not have the “mental ability of the white children.”<sup>48</sup> While this reference to disability is brief, it is significant in that Mexican American plaintiffs meant to distance themselves from the disabled in order to better position themselves. Assessments of biological deficiency were not fundamentally equivalent to disability, but Mexicans’ declarations of able-bodiedness contested racial inequalities by establishing themselves as part of the norm versus questioning its parameters.<sup>49</sup>

### What’s the payoff?

In this article, I have argued that we should examine Chicana/os in relation to other racialized groups in order to develop a fuller understanding of how racial categories are formed and operate. Thinking about race relationally will continue to be of importance in the future not just for trends in the scholarship but for the world we live in. Indeed, those of us who study history often do so to understand the relationship between racial representations and structural forces, power and inequality, and how these relationships change over time in order to understand how to bring about change in our present.

A very cogent, contemporary example of how race operates relationally was inspired by the activism seen in response to the “Compton Cookout” party organized by some University of California, San Diego (UCSD) students in February 2010. Held during Black History Month, the party boasted a “ghetto theme” and perpetuated racist stereotypes through actions such as claiming that chicken, watermelon, and malt liquor would be served at the party. Furthermore, the invitation encouraged women attending the party to come dressed as “ghetto chicks.” Critics protested the degradation and homogenization of African Americans, compounded by class and misogynist stereotyping. The protests were met by more

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48. *Méndez et al. v. Westminster School District of Orange County*, Petitioners’ opening brief, Sept. 20, 1945, pp. 20, 6.

49. For more on the links between race and disability, see Natalia Molina, “Medicalizing the Mexican: Immigration, Race, and Disability in the Early-Twentieth-Century United States,” *Radical History Review*, issue 94 (2006), 22–37. For an excellent essay on how disability discourses help structure inequalities, see Douglas Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,” in Paul Longmore and Lauri Umansky, eds., *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York, 2001), 33–57.

virulent actions, most notably the hanging of a noose, historically a symbol of the violence directed at blacks through lynchings, on the campus library.<sup>50</sup>

In response to such actions, undergraduate students in the Black Student Union (BSU) spearheaded demands that university administrators address the immediate incidents and also take steps to change the campus climate to avoid such events in the future. The BSU received support from a wide range of allies, including, but not limited to, the Chicana/o student group, MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlán), Asian Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders at UCSD, the Medicine Diversity Coalitions, the Anthropology Graduate Student Coalition, Community Members and Scripps Oceanography Institute, the Critical Gender studies program, and the departments of literature, ethnic studies, history, and music. Such support is reminiscent of the broad cross-racial coalitions discussed earlier in this article, such as in support of *Méndez*. These groups offered support through walking out, sitting in, teaching out, meeting with administrators, holding public forums, giving public speeches, and circulating statements of support. In addition, a host of university community members, including staff, faculty, janitors, graduate students, and undergraduates, showed up at the many events and marches to show their support. They connected their own struggles as Jews, Middle Easterners, Palestinians, gays, lesbians, transsexuals, and transgender individuals, first-generation college students, members of racialized groups, and the disabled to those of the African American students. The strong response of non-African Americans to this purportedly African American issue demonstrates the ways in which people recognize power struggles and can connect their own experiences as a non-dominant disenfranchised group in ways that question larger structures of power.

The protests over the “Compton Cookout” coincided with organized protests for a seemingly unrelated issue—the continued fee raises at the University of California, system-wide.<sup>51</sup> Dubbed as

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50. My discussion of these events is drawn from my own participation in the protests, as well as consulting the resources at the UCSD Black Student Union’s website, online at [blackstudentunion.ucsd.edu/](http://blackstudentunion.ucsd.edu/) and [stopracismucsd.wordpress.com/](http://stopracismucsd.wordpress.com/), accessed Dec. 12, 2011. See also *Another University Is Possible* (published by University Readers at UCSD, 2010); available through Amazon.com.

51. [ucsdcoalitionforeducationaljustice.wordpress.com/about/](http://ucsdcoalitionforeducationaljustice.wordpress.com/about/), accessed Dec. 12, 2011.

a “Day of Action,” protesters aimed to bring attention to and contest the skyrocketing fees that, they argued, made public universities inaccessible to working-class and middle-class individuals alike. They drew connections between class and educational barriers, but also racial barriers. They critiqued the public university system for failing to reflect the diverse demographics of the state in terms of its student body, as well as faculty. If tuition continued to soar, they claimed, public education would become even more inaccessible and threaten to exacerbate already existing inequalities. They thus recognized how the lives of marginalized communities are linked across time and space and thereby affect one another, even when they may not appear to do so.<sup>52</sup> It is this ability to see commonalities with people different from us in order to make social change that a relational notion of race approach, above all, seeks to achieve.

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52. I expand on how marginalized communities are connected using my theory of “racial scripts” in Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*.