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# Chinatown: The Semi-Permeable Construction of Space and Time

By Mario Pulido

Often times, when historians look back at a time for research, understanding the space in which that time occurs is significant to the context of the situation of the given space socially and in its geopolitical context. Understanding context gives historians a better perspective on how the people they are studying were and how they behaved or thought. Primary documents are typically the vehicle in which the historian uses to travel to the period they are studying and can often place it down to the most specific details such as what a typical day in the life of that society is like. Many theories around concepts such as race and identity are present in these places during time. In turn, these theories and concepts make the study that much more tedious and sometimes even easy to miss or are overlooked. Often, a primary document such as a newspaper also serves as the perfect arena for proving the grounds of these theories or disproving them.

One such space where a number of social construction theories come into play is the community of Chinatown in San Francisco towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The focus of this analysis will revolve around the year of 1891 in Chinatown. Among the different events happening in Chinatown in 1891, the events around the city of San Francisco as a whole make a great subject to study. The method in which I arrive to San Francisco in 1891 is the newspaper the *San Francisco Bulletin*. In reading the *San Francisco Bulletin*, I place myself in the context of local life in San Francisco and can understand the situation socially and in its geopolitical context. The essence of this paper ties in strongly with the idea that even space, time, and borders are racialized, given the fact that it occurs in Chinese Exclusion Era San Francisco.

The *San Francisco Bulletin* depicts San Francisco in the week of August 3, 1891; as any local newspaper does, first putting the gossip of the locals as well as informing local events. However, the articles are clearly written from the perspective of an era that marginalized and vilified Chinese immigrants where, within a three day span, Chinese citizens/non-citizens were the topic of at least one article each day. Ironically, common events such as world news or local sports were in the norm along with articles that are today considered hateful. For example, a heated baseball game occurred on August 3, 1891, in which part of the article states, “Those who attended yesterday's ball game undoubtedly got the worth of their money. For fourteen innings the Sacramentos and the San Franciscos strove for the mastery, the score at the end of the ninth inning being 9 to 9.”<sup>1</sup> It is interesting that at the same time this game is going on, in the same day, things such as digging a mile down for natural gas makes it in the newspaper.<sup>2</sup> What is more interesting about all of this is that the hierarchy of importance at the time included local events, sports, and news on the status of Chinese immigration and Chinese citizens/non-citizens.

The articles are typically arranged with most of the material being local culture such as travel or events happening in the area. These specific articles are seen with the heading named “Pacific Coast Items.” This section of what is important to the average

citizen of San Francisco includes what happens in terms of local events or travel. For example, some of the excerpts of “Pacific Coast Items” includes, “The Charleston leaves Santa Cruz for San Francisco to-day.”<sup>73</sup> Another writes, “The brewery of E. Schubert at Spanish-town was burned Saturday night.”<sup>74</sup> These kinds of articles are common in normal newspapers that are typically important locally and are the subject of common occurrences even in today's newspapers, which fits the social norm.

Baseball, among other sports, are largely mentioned items in the hierarchy of importance. Given that baseball's nickname is “America's pastime”, this is not surprising and was considered important then as it is now. Another article from August 5, 1891 brings up baseball as a local event when in an article written about it states, “Colonel Thomas Robinson, the alleged manager of the Oakland Base-ball Club and Tip O'Neill, the Captain and real manager, have been doing a little more tinkering with their nine, and while strengthening it in one place, have allowed it to be weakened in another.”<sup>75</sup> This goes to show that typical local news, down to sports lineup changes, were newspaper-worthy alongside the articles of Chinese exclusion and marginalization. Yet again, at least one article per paper issue was about Chinese immigrants. What is interesting about this newspaper and its articles is the fact that updates on Chinese citizens/non-citizens were seen to be just as important as sports and also important enough to make it to the front page three days in a row and even finding their way into multiple articles in one day.

It is apparent that the American attitude towards Chinese immigration is what created a social formation that led to the creation of borders such as the neighborhood of Chinatown in San Francisco. Articles and items like the aforementioned “Base-ball” and “Pacific Coast Items” make it easy to forget that there was a culture of racism that became notorious for the exclusion and marginalization of Chinese immigrants. Laws that become publicized through newspapers enforce this marginalization. The extreme consequence of laws is that they form borders to place the marginalized populations. At the same time, laws also essentially create a way to keep communities within these borders without their permission and are granted consent by the vast majority through discipline of the local newspaper and other public domains or sources that vilified Chinese citizens/non-citizens. The *San Francisco Bulletin* supports this in an article in which it states, “The complaint in each case sets up that Macabe sold a railroad ticket to a Chinese person without having demanded as a preliminary, the production of a certificate of residence provided for under the law.”<sup>76</sup> This is effectively profiling the average citizen due to race. If registration is required and transportation is denied, then as a consequence, populations of Chinese workers who came to find work and a better standard of living were unable to travel. Consequently, the workers were stuck where they lived due to this marginalization and laws that were enforced and made publicized in the local newspaper that entire populations of people read. The newspaper article made sure to villainize Macabe, the Chinese man. Consequently, newspapers enforce the laws that create racial formations such as this by supporting the idea that registration is legal profiling.

If newspapers were sympathetic to racist attitudes or sentiments, the consequences become more serious. Simply put, the argument to be made is that if laws create racial formations and leave communities in one place, place borders upon them, and places difficult social/economic circumstances upon them, it becomes impossible to leave without being white or possessing the assets of being socially white, leaving “white people” to be the only people who could fluidly cross these socially constructed borders in and out as

they please. This creates a semi-permeable border that makes it almost guaranteed the people who were bordered stay bordered, while white people or people who possess social whiteness become the only ones who can cross these socially and legally constructed borders at will. If someone did not appear to be Chinese and appeared what was acceptably white, they could move across the socially constructed border in and out as they please. Those who were socially white, possessed land, and larger amounts of money were also more likely minorities to be able to move through these semi-permeable socially constructed borders. Though it is mainly up to skin color, social whiteness does enhance this idea. The idea that only specific people could go in and out through this socially constructed border is comparable to having a gradient or semi-permeable membrane, and as compared with the process of osmosis, where only specific particles could cross the gradient due to a concentration of other particles as needed at will. For example, the gradient would allow the specific particles, or people who were considered white, to cross at will as needed for reasons such a business, interests, or law. The non-specific particles, are forced behind the gradient or in this case, border. It is difficult to cross and go against the grain for those entrapped inside the gradient as opposed to the specific particles which are comparable to those who were white and possessed the privileges of social whiteness, who could go to or away from the concentration that they created at will with ease because of their status. This relates to Chinatown because it is a community with artificial borders that was socially constructed. This successfully supports the idea that the purpose of Chinatown was to keep Chinese citizens inside and away from the white communities of San Francisco.

Out of the many articles from the week of August 3, 1891, none quite appealed to this idea of semi-permeable borders more than an article entitled, “Unearthing Chinese Frauds.” This article was striking because it plays into the idea that the typically powerful and dominant white population, specifically revenue collectors, who were most likely white or socially white could enter Chinatown or a bordered area as they wished and left as they wished. This is seen when the article writes, “Under the directions of Revenue Collector Quinn, a thorough search is being made of Chinatown by the several deputies connected with the Internal Revenue Department, for the purpose of unearthing the frauds practiced by the Chinese in the manufacture of cigars, cigarettes and opium. During the past month many seizures have been made and a number of opium factories demolished, but the deputy inspectors state that there is still considerable under-hand work going on.”<sup>77</sup> Not to condone opium production, but this pertains to the idea of the semi-permeable border because it shows that in the border or on either side of the border, those who possessed social whiteness tended to have the power or position socially to cross the border into the community and do as they pleased, including the seizure of revenue. People who possess positions like that are typically socially white or pass for being a white citizen. What makes this pertain more to the idea of the semi-permeable border is that even if such accusations of the white population were true by the community in Chinatown, the Chinese could do nothing because laws restricted them to Chinatown to create their own culture and stay behind the borders as the white population could watch or enter and leave as they pleased. Chinese citizens/non-citizens behind this construct were unable to move to where the white communities were because they had been marginalized and kept there. As a consequence, articles like this vilified and further encouraged the marginalization of the Chinatown community. This led to an outside attitude towards those living in the

community of Chinatown to be more likely to enforce a border culture upon either side. This attitude led to the enforcement of stricter laws against the Chinatown community, which makes it a political construct just as much as it is a social construct.

One of the contributions to this attitude was a strong sense of a predominant white identity across the United States, so San Francisco was no exception. Any race or ethnicity that was not considered white was typically marginalized, which includes the community within Chinatown of Chinese citizens/non-citizens. George Lipsitz makes a point that supports this when he writes, “Anti-Asian sentiment in the United States depends upon its necessary correlative- the assumption that true cultural franchise and full citizenship requires a white identity. This violence against Asian Americans stems from the kinds of whiteness created within U.S. Culture and mobilized in the nation's political, economic, and social life.”<sup>8</sup> This attitude created an atmosphere that led to violence and the creation of political and social borders that placed Chinese citizens/non-citizens in places away from those who did not possess social whiteness or were not of the same skin color as those who were acceptably white. Because the population of the community in Chinatown were not white, the predominant white community attacked Chinese citizens/non-citizens from every angle, socially and politically. The article “Unearthing Chinese Frauds” contains every essence of the points that are being made.

Lipsitz also mentions Chinatown when it comes to the formations and laws to enforce segregation of Chinese citizens/non-citizens. This plays into the idea of space and time also being racialized by borders created to put Chinese citizens/non-citizens in places where those who were considered white were not. Lipsitz mentions this when he writes, “In 1890, San Francisco's Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance mandating the removal of Chinese Americans from neighborhoods close to downtown and ripe for redevelopment. The law ordered Chinese residents to resettle in isolated industrial areas of the city filled with waste dumps and other environmental hazards.”<sup>9</sup> This supports the idea that space in 1890s San Francisco was even racialized. San Francisco racialized places with good or bad living conditions, giving the favorable places to those who were white and giving the poor areas to Chinese citizens/non-citizens, then bordering them.

This ties into a final idea presented by Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Their idea calls places such as Chinatown and other segregated or bordered areas that distinguish race “racial formations.” Their lens is interesting because it explains the creation of these borders which have become popular topics of debate because of the way they interact with people on either side of them. Omi and Winant write, “We use the term *racial formations* to refer to the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings.”<sup>10</sup> This supports the idea that the construction of Chinatown was a racial formation. In turn, Chinatown became marginalized and a place for the “Other” where Chinese citizens could be vilified and attacked socially and politically like mentioned in the “Unearthing Chinese Frauds” article. This formation also gave those who were white or socially white the mobility to go in and out of the border as they pleased without risking their whiteness. The white community could never stay in places where the population they marginalized stayed because it was unfathomable at the time; they only passed in and out as they needed, such as ensuring law enforcement. This also gave them more reason to border and marginalize such populations to make sure the marginalized population stayed in so there was no mixture. Omi and Winant also bring this up when they write, “White is

seen as a 'pure' category. Any racial intermixture makes one 'nonwhite.'"<sup>11</sup> Anyone who was not white jeopardized the well-being of the "pure" category, which led to the displacement then bordering that became Chinatown. This attitude was present throughout the newspaper, which could be seen just in the articles that were in it.

A simple newspaper such as the *San Francisco Bulletin* could contain things that would be considered harmless today such as sports and other local events, and at the same time, house things that are currently the subject of many debates in the study of comparative race and ethnicity. It indeed was a place that serves as the grounds for proving or disproving social theories such as racial formations and border culture. The same place where the Sacramentos and the San Franciscos played baseball was also the same place where Chinese immigrants, citizens, and non-citizens were attacked socially and politically and became the perfect example for ideas like racial formations or semi-permeable borders. This analysis would not be possible without the different lenses that San Francisco on August 4, 1891 could be seen through in which George Lipsitz, Michael Omi, and Howard Winant present.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Base-Ball," *San Francisco Bulletin*, August 3, 1891.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Base-ball," *San Francisco Bulletin*, August 5, 1891.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> "Unearthing Chinese Frauds," *San Francisco Bulletin*, August 4, 1891.

<sup>8</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 72.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 14.