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Anti-Japanese Sentiment, International Diplomacy, and the Texas Alien Land Law of 1921

By BRENT M. S. CAMPNEY

THE JAPANESE ‘INVASION’ OF TEXAS APPEARS TO BE IN FULL SWING,” reported a correspondent from the lower Rio Grande Valley (hereinafter, the Valley) on January 7, 1921. The writer drew this conclusion from the arrival a day earlier of two Japanese families who had been met at the train station in the South Texas town of Harlingen by a mob who warned the immigrants not to settle on the land that they had already purchased in the vicinity. The alleged invasion continued with the arrival of B. R. Kato, “another Japanese colonist from California, [who] reached Brownsville today.” As Kato alighted from the train, an antagonistic crowd informed him “that public sentiment made it impossible for Japanese to colonize here and that trouble was probable if the attempt was made.” Amid rumors that other Japanese immigrants were en route, local white residents cautioned against such efforts; the reporter predicted that the “Rio Grande district is apt to prove a hornet’s nest for the Japanese, because the [white] natives of this region, which retains many aspects of the old frontier, are more inclined to take ‘direct action’ than the [white] people of California, where the dispute over the Japanese land holdings has been largely confined to the legislature and the courts.”¹

This article explores the responses of white citizens of Cameron and Hidalgo Counties to the so-called Japanese invasion between October 1920 and January 1921, including threats of mob violence, the arousal of public opinion, and the elevation and expansion of anti-Japanese sentiment. Second, it examines the stereotypes of the Japanese people

¹ “Start Invasion of Texas,” *Kansas City (Mo.) Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1. Much of the primary research for this study can be found in the Brent Campney Collection, which focuses on race relations in South Texas, held at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Special Collections and Archives, Edinburg Campus (finding aid available at <https://archives.lib.utrgv.edu/repositories/2/resources/323>). The author thanks David C. Atkinson, Robert Hoppens, Shannon Pensa, and Charles Waite for their contributions to this work. He also thanks the Office of Global Engagement at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley for a grant to complete this research.

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promoted by white Texans to justify these responses. Third, it compares and contrasts the tepid responses of the anti-Japanese forces with those of the mobs who had slaughtered ethnic Mexicans there in a 1915 massacre, and it ties these different responses to the international power, prestige, and diplomatic leverage of the countries from which the victims originated. Fourth, the study demonstrates how white people in the Valley, in the state capital of Austin, and across Texas not only eliminated the perceived threat posed by the Japanese immigrants through the passage of an alien land law barring them from landownership but also stoked similar fears of a Japanese invasion among white residents of neighboring states and prompted comparable responses. Finally, it speculates on the implications of the findings for the historiography. To meet these objectives, the study relies on a number of sources but especially on newspapers published nationally, regionally, and locally.

With its focus on Japanese immigration into the Valley after World War I, this article provides an antidote to two scholarly trends. First, it challenges a bias toward the study of ethnic Japanese experiences in the U.S. Far West (particularly along the West Coast), a characteristic of Asian American historiography generally. Instead, this study addresses Japanese experiences in South Texas and orients the story, as did some contemporaries, toward the South and particularly toward the Gulf Coast states like Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida, while at the same time contextualizing these experiences within the American West and developments in California, Arizona, and New Mexico. Second, by examining the 1920s, this study challenges a bias toward a focus on internment during World War II, when the U.S. government imprisoned all persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast.² As a result, the article demonstrates that decades earlier white Americans appealed to the same stereotypes and exclusionary impulses used against the Japanese during the internment, exacerbating tensions between Japan and the United States, while the two countries were jockeying for power and prestige in a world recently devastated by World War I, and laying the groundwork for that better-known and wholesale suspension of the rights of ethnic Japanese populations during World War II. At the outset, however, the study provides an overview of Japanese immigration to the United States and its impact on bilateral relations, describes the short history of the Japanese in South Texas generally and in the two easternmost counties in the Valley specifically, and summarizes the

² But see also Jason Morgan Ward, "No Jap Crow: Japanese Americans Encounter the World War II South," *Journal of Southern History*, 73 (February 2007), 75–104.

violent legacy of white supremacy in the Valley as expressed in the ruthless suppression of ethnic Mexicans and African Americans.

Denied by their government the right to emigrate from Japan until 1866, Japanese immigrants did not begin arriving on the American mainland, primarily in California, until the late nineteenth century. After 1900 they began migrating to the Golden State in larger numbers in response to a shortage of agricultural laborers there due to the continued ban on Chinese immigration after the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the movement of many white workers into nonagricultural employment, and a marked increase in commercial agriculture. Sharing a strong cultural capacity for collective action, the Japanese immigrants worked as family units, showed considerable financial acumen, and stood together steadfastly against injustice.³

According to U.S. law at the time, Japanese immigrants could not become citizens, although many wanted to do so. This group constituted the Issei generation. Their children, the Nisei, were American-born citizens. By 1910, Issei—like many other Californians—worked the land as owners, tenants, or sharecroppers. They earned admiration and scorn for their ability to work land that most white people viewed as unsuitable for cultivation. Not surprisingly, Japanese farmers learned that their productivity was a “mixed blessing.” “On the one hand,” write historians David J. O’Brien and Stephen S. Fugita, “it clearly contributed to their economic mobility and their eventual movement into middle class occupations . . . , but, at the same time, it caused a good deal of resentment on the part of many white farmers.” Despite boasting of natural superiority, white Americans feared, as California attorney general U. S. Webb later contended, in 1922, that the ““American family reared along the lines of American traditions with the father managing the farm, the mother presiding in the home, and the children during their younger years attending school, cannot compete with the Oriental farm life wherein children and mother join with the father in the actual farm labor, and in addition do not enjoy conditions of life which are demanded by the American standard of living.””⁴

³ David J. O’Brien and Stephen S. Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience* (Bloomington, Ind., 1991), 10–22, esp. 19. For recent work in Asian American history, see Gary Y. Okihiro, *Common Ground: Reimagining American History* (Princeton, 2001); Edlie L. Wong, *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship* (New York, 2015); Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton, 2015); Lon Kurashige, *Two Faces of Exclusion: The Untold History of Anti-Asian Racism in the United States* (Chapel Hill, 2016); and David C. Atkinson, *The Burden of White Supremacy: Containing Asian Migration in the British Empire and the United States* (Chapel Hill, 2016).

⁴ O’Brien and Fugita, *Japanese American Experience*, 21–23 (first, second, and third quotations on 22; fourth quotation on 23).

In 1909 Sidney G. P. Coryn, a writer for the *Argonaut* in San Francisco, summarized the issue: "For many years the Japanese have been an irritation in California. For many years the newspapers of the state—and notably the San Francisco 'Chronicle,' a journal of responsible conservatism—have drawn attention to the increasing numbers of Japanese immigrants and the consequent injury to the interests of the country. Some five years ago these complaints came energetically to a head. Statistics were compiled from the scanty material at command, opinions were collected, and grievances stated, with the result that the Japanese question became an issue of magnitude." To Coryn and to many white Californians, Japanese immigrants constituted a fundamentally alien group of smart, sneaky outsiders whose aim was to dispossess white people of their hard-earned assets. Although white Americans claimed that their society was a meritocracy, Coryn betrayed his fear that in a fair contest the Japanese migrants might overwhelm white locals and take over the United States. As a result, white Americans tilted the scale in their own favor, in order to win the contest, by criticizing the Japanese for their successes. For example, white residents of San Francisco had an abundance of complaints against the Japanese in the city:

In many instances we need no deep research to see that the complaints are well founded. Japanese shoe repairing shops, for instance, are to be found dotted all over the city. Japanese laundries are nearly as numerous. There are hundreds of Japanese janitors, and Japanese house cleaners, while the invasion of other branches of activity is steady and persistent. Divisions of the city are becoming known as Japanese quarters . . . All these things mean the dispossession of white men. . . . The presence of the Japanese trader means that the white man must either go out of business[s] or abandon his standard of comfort and sink to the level of the Asiatic.⁵

Consistent with these fears, by 1913 state legislators had proposed several bills to ban all aliens from purchasing land in California, which drew opposition from European governments and foreign investors. In response, California lawmakers restricted landownership in the final bill, which became law in 1913, to those "aliens eligible to citizenship," thereby targeting specifically the Japanese, who were not "eligible," without ever mentioning them by name. While the 1913 law exacerbated anti-Japanese resentments in California, the legislators failed in their purpose. As David O'Brien and

⁵ Sidney G. P. Coryn, "The Japanese Problem in California," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 34 (September 1909), 42–48 (first quotation on 42; second quotation on 43).

Stephen Fugita note, "Some Issei put the land in the name of their American-born children and made themselves their guardians. Or they placed land in the name of legal-age children, usually Hawaiian-born Nisei, some of whom were just beginning to reach their majority Some Issei created dummy corporations which had a majority of American citizen shareholders." The legislature closed these loopholes in 1920 with a law that "prohibited the Issei from owning or leasing land, being corporation shareholders, or acting as guardians for minors owning or leasing land." Voters in every county of California approved it. Although some Japanese found ways to skirt the new law, largely by illegal means, they suffered a shattering blow.⁶

Compared with other immigrant groups, the Japanese enjoyed significant advantages. First, their country of origin actively protected the rights of its citizens abroad, even if its motivation for doing so, as historian Naoko Shimazu has demonstrated, was propelled more by the advancement of Japan's own prestige internationally than by a genuine concern for the fortunes of individual emigrants themselves. Second, Japan, as an ascendant world power, had recently demonstrated its influence by defeating much larger adversaries in wars with China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905) and by imposing protectorate status on Korea in 1910. Then, during World War I, as Walter LaFeber has written, "No nation gained so much so cheaply from the carnage as Japan." In its role as Britain's ally in Asia, Japan gained control over German possessions across the Pacific. Shortly thereafter, the Canadian prime minister stated what had become increasingly clear: "only 'three major powers' remained in the world—the United States, Great Britain, and Japan."⁷

As a result of Japan's growing influence, its government—backed by its citizenry—protested loudly against racist laws aimed at Japanese nationals in the United States. After white Californians threatened to segregate Japanese children in schools in 1906–1907, a leading

⁶ "An act relating to the rights, powers and disabilities of aliens . . . with respect to property in this state," May 19, 1913, *The Statutes of California and Amendments to the Codes, Passed at the Fortieth Session of the Legislature, 1913* (Sacramento, Calif., 1913), 206–8 (first and second quotations on 206); O'Brien and Fugita, *Japanese American Experience*, 22–26 (third and fourth quotations on 24).

⁷ Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race, and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (New York, 1998), esp. chap. 3; Walter LaFeber, *The Clash: A History of U.S.-Japan Relations* (New York, 1997), 99–128 (first quotation on 99; second quotation on 128). On Japanese ascendancy, see S. C. M. Paine, *The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy* (New York, 2003). See also Sidney Pash, *The Currents of War: A New History of American-Japanese Relations, 1899–1941* (Lexington, Ky., 2014).

newspaper in Tokyo declared that Japan had “‘been HUMILIATED’” and proposed that the government send warships to the U.S. West Coast. Japan expressed its strong objections to the California measure through diplomatic channels and gained concessions. Recognizing the economic and military risks of a confrontation and “‘furious at the ‘idiots’ in California,” U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt reached the so-called Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, which spared Japanese schoolchildren the indignity of segregation but curbed the flow of Japanese nationals to the United States.⁸

When California legislators passed the alien land law in 1913, the Japanese government and its people again protested. As Walter LaFeber writes, President Woodrow Wilson “‘dispatched [Secretary of State William Jennings] Bryan to talk sense with the state legislators.” After the legislators ignored Bryan, twenty thousand Japanese took to the streets of Tokyo to protest against the United States and to cheer “‘as a politician urged that the Imperial Fleet steam to California to protect Japan’s citizens and dignity.” Moreover, there were rumors that the fleet was moving against Hawaii and the Philippines. In response, the Japanese government again protested the new California law. A U.S. Navy admiral assessed the state of affairs and concluded that “‘war is not only possible but even probable.”⁹

Furthermore, Japan and the United States were locked in an imperial contest that elevated the significance of clashes over immigration. As Japan was humiliating China and Russia (its defeat of the latter was a transcendent event in the West because a “‘nonwhite” nation defeated a “‘white” one for the first time in modern warfare), the United States was humiliating Spain in war and subsequently installing colonial practices in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the Caribbean and in the Philippines and Guam in the Pacific. During this period, the United States also gained control over Hawaii and secured a strong position in China. Amid persistent speculation about the threats posed by Japan in the Western Hemisphere and the hysteria inflamed by the American press, the United States reacted swiftly in 1912 to the rumored purchase of “‘a strategic area of Mexico’s Baja California” by Japanese business interests, a story denied by the Japanese government. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge authored a resolution, which received overwhelming support in the Senate, that asserted the applicability of the Monroe Doctrine—banning

⁸ LaFeber, *Clash*, 89.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 104–6 (first and second quotations on 105; third quotation on 106).

the intervention of colonial powers in the Western Hemisphere—to the expansion of international corporations.¹⁰

In this scramble for influence, markets, and resources, the United States blocked or marginalized Japan whenever possible. Frustrated by and resentful of American opposition in the Pacific and the United States' overt racism, Japan demanded in the Treaty of Versailles a racial equality clause that would require that the Western nations deal on an equal basis with nonwhite nations. Concerned over Japanese ambitions and fearful of the potential consequences of the clause among their own nonwhite colonial subjects, the Western nations—led by the United States and Australia—excluded the clause from the treaty. Furthermore, shortly after the war the United States sided with China over control of the Shandong Peninsula, which Japan had secured through the Treaty of Versailles. Finally, for two decades after its passage, the United States invoked the so-called Lodge Corollary on at least four occasions to scuttle land purchases in Mexico by Japanese companies.¹¹ Jilted, Japan in the 1920s turned from a model of cooperation with the West toward one predisposed toward nationalism and militarism—and, ultimately, to conflict culminating in World War II.

Given their paranoia about Japanese immigration domestically and their fear of Japanese power internationally, many white Americans developed emotional and deeply ingrained stereotypes about the Japanese. These stereotypes asserted that the newcomers were “from such a different culture that they could never adopt American ways.” As white Americans had done previously with the Chinese, they regarded the Japanese as inherently and unalterably alien, as crafty and sneaky, and as fifth columnists.¹² The *Dallas Morning News*, covering testimony in the Texas senate in 1921, expressed the argument that “[t]he inability of the Japanese to assimilate in America, as well as his fixed racial and religious differences, are given as the main reason why he is not wanted as a citizen and a land owner.” Barred from American citizenship, “he will forever remain an alien, and ‘once a Japanese, always a Japanese,’ is

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57–62, 75–84, 104 (quotation).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 120–27, 104.

¹² O'Brien and Fugita, *Japanese American Experience*, 1. For studies of anti-Asian (pan-Asian and specific Asian ethnic) stereotypes, see, for example, Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Pan-ethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identity* (Philadelphia, 1992); Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998); Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia, 1999); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776–1882* (Baltimore, 1999); Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York, 2001); and Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton, 2014).

a common expression.” With the recurrent clashes between the two nations over immigration and empire, the American Legion warned that Japanese immigration constituted a Trojan horse. “[I]n explaining to the committee why the legion was opposed to Japanese settling in the United States,” the *Morning News* reported, a legionnaire testified that “in event of a war with Japan, which many profess to believe will eventually occur, the colony of little brown men in our midst would be of great assistance and comfort to the enemy.”¹³

In South Texas, whites confronted with hostility the few Japanese who attempted to settle there in the early twentieth century. In 1907 white residents of San Antonio responded harshly to an influx of migrants who had entered the United States at its southern border. “There are many Japanese coming into Texas continually from Mexico and hundreds of these are finding their way to San Antonio, where they are meeting with a very chilly reception,” reported the *Fort Worth Telegram*. “The hotels in that city refuse to receive the little brown men as guests, notwithstanding the fact that they have money to defray the expense of accommodation, and this is causing the new arrivals to sleep out in the open at any old place they can snatch a few hours of slumber. The police of that city are arresting these men.” Some whites offered the Japanese migrants employment with terms that ruthlessly leveraged their desperation. “The negroes [in San Antonio] have been working at about an average of \$4 per week and board and lodging,” reported the *Brownsville Daily Herald*; “The Japs are taking the same jobs at \$2 per week and do not object to sleeping in the barn with the horses.” As a consequence, the newspaper claimed, African Americans in San Antonio were pushing Japanese workers off the sidewalks, generally abusing them, and “making threats openly to drive the Japanese out of the city.” By pitting minority groups against each other, white employers in San Antonio wrung financial concessions from black workers, while offering the Japanese little protection from the affronted black population. South Texas was a complex multiracial environment in which white supremacists dominated ethnic Mexican, black, and Asian populations in part by turning them against each other and encouraging them to express and act upon their own racial prejudices.¹⁴

¹³ John Sneed, “Alien Land Bill Causes Agitation,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1921, p. 6.

¹⁴ “Arresting Japs in San Antonio,” *Fort Worth (Tex.) Telegram*, February 6, 1907, p. 6 (first and second quotations); “Japs Take Jobs from Negroes,” *Brownsville (Tex.) Daily Herald*, January 28, 1907, p. 1 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations).

According to Hisako Ochiai, very few Japanese settled in the Valley in the early twentieth century; the first appears to have been Heishiro Miyamoto, who arrived in Hidalgo County in 1908. In addition to Miyamoto, who later partnered with M. Tsuno, three more Japanese immigrants came in 1909, leasing land for a three-year period. Unfortunately, Ochiai writes, “there are no further records available to trace the fate” of these Japanese “pioneers.” Over the next nine years, a total of twenty more Japanese immigrants arrived as individuals, couples, or families. Then, in 1919 a somewhat larger group of seven Japanese families bought 389 acres of land owned by the local Brulay family and located near Brownsville.¹⁵

Given their very small numbers over the decade or so before World War I, the Japanese living in the Valley attracted relatively little hostility. As a Japanese American from the region later recalled, “What I faced was not prejudice at all, but the curiosity of native [white] Americans.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, local whites seemed cognizant of the Japanese presence, as revealed in 1921 when a white community leader in San Benito, Texas, reckoned that some fifteen to twenty families lived in Cameron and Hidalgo Counties and was able to locate each of them with geographical precision. With his recall of numbers and locations, he compromised his claim that the earlier immigrants had attracted little attention.¹⁷ With the white reaction to the “invasion” of immigrants in 1920–1921, no white person generally could claim indifference.

In the early twentieth century, white migrants to the Valley—many of whom were midwesterners and southerners—wrested control of the region from its largely ethnic Mexican inhabitants through a ruthless and multifaceted campaign.¹⁸ When the railroad arrived in 1904, connecting the region to national and international markets, powerful white agricultural interests converged on the Valley and, using chicanery, fraud, and intimidation, seized lands held by Mexican Americans in what had long been a ranching area. Within a decade white arrivals had gobbled up the land and resources from Mexican Americans and put the latter, as

¹⁵ Hisako Ochiai, “The Community of the Japanese Americans in the Rio Grande Valley” (M.A. thesis, Texas A&I University, 1974), 32–40 (quotations on 35).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁷ “Legion Men Hopeful of Law to Bar Japs,” San Benito (Tex.) *Light*, February 5, 1921, p. 1.

¹⁸ In writing Mexican American and South Texas history, it is customary to use the term *Anglo* rather than *white* to describe the dominant group because, under U.S. law, persons of Mexican descent are classified as white, even if they rarely enjoyed in practice the benefits of that identity. Given the central focus here on relations between the United States and Japan, and the role of global white supremacy in shaping that relationship, this article employs the word with greater currency in an international context by using the term *white*.

well as increasing numbers of desperate and more easily exploitable Mexicans from across the border, to work as stoop labor on lands that Mexican Americans had recently owned.¹⁹

White residents of the Valley consolidated their control through the slaughter of at least three hundred, and perhaps a thousand or more, Mexican Americans and Mexicans in a slow-rolling massacre in 1915. Under the pretext of putting down the Plan de San Diego uprising, white posses roamed the Rio Grande Valley from July until October, killing alleged rebels—who included virtually any person of Mexican descent encountered by a posse—and burning their houses. Ultimately, these white vigilantes drove substantial numbers of Mexican Americans and Mexicans across the border into Mexico, a republic then being torn apart by the Mexican Revolution. After the massacre, whites took advantage of the climate of fear to impose an increasingly harsh brand of discrimination against people of Mexican descent in all sectors of life.²⁰

On New Year's Eve in 1920 in McAllen, Texas, just a week before the so-called Japanese invasion, white civilians and authorities, along with many ethnic Mexicans, revealed their capacity for racist mob violence. Amid open antiblack hostility, unknown parties killed several Mexican Americans near the town, a crime that other residents assigned to black perpetrators. In response, a hostile crowd of whites and ethnic Mexicans formed, giving municipal authorities—who were openly taking sides with the mob—an opportunity to tell local black people to leave town, a warning that many of them followed during the hours when 1920 turned into 1921. "A general exodus of all negroes from McAllen, under threat of possible mob violence," was one of the "high spots in a miniature 'crime wave' that ushered in the New Year" there, reported the *Corpus Christi Times*; "There was a large negro colony here and so far as is known not a member remained in the city last night." "Feeling against the blacks has been growing for some time," it added. "Fearing trouble

¹⁹ On this chronology of events, see, for example, Timothy Paul Bowman, *Blood Oranges: Colonialism and Agriculture in the South Texas Borderlands* (College Station, Tex., 2016), 3–7, 25–26.

²⁰ On the 1915 massacre, see Benjamin Heber Johnson, *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans into Americans* (New Haven, 2003). On racist violence against ethnic Mexicans in South Texas more generally, see Nicholas Villanueva Jr., *The Lynching of Mexicans in the Texas Borderlands* (Albuquerque, 2017); and Monica Muñoz Martínez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018). On African Americans in South Texas, see Bruce A. Glasrud, ed., *African Americans in South Texas History* (College Station, Tex., 2011). On the relationships between whites and ethnic Mexicans in South Texas more generally, see David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836–1986* (Austin, 1987); Bowman, *Blood Oranges*; and John Weber, *From South Texas to the Nation: The Exploitation of Mexican Labor in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, 2015).

on the part of Mexican residents and some [white] Americans,” the police chief “warned the negroes to leave the city.”²¹

With the massacre in 1915 and episodes like the McAllen expulsion, not to mention several other anti-Mexican lynchings in the intervening period, the Rio Grande Valley, a place where armed vigilantes roamed and ethnic minorities fled, was among the most mob-violence-prone areas in the World War I-era United States (Map 1). As Brownsville native and borderlands scholar Américo Paredes wrote in a 1958 reflection on Laredo, which was equally applicable to other areas of South Texas, “the north bank of the Rio Grande” marked the edge of a “lynching belt” through which ethnic Mexicans tiptoed surreptitiously.²² Clearly, then, the Japanese settlers entered the “hornet’s nest” in the Valley at a time when, as a national correspondent recognized, the white “natives of this region” were inclined to take ““direct action”” to defend their interests.²³

In October 1920 news spread that South Texas real estate developer F. Z. Bishop had sold 280 acres of land near Harlingen to a Japanese broker in Los Angeles, named B. Yamada, who planned to sell it to Japanese immigrants seeking to leave the Golden State. “A rumor that appears to be widespread is to the effect that Japanese, fearing the passage of the anti-alien land-owning bill in California, are looking to Texas for colonization,” worried the *San Benito Light*, a racially conservative newspaper in San Benito, Texas, located less than ten miles from the property in question. When it became clear that there was truth to the rumor, many whites shared the view expressed by a Harlingen resident and American Legion post commander. “We are not looking for trouble and don’t want it,” he declared. “But if the Japs come, I can safely say, from the temper of public opinion in the Valley, it will mean a fight.” Bishop insisted that he would on principle complete the deal with the investors ““if it takes the [Texas Rangers] and the state militia to do it!”” However, he also promised that he would sell no more land to the Japanese, “since he had seen how strong the public sentiment is against it. He was completely unaware of its strength, he declared, until ‘I called that mass meeting and they almost mobbed me.’”²⁴

²¹ “M’Allen Murders Cause Exodus of All Negroes,” *Corpus Christi (Tex.) Times*, January 5, 1921, p. 2.

²² Américo Paredes, “*With His Pistol in His Hand*”: *A Border Ballad and Its Hero* (Austin, 1958), 78. On the lynching of ethnic Mexicans in South Texas and across the U.S. Southwest, see William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928* (New York, 2013).

²³ “Start Invasion of Texas,” *Kansas City Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1.

²⁴ “F. Z. Bishop in Interview Is Quoted as Saying Deal with Orientals Will Be Completed,” *San Benito Light*, October 29, 1920, p. 1.

MAP 1

WHITE MOB VIOLENCE IN THE LOWER RIO GRANDE VALLEY, 1915–1922

NOTE: Documenting acts of racist violence against Japanese immigrants, ethnic Mexicans, and African Americans, this map underscores the level of social discord in the lower Rio Grande Valley between 1915 and 1922. Because it includes the killings of ethnic Mexicans by mobs documented in *Forgotten Dead* by William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, supplemented by the killings in Rio Hondo (1921) and Mercedes (1922) identified in this study, and not the many killings perpetrated by Texas Rangers or by lone white vigilantes, the map illustrates only a fraction of the actual number of such executions of ethnic Mexicans.

SOURCES: William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb, *Forgotten Dead: Mob Violence against Mexicans in the United States, 1848–1928* (New York, 2013); Brent Campney Collection (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley Special Collections and Archives, Edinburg Campus). Map by Erin Greb Cartography.

Within a few weeks white Valley residents relaxed, concluding that the “undertaking to bring Japanese here for colonization purposes had been quietly abandoned, in view of the storm of opposition it raised.” They discovered their error on December 21 when they learned that Bishop had, as promised, sold the land and that the buyers would soon arrive. Over the next several weeks a handful of Japanese migrants—perhaps two or three dozen individuals at most—filtered into the region. One family arrived at a farm near Santa Maria, joining three other earlier Japanese settlers. Another Japanese family and a single Japanese man materialized nearby in a search for land. A lone laborer, the aforementioned B. R. Kato, arrived in Brownsville, expecting to work on a nearby farm. In the most publicized arrival, the

Okuma family, consisting of two brothers, their wives, and four children, arrived in Harlingen to settle the property purchased from Bishop. "Texans met [the] incoming Japanese families and told them of the white man's sorrow that the yellow men could make no longer visit than a night," an observer quipped.²⁵

Members of the American Legion, the national veterans' organization formed in 1919, led the protests. "The San Benito post of the American Legion today took steps to perfect the organization of a central executive committee, representing all posts in the Valley, to handle in a comprehensive way the Japanese situation," noted the *Light*. Its members roamed the countryside, menacing the few Japanese already settled and demanding the departure of the new arrivals. They also sent messages to absentee owners of land occupied by the Japanese requesting the "authority to oust the 'squatters'"; as journalists reported, "trouble is feared if the permission is given." The San Benito Legionnaires mobilized against the influx in other ways as well. One member announced that "out of 650 questionnaires" distributed to local residents, "over 250 answers had already been received." This was regarded as "a very high percentage of replies in such a short notice," and, he predicted, "we shall soon have over 50 percent of answers. The sentiment of those who have replied is overwhelmingly opposed to Japanese colonization here." When Kato arrived in Brownsville, "a committee of the chamber of commerce, American Legion, retail merchants' association and farmers' organizations . . . told [him] to leave within forty-eight hours."²⁶

Although the local Legion post organized the response and clearly reflected the views of the region's prominent businessmen and farmers, its members exemplified white attitudes generally. "Considerable anti-Japanese sentiment has developed in Rio Grande Valley towns during the past two months," remarked the *San Antonio Express*. The *San Benito Light* agreed, stating that "Japs will not be welcomed in Harlingen or at other Valley points." A Legion post commander from San Antonio declared, "'There is a strong sentiment against the settlement by

²⁵ "Valley Stirred by Discovery That Japanese Have Warranty Deed to Land Near Harlingen," *San Benito Light*, December 21, 1920, p. 1 (first quotation); "Plans Made to Check the 'Peaceful Penetration' by Purchasers and Squatters," *San Benito Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1; "Japanese Arriving in Harlingen Asked by Citizens to 'Move On,'" *San Antonio Express*, January 7, 1921, p. 1; "Next Move in Jap Situation Is Up to Kishi," *San Benito Light*, January 8, 1921, p. 1; "The Texas Way," *Twin Falls (Idaho) Daily News*, January 15, 1921, p. 6 (second quotation).

²⁶ "Legion Starts Referendum on Jap Question," *San Benito Light*, December 28, 1920, p. 1 (first and fourth through seventh quotations); "Start Invasion of Texas," *Kansas City Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (second, third, and eighth quotations).

Japanese of Texas lands existing throughout the State. . . . A flood of protests has been received by myself and other members of Alamo Post in which residents from various sections of the State expressed themselves strongly opposed to allowing Japanese from California or any other State to take up lands in Texas.” By January 1 the *Light* had expressed its satisfaction (or at least its hope) that white Valley residents who were initially indifferent to the Japanese had come to embrace more conservative views: “Now that we are all together, let’s keep together and see that the Valley is to be a little section of America that is kept safe for Americans.” Two weeks later, the *Light* added that “it would be folly to relax for one moment in our determination to keep the Lower Rio Grande Valley for the white race.”²⁷

With the arrival of the Okumas in Harlingen on January 6, white locals began a standoff that continued for three weeks. As the San Benito *Light* reported, “Legion men of Harlingen met the Japs at the station and told them of the sentiment in the Valley.” They at least hinted at—and probably stated overtly—their willingness to use violence to prevent the Okuma family from occupying the land. “Upon advice of the Legion men the Japs made no attempt to go to the farm they had purchased and did not order their household goods and farm implements unloaded,” noted the *Light*. Instead they “agreed” to remain in a hotel while the matter was being resolved. In saying that the Japanese family “agreed” to delay the move, the newspaper minimized the menacing nature of the crowd.²⁸ “Gathering in small groups in the town, knots of men are discussing the crisis in guarded tones,” observed a correspondent published in the *Kansas City Times*. “Legion representatives have told the Japanese that they themselves mean to keep strictly within the law” but were “not convinced that they can control public sentiment, which, in the case of some of the farmers and truck men, is decidedly fiery.”²⁹

For the remainder of January, the Okumas lived in fear in the hotel. At the same time, white residents of the Valley warned them to avoid any move likely to result in bloodshed and urged them to “vamoos[e] pronto.” Having spent their fortunes on land from which they were barred, the Okumas fluctuated between demands that their rights be

²⁷ “Japanese Arriving in Harlingen Asked by Citizens to ‘Move On,’” San Antonio *Express*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (first and third quotations); “Next Move in Jap Situation Is Up to Kishi,” San Benito *Light*, January 8, 1921, p. 1 (second quotation); “Clearing the Situation,” San Benito *Light*, January 1, 1921, p. 2 (fourth quotation); “Our ‘Jap Situation,’” San Benito *Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (fifth quotation).

²⁸ “Plans Made to Check the ‘Peaceful Penetration’ by Purchasers and Squatters,” San Benito *Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1.

²⁹ “Start Invasion of Texas,” *Kansas City Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1.

recognized and laments that their departure was impossible. The Legionnaires, for their part, believed "that the Japs . . . are sincere in their desire to get away." While the Okumas lived as hostages, local whites intimidated the other Japanese people in the area. Some visited "the old Rabb ranch near Santa Maria late yesterday to interview the Jap families there," observed the *Light* on January 8. "The trip was made for the purpose of impressing upon the family that arrived only a few days ago for a 'visit' that it was expected they would visit only for a limited time." In Brownsville, others chased Kato away moments after he alighted from the train. The *Light* framed this confrontation as more gentlemanly than it probably was: "Kato said he had merely gone to Brownsville to work on the old Brulay place, now owned by Jap growers, but added that if Brownsville people thought there were already enough Japs in that vicinity he would not remain."³⁰

The drama in South Texas was now national news.³¹ Consequently, S. Kishi, the Japanese realtor in California who had sold the Texas land to the Okuma brothers, announced that he would travel to the Valley to resolve the dispute. He faced a dangerous task. When he failed to arrive as anticipated, the San Benito *Light* speculated on his whereabouts. When he missed a meeting in Harlingen, the Legion "men who were there as a reception and information committee, to give Kishi some correct data regarding the Valley's anti Jap sentiment are still puzzled as to what became of him." They concluded that Kishi, "mistaking a party of about 300 . . . who happened to be at the station for a fully organized [Asiatic] Society [an anti-Japanese mob]," made "himself scarce" and continued on to Brownsville. "Legion men there, however, made a search of the train. It failed to yield any trace of the missing Kishi." On January 17, however, the newspaper reported that the Okuma brothers, along with the now present Kishi, had toured their land before returning to the hotel.³²

Notwithstanding the San Benito *Light*'s certainty that all white people in the Valley were now unified in their anti-Japanese sentiment, there

³⁰ "Next Move in Jap Situation Is Up to Kishi," San Benito *Light*, January 8, 1921, p. 1 (first, third, and fourth quotations); "Are Anxious to Leave Valley," San Benito *Light*, January 10, 1921, p. 1 (second quotation); "Plans Made to Check the 'Peaceful Penetration' by Purchasers and Squatters," San Benito *Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (fifth quotation).

³¹ See, for example, "Japanese Families Excluded by Texans," Miami (Okla.) *District Daily News*, January 6, 1921, p. 1; "Texas to Consider Passage of Bill to Bar Out All Japs," Tucson (Ariz.) *Citizen*, January 7, 1921, p. 7; and "Asks About Texas Ban on Japanese," Pawtucket (R.I.) *Times*, January 11, 1921, p. 2.

³² "Jap Operator May Have Gone Back to Coast," San Benito *Light*, January 11, 1921, p. 1 (quotations); "Japs Look Over Farm But Remain in Their Hotel," San Benito *Light*, January 17, 1921, p. 1.

were some who were not. In Hidalgo County, where the Japanese presence was even smaller than in Cameron, some mused that such an influx might be good for the economy amid the deep economic recession roiling Texas and the United States generally after World War I. Others argued that the Japanese had demonstrated strong capabilities as farmers. "Up around McAllen . . . there is a very marked lack of interest in efforts to prevent Japanese colonization," the *Light* scowled. "Certain more or less influential residents in that neighborhood have been active in speaking a word here and there in favor of land selling to the Japanese claiming, it is alleged, that more Japanese in idle Valley land would be 'good business.'" A McAllen newspaper (reprinted in San Benito) assailed what it regarded as local race-traitors by mocking such money-grubbing arguments as "We need money now. And the Japs can bring it."³³

Faced with the anger and incredulity of neighbors and friends, many of these so-called race-traitors swiftly modified their views, adopting the anti-Japanese line rather than suffer marginalization in the community. One Cameron County resident who had recently rented land to a newcomer promised that he would not do so again. "[He] declared that his position was one against all Japanese settlement in the Valley, but that if the sentiment over the district was not so strongly against the orientals that they could not rent any land he would rather rent to a Jap than permit the land to lie idle." Now that he had gauged the public temper, he maintained "that if the people of that community would agree on not letting the Japs in he would assist in every way in keeping the bars up." Another white resident proudly reported that he had "refused to sell mules to the new Jap [in his neighborhood] and had told him he was not wanted."³⁴

To combat what they characterized as "apathy" in McAllen, American Legion posts in the Valley ramped up their efforts "to arouse sentiment against Japanese colonization" and to remedy the perceived "lack of understanding there regarding the Jap menace." Three days later the San Benito *Light* noted reports from "up Valley" that showed a continuing "lack of interest in the campaign to prevent the Japanese colonization and in some quarters a quiet but definite movement in favor

³³ "Sun Thinks Japanese Gold Has Made Some Upper Valley Residents Speak Favorably of Colonization Project," San Benito *Light*, January 31, 1921, p. 2. On the sharp recession in Texas in 1920–1921 and its relationship to a spike in racist attacks against Mexican Americans, see F. Arturo Rosales, *¡Pobre Raza!: Violence, Justice, and Mobilization among México Lindo Immigrants, 1900–1936* (Austin, 1999), 102.

³⁴ "Plans Made to Check the 'Peaceful Penetration' by Purchasers and Squatters," San Benito *Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1.

of land sales or leases to them,” a situation that the newspaper considered “beyond the comprehension of people in this part of the Valley.” It charged that upper Rio Grande Valley residents “who are not strongly opposed to Japanese colonization are not familiar with the issue.” The *Light* scorned those in McAllen who refused to “profit by California’s experience” and insisted on being “lulled into a false sense of security by Jap promises or by scoffing Americans who profess to see the ‘Jap peril’ as a monumental joke.”³⁵ In all likelihood white McAllen residents—the more influential ones, anyway—were more receptive to the Japanese presence because of a pro-growth orientation that eventually made McAllen the economic center of the Valley. However, as suggested by the expulsion of the town’s entire black population just a week before the arrival of the Japanese in the Valley, whites in McAllen could mobilize behind racist violence, if that served their purposes.

A few days before the end of January, Kishi and the Okumas “told Legion men they intended to take immediate possession of their recently purchased property.” The Legionnaires responded that “they had a legal right to do so but repeated the advice previously given them.” Finally, on January 31 Kishi and the Okuma clan boarded a northbound train and left without announcing their destination or their intentions. “Legion men who met the Okumas [three] weeks ago upon their arrival and advised them that sentiment in Harlingen was strongly opposed to Japanese were somewhat surprised at their sudden departure,” the *Light* observed. “The Valley has won its fight so far by impressing upon the Japanese that they are not wanted and will not be made welcome.” With unexpected suddenness “Harlingen’s ‘Japanese Problem’ disappeared.”³⁶

To justify their demands for Japanese exclusion, white Texans articulated the stereotypes deployed against the Japanese across the country. The Dallas *Morning News* reported from the statehouse in Austin, “There is much talk about the Japanese being undesirable as citizens, but very little reason has been given, except that they are ‘unassimilable.’” A man in Harlingen reasoned, “You can’t tell about a Jap.” Another observer claimed that “all history” showed that radically different peoples could not “amalgamate” or “live peaceably together.” Accordingly, “The people of the Lower Rio Grande have no desire to try

³⁵ “Will Seek Help of M’Allen Rotary in Anti Jap Fight,” *San Benito Light*, January 25, 1921, p. 1 (first, second, and third quotations); “Apathy, the Ally of the Japanese,” *San Benito Light*, January 28, 1921, p. 2 (fourth through seventh quotations); “Our ‘Jap Situation,’” *San Benito Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (eighth and ninth quotations). For more on the sentiments in McAllen, see “More Japs Said to Be Enroute to the Valley,” *San Benito Light*, January 24, 1921, p. 1.

³⁶ “Japanese Leave Harlingen,” *San Benito Light*, February 1, 1921, p. 1 (first, second, third, and fifth quotations); “Our ‘Jap Situation,’” *San Benito Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (fourth quotation).

to prove the contrary.” It was a classic case of blaming the victims. As Saburo Arai, a Japanese man from Harris County, Texas, testified before the state legislature, white Texans accused Japanese immigrants—banned from becoming citizens—“of hoarding fortune, only to return to their native country with amassed wealth.”³⁷

Like other white Americans, whites in the Valley regarded the Japanese as smart and sneaky, as people who could beat white Americans at their own games and amass influence and wealth through devious means. “Japs are as insincere in their promises to Americans as they are persistent,” declared the *San Benito Light*. “These, in fact, are their chief characteristics.” Hence, they were “not easy to cope with.” Possessing “a craftiness that at times borders onto the uncanny, the Japs have won fight after fight that has been waged against them on the coast,” the *Light* complained. “And they are still fighting and finding new loopholes in the laws that have been enacted to keep them from spreading their influence and entirely overrunning the American farmer.”³⁸

Just as white people in the Far West had worried earlier that the Chinese would multiply quickly and overwhelm them, so, too, did white Texans worry that the Japanese would crowd them out. Citing the example of Hawaii, the *Corpus Christi Caller* argued that the Japanese had grown to nearly half the population since the first arrival of the “yellow men” in the 1880s. Turning to California, the *Caller* applauded the people there who anticipated “the day when the Japanese shall overrun and swamp it,” too, and the California government that had addressed the menace through its alien land laws. “What California and the west coast have been doing,” the newspaper continued, “must be done all over the country if we would heed the warning writ plain upon the wall by events in Hawaii.” Eager to check Japanese immigration, the *Caller* urged that “[t]here is no occasion for a clash with Japan.” But, it maintained, “Self-preservation is the first law of nature. Preservation of this country for those who shall inherit it when we are gone is a solemn duty we may not evade.”³⁹

Local white Texans viewed the Japanese settlers as the advance guard of an effort to take over the Rio Grande Valley in essentially the same

³⁷ John Sneed, “Alien Land Bill Causes Agitation,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1921, p. 6 (first and seventh quotations); “Japs Look Over Farm But Remain in Their Hotel,” *San Benito Light*, January 12, 1921, p. 1 (second quotation); “Legion Men Hopeful of Law to Bar Japs,” *San Benito Light*, February 5, 1921, p. 1 (third through sixth quotations).

³⁸ “Our ‘Jap Situation,’” *San Benito Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2.

³⁹ “Japs and the Valley,” *Corpus Christi Caller*, January 26, 1921, p. 4 (quotations); and reprinted as “Sees Ample Justification of Valley’s Fight Against Japanese Colonization,” *San Benito Light*, January 26, 1921, p. 1.

way that whites had seized the region from ethnic Mexicans. Anti-immigrant speakers in the Cameron County town of Los Indios described this approach, in a popular phrase of the period, as the Japanese method of "peaceful penetration." The San Benito *Light* ribbed the race-traitors in McAllen for their capacity to be duped. It was, the newspaper asserted, "this same viewpoint and this same argument that paved the way for California's present problem. It was the owner of land who did not or could not cultivate it and who pretended to believe it better to lease or sell to Japanese than to allow it to remain idle, who in reality painted a yellow streak through California's richest and most productive regions."⁴⁰

Given the frosty relations between the United States and Japan, whites in the Valley also regarded the settlers as spies seeking to obtain intelligence and exploit weakness. "Acquisition of land in the Valley, there is every reason to believe, was done in accordance with the policy of the Japanese government and of the Japanese people to colonize favorable sections of the United States and permanently establish their race in this country," speculated the *Light*. Citing a U.S. government report, the newspaper added that Japan had established "in this country powerful associations through which she is controlling the acts and policies of all Japanese here and exerting organized effort in the interests of . . . the dominant military party of Japan for world conquest." Similarly, the McAllen *Sun* insisted that the Japanese settler "may take from the soil much wealth, and he may take from the border many secrets to the [Tokyo] government." To the race-traitors who "preach[ed] of the money advantages that will be brought" by the Japanese, a Legionnaire suggested that they consider the welfare of their country over their pocketbooks: "It endangers this border in the event of Japanese trouble."⁴¹

Whites also regarded the Japanese as potential saboteurs. Legion men spent weeks compiling evidence that they claimed would prove that behind the Japanese interest in the Valley lurked "a well developed plot that assumed alarming international proportions." Stressing the "danger of allowing the Japs to get a foothold in the lower Valley," they "pointed out that fording the Rio Grande river is easy of accomplishment because of the vast stretches of unguarded territory and that it was unreasonable

⁴⁰ "Plans Made to Check the 'Peaceful Penetration' by Purchasers and Squatters," San Benito *Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (first quotation); "Apathy, the Ally of the Japanese," San Benito *Light*, January 28, 1921, p. 2 (second quotation).

⁴¹ "Our 'Jap Situation,'" San Benito *Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (first and second quotations); "Sun Thinks Japanese Gold Has Made Some Upper Valley Residents Speak Favorably of Colonization Project," San Benito *Light*, January 31, 1921, p. 2 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations).

to expect the immigration officials could prevent a veritable influx of Japanese into this country through Mexico if allowed to settle in the Valley.” The McAllen *Sun* likewise worried that “the Japanese government desires to have some of its smartest, shrewdest men become entrenched very near the international border.” The Japanese, it added, were “coming into this border country and creating bases for secret preparations and activities against the American flag.”⁴²

Due to these fears of espionage and sabotage, rumors of international intrigue began to circulate. “Harlingen Legion men and members and officials of the Chamber of Commerce are investigating a letter received there late yesterday alleging a scheme to acquire large tracts near Harlingen for the purpose of forming a million dollar Japanese colony which, the writer declared, was to be financed by the Japanese government and the wealthy Japanese of California,” the *Light* reported. The letter writer claimed that, as a clerk for a real estate company in San Antonio, he had learned that the conspirators, “including ‘a German,’ were trying to get control of large acreage in the Valley with a view of colonizing it with Japs.”⁴³ Brownsville attorney Harbert Davenport claimed “that the Japanese were increasing daily [in Texas] and that entrance was being made through Mexico at an alarming rate.” Reviewing recent conflicts between the United States and Japan, the McAllen *Sun* lodged its annoyance with Mexico, asserting that “we have, as a government, protested against [its] permitting the Japs to colonize in that country. . . . We regard it as unfriendly on Mexico’s part to permit great numbers of Japs to gather near the international border, where they could accomplish so much against America quickly when trouble starts.”⁴⁴

Similarly, the San Benito *Light* recalled the limited involvement of a few Japanese immigrants in the Plan de San Diego uprising in 1915 and

⁴² “Legion Men Declare Tens of Thousands in Mexico Await Chance to Cross Rio Grande,” San Benito *Light*, February 10, 1921, p. 1 (first, second, and third quotations); “Sun Thinks Japanese Gold Has Made Some Upper Valley Residents Speak Favorably of Colonization Project,” San Benito *Light*, January 31, 1921, p. 2 (fourth and fifth quotations).

⁴³ “Next Move Up to Them Say Harlingen Men,” San Benito *Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 1. The concern about border security in 1921 paralleled a larger shift toward militarizing the Texas-Mexico border during the 1920s. See Miguel Antonio Levario, *Militarizing the Border: When Mexicans Became the Enemy* (College Station, Tex., 2012).

⁴⁴ “Large Japanese Plan to Invade Valley Through Mexico Made at Hearing,” San Benito *Light*, February 4, 1921, p. 1 (first quotation); “Sun Thinks Japanese Gold Has Made Some Upper Valley Residents Speak Favorably of Colonization Project,” San Benito *Light*, January 31, 1921, p. 2 (second quotation). Interestingly, Harbert Davenport, who took an active role in formulating the legal arguments against Japanese settlement in Texas, was a white ally of the Mexican American population and a contemporary critic of the massacre of 1915. See Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 83, 89, 124.

used that evidence as a reminder about their probable involvement in some future confrontation. In making its case against the Japanese immigrants, the newspaper asserted that their settlements “on the Texas bank of the Rio Grande soil” would permit “the Japanese, if they so desire, [to] foment ill-feeling between the United States and Mexico.” As proof it added that in 1915 “a detachment of United States signal corps men was attacked and cut up at Ojo de Agua by a band of Mexican bandits. Five of the bandits were left dead on the field, and one of them was a Japanese. Another Japanese was reported dying on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande.”⁴⁵

Reflecting their views of the Japanese in the United States as fifth columnists eager to destroy America from the inside out, Valley whites regarded the Japanese individuals in this land drama as wealthy, wily con men masquerading as oppressed minorities but focused on the appropriation of resources rightfully belonging to white Americans. The *Light* described Kato as “a stylishly dressed and diamond bedecked Jap who declared he was merely a poor farm laborer.” It differentiated between the realtor, Kishi, and the land broker, Yamada, by calling the first the “dapper, well dressed, suave and well educated Jap” and the second the “millionaire Jap of California.” A member of the American Legion shared a similar view of the Okumas, who had been banned from occupying their land and forced to live in a hotel. “We don’t believe that talk about them being poor,” he asserted, “for they are still at the hotel and poor people can’t pay hotel bills these days for families like theirs.”⁴⁶ Evidently, he never considered the fact that he and his colleagues were imposing a financial hardship on a family who had no choice but to expend their resources on hotel bills because they could not take possession of their land. While the Okumas were hiding in the hotel awaiting resolution to their ordeal, Hisako Ochiai writes, “a boxcar containing farm machine and household goods,

⁴⁵ “Legion Men Hopeful of Law to Bar Japs,” *San Benito Light*, February 5, 1921, p. 1 (quotations); Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 90–91, 130–31. On the history of Japanese settlement in Mexico, see Jerry García, *Looking Like the Enemy: Japanese Mexicans, the Mexican State, and U.S. Hegemony, 1897–1945* (Tucson, 2014); and Selfa A. Chew, *Uprooting Community: Japanese Mexicans, World War II, and the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson, 2015). For other recent work on the migration to Mexico of another East Asian national group, see Julia María Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans: Transpacific Migration and the Search for a Homeland, 1910–1960* (Chapel Hill, 2012).

⁴⁶ “Plans Made to Check the ‘Peaceful Penetration’ by Purchasers and Squatters,” *San Benito Light*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (first quotation); “Kishi Passe[s] Buck on Jap Row to Bishop,” *San Benito Light*, January 12, 1921, p. 4 (second quotation); “Kishi Remains in Harlingen Awaiting Word from Yamada,” *San Benito Light*, January 12, 1921, p. 1 (third quotation); “Japs Look Over Farm But Remain in Their Hotel,” *San Benito Light*, January 17, 1921, p. 1 (fourth and fifth quotations).

shipped by the Okuma families arrived. They had promised the local people not to attempt to unload the goods for the present so the car was kept on the railroad tracks in Harlingen. Freight charge on the car amounted to \$875 and demurrage of five dollars per day was charged on the car."⁴⁷

As in California, white people in the Valley feared that they could not compete with the Japanese immigrants. According to one journalist, locals admitted that the Japanese farmer was "industrious and thrifty and unexcelled as an agriculturalist. He reclaims waste land that the American farmer would not care to cultivate." Writing from Brownsville, another journalist described the consequences of that realization. White residents "fear that [the] Japanese, because of their ability to operate farms and truck gardens at lower labor costs, will gradually drive out competition." Furthermore, he added, that fear was so pervasive that it "is openly expressed and it is arousing a feeling of bitterness among the [white] natives, both in towns and country districts." The few Valley advocates of Japanese immigration recognized this fear and the anger that flowed from it. As one Valley resident remarked, "I know the Japs and what they can do. I know that they are better farmers than the American farmers. These American farmers are afraid to put their farming up against the Jap kind."⁴⁸ Rather than compete in accordance with their professed beliefs in meritocracy, white Americans preferred to exclude the competition, damn the economic consequences, and privilege supposed national security.

In the forefront of this debate was the *San Benito Light*, already furious at the race-traitors in McAllen. It argued that economic calamity was preferable to Japanese settlement. "Better that every acre of the Valley remain unwatered and covered with brush and cactus than to allow it to be converted into a principality of Japan, populated and controlled by aliens incapable of understanding or maintaining American institutions and ready if called upon to take up arms against them," it argued. "Far fetched? Not in the least. One has only to study the history of the Japanese penetration of southern California and to probe conditions in some of its most productive counties to learn that the Japanese issue is a real and vital one." The fact that the "Japanese themselves admit that what they have done in California they hope to

⁴⁷ Ochiai, "Community of the Japanese Americans in the Rio Grande Valley," 45.

⁴⁸ John Sneed, "Alien Land Bill Causes Agitation," *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1921, p. 6 (first quotation); "Start Invasion of Texas," *Kansas City Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (second and third quotations); "Sun Thinks Japanese Gold Has Made Some Upper Valley Residents Speak Favorably of Colonization Project," *San Benito Light*, January 31, 1921, p. 2 (fourth quotation).

do here,” it continued, “should be enough to make every man who gives a hang for his fellow man, his state or his country line up solidly with the American Legion and those individuals who are resolved to keep the Valley white.”⁴⁹

Because of its recent and virulent anti-Japanese racism, the departure of the Okumas a week earlier, or perhaps some other motive, the *Light* published on February 7 a somewhat conciliatory editorial that demonstrated its recognition of Japan’s formidable power. “The Japanese think we don’t like them, and profess to be worried about it. . . . We seek no trouble with Japan,” the editorial contended. It justified the newspaper’s previous condemnations of that country’s aggression, writing, “We didn’t like the Shantung [Shandong] grab because we were sorry for China, and the Korean massacres are disgusting to us because of their barbarity.” (Tellingly, it made no comparable references to American atrocities in the Philippines twenty years earlier.) “So long as the Japanese do not become a distinct world menace,” the editorial continued, “the people of the Unit[e]d States will have no special interest whatever in them.” If the view of most Americans could be encapsulated, it would be one “not of ‘watchful waiting,’ but ‘simply of waiting’” to see “what the Japanese do in their new-won position in world affairs.” “Actually,” the editorial concluded, “the fate of Japanese-American relations is in the hands of the Japanese themselves.”⁵⁰

Reflecting their recognition of Japan’s power, white Texans who had slaughtered ethnic Mexicans just a few years earlier in the Valley made only vague threats of violence against the Japanese settlers. White people in Brownsville advised Kato to leave within forty-eight hours but did not assault him. White residents of Harlingen held the Okumas as informal captives, warning them to leave but using no force to ensure that outcome. In fact, leading opponents of the Japanese settlements actually downplayed the possibility of violence. As the *Light* reported, “‘Contrary to a general impression which has got around,’ S. H. Crews, the commander of the local post said today, ‘the American Legion is determined to find a solution to this matter in some way that is both peaceable and effective. We realize that it is a very difficult and delicate matter and, while we are determined to prevent Japanese colonization here, we want to do so in a way that will prevent embarrassment to all concerned.’” Another veteran declared that “there had been too much loose talk about violence. The American Legion

⁴⁹ “Apathy, the Ally of the Japanese,” *San Benito Light*, January 28, 1921, p. 2.

⁵⁰ “America [and] Japan,” *San Benito Light*, February 7, 1921, p. 2.

stands for law and order, he said, and would continue to stand for it.”⁵¹ While some elements of these crowds surely wanted violence, they were restrained by the leaders of the movement, who were men of some prominence locally.

During the Harlingen standoff, the Japanese consul in Chicago sent a telegram to the “town officer” of Harlingen, demanding a report and giving the affair “[a]n international aspect.” The diplomat wrote, “By news, certain Japanese families [who have] arrived [in] your town have been warned by committee of citizens and American Legion that [it] would be dangerous to settle on the land. Please wire particulars.” The consul and his telegram infuriated Valley whites—but they responded not with violence but with exasperation and renewed assurances of their commitment to nonviolence. “Members of the Harlingen post [of the American Legion] were indignant today over the receipt of a telegram signed by the Japanese consul in Chicago asking whether violence was being offered Jap subjects,” reported the *Light*. “The message was ignored, Legion men seeing it as a piece of gross impertinence.” Gross impertinence or not, a leader of the group felt compelled to issue a statement that “Legion men are doing everything in their power to prevent violence and to protect the Japs.” Despite evidence to the contrary, he concluded, “We are certainly not accountable to a Jap consul.”⁵²

Notwithstanding their bluster, Valley whites recognized that the views of the Japanese government were consequential. For that reason, they waited with sullen irritation while their victims considered possible options. According to a “report published in a Houston paper,” one Japanese immigrant “was remaining in Harlingen ‘awaiting diplomatic as well as legal advices,’” a quotation that “strengthened the suspicions held by a good many Harlingen people that the Jap situation had not been ended.” “‘The next move is up to the Japs.’ That is the attitude of Harlingen,” the *Light* reported. “‘We have told them we didn’t want them and they have promised to move on’ said one man there this afternoon. ‘Instead they keep hanging around and palavering and hobnobbing with themselves and sending telegrams and long distance messages.’”⁵³

In addition, officials in Cameron County told the Japanese in Harlingen that the Texas Rangers, a state police force, would protect them if

⁵¹ “Legion Post Here Agrees to Full Support of Fight on Japanese Immigration,” *San Benito Light*, December 23, 1920, p. 1.

⁵² “Japanese Consul Wires Harlingen,” *San Antonio Express*, January 10, 1921, p. 1 (first, second, and third quotations); “Are Anxious to Leave Valley,” *San Benito Light*, January 11, 1921, p. 1 (fourth through seventh quotations).

⁵³ “Next Move Up to Them Say Harlingen Men,” *San Benito Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 1.

they dared to test the threats of violence. "Harlingen Legion men have their doubts as to whether the offer came direct from rangers," the *Light* explained, "and think the Japs were merely told rangers would be provided to guard them if they wanted to take possession of their land." Due to fear or distrust perhaps, the Okumas declined the protection, prompting the *Light* to wonder what the effect would be "of the Jap brothers at Harlingen to accept proffered assistance of the rangers."⁵⁴ Irrespective of the source of the offer of protection or the reason for its refusal, the suggestion that the Rangers would protect the Japanese marked a profound difference from their behavior in 1915 when the Rangers perpetrated mass murder against ethnic Mexicans. It surely also reflected the reorganization of the Rangers after an investigation into their murderous conduct at that time.⁵⁵

Throughout the country, commentators cautioned white Texans to avoid violence that might generate friction between the two powerful adversaries, the United States and Japan. Newspapers nationwide published the relevant wire reports. One editorial expressed concern that there was "a question . . . whether repetition of the Texas incident might not cause a far greater flareback of Japanese opinion than" would more "orderly processes." Another worried that the "possibilities of international complications are seen, which may have an important bearing on negotiations now in progress between the Japanese and United States governments over the question of exclusion of orientals and the right of those now in the country to own land."⁵⁶

When the Okumas finally left Harlingen after three weeks, they did so on their own terms. In fact, they surprised their antagonists, who had no information on the family's whereabouts or destination. Furthermore, in assessing the success of the Legion and its supporters in clearing the Valley of Japanese settlers, a leader of the organization seemed to recognize the impotence of his group when he asserted that the largely innocuous threats had been the sum total of its intentions and, to a large extent, of its capabilities. "The main idea," he told the *San Benito Light*, was simply "to let our little brown friends know that we are on the job. California had

⁵⁴ "Are Anxious to Leave Valley," *San Benito Light*, January 10, 1921, p. 1.

⁵⁵ After an investigation in 1919 of this massacre of ethnic Mexicans, the state reorganized the Texas Rangers to prevent the sort of abuses that its deputized officials had undertaken. State representative José Tomás Canales was the driving force behind the investigation. See Johnson, *Revolution in Texas*, 169–75; and Martínez, *Injustice Never Leaves You*, 172–226.

⁵⁶ "The Texas Way," *Twin Falls Daily News*, January 15, 1921, p. 6 (first and second quotations); "Start Invasion of Texas," *Kansas City Times*, January 7, 1921, p. 1 (third quotation).

plenty of laws but the Japs slipped in anyway. The Legion posts of the Valley intend to see that California's mistake is not repeated here."⁵⁷

Although whites in the Rio Grande Valley were pleased with the departure of the Okumas from Harlingen, they recognized that the victory was incomplete: "The promises of a handful of Japs [do] not seem likely to solve nor end our Japanese situation." Solving the situation, many Valley whites agreed, required legislation. After all, the Okumas "had a legal right" to their land, as the Legion men themselves admitted. While they had succeeded in delaying and expelling a small number of Japanese with threats, they now needed "orderly processes" to stanch the flow of immigrants.⁵⁸ In fact, immediately after the arrival of the Okumas, Brownsville attorney Harbert Davenport began to investigate legal ways of denying them occupancy. As the San Antonio *Express* reported on January 8, 1921, Davenport "recalled a Texas law passed in 1892, which denies the right to own land in Texas to any non-resident alien."⁵⁹

Less than a week later, the American Legion utilized Davenport's legal finding as leverage to expel the Okumas by undermining the validity of their deed. "The deed will be attacked on the ground that the Texas laws of 1892 prevent the sale of Texas lands to alien nonresidents," explained the Corpus Christi *Times*.⁶⁰ The San Benito *Light*, given its opposition to the Japanese, applauded the Legion for pursuing any method to keep the immigrants out, declaring that it would be foolhardy "to imagine the Japs will abandon so easily their efforts to establish themselves in this section." Furthermore, it emphasized the necessity of the law and the importance of creating "a public sentiment so strong that no one, no matter how greedy or how un-American will dare risk its wrath."⁶¹

⁵⁷ "Mercedes Farmers to Aid Legion in Anti-Jap Movement," San Benito *Light*, September 16, 1921, p. 1.

⁵⁸ "Our 'Jap Situation,'" San Benito *Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (first quotation); "Japanese Leave Harlingen," San Benito *Light*, February 1, 1921, p. 1 (second quotation); "The Texas Way," Twin Falls *Daily News*, January 15, 1921, p. 6 (third quotation).

⁵⁹ "Senators Endorse Valley Offensive Against Japanese," San Antonio *Express*, January 8, 1921, p. 1. According to this account, the only case in which the law had been tested involved a Mexican American who was protected under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed with Mexico in 1848, which offered full citizenship rights to the Mexican Americans living in lands gobbled up by the Americans as the spoils of the U.S.-Mexican War. That precedent should not be relevant, the *Express* explained; "No such treaty arrangement exists in the case of a Japanese subject, Davenport says."

⁶⁰ "Japanese Deeds to Be Attacked under 1892 Law," Corpus Christi *Times*, January 14, 1921, p. 3. Attorneys recognized that the law had "been held invalid in some of its provisions," when it had been unsuccessfully used against a Mexican national in 1892, but concluded that this flawed law was "the only legal method" that the attorneys drafting the new legislation could think of to invoke "at this time to prevent Japanese colonization of the Valley."

⁶¹ "Our 'Jap Situation,'" San Benito *Light*, January 14, 1921, p. 2 (first quotation); "Apathy, the Ally of the Japanese," San Benito *Light*, January 28, 1921, p. 2 (second quotation).

As Valley whites stirred up support across the state for a legal solution, on January 28 Senator Richard Moberley Dudley of El Paso proposed an “anti-Japanese colonization bill” in the state senate (S.B. 142). Dudley noted “the danger of Texas becoming overrun with Japanese and said the measure he offered was modeled [after] the California exclusion act prohibiting ownership of land by persons not eligible to become citizens.”⁶² In the first days of February, Harbert Davenport and other prominent white people from the Valley departed for Austin to testify before the legislature in behalf of the Dudley bill. As the measure moved toward passage, the *San Benito Light* proudly reported the role of Valley residents in ensuring that outcome: “Encouraged by telling points driven home by their witnesses in the senate hearing of the Dudley . . . bill, members of the American Legion from the Lower Rio Grande Valley today predicted the passage of that measure or a suitable substitute.” State representatives likewise declared that “the people of the Rio Grande Valley are determined to prevent the settlement of their lands by Japanese, or other foreigners who do not become in truth and in fact American citizens.”⁶³

By February 11 whites in the Valley were jubilant over two bits of news. First, they learned that Yamada and Kishi, the broker and dealer involved in the initial Valley land sale, had agreed to “pocket their loss and abandon further efforts there”; and second, they heard “that the senate legislative committee reported favorably on the Dudley anti alien land law.”⁶⁴ Then in rapid succession the legislature had passed the bill by March 11—slightly revised and renamed the Pope bill to include its Nueces County sponsor in the Texas House, Walter Elmer Pope. On April 1, Governor Pat M. Neff signed it into law, effective on June 11.⁶⁵

⁶² “Proposed Measure Modeled on California Alien Law,” *San Benito Light*, January 28, 1921, p. 1 (quotations); *Journal of the Senate of Texas: Being the Regular Session of the Thirty-Seventh Legislature, Begun and Held in the City of Austin, January 11 to March 12, 1921* (Austin, 1921), January 28, 1921, p. 170; hereinafter cited as *Texas Senate Journal*. On Dudley, see “Richard Moberley Dudley,” *Legislative Reference Library of Texas*, <http://lrl.texas.gov/legLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=2386>.

⁶³ “Legion Men Hopeful of Law to Bar Japs,” *San Benito Light*, February 5, 1921, p. 1.

⁶⁴ “Ask Holder of Notes to Cancel Debt,” *San Benito Light*, February 11, 1921, p. 1 (quotations); *Texas Senate Journal*, February 10, 1921, pp. 347–48.

⁶⁵ “Anti Jap Act Engrossed in Austin House,” *San Benito Light*, March 10, 1921, p. 1; *Texas Senate Journal*, March 11, 1921, p. 1169; “Anti-Alien Land Law Will Go in Effect June 11,” McKinney (Tex.) *Daily Courier-Gazette*, April 25, 1921, p. 3; “An Act to amend . . . ‘Aliens,’ relating to the rights, powers and disabilities of aliens . . . with respect to property in this state,” April 1, 1921, *General Laws of the State of Texas, Passed by the Thirty-Seventh Legislature at the Regular Session, . . . Adjourned March 12, 1921* (Austin, [1921]), 261–63; hereinafter cited as *Texas Alien Land Law, General Laws of Texas*. See also “Walter Elmer Pope,” *Legislative Reference Library of Texas*, <http://lrl.texas.gov/legLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=1710>; and “Pat M. Neff,” *Legislative Reference Library of Texas*, <http://lrl.texas.gov/legLeaders/governors/govPage.cfm?governorID=27>.

The legislation against the Japanese contained evidence of the hysteria that gripped white Texans in the winter and spring of 1921. Most of the law, of course, consisted of the unemotional language typical of such legislation, even as it targeted the Japanese with unmistakable precision. It exempted Europeans ("Aliens eligible to citizenship in the United States") and citizens of Canada and Mexico ("Aliens who are natural born citizens of nations which have a common land boundary with the United States") but banned the Japanese—as they were not "eligible to citizenship in the United States." However, the final clause of the bill highlighted the fevered emotions under which the legislation was hustled through: "The fact that aliens who do not propose becoming citizens of the United States are now attempting to acquire title to large bodies of fertile land in this State creates an emergency and an imperative public necessity that this bill shall and it hereby does take effect from and after its passage, and it is so enacted."⁶⁶ It did not highlight the fact that the so-called public emergency had been caused by a mere handful of Japanese arrivals—most of whom had already been chased away. Clearly, this emergency was no emergency at all.

Although the lawmakers ignored his testimony in the legislature, Saburo Arai, a Japanese national and landowner living in Houston, provided considerable insight into the views of many of the nearly five hundred Japanese in Texas in 1921. Arai urged that "the committee weigh the matter carefully before rendering [a] final decision." He stated that "although he was not a citizen it was only because that right had been denied him and that he was confident he spoke the opinion of hundreds of his race." Recalling the expedition of Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, which forced Japan to engage with the world after centuries of self-imposed isolation, Arai argued that the Japanese emigrants saw this event as the salvation of their country of origin: "He denied that the Japanese were aggressing upon the territory in the Rio Grande Valley and declared that the Japanese looked upon the United States as their benefactor and that it was through the influence of this country that the gateway of Japan had been opened."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Texas Alien Land Law, *General Laws of Texas*, 261 (first, second, and third quotations), 263 (fourth quotation).

⁶⁷ "Large Japanese Plan to Invade Valley Through Mexico Made at Hearing," *San Benito Light*, February 4, 1921, p. 1 (quotations); John Sneed, "Alien Land Bill Causes Agitation," *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1921, p. 6. On Saburo Arai, see Walls, *Japanese Texans*, 119–27.

Far less noble than the appeal from Arai was the racist hysteria engendered in Austin, in the Valley, and across the state during the debate over the law, and its probable influence in the killing of a Japanese farmer, I. Onishi, on June 10 near La Marque on the Gulf Coast, some three hundred miles northeast of Harlingen. Onishi's young son told investigators that he had discovered an unknown man peering through the windows of his home, a stranger who demanded to see "the boss" of the house. When Onishi walked out to meet him, the stranger gunned him down and fled. Although "the boy was not able to say whether [t]he man who shot his father was white or colored," it is noteworthy that the assassin killed Onishi around 8 P.M., just four hours before the anti-Japanese law went into effect.⁶⁸ As this killing suggests, Texans elsewhere used the hysteria surrounding the Valley confrontation to effect their own purposes against Japanese settlers.

When the handful of Japanese arrived in the lower Rio Grande Valley in January 1921, they arrived in the long shadow of the massacre of ethnic Mexicans in 1915 and in the immediate aftermath of the expulsion of African Americans from McAllen. The Japanese arrivals amounted to just two or three dozen migrants, at least four of whom were young children. Nonetheless, they were skilled farmers and possessed capital sufficient to purchase hundreds of acres of land. Although they had no legal right to U.S. citizenship, they did have the support of a powerful and growing Japanese empire intent upon protecting its emigrants in order to safeguard its own status internationally. Hence, the Japanese differed in key ways from both the ethnic Mexicans and the local African Americans, differences that help explain the sharp distinctions in their treatment at the hands of white people in the Valley.

Unlike the Japanese, ethnic Mexicans inhabited the region in numbers that significantly exceeded the white population, and some migrated regularly back and forth across the Rio Grande. Dispossessed of their land in Texas over the previous two decades or on the run from the brutal revolution that had ravaged Mexico since 1910, ethnic Mexicans in the Valley were largely unskilled laborers with very limited assets. Some of them—the Mexican Americans—possessed U.S. citizenship, and those who did not could obtain it under the provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Even when

⁶⁸ "Lamarque [*sic*] Farmer Dies from Wound," *Galveston (Tex.) Tribune*, June 11, 1921, p. 1. See also "Japanese Farmer Called to Door and Fatally Shot on Farm Near La Marque," *Galveston Daily News*, June 12, 1921, p. 10.

individuals held U.S. citizenship, however, they were subject to a decidedly second-class version as a result of Jim Crow practices. Those ethnic Mexicans possessing Mexican citizenship could expect limited diplomatic support from Mexico when targeted for violence in Texas; however, given the weakness of that war-ravaged country, white Texans felt at liberty to ignore such support altogether. Like the Japanese, African Americans lived in the Valley in sparse numbers, but in contrast, they were largely unskilled, suffered legally mandated second-class citizenship, and could appeal to no foreign governments—weak or strong—for protection. As a consequence of these differences, white Texans could threaten the Japanese and ultimately drive them from the region with unrelenting hostility, but they could not abuse them with the casual impunity that they enjoyed in their dealings with ethnic Mexicans and black people. White Texans proved this point with astonishing clarity in the weeks and months after the flight of the Japanese from Harlingen.

After the murder of a white teenaged girl in Rio Hondo in February 1921, white posses rounded up dozens of ethnic Mexican suspects and lynched Salvador Saucedo, a Mexican national. In its coverage the *San Benito Light* claimed that the alleged crime in Rio Hondo had aroused passions that exceeded those evidenced in 1915. Even during those “stirring” days, it observed, there had “never [been] a crime that [had] caused such widespread interest and public indignation.”⁶⁹ A short time later, in July 1921, whites drove an unknown number of black people from Harlingen. Expressing his satisfaction with the expulsion, a white resident declared, “I don’t know whether [the black people] who are reported missing today had been doing any wrong. But I am certain the community will not suffer any from their absence.”⁷⁰ Over the next sixteen months, mobs in Harlingen, Mercedes, and Weslaco killed three more victims, all of whom, like Saucedo, were Mexican nationals.⁷¹ After Mexican diplomats pressed the U.S. State Department to investigate the lynching in Weslaco in 1922, whites in the

⁶⁹ “Crime More Shocking Than Any Staged in Valley during Bandit Trouble,” *San Benito Light*, February 28, 1921, p. 4.

⁷⁰ “Undesirables Heed Notices in Harlingen,” *San Benito Light*, July 23, 1921, p. 1.

⁷¹ On the mob killings in Harlingen and Weslaco, see “Grand Jury Probes Death of Mexican,” *San Benito Light*, February 4, 1922, p. 1; “Mexican Farmer Shot from Horse Near Harlingen,” *San Benito Light*, February 6, 1922, p. 1; “Mexico Protests Weslaco Affair,” *Brownsville Herald*, November 15, 1922, p. 1; and “Body of Zarate Found in Road Near Weslaco,” *Brownsville Herald*, November 16, 1922, p. 1. On the incident in Mercedes, which involved the killing of a teenaged ethnic Mexican girl by a posse raiding the Mexican American quarters, see “Customs Officer Killed by Bootleggers in Fight at Mercedes Sunday Night,” *Brownsville Herald*, October 2, 1922, p. 1; and “Orders Border Men to ‘Shoot First,’” *San Antonio Light*, October 2, 1922, p. 1.

Valley dismissed these protests with more violence by threatening vengeance against the Mexican consul posted in Hidalgo. Amid these mob-related threats and actions, Mexican officials furnished reporters with a lengthy “list of Mexican nationals killed along the border in the last eleven months for which no punishment has been meted out.”⁷²

While white Texans in the Valley had deployed the recently organized and very respectable American Legion against the Japanese, they largely relied on branches of the far less reputable white supremacist organization, the Ku Klux Klan, to take action against ethnic Mexicans and African Americans. In the summer and fall of 1921, Klan chapters formed in Brownsville, Harlingen, Mercedes, McAllen, and San Benito, prompted, perhaps, by the fear recently provoked by the Japanese. At this point, the Legion and the Klan apparently had similar memberships. In fact, the Invisible Empire made its first appearance in one Hidalgo County town at an event for the veterans’ group. “Mercedes got its first glimpse of Klansmen last night when a long line of masked figures suddenly appeared” at the height of a “street dance being staged by [the] American Legion post,” wrote an observer. “The appearance of the Klan had a sobering effect on the crowd of merrymakers. Dancing and music stopped and the procession moved quietly down Texas Avenue and disappeared in the darkness at the edge of town.”⁷³ Yet white supremacists in the Valley chose to deploy the Klan against African Americans and ethnic Mexicans, a decision reflecting the real differences in white aggression against the Japanese.

Watching the drama against the Japanese migrants unfold in Texas in early 1921, white Louisianans worried that the same Japanese migrants driven from California and moving toward the Lone Star State might also be attracted to agricultural settlement in Louisiana. As Louisiana delegates rewrote the state constitution in the spring of 1921, they moved

⁷² “Protest Filed at Washington,” *Austin Statesman*, November 15, 1922, p. 1; “Mexican Consul General Gives List of Mexicans Whose Deaths Unpunished,” *Brownsville Herald*, November 18, 1922, p. 1; “Consul General Makes Public List [of] Mexicans Killed in Texas,” *Corsicana (Tex.) Daily Sun*, November 18, 1922, p. 1; “Consulate Now Publishes List,” *Laredo (Tex.) Weekly Times*, November 19, 1922, p. 1 (quotation).

⁷³ “Mercedes Crowd of Merrymakers Views Klansmen,” *San Benito Light*, October 8, 1921, p. 1 (quotations). On the rise of the Klan in the Valley, see, for example, “Harlingen Receives Real Surprise When 200 Klansmen March,” *San Benito Light*, August 27, 1921, p. 1; “Klan Makes Existence Here Known by Gift of \$50 to Sick Ex Soldier,” *San Benito Light*, November 23, 1921, p. 1; “Klan Appears in M’Allen Church to Make Contribution,” *San Benito Light*, February 21, 1922, p. 4; and “Klan Makes Appearance at Revival,” *San Benito Light*, February 27, 1922, p. 1. On the growth of the Klan nationally in this period, see Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago, 2017).

to block any such eventuality. "No Japanese is going to be allowed to own land or mineral rights in the state of Louisiana," predicted the Shreveport *Times*. One of the chief proponents of the measure was former governor and then state representative Jared Y. Sanders. "It is better to act beforehand than to act too late," he told committee members. The man who introduced the ordinance, J. S. Dykes of Union Parish, pointed to the events in the Rio Grande Valley as a cautionary tale. "Louisiana has enough of radical conflict without continuing the possibility of colonization by oriental people," he explained. "And the recent trouble in Texas and the necessity for drastic action taken there to prevent Japanese colonization would show that with the threat of expulsion from California impending, or at least a restriction upon rights of ownership [sic] of real property in that state, the Jap is beginning to look elsewhere in the nation for location and settlement. We don't want h[i]m here!"⁷⁴

Next door in Mississippi, former governor and U.S. senator James K. Vardaman applauded Louisiana for what he called "a very wise precaution." "If I had my way about things," Vardaman editorialized, "I would not permit any except members of the white race to own land in this republic." Although Mississippi did not follow Louisiana's example, the historian Stephanie Hinnertshitz has found that cotton planters in the state did support such a measure. In his editorial Vardaman argued that "every state in the republic should follow [Louisiana's] example." Like white Americans in the West, those along a wide stretch of the Gulf South worried that Japanese immigration presented an imminent threat and moved to neutralize it.⁷⁵

To the west of Texas, in neighboring New Mexico, residents also responded directly to the events in South Texas. "[T]he citizens of the San Benito district of Texas have passed a series of resolutions and petitions to be presented to the legislature asking for a bill to exclude aliens from owning or leasing property in that state," reported the *Rio Grande Republic* in Las Cruces on January 13. As a result, it added, "The Dona Ana County Farm Bureau of this state will soon take up the matter and from the sentiment expressed a petition will be sent to the New Mexico legislature

⁷⁴ "Louisiana May Bar Jap from Holding Land," Shreveport (La.) *Times*, April 8, 1921, p. 1 (first and second quotations); "Convention Gets Under Way with Important Work," Opelousas (La.) *St. Landry Clarion*, March 26, 1921, pp. 1, 5 (third and fourth quotations). The Louisiana constitutional convention delegates based the ban closely on "California's Famous Statute." See "State Bars Japs, Chinese to Own Land," *New Orleans Item*, June 8, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁵ "Keep the White Race Pure," Jackson (Miss.) *Vardaman's Weekly*, March 24, 1921, p. 5 (quotations); Stephanie Hinnertshitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill, 2017), 27–69, esp. 45.

asking for protection from aliens for the lands in this state.”⁷⁶ By September 1921, New Mexico, like Louisiana, had amended the state constitution to include an alien land provision. Legislators in Arizona also responded quickly to the anti-Japanese hysteria, probably because of the state’s long border with California and the perceived threat of an influx of migrants. In February 1921, Arizona lawmakers enacted their own anti-Japanese legislation. Amazingly, the arrival of a few dozen Japanese migrants from California in the Rio Grande Valley in 1921 directly sparked the legal exclusion of these people from Texas, Louisiana, and New Mexico, prompted its consideration in Mississippi, and stimulated the growth of anti-Japanese sentiments across the Gulf South and in the U.S. West.⁷⁷

As this article has shown, whites in the Valley mobilized with extraordinary coordination and discipline to combat a very small influx of immigrants, a mobilization that underscored the fears that whites entertained about the hard work and enviable thrift practiced by the Japanese and, as whites interpreted those traits, the menacing trickery and duplicity deployed by Japanese immigrants to the disadvantage of good, honest white Americans. As a result of their efforts and the subsequent promulgation of the alien land law, the number of Japanese residents in Texas in 1930 was only 519—up just slightly from 449 a decade before.⁷⁸

Furthermore, led by figures of local prominence, white residents of the Valley were cognizant of the distinctions in the relative power of the United States and the home countries of those individuals targeted, and, significantly, they used that understanding in determining their tactics. With war-torn and internationally weak Mexico, white Texans killed Mexican nationals without fear of consequence. With a powerful, assertive Japan, they intimidated the newcomers but did not resort to violence. Underscoring the prevailing view that ethnic Mexicans were a group easier to control and exploit than the Japanese, the band of white men who visited the Japanese farmer near Santa Maria advised him to fire any newly arrived Japanese workers and to “employ Mexicans if he needed, as he alleged, more farm hands.”⁷⁹ Recognizing the geopolitical differences in these two “brown” countries and treating their nationals accordingly, whites in the Valley exemplified the validity of the argument made by historian Paul

⁷⁶ “Sentiment Is Crystallizing against Alien Competition,” *Las Cruces (N.Mex.) Rio Grande Republic*, January 13, 1921, p. 1.

⁷⁷ *House Documents*, 67 Cong., 1 Sess., No. 89: Charles F. Curry, *Alien Land Laws and Alien Rights* (Washington, D.C., 1921), 32, 36–38, 68.

⁷⁸ Bruce A. Glasrud, “Asians in Texas: An Overview, 1870–1990,” *East Texas Historical Journal*, 39, no. 2 (2001), 10–22, esp. 14.

⁷⁹ “Next Move in Jap Situation Is Up to Kishi,” *San Benito Light*, January 8, 1921, p. 4.

A. Gilje that mobs were fundamentally rational entities, not the irrational forces so often imagined by scholars and laypersons alike.⁸⁰

Affirming the finding that racist mobs tailored their actions to the relative strength or weakness of an immigrant's nation of origin, historians William D. Carrigan and Clive Webb have found that a stabilizing Mexican government began to place diplomatic pressure on the United States to protect Mexican citizens from American mobs shortly after the Mexican Revolution. Dubbing the 1920s the "Decisive Decade," Carrigan and Webb argue that Mexican officials, exploiting the fears of U.S. politicians and businessmen over the stability of foreign markets and the international reputation of the United States, curbed vigilante violence to such an extent that the last known killing of a Mexican citizen at the hands of a mob in the United States occurred in Raymondville, Texas, in September 1926.⁸¹ Although Mexican officials still did not possess the influence of their counterparts in Japan and did see a number of their nationals lynched in the United States in the 1920s, they achieved some success in providing protection for their expatriates. Yet by placing their success into context with the much greater success of the Japanese, this study demonstrates just how modest that achievement was.

Texas legislators responded quickly to a hysterical white outcry against an extremely small group of Japanese migrants in the Valley by enacting an anti-alien land law. In Louisiana and New Mexico, legislators reacted to the same perceived threat and incorporated anti-Japanese provisions into their state constitutions before the issue had even surfaced as a major subject of debate in either state. Furthermore, the Florida legislature, "taking a cue from Louisiana," determined to lock out the Japanese with its own alien land constitutional amendment in 1925. The next year, voters ratified it. By that time, the three Gulf South states with the largest (if minuscule) Japanese populations all had alien land provisions, and nearly the entire Gulf Coast had banned Japanese settlement.⁸²

By demonstrating that some white people encouraged rather than opposed Japanese settlement in the Valley and that the anti-Japanese majority intimidated these so-called race-traitors into silence, this study shows that both white supremacy generally and anti-Asian sentiments specifically were not as monolithic as historians have often suggested. In this sense, it affirms the work of historian Lon Kurashige, who has posited that the

⁸⁰ Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 7–8.

⁸¹ Carrigan and Webb, *Forgotten Dead*, 147–58 (quotation on 147). According to Carrigan and Webb, the last known lynching of a Mexican American occurred in Farmington, New Mexico, in November 1928. *Ibid.*, 159–64.

⁸² Hinnertshitz, *Different Shade of Justice*, 42–56 (quotation on 53). Florida had 153, Louisiana 219, and Texas 449 Japanese or Japanese Americans in residence in 1920.

exclusion of Asian immigrants from U.S. citizenship and often from the boundaries of the country was not the result of a solid consensus among white Americans but the subject of a vigorous debate in which a white minority—including prominent academics, religious leaders, businessmen, and politicians—argued for the benefits of immigration from Asia. The experience in the Valley also affirms the scholarship of historian David C. Atkinson, who has demonstrated that, contrary to the prevailing views of historians, collaborative anti-Asian immigration policies and practices among white-majority countries—the United States, Britain, and white settler colonies like Canada and Australia—from the 1890s to the 1920s tended to sow divisions and tensions among them rather than to advance the global white supremacy that these nations sought.⁸³

After the murder of two Japanese immigrants and an attack with tar and feathers on a Japanese national in California within two days in June 1924, the press in Japan picked up these stories to critique what was regarded as white American racism generally and anti-Japanese racism specifically. “The year 1924 became a watershed for the Japanese view on lynching,” writes historian Fumiko Sakashita, an insight magnified in Japan by the recent passage by the U.S. Congress of the National Origins Act of 1924, which banned Japanese immigration to the United States outright. While the 1920–1921 affair in the Rio Grande Valley did not attract the kind of anger and comment in Japan that the California incidents of June 1924 did, this study suggests that anti-Japanese mob intimidation, threats of violence, and actual violence were neither uncommon nor confined to the West Coast.⁸⁴

A growing number of studies address racist violence against Asian Americans in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States. Not surprisingly, much of this work focuses on the abuse directed at people from China, a country that—like Mexico—was weak and could not, therefore, exert the leverage necessary to curb violence against its nationals from the 1850s until at least the turn of the twentieth century. In their studies of anti-Chinese mob violence, Jean Pfaelzer and Beth Lew-Williams argue that, while mobs did hang and shoot Chinese victims, white Americans more commonly targeted Chinese immigrants for expulsion or exclusion.⁸⁵ As

⁸³ Kurashige, *Two Faces of Exclusion*; Atkinson, *Burden of White Supremacy*.

⁸⁴ Fumiko Sakashita, “Lynching across the Pacific: Japanese Views and African American Responses in the Wartime Antilynching Campaign,” in William D. Carrigan and Christopher Waldrep, eds., *Swift to Wrath: Lynching in Global Historical Perspective* (Charlottesville, 2013), 181–214 (quotations on 190).

⁸⁵ Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans* (New York, 2007); Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018). Pfaelzer provides a useful map of the anti-Chinese expulsions in California between 1849 and 1906. Pfaelzer, *Driven Out*, ix.

this article shows, whites in the Valley were similarly reluctant to employ lethal mob violence against the Japanese. Elsewhere, however, white Americans did commit such violence on occasion, as historian Larry R. Gerlach has established with the identification of a Japanese lynching victim in Utah in 1884 and as Sakashita describes with the attacks in 1924 on Japanese victims—events that the Japanese press dubbed lynchings, despite the nonlethal outcome of the tar-and-feathering incident.⁸⁶

This article also intersects with a number of recent studies on Chinese and Japanese migration in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.⁸⁷ These studies underscore the mobility of Chinese and Japanese expatriates and help explain Asian migrations across the Texas-Mexico border in the early twentieth century, such as the one that brought a number of Japanese migrants to San Antonio in 1907 and provoked such turmoil there. Since much of the scholarship focuses on Chinese migrants, this study advances the literature by focusing on Japanese settlers and on the territory north of the Rio Grande.

Like the works of historians such as Neil Foley and Gerald Horne, this article underscores the complex and heterogeneous quality of racial demography and interracial relations in South Texas. In particular, it foregrounds the varieties of white oppression against not only Japanese immigrants but ethnic Mexicans and African Americans as well. Yet it also demonstrates how racism and conflict undermined the relationships among these racial minority groups, as illustrated by the struggle between African Americans and Japanese immigrants in San Antonio and by the expulsion of the black population from McAllen by the combined forces of white and Mexican American residents. It also joins a growing body of

⁸⁶ On anti-Chinese mob violence, see also Scott Zesch, *The Chinatown War: Chinese Los Angeles and the Massacre of 1871* (New York, 2012); Stephen J. Leonard, *Lynching in Colorado, 1859–1919* (Boulder, 2002), 123–54, esp. 131–35; and Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850–1935* (Durham, N.C., 2006), 81–82, 168–71. On the anti-Japanese lynching in Utah, see Larry R. Gerlach, “Ogden’s ‘Horrible Tragedy’: The Lynching of George Segal,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 49 (Spring 1981), 157–72. On the mob violence (as well as a vigilante killing of two Japanese nationals) in California, see Sakashita, “Lynching across the Pacific,” 190–91. For illuminating discussions of anti-Asian race riots in the Pacific Coast U.S.–Canada borderlands, see Atkinson, *Burden of White Supremacy*, 111–14.

⁸⁷ Elliott Young, *Alien Nation: Chinese Migration in the Americas from the Coolie Era through World War II* (Chapel Hill, 2014); Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill, 2013); Grace Peña Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican: Global Migration, Localism, and Exclusion in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Stanford, 2012); Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (Chapel Hill, 2017); Schiavone Camacho, *Chinese Mexicans*; García, *Looking Like the Enemy*; Chew, *Uprooting Community*; Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York, 2005); Daniel M. Masterson and Sayaka Funada-Classen, *The Japanese in Latin America* (Urbana, 2004).

scholarship, as represented by the works of Julian Lim and Grace Peña Delgado, on multiracial relations along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.⁸⁸

Most of the scholarship on mob violence against Asian populations in the United States focuses on the Mountain and the Far West regions, just as much Asian American historiography does in general.⁸⁹ With its focus on South Texas, this essay instead orients the story toward the South and the Gulf Coast, contributing to a trend evident in works such as *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South*, which highlight the varieties of Asian American history in the region.⁹⁰ In so doing, this study also complicates and recasts the well-known issue of racist mob violence in the South, repopulating a story usually focused on white-black relations with persons of Japanese and Mexican American descent. In reporting the push to exclude Japanese immigrants from Texas through the alien land law, the *Dallas Morning News* portrayed the state as leading the fight in freezing out a potential new competitor in the South and predicted correctly that other states might emulate Texas's efforts: "It is admitted by all that the question is an important one and that Japanese settlement in Texas looms up as one which might become of great seriousness in the future and is pregnant of another race problem that might have to be dealt with by the South in years to come." Indeed, whites elsewhere in the Gulf South quickly took up the issue and, in Louisiana and Florida, took steps to ensure that this "race problem" would not become a major issue in those states.⁹¹

While the focus in this article is on the South, white westerners likewise moved expeditiously to freeze out potential Japanese newcomers. As California drove out its Japanese residents, neighboring Arizona pushed

⁸⁸ Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley, 1997); Gerald Horne, *Black and Brown: African Americans and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1920* (New York, 2005); Lim, *Porous Borders*; Delgado, *Making the Chinese Mexican*.

⁸⁹ Until recently, studies in Asian American history have focused on the Pacific Coast, particularly on California. More recent literature has expanded the geographical focus, particularly by placing the U.S. Pacific Coast into conversation with developments in Canada and Latin America. See, for example, Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, 2015); and Kornel S. Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley, 2012). This study continues these efforts by stretching the narrative farther to the south and east.

⁹⁰ Khyati Y. Joshi and Jigna Desai, eds., *Asian Americans in Dixie: Race and Migration in the South* (Urbana, 2013); Leslie Bow, *Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the Segregated South* (New York, 2010); Hinnertshitz, *Different Shade of Justice*. On Asian Americans in the Midwest, another understudied area, see Yu, *Thinking Orientals*; and Victor Jew, "'Chinese Demons': The Violent Articulation of Chinese Otherness and Interracial Sexuality in the U.S. Midwest, 1885–1889," *Journal of Social History*, 37 (Winter 2003), 389–410.

⁹¹ John Sneed, "Alien Land Bill Causes Agitation," *Dallas Morning News*, February 6, 1921, p. 6. On the passage of "anti-Asian land laws" in Louisiana and elsewhere, see Walls, *Japanese Texans*, 120 (quotation in note); and Hinnertshitz, *Different Shade of Justice*, 27–69.

through its own anti-alien legislation even as the dramatic events were playing themselves out in South Texas, where some of the California fugitives had fled. Responding to the events in the Lone Star State, New Mexico—wedged between Arizona and Texas—wrote an anti-alien provision into its new state constitution.⁹² Even as this article provides insight into anti-Japanese sentiment in the American West, however, it focuses on a different West than the one usually examined by scholars, the West Coast.

The vast majority of scholarship on Japanese American history focuses on the internment during World War II and on how stereotypes of these people—and of East Asians generally—as inherently unassimilable drove white Americans and the machinery of government and law to suspend the rights of nearly every ethnic Japanese resident and to imprison them as enemies of the state. With its focus on the post–World War I period, this study demonstrates how the seeds of the internment sprouted among the hysteria attendant to Japanese population growth in 1920–1921, and how the anti-Japanese movements across the country in this period drove the rising rancor between the United States and Japan internationally, ultimately spawning the Pacific war of 1941–1945 and the accompanying internment itself.

Finally, in showing how Japan could exercise its influence over American politicians in the nation's capital and over crowds of ordinary white people in small towns in Texas, and that neighboring Mexico could not, this essay confirms that the study of racist and mob violence in the United States is a fundamentally international story rather than a narrowly “American” one. In this sense, it builds on a handful of recent monographs and edited volumes that treat racist intimidation, threats of violence, and mob violence “historically and globally.” Certainly, studies of violence targeted at ethnic Chinese, Chileans, Italians, and others will almost certainly show that the possibility of death for foreign nationals at the hands of American mobs was directly related to the power and influence wielded by the governments in their countries of origin and to the potential consequences for the American government and by extension for the perpetrators, an advantage clearly unavailable to most African Americans.⁹³

⁹² Curry, *Alien Land Laws and Alien Rights*, 32, 36–38, 68.

⁹³ William D. Carrigan and Christopher Waldrep, “Introduction,” in Carrigan and Waldrep, eds., *Swift to Wrath*, 1–9 (quotation on 2). For other studies of lynching in a global historical perspective, see Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt, eds., *Globalizing Lynching History: Vigilantism and Extralegal Punishment from an International Perspective* (New York, 2011); Sarah Fouts, “The Mafia, La Raza, and the Spanish-Language Press Coverage of the 1891 Lynchings in New Orleans,” *Journal of Southern History*, 83 (August 2017), 509–30; and Michael J. Pfeifer, ed., *Global Lynching and Collective Violence* (2 vols.; Urbana, 2017).