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**The Limits of Sympathy: Anti-Chinese Riots as Racialized Space on the American Frontier**

Chinese laborers in the late nineteenth century were a new feature of the industrializing United States. Attached to them were mainstream associations with a mysterious, overly populous and threatening East Asian culture. In the 1880s this constellation of assumptions came into tight proximity as the U.S. lurched through economic depressions and labor disputes. As the Chinese Exclusion Act passed in 1882, anti-Chinese riots were a recurring feature of the frontier.

While the pictorial press struggled to thrash out a coherent sense of expanding national space, illustrations of riots throughout the west raged through the era's periodicals. This paper argues that images of anti-Chinese riots were certainly violent, but they also demarcated discrete spaces of racial hierarchy on the seemingly chaotic frontier. Chinese laborers were always overpowered. White laborers were always attacking. Still, in these envisioned spaces, readers were invited to imaginatively extend the power of the mainstream in expressing their sympathy for helpless Chinese figures. That sympathy had nothing to do with racial justice, and everything to do with symbolically imposing order on a disordered landscape.