

## Let's Talk: Intersecting Histories of Black and Asian Neighborhoods in Oakland

Editing & Audio Transcription by Christopher Nakatsuka

[intro music plays-Lundstroem: *The perfect corporate podcast intro*]

Let's Talk intro

**Stephanie Hoang:** Welcome to another episode of Let's Talk, a podcast where we feature individuals and organizations who are working hard to bring our AAPI and Black communities together. By highlighting their stories, we hope to encourage inclusive, intergenerational, and anti-racist perspectives in all spaces. I'm Stephanie Hoang, the Program Manager at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center and this is "Let's Talk."

Today we have a special Let's Talk episode that was recorded live at the Oakland Museum of California in the Black Power exhibition of the History Gallery. Join us in a conversation between Carolyn Johnson, the Executive Director of the Black Cultural Zone and Roy Chan, Director of the Oakland Chinatown Oral History Project, facilitated by me, as the Oakland natives reflect on their experiences and the intersecting histories of Black and Asian neighborhoods in Oakland.

**Rhonda Pagnozzi:** Hello everybody, thank you so much for joining us today. We're gonna go ahead and get started with our panel talk. *I'm gonna let Stephanie's gonna* do the round of intros here, but I just wanted to gather your attention that this is a part of our Lunar New Year festivities today. And I just want to remind everybody to check out the garden and check out their performances. Check out our cafe in our store and keep an eye on our website and consider becoming a member. If you're doing this type of program. We're going to help to keep our galleries activated and do more in gallery programming going forward. But with that, I'm going to hand it off to Stephanie and she's going to introduce the panel discussion.

**Stephanie:** Thank you, Rhonda. Hi, everyone, my name is Stephanie. I am the program manager at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, which is right located just down the street at Pacific Renaissance Plaza. We're so excited to have a panel talk here today with Carolyn Johnson, who's the executive director of the Black Cultural Zone, and Roy Chan, who's the director of the Oakland Chinatown Oral History Project. So let's give them a round of applause.

So I was born and raised here in Oakland. My family immigrated to the United States after the Vietnam War. We're ethnically Chinese, but they were born in Vietnam. And growing up in Oakland, Oakland has a really special place in my heart. It's like the main character of my life. And I'm really excited to talk to these two panelists here and really to, to talk to them about the history of Oakland and our communities and how we all intersect. So I want to start off with our panel. Just give yourself give you a chance to share with us who you are and what is your connection to Oakland

**Carolyn Johnson (CJ):** first, all right so again, I'm CJ. I'm the CEO of the black cultural zone. It's a Community Development Corporation that was just formed in 2019 by a larger group

called the East Oakland Black Cultural Zone Collaborative to really try and hold place for Black people in Oakland, which is rapidly gentrifying and displacing a lot of us and so that is the goal. I am born and raised in East Oakland, my great grandfather migrated to West Oakland from Oklahoma, in the 30s, I believe, and then my grandmother and my father's side of the family, they migrated to Bayview Hunters Point. And at some point we made it—they made it to Russell City where they met and got married and they were displaced from that area and wanted to move and into East Oakland. And so I was born in Highland Hospital. You cannot get more East Oakland than that, and I graduated from Castleman High School. All right.

**Roy Chan:** So I I was just telling them that I guess I would consider myself a second generation Oaklander. My dad was a refugee from from China, came to Oakland in the 50s. Worked in Chinatown but all over Oakland as a butcher. We grew up in San Antonio district. I was born in San Francisco Chinatown, but really, we came here, basically when I was a kid, and grew up in Oakland. I remember my dad used to take me around all over, all over Oakland. He worked in the shipyards here in Oakland at the Kaiser shipyards, he worked as a butcher locally in Safeway all over all over the city. And I grew up in the 80s at Oakland High and that was, it was a really mixed community. I remember you know, my friends and classmates were basically half Asian half Black growing up and I was not into sports but I was into the arts. I was in drama, and I was into actually hip hop culture too. And we would do breakdancing, so there was a lot of intermixing and intermingling and at least in our community and our Oakland High during that time so I have some really, really great memories of Oakland..

**Stephanie:** Thank you both. Yeah, I think for me growing up in Oakland, I saw such diversity. Oakland has been a hub for so many communities that have been displaced from other places, whether it's African Americans during the Great Migration or Chinese immigrants after the '06 earthquakes. How do you think that has affected the dynamic of Oakland and how our neighborhoods look like?

**CJ:** That's a great question. I always, you know, I grew up in East Oakland and you will still primarily probably 85-90% African American at least through when I graduated. And we spent a lot of time you know, [in] West Oakland, in Chinatown, and in the Fruitvale—that was just our weekends, and that's what we did. So we were very used to seeing a very diverse sort of community and then I when I went to college, I was so surprised to see how separated everybody was it was like, "What is going on?". This is not what I grew up in Oakland. But one thing that someone said to me, Dr. Jennifer Tran, she's the head of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce. And she's like, "CJ you're always talking about Oakland. And yes, it's a lot of black people. That's great. Which you say you are a different kind of black person because you had been so exposed to so many different groups. And it's the same for me as a Vietnamese person. If I grew up in Montana, for example, I've never met a black person, I would be a different Vietnamese." And so we are all different in Oakland, because we're just so used to being with a range of people that no one is new or different. And we understand a little bit more about complexity. And so I think Oakland, you're just different because there's no place like Oakland and as diverse as Oakland, but everybody kind of knows that it's small enough that we're two degrees of separation at most regardless of ethnicity. So that's my opinion.

**Roy:** Yeah, you know, I think, you know, the history of Oakland, you know, from the very beginning of Oakland. I mean, I mean, I think, you know, again, Oakland is a part of the Bay Area, where indigenous folks were dispossessed of their land. So that is where we come into when we talk about geography, but I think, you know, I think people of color that you had mentioned African Americans from the Great Migration, Asian Americans, we were there from the very beginning in the mid 19th century. You know, I think there was this as CJ mentioned, there's this great intermingling of folks. I think, you know, our memory, our recent memory, kind of thinks of Oakland sometimes as being somewhat segregated, but you know, I think there was a time when West Oakland was very diverse in the late 19th century. But then, I think, due to structural racism, I think many communities, these enclaves, ended up really becoming more entrenched. So Oakland Chinatown, for instance. I don't know if many folks know that. Folks always ask me like, "How did Chinatown form? Did y'all just want to get together and eat the same foods and hang out?" And it might be part of it, but I think you know, its roots is that, you know, where Chinatown is at 8th & Webster, that that location is probably the fourth or fifth location of Chinatown. There were Chinese settlements in uptown, downtown Oakland, and Chinese were pushed out of those neighborhoods. by the government, there was a mysterious fire. And so a lot of you know, the displacement and Oakland as being a place of refuge that displaced those displacement patterns continue throughout the history of Oakland.

And so you know, I you know, in our Oral History Project, we talked to a lot of elders, and many of them remember growing up, you know, in the 50s, you know, they were afraid to cross Franklin or Broadway, that they had this feel like they had to stay in Chinatown. They couldn't own property outside of Chinatown. I mean, I think it was the same with you know, African Americans. You know, the history of the porters that worked at the railroad was and, you know, they, they weren't allowed to, they were, they were forced to live west of Adeline. So that history of these enclaves that that started up are, you know, and the hierarchy of geographies and the way that the these patterns have been part of that, unfortunately, that discriminatory history and then, you know, in later decades in the 20th century with, you know, redlining, and as Oakland grew and, you know, upper class and whites were able to move into the Hills. In the flatlands we design plays, we became more and more entrenched, but you know, out of that there was a lot of resilience and, and a lot of beautiful things that came out of these enclaves. I mean, 7th Street was thriving in West Oakland for a long time, you know, a long time before urban renewal came and the freeway came and BART came and really fractured all of these communities. And we can say the same for open Chinatown. I mean, right here in the museum Laney, BART really displaced hundreds of residents in Chinatown during the 60s and oftentimes we forget that we walk around and we have no memory of what used to be on these blocks. And so, you know, part of our oral history project is talking to elders to sort of reclaim that history and really make young folks really understand that connection that the past is living in the present. We just have to open our eyes when we walk around and learn from each other.

**Stephanie:** Thank you, thank you for that. And what I really hear is that like with the diversity that comes with Oakland, there's a lot of opportunities right for us to broaden our understanding of the world and understand different perspectives and there's a lot of strength and skills that

come from that. But there's also a lot of challenges, you know, when we have different dynamics and different peoples that don't know each other or that are fighting for resources or being pitted against each other—and so, both opportunities and challenges in that. Where do you all see us today in Oakland, right? I will say like Oakland is very often in the national spotlight, for a multitude of reasons. We are the home of the Black Panthers, the hub for social justice and activism, the mayor's who will stand up against the president, but we're also the place that people point to when they say look at the crime, look at the houselessness look at all of these problems right in California. Where do you see Oakland is now?

**CJ:** So I think that Oakland is—I want to take a step back. The East Oakland Black Cultural Zone Collaborative was actually formed by a multiethnic group, several Asian folks are involved in are still very involved in East Oakland Black Culture Zone Collaborative as with the formation of the Black Panther Party and so open again, it's always seen solidarity across our sort of Chicano, Latinx communities, and Asian communities and so we are still talking with each other. We are still communicating. We have something that we've been working on called the flatlands Alliance, where we have conversations, Asian American, Black American, Latinx, about our experience in the flatlands, flatlands are below 580. You know, where it's more challenging a lot of us grew up here and so it's an interesting thing to see what people are telling us. Our relationships are. We're good. I don't know quite what you're talking about. And so we continue to have these conversations, these conversations and happen in many, many rooms. But it's that dichotomy between the story that's being told and what's actually happening. We have an obligation to make sure that what I would call clubs would no longer be able to live in Oakland, because this place other places, they began to just only be able to hear the stories that are being told, and we have to reconnect them back here to these conversations to go pay them no attention. We're good. We're moving. We're focused. And we understand that history. But I think that we take for granted that our young folks and folks who are now dispersed, still get that every day **I saw you on the weekend kind of conversation**. It won't happen unless we are explicit about it. And so I think there is an opportunity for us to reconnect our young folks and folks who've been displaced, to again fight back against the story. We can all agree when we see young African American men who are handling an elder, an Asian elder horrifically that that is ridiculous. And that can't be the only story that they see. They need to see this story. They need to know that the Black Cultural Zone was formed in part by Asian American groups as well. And we've got to just remember to tell that story because if we get lazy or make the assumption that we all know, folks won't know the truth. In my mind, we've always been good and in fact National Capacity, which is a group that you formed an organized, centering culture with community development is actually the motto for the Black Cultural Zone and we got that from groups like his and you have no problem saying that and he'll probably communicating our Flatlands Alliance is something that is important to us. We'll be starting to have night markets and conversations and healing circles, because when new folks come in and they don't get the story they just see the news. And you know, anti-blackness is real. If it works for you to move away from Blackness to make your life easier from a place that you just let go. It wasn't easy. I totally get that. And we have to figure out how to make sure that at some point we always say as well we so go you know as we're being gentrified, and displace eventually will look like none of us are here if we don't take care of

**Roy:** Yeah, yes. Yeah. You know you know, you mentioned that these are real problems that continue to manifest itself in the city. You know, a lot of it sort of as a result of these fracture communities from the 60s, urban renewal, disinvestment, these ongoing issues, and they're real problems, you know, and there is some real, you know, work that we need to do as communities. You know, I think some of that there's a lot that we see in the news around racial tensions. And some of it we have to work through. I mean, in our communities, I mean, in Chinatown, I think we're continually working through how do we be more of a welcoming neighborhood rally? How do we, you know, the chatter that you hear, you know, in the community around that sometimes you hear around scarcity or fear of the othering and racial profiling, that's real, and that's something we have to address head on as a community, particularly in these moments of suffering and violence that we need to suffer together to find common solutions. Those are real, real, real problems. But I think you know, one of the things that we forget and these moments that we keep highlighting the tensions, particularly the media is that we forget we have a history of solidarity, a long history of solidarity. I think, you know, CJ, you had mentioned, you know, your organization, the Black Culture Zone that came from the Eastside Arts Alliance, which has its roots in the Third World Liberation Front, which is a very multicultural solidarity. Folks that quit for ethnic studies in San Francisco State, UC Berkeley and their college during that time, learn Oakland. So that history is really important, I mean, at our communities you're mentioning and and learning from each other. In the 60s, the Black Panther Party, their their their their food programs and breakfast programs for the community around self determination that was a model for social service organizations in Chinatown, and then you get America for us to create our social service programs for the community. And so there's a lot of modeling in that way too. And so there's a lot of common things that we share and not just our struggles, but the solidarity that we rally around. I think there's a lot of examples that we see even in the midst of the ugliness that we see on the news during the pandemic.

Just in the last year or two, within a few blocks of here, I've witnessed a lot of beautiful moments and acts of solidarity. Two blocks or maybe a few blocks away in Harrison park right after these violent incidents. in Chinatown, we've brought people together, artists, African American artists, Asian artists, through the Cultural Affairs Commission that I've been on, really came together. Hundreds of people attended this online town hall. My brother **kept choice**. Jazz musician, immediately came together with a Chinese or Er Wu, our instrumentalist, Tao Shi and they came together and created a beautiful piece at Harrison Park and recorded it and we showed it and it brought tears to everybody. And it was certainly in this moment where we really wanted to show this is a moment we need to stand up and show that solidarity.

Then, you know, two blocks away here at Madison Park. I've been a part of this Tai Chi community that you know, I'd love to share a little bit about that history. You know, it was a Madison Park and Lake Merritt BART blocks. They were, you know, once a part of Chinatown and through eminent domain, hundreds of residents were displaced from those blocks and the BART station was built. And then 10 years ago, the city and BART decided that they wanted to redevelop again on those blocks and potentially get rid of Madison Park and we had through our oral history project we were able to really bring to light this incredible community of tai chi

practitioners of elders coming together every morning to reclaim the space. And just their presence every day was an act of protest. And it wasn't just Asians as we learned there were hundreds of people gathering every morning and non-Asians are coming together. There was Charles who was a Black firefighter that learned Qigong through Lawrence. So there's this beautiful friendships. And it was through this gathering of folks that we really helped BART changed their stance that they were able to preserve this park, for things threatened and there was a story in particular that I wanted to share that out of this community, there was a friendship between one of the Chi, the Tai Chi masters, his name was was **wing** and Ricky who was an African American resident here in Oakland, defended him through several years learn this practice **background** which is a form of Tai Chi, and he became a part of the community and there was this one day they were sharing with me that Ricky was practicing **Black Law** with a sort he was swinging it around, you know, during was the other folks that doing tai chi and a police car pulled up and stopped him and was trying to arrest him. And in that moment, some of the other elder Asian practitioners came and stood by him. And really, in that moment, stood with him and said, No, he belongs with us. We're part of this community and it was just so beautiful. It was this moment of solidarity. And it was this moment where I think maybe the Chinatown elders like my dad. They witnessed, you know, police brutality with somebody in their community. And there was just this moment of solidarity that was very organic that happened that we learned through history, and it's just another beautiful moment that I like to share that really kind of epitomizes the spirit of open Oakland history that you're talking about.

**Stephanie:** Thank you and I think those memories, right, like because it's the big moments, it's the marches. It's the projects, but also it's the way we show up for each other every day that's really important and in how we build our city. And I'll say like, for me growing up in Oakland in the 90s and in the 2000s, and the hyphy movement and I got to see so much activism, you know, just as a young person and that really shaped just who I am, you know, going to events at Eastside going to Chinatown every weekend, and just seeing all the folks who are holding it down for the city and speaking up about these important issues and taking me under their wing right to give me that context to give me the opportunity to learn was so powerful. So I just want to take that moment to thank you all for sharing those stories. Because that was really important for me growing up as in a way a newcomer to the city, right? My family being new to the city and kind of just starting to lay our roots. And I'm wondering for you two, as you're thinking about all of the folks who flocked to Oakland knowing that it is a hub for activism for social justice, for resistance to oppression. What do they need to know?

**Roy:** A lot of beautiful you know,

**CJ:** After I saw forget the woman at the Lake Merritt, people were barbecuing. Oh, yeah.

But one of the

One of the things I said is that we have a responsibility in Oakland, people are going to come if you've never read the book, How to Kill a City. It's a cycle of gentrification and displacement. That is oldest time, buy low, sell high, but people are going to come it's our obligation to let people know where they're coming to. You come to my house, you don't wear shoes in the house, we eat at six etc. And so one of the things we have an obligation to do with the stories

and the walking tours is to let folks know if you're moving here, you're not moving here to a place that you're making brand new that you're fixing, that is improving or there's a thing that they're stopped renaming neighborhoods. That's another that's a whole nother story. Uptown is a joke, but I'm gonna stop. But you're coming somewhere you're not. That theory of discovery is old and it didn't work then. This is indigenous land that was stolen and then our neighbors were here. Eminent Domain. Lots of things been taken. Even this museum is sitting on land that was taken [from] Japanese folks while they were in internment camps. We have to learn how to tell the truth. And we have to learn how to tell folks where they're coming and how we all relate to each other. We get along. I mean, it's just neighborly in Oakland. And yes, they're different. They look a little different. It's like what you're eating over there. Well, that's different than before. That's how we are here. But to come here and to call the police on folks for minor things is not something we do but there are practices that are uniquely Oakland, that are very unique. It's not going to be like another black city or an all Chinatown. It's a mixture that you have to respect and the divide and conquer mentality will not work here because we will not be divided and we will not be conquered. We're a fighting city. Our backs are against the wall right now. But we're going to make sure that we keep this beautiful, beautiful place that is very, very unique because the world needs cities like Oakland, because we know how to live with each other. So watch where you come in.

**Roy:** Yeah, I mean, I would just echo that CJ. You know this, this idea that you know, every time you enter, you know, you live in a neighborhood you're part of the house that you bought or you're renting. This isn't a clean slate. This is a part of a lineage and the history. There's a power in our places that we live and and we think that they're just placed dead places when they are alive. They're, you're a part of a long history. And so, you know, I would say I would encourage you folks to, you know, really understand the history. And really, there's so many opportunities you don't necessarily need to learn it through a book. I couldn't go through so many incredible events and festivals in our public spaces throughout Oakland throughout the year where you can really engage in these communities and these are living histories. This isn't the past, this is the present. So I would say just be really respectful and connect with your neighbor in a deeper way.

**Stephanie:** Thank you. Thank you both. And that's such great words to all of the folks you know that come to Oakland because we know that we all come from somewhere you know, so I appreciate that. And I want to close this out. Give us a chance to speak from three people from Oakland, right? What do you wish the world knew about? Oakland?

**CJ:** Nothing please stop. I just I think what I said was we are we are fighters like people left, you know, all kinds of terror in the south to come here. And we there's nowhere else to go. We're at the edge of this nation. And so all we could do was turn around and face forward. So that is what you're dealing with is that we may be down but we are definitely not out and we understand what's happening and the divide and conquer mentality will not work and we're beautiful, fun city. Very unique people. There is no one description of folks in Oakland and so just sit back and enjoy. Enjoy.

**Roy:** Yeah, I would say yeah, I think we love our food but we want you know, we love each other and I think there's a deep sense of community that I think we'll discover in Oakland. But yeah, I would say it's a place of resentment. It's a place of joy. And it's a place where we are deeply rooted in our culture and we are uniquely embedded in our culture, we come together and share our country. Always find a way to party and have a celebration today.

**Stephanie:** All right, thank you. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you to ask like two really important culture keepers here. In Oakland, letting us know and allowing me to learn and to ask questions and to have this open conversation. I'm excited and I know we'll keep this relationship going and thank you all for being here.

**CJ:** You can find us at [BlackCulturalZone.org](http://BlackCulturalZone.org). And at Black boxes on all social media.

**Roy:** You're making recordings. Is that going to be something you're going to post?

**Stephanie:** Great question. So I work with Oakland Asian Cultural Center, and we're recording this as part of a podcast called Let's Talk which amplifies black Asian solidarity as part of our open ears for change project. You can find it that [oacc.cc](http://oacc.cc)

**Roy:** And then the oral history project if you want to go on that website is [chinatownmemories.org](http://chinatownmemories.org)

[outro music plays - *Lundstroem: The perfect corporate podcast intro*]

Let's Talk outro

**Stephanie:** This podcast was produced with the support of the Gingko Fund, the Asian Pacific Fund, and the Awesome Foundation. Wanna suggest future guests? Email us at [programs@oacc.cc](mailto:programs@oacc.cc).

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