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Grassroots Surrealism:  
The Culture of Opposition and the Crisis of Development in 1930s California

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

by

Elizabeth E. Sine

Committee in charge:

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Professor David G. Gutiérrez  
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The Dissertation of Elizabeth E. Sine is approved, and it is accepted in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Co-Chair

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Co-Chair

University of California, San Diego

2014

## DEDICATION

For my grandma Eileen, mother Shelley, and Nicholas.

“In some periods and circumstances, the given relationships, socially and politically, seem inert and fixed. Culture signifies the predictable and overpowering reproduction of what ‘is.’ It claims the verities of tradition and authorizes familiar futures from the repetitions of a naturalized past (‘what has always been the case’). Politics becomes the machinery of maintenance and routine. The image of a different future becomes displaced into fantasy and easily dismissed. The cracks and fissures are hard to find.

“But there are other times when things fall apart. The given ways no longer persuade. The present loosens its grip. Horizons shift. History speeds up. It becomes possible to see the fragments and outlines of a different way. . . . When this happens, the formal institutional worlds of politics in a nation or city and the many mundane worlds of the private, the personal, and the everyday move together. They occupy the same time. The present begins to move. These are times of extraordinary possibility and hope. New horizons shimmer. History’s continuum shatters.”

—Geoff Eley<sup>1</sup>

“We wish to preserve the fire of the past, not the ashes.”

—William James<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), viii-ix.

<sup>2</sup> William James, qtd. in Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 103.

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me to see the contributions to libratory struggles that have emerged beyond the many boundaries that usually circumscribe the study of social movements. To have her join my committee and to be able to draw directly on her insight—about my dissertation and things beyond it—is a privilege for which I am tremendously grateful. I have also drawn on the generous support and contributions of other faculty from across and beyond UCSD. In particular I want to express my gratitude to Nayan Shah, Lisa Lowe, and Roberto Alvarez, each of whom has contributed profoundly to the questions, ideas, and imperatives that drive this dissertation.

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A selected portion of Chapter 2 of this dissertation has been revised into an article and submitted for possible publication in *Labor: Studies of Working-Class History of the Americas*. A selected portion of Chapter 4 has been submitted for possible inclusion in *Race-Making, Race-Neutrality, and Race-Consciousness*, a collection edited by the University of California Center for New Racial Studies to be published by Routledge.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Grassroots Surrealism:  
The Culture of Opposition and the Crisis of Development in 1930s California

by

Elizabeth E. Sine

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, San Diego, 2014

Professor Luis Alvarez, Co-Chair  
Professor Daniel Widener, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines the upsurge of working-class social movements in rural and urban California during the Great Depression era. As the twentieth century's worst economic crisis unfolded in one of the most rapidly modernizing regions among industrialized nations, *Grassroots Surrealism* traces how Depression-era Californians made sense of conditions they confronted, pursued self-defined needs and aspirations, and contributed to the making of a broader, multiracial and transnational oppositional culture in the process. It argues that significant currents of grassroots movements in 1930s California advanced a politics of "grassroots surrealism," which rejected the rationalist strictures that dominated modern, Western thought and regarded desire,

imagination, and creativity as indispensable political priorities. Rather than reflecting a unifying social-democratic agenda or a homogenizing American identity, California's grassroots surrealists asserted political visions that underscored the interconnectedness and interdependence of global struggles for dignity, against the dehumanizing effects of Western imperialism and racial capitalism.

*Grassroots Surrealism* offers a comparative and relational examination of the struggles of multiethnic Mexican, Filipino, Asian, African American, Native American, and European American working populations in the Imperial Valley's agricultural fields, San Francisco's waterfront, Los Angeles' culture industry, and Mendocino County's Round Valley Indian Reservation. It excavates the under-examined sources of rank and file workers and working-class communities—in oral histories, community newspapers, and expressive culture—alongside the records of union leaders and politicians that have traditionally anchored the field. As it analyzes grassroots politics in forms that ranged from strikes to jazz music across the capitalist landscape—from rural to urban and north to south in California—it reveals how seemingly disparate communities were linked in their myriad struggles against Depression-era capitalism. Ultimately, this dissertation destabilizes dominant narratives of the New Deal by demonstrating that corporatist and social-democratic politics were far from popular consensus. It brings into focus California's place in the global capitalist map, locates multiethnic working communities within that cartography, and shows how their efforts to remake the 1930s were far more heterogeneous, multivalent, and contested than scholars have previously recognized.



## Introduction

*We are marching toward the future.*  
*We are marching together.*  
*We are marching hand-in-hand.*  
*We are strong marching together.*  
*We are happy marching toward the future.*  
*We are the marching children of the future.*  
—Carlos Bulosan<sup>3</sup>

During the first week of January, 1933, thousands of people from throughout California marched to the state capitol in Sacramento. The first to set out was a contingent of local residents, farm workers, and activists who departed from El Centro and Brawley, just north of the U.S.-Mexico border, on January 2. As these determined travelers made their way through San Diego and toward Los Angeles over the next three days, additional marchers took to the streets, embarking from Ventura and from the northern reaches of the state in Eureka. By January 7, three more groups left from San Francisco, Oakland, and Redding. The ranks of each wave of marchers swelled as they passed through cities, towns, and countrysides along the way to their destination, as hundreds and sometimes thousands of people joined in for part or all of the remaining distance.<sup>4</sup>

The routes they traveled were well-trodden, to be sure. They trekked along major arteries that carried goods everyday from farms, factories, and ships to markets near and far; the same roads that itinerant workers and their families used to follow shifting and seasonal labor demands across the landscape. Yet, the aims of the marchers who headed

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<sup>3</sup> Carlos Bulosan, "Marching," n.d., Carlos Bulosan Papers (Acc. No. 0581-010), Box 3, folder 18, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, Washington.

<sup>4</sup> *Western Worker* January 2, 1933, 1-2; *Western Worker* January 9, 1933, 1; Sam Darcy, radio address for station KTAB San Francisco, January 5, 1933, Sam Darcy Papers (TAM 124), Box 2, folder 25, Tamiment Library and Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York.

to Sacramento in early 1933 were markedly different from others who routinely passed down these same roads.<sup>5</sup>

The marchers were a motley bunch—multiethnic, interracial, women, men, and children—who survived on wages they earned from a range of different jobs. They included ethnic Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, African American, and European American textile workers, lumber workers, teamsters, small farmers, agricultural workers, longshore workers, domestic workers, and many who were jobless. Despite their differences, they marched together in common struggle forged from the political and economic challenges they shared amid the Great Depression. It was a “March Against Hunger,” underscoring how basic human needs could provide a powerful basis for solidarity. Yet, the march also reflected participants’ awareness of the ways in which struggles against starvation were linked with those against other indignities. The marchers carried signs that read, “WE WANT BREAD! NO MORE PROMISES—WE REFUSE TO STARVE!” “We demand UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE!” “Repeal the criminal syndicalist law!” “FARM RELIEF!” “Free Tom Mooney!” “Free the Scottsboro boys!” “Stop the Deportation of Unemployed Aliens!” “Down with Japanese Imperialism!”<sup>6</sup> More than an appeal for reforms and relief from the government, the march was an assertion of political power by people who refused the forms of subordination that California’s economy and the politics of the Depression had imposed upon them. At the same time that they called attention to prevailing injustices and

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<sup>5</sup> *Western Worker*, January 2, 1933, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Clinton Clark, *Remember My Sacrifice: The Autobiography of Clinton Clark, Tenant Farm Organizer and Early Civil Rights Activist* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 26-27; Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 342; *Western Worker*, January 16, 1933, 1; *Western Worker*, January 23, 1933, 4.

pressed for concessions from the region's political establishment, the marchers also gestured toward a broader redefinition of political participation and social membership in Depression-era California.

The march represented a convergence of struggles that reverberated throughout the state and around the globe in early 1933. The market economy's bleakest days were accompanied by the uprising of aggrieved populations worldwide, who faced similarly devastating conditions and a common sense of their own precarity. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in hunger marches throughout the western United States that same week, on the heels of a nationwide hunger march to Washington D.C. in December 1932. In Alabama, Black and White sharecroppers battled for recognition of their right to organize. In Barcelona, Spanish workers clashed with police and made calls for a general strike, while residents of the Xauen region of Morocco revolted against Spanish imperialism. London railroad workers prepared to strike in the face of impending wage cuts, while peasants in India revolted against British colonial soldiers and refused to pay taxes to landlords. In Tokyo, thousands of working-class people faced mass arrests for their attempts to organize. In Managua, rebel peasants and workers clashed with U.S. Marines.<sup>7</sup>

Back in California, authorities had their hands full. Recognizing the state as a key site in the global crisis because of its economic wealth and historic role in global economic development, politicians, business leaders, and social scientists desperately

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<sup>7</sup> "Returning Marchers Write of Bitter Struggle in Washington," *Western Worker*, December 26, 1932, 2; "Negro, White Workers Unite Behind Sharecroppers," *Western Worker*, January 16, 1933, 1; "Street Fighting in Spain," *Western Worker*, January 23, 1933, 2; "Revolt in India Province," *Western Worker*, January 23, 1933, 2; "2,000 Arrested in Japan Raids," *Western Worker*, January 30, 1933, 2; "Insurrection in Nicaragua," *Western Worker*, January 9, 1933, 2.

sought to restore “a desirable balance” of industrial and social relations. According to their assessment, such a step was critical to addressing the broader problem of “world unrest.”<sup>8</sup> In the months that preceded the statewide hunger march, the most esteemed intellectuals from California’s leading universities met to tackle what they saw as the pressing question of “the nature and controllability” of the state’s social forces, and to figure out how to quell the “acute dissatisfaction” and “social distress” which exacerbated the “existing breakdown of economic machinery in the present world-wide depression.”<sup>9</sup> In the months that followed the march, U.S. politician and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch expressed the fears of many political and economic leaders when he noted, “Maybe the country doesn’t know it yet, but I think we may find we’ve been in a revolution more drastic than the French Revolution. The crowd has seized the seat of government and is trying to seize the wealth. Respect for law and order is gone.”<sup>10</sup>

This dissertation investigates the crisis of capitalism in California during the Great Depression and corresponding efforts by people from the grassroots to imagine and enact more sustainable and democratic modes of social, political, and economic development.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, Report to Plenary Session by the Committee on Social Planning, July 16-17, 1932, 11, Murray Reed Benedict Papers, BANC MSS 2009/109, Carton 7, folder 11, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Meeting minutes, Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, June 15, 1932, morning session, Clift Hotel, San Francisco Morning Session meeting minutes, 1, Murray Reed Benedict Papers, Carton 7, folder 11.

<sup>9</sup> Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, Third Annual Meeting program and advance summaries of opening addresses, June 14, 1933, “How Far Are Social Forces Controllable?,” Murray Reed Benedict Papers, Carton 12, folder 16; Meeting minutes, Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, June 15, 1932, morning session, Clift Hotel, San Francisco Morning Session meeting minutes, 2, Murray Reed Benedict Papers, Carton 7, folder 11.

<sup>10</sup> Bernard Baruch, qtd. in John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (New York: Pluto Press, 2002, 2005, 2010), 196.

<sup>11</sup> In describing sustainable modes of development here, I do not intend to confuse the reader with currently fashionable uses of the phrase “sustainable development,” which revolve primarily around minimizing human impact on the environment and promoting sustainable and conservative usage of natural resources. Instead, the reference to sustainability here is primarily and fundamentally social. It refers to conditions of life that make subsistence possible, and to the social relations and antagonisms that define and drive

In an era marked by deep uncertainty and radical possibility, *Grassroots Surrealism* traces how people made sense of conditions they confronted, pursued self-defined needs and aspirations, and changed their surroundings and themselves in the process. From the upsurge of rural agricultural strike activity in 1928 to the acceleration of urban defense mobilization upon U.S. entry into the Second World War in 1941, this dissertation charts the deepening instability of California's relationship to the global economy through the everyday self-activity of ordinary people. Its protagonists are less the union leaders and politicians that often occupy the spotlight in narratives of the era's social movements. They are more members of families and communities who worked in fields, in factories, on ships, and on docks; they are artists, performers, and grassroots intellectuals; they are indigenous Californians, as well as immigrants and descendants of immigrants from Mexico, the Philippines, China, Japan, and the formerly slave South. Many of them occupied the margins of mainstream California society and, despite playing a fundamental role in the making of California, remain unknown. Amid the turmoil and unpredictability that marked the 1930s, these multiethnic working populations advanced visions of themselves and their world that challenged the constraints of dominant political discourses and modes of social organization. They fashioned political identities less around national, ethnic, or racial affiliations than around a sense of their relationship to broader, global circulations of grassroots struggle. They pursued notions of dignity, autonomy, and freedom that prevailing institutions denied them and gave expression to alternative imaginings of what life in and beyond the Great Depression might have been.

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economic development patterns. As John Holloway asserts, it is precisely when social antagonisms intensify to a point of becoming unsustainable that a crisis can be said to exist. See Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 191-192.

The groundswell of grassroots insurgencies that swept California during the 1930s contested patterns of development that had dominated the region for the preceding half century. In a place that stood at the cutting edge of global capitalist advancement—indeed, one of the most rapidly developing regions among industrialized nations—people from across the landscape pushed back against the logic of capital. They challenged the rationalized system of production that prioritized efficiency and profits over human needs. They fought patterns of displacement and dislocation that fragmented familial, social, and cultural ties. They rejected the limits of political structures that authorized a few select spokespersons to determine life conditions for the many. Most fundamentally, they resisted their own dehumanization and created a crisis of power for political and economic elites. The era's movements did more than oppose the established order of things, however. As policy makers, business owners, bankers, and commercial farmers worked to shore up the dominance of local and regional power blocs in the name of social stability and economic growth, grassroots struggles generated new visions of social, cultural, and political life across California. They constructed notions of social belonging that affirmed their position not merely as regional or national minorities but as part of the world's social majorities. They forged solidarities out of shared vulnerabilities, linking people across urban-rural divisions, racial and ethnic difference, and the varied ties of local populations to wider circuits of capital and labor. They imagined and enacted more just methods for managing resources, technology, and social relations, while seeking creative autonomy and participatory democracy. The imaginative and creative work of the era's movements encompassed people of diverse backgrounds from all corners of the regional economy. Far from reflecting a political consensus or even sharing common

strategies, these “grassroots surrealists” pursued a multiform vision of emancipation and had a lasting impact on institutions and social relations.<sup>12</sup>

While the term “surrealism” typically references a movement of professional artists and intellectuals that reached its pinnacle in interwar Europe, I employ the concept more broadly as a rubric for examining significant but overlooked currents of popular movements in 1930s California.<sup>13</sup> Like their European counterparts who coined the term and elaborated its theoretical insights, participants in the movements under examination here rejected the rationalist notions of progress that dominated modern, Western thought, and regarded the liberation of desire, creativity, and imagination as necessary political priorities. These movements were interethnic, multiracial, and transnational in their composition as well as their aspirations. They encompassed a wide field of struggles that were inherently differentiated, often contradictory, and fundamentally interdependent.

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<sup>12</sup> My framing of these struggles around competing visions of human development draws on theoretical insights emerging from contemporary movements against globalization and the broader literature of critical development studies. See, for example, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998) and Rachel Silvey and Katherine Rankin, “Development Geography: Critical Development Studies and Political Geographic Imaginaries,” *Progress in Human Geography* 35, no. 5 (November 2010): 696-704. See also Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York and London: Verso, 1998); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, 1972); Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881-1905* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> A growing number of works have begun to explore the broader political and cultural implications of surrealist currents, as well as their relevance and applicability for examining social movements in and beyond the spatio-temporal boundaries of interwar Europe. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Gavin Grindon, “Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avante-Garde,” *Oxford Art Journal*, 34, no. 1 (2011): 79-96; E. San Juan, Jr. “Antonio Gramsci on Surrealism and the Avantgarde,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 31-45; Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, “The Situationist International, Surrealism, and the Difficult Fusion of Art and Politics,” *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004): 367-387; David Roediger, *History Against Misery* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 2006), 19-20; Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kirsten Strom, “Avante-Garde of What?: Surrealism Reconceived as Political Culture,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 37-49; Pierre Taminiaux, “Breton and Trotsky: The Revolutionary Memory of Surrealism” *Yale French Studies* 109 (2006): 52-66.

They shared with contemporaries in the anti-Stalinist left a deep criticism not only of the alienating forces of the market and the homogenizing pressures of national culture, but also of the pressures for conformity that underpinned calls for political unity that emanated from central leadership of national labor and left organizations. California's grassroots surrealists worked through established institutions when it served them to do so, and abandoned them when it did not. As the Depression deepened and the political future became increasingly unclear—as debates concerning the proper balance between disciplined organization and the creative, spontaneous self-activity of working people pervaded and polarized progressive circles—grassroots surrealists asserted the indispensable role of imagination in the pursuit of liberation and posited social transformation as an objective without a predetermined end.

### ***Capitalist Development in Global California***

Depression-era debates over the future of development in California had roots in a longer trajectory of regional economic modernization and racial domination. Following the gold discoveries of 1848, California became a critical node for a world being stitched together by industrial capitalism. As the world rushed in seeking the wealth that California had to offer, Californians looked increasingly outward, pursuing access to new markets, transportation routes, and labor pools from across the Pacific and throughout Latin America. California rapidly became an intersection for hemispheric and transpacific circuits of capital and labor and a key engine of U.S. empire and the global economy. By the end of the nineteenth century, the influence and investments of the



state's industrial leadership helped draw regions of China, Japan, Hawaii, the Philippines, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean into California's imperial orbit. These developments caught the attention of Karl Marx, who wrote from London to German-born labor organizer and New Jersey resident Friedrich Sorge in 1880, asking Sorge to gather what information he could on conditions in California. "California is very important for me," Marx explained, "because nowhere else has the upheaval most shamelessly caused by capitalist centralization taken place with such speed."<sup>14</sup>

What political geographer Edward Soja has described as the "Californianization of capitalism"—that is, a tilting of the global space economy of capitalism in the direction of California—accelerated leading into the early-twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> By the end of the 1920s, California was not only a leading global producer of gold, silver, mercury, and several other minerals; it was the number one producer of oil in the world. It brought more agricultural goods to market than any other region of the country. It was the nation's leading commercial fishery, and one of its largest producers of timber and lumber.<sup>16</sup> It also developed a substantial manufacturing base, with Los Angeles rivaling Flint and Detroit in the production of automobiles and leading the nation in the production of aircraft.<sup>17</sup> It was a major center of national and global finance, with San Francisco becoming home to the "Wall Street of the West." Booms in California real

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from Karl Marx to Friedrich Sorge, November 5, 1880, originally trans. and ed. by Leonard E. Mins, in *Science and Society* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1938), later published in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Letters to Americans, 1848-1895* (New York: International Publishers, 1953), 126.

<sup>15</sup> Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York and London: Verso, 1989), 190.

<sup>16</sup> Richard A. Walker, "California's Golden Road to Riches: Natural Resources and Regional Capitalism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91, no. 1 (2001): 172-173.

<sup>17</sup> Mike Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles," *Antipode* 29, no. 4 (1997): 364. Also printed in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, edited by Tom Sitton and William Deverell, 96-122 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

estate, tourism, advertising, and motion picture production further made the state into a key shaper of mass culture and consumer desire. As a center of global artistic production, California helped increasingly to define the very notions of capitalist modernity and progress that it came to emblemize.<sup>18</sup> In economic as well as cultural terms, California's development facilitated the broader transformation of the United States from a debtor nation to the world's largest exporter and international creditor by the end of the First World War, and to a global superpower by the end of the Second.<sup>19</sup>

California's emergence as a driver of capitalist production and power is but one piece of the larger story of the state's development by the eve of the Great Depression, however. For many, life in California during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

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<sup>18</sup> Major works on California art include Stephanie Barron, Ilene Fort, and Sheri Bernstein, *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); Paul Karlstrom, ed., *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900-1950* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-1970* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). Regarding California's role in the making of mass culture and consumerism see, for example, Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920's* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Walker, "California's Golden Road to Riches"; Paul A. David and Gavin Wright, "Increasing Returns and the Genesis of American Resource Abundance," *Industrial and Corporate Change* 6, no. 2 (1997): 203-245. Regarding the specific impact of Los Angeles and the Southern California region on the national and global political economy, see Edward W. Soja, *My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014); Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, Chap. 8; Allen John Scott and Edward W. Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith Publisher, 1946, 1973). Regarding the particular contributions of California's cities to patterns of metropolitan and military development, see Roger W. Lotchin, *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910-1961* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

centuries was defined less by expanding wealth and political influence than by struggle. In sync with the broader history of U.S. western expansion, the advancement of industry, infrastructure, and prosperity in California relied on patterns of conquest and unequal arrangements of race and labor. These same patterns subjected the region's diverse indigenous and immigrant populations to sharp asymmetries of wealth and power and the self-justifying logic of White supremacy.<sup>20</sup> California's early settlement entailed the brutal displacement and decimation of indigenous people, through practices that ranged from land confiscation and segregation to state-sanctioned genocide. Not coincidentally, the nation's Indian wars reached their peak levels of violence and devastation in the very regions of California that generated the most wealth in gold during the late-nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The completion of huge infrastructural projects and the extraction of wealth through mining and industrial agriculture were made possible by the concurrent importation, exploitation, and social and cultural exclusion of an increasingly transnational and multiethnic workforce, which included workers with ethnic ties to China, Japan, India, the Philippines, Mexico, Armenia, Italy, Alaska, Hawaii, and African

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<sup>20</sup> See especially Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987); Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Lizbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1669-1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); James Gregory, "The West and Workers, 1870-1930," in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Deverell (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 240-255. For early seminal works on this subject, see Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) and Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971). Significantly, patterns of resource and population management that took hold in the region were not isolated experimentations but provided a model for the rest of the nation and its imperial ventures abroad. See David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 120-130.

American populations in the Deep South.<sup>22</sup> At the same time that forces of dislocation, dispossession, and disfranchisement helped to harness a flexible labor pool and undergird racial hierarchy and industrial power in California, these processes also revealed the contradictions of modernization and globalization. Therein lay the footing from which aggrieved populations challenged the conventions that governed metropolitan and agricultural development.<sup>23</sup>

As California emerged as an important site in wider circulations of labor and capital between the 1880s and 1920s, it also became a locus of major fault lines on which the global market system would quake during the 1930s. With its bounty of natural resources and among the world's most rapidly developing sectors of finance, commerce, and agricultural production, California served as a beacon for early-twentieth century capitalist fantasies of boundless growth and prosperity. Yet, its patterns of growth were far more volatile, and its social and political institutions far more unstable, than its boosters, investors, and observers often liked to admit. Underlying its image as a model of modern capitalism's promise was a reality of vast inequality and constant contestation—indeed, sometimes violent confrontation—between capitalist brokers who sought to subordinate California's human and natural resources to the dictates of profit

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.; Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), esp. 269-291.

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Feuerbach: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook," in *The German Ideology: Part I and Selections from Parts II and III*, ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, Co, 1970), 39-91; Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees," *Journal of Communication and Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986): 28-44; As Michel Foucault states concerning what he calls "the insurrection of subjugated knowledges," "historical contents alone allow us to see the dividing lines in the confrontations and struggles that functional arrangements or systematic organizations are designed to mask. Subjugated knowledges are, then, blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship." Michel Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the College de France, 1975-76*, translated by David Macey, (New York: Picador, 1997, 2003), 7.

and power and the people and land who proved insubordinate to those imperatives.<sup>24</sup> In the words of journalist Carey McWilliams, California's history was marked by a "notorious lack of social and political equilibrium. . . . The state is always off balance, stretching itself precariously, seeking to run the rapids of periodic tidal waves of migration" to fill its insatiable demand for labor while striving to maintain its status quo and regarding "[e]ach wave of migration . . . with fear and trembling."<sup>25</sup> These antagonisms and imbalances, which accompanied and threatened California's development throughout the early-twentieth century, were put in stark relief amid the crisis that unfolded in the 1930s. The Great Depression accentuated the deep-rooted tensions and disequilibrium of California society, proving regional patterns of economic expansion to be unsustainable. In his analysis of the devastated global economy at the onset of the Second World War, with particular attention to the role of the United States' western frontier in the making of the crisis, Austrian political economist Karl Polanyi wrote in 1944, "As the lower ranges of labor could not any more be freely replaced from an inexhaustible reservoir of immigrants, while its higher ranges were unable to settle freely on the land; as soil and natural resources became scarce and had to be husbanded," the same region that had "been adduced by economic liberals as conclusive proof of the ability of a market economy to function," was torn at the seams by the "cumulative strains" endemic to its own system of social relations.<sup>26</sup>

As much as the Great Depression was marked by soaring inflation, poverty,

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<sup>24</sup> Regarding this central antagonism between forces of subordination and insubordination, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1944, 2001) and Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*.

<sup>25</sup> Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1949, 1971), 17, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 210-211.

unemployment rates, and catastrophic human suffering, it was also an era of intensified conflict between contrasting visions and aspirations for the future. For California's urban and rural industrial elites who had control over the region's resources, markets, and political institutions, the problem of the Depression was not only to maintain authority and profits in a stagnating economy but also to respond to the assertion of a new form of social power by the grassroots.<sup>27</sup> Of course, in a general sense, the problem of grassroots insubordination in itself was far from novel. California's elites had proven adept at innovating strategies of social control to contain labor and political disturbances. Yet, the expressions of grassroots solidarity that elites confronted during the 1930s threatened the stability of the social order in a new and profound way. The popular movements that took shape in this period were of a scope and scale that the region had not previously seen, traversed divisions that had long ordered capitalist society, and undermined the narrative logic that undergirded California's ascendancy as an imperial metropole in the name of social progress. In the crisis of power that resulted, business and political leaders tested old tactics for restoring social order and invented new ones. They combined established methods of repression and terror with new modes of inter-employer organization, urban-rural industrial alliance, and campaigns of cooptation.<sup>28</sup> Ultimately,

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<sup>27</sup> Regarding the formation and composition of California's urban and rural power blocs, see, for example Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1939, 2000); Mike Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop: Ford and Darwin in 1920s Los Angeles," in *Metropolis in the Making: Los Angeles in the 1920s*, ed. Tom Sitton and William Deverell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 96-122; Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996); William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. Chap. 6; Laura Renata Martin, "'California's Unemployed

by the 1940s, their experiments gave way to a new corporate liberal order that worked to absorb and appropriate radical elements under the banner of multicultural Americanism.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, it would be inaccurate to characterize California's elites as wholly responsible for the suppression of the region's popular movements. Sometimes inadvertently and at other times with conscious intent, labor leaders employed top-down methods of representation that marginalized the needs and interests of working-class constituents. Liberal advocates for racial justice pursued narrow definitions of civil rights that reinforced the subordination of purportedly "un-American" populations. Some civic activists strove to reinscribe the racial and gender boundaries of established political institutions. Middle-class property owners frequently sided with industrial and municipal elites in their efforts to rid their neighborhoods and local establishments of populations they regarded as troublesome and transient. Professional journalists and social scientists often denigrated popular protests for their failure to conform to prevailing notions of proper political participation. Middle- and working-class people carried out vigilante raids, strikebreaking activities, and acts of racist terror against fellow workers.<sup>30</sup> In these and other ways, the actions of people from across the social spectrum—many of them self-designated agents of the "public good" and seekers of a well-ordered society—

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Feed Themselves': Conservative Intervention in the Los Angeles Cooperative Movement, 1931-1934" *Pacific Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (February 2013): 33-62.

<sup>29</sup> George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), esp. 59-60, 157-181, 341-343; Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>30</sup> Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Starr, *Endangered Dreams*; David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

disparaged grassroots struggles and fortified dominant power relations. Along with the region's elites, they struggled to contain the burgeoning of grassroots unrest and unruliness.

Meanwhile, across California's multiracial and multiethnic working populations, diverse and seemingly disparate ethnic Mexican, Filipino, Asian, African American, Native American, and European American communities offered an alternative account of the era's crisis. Many working-class Californians experienced the Depression less as a sudden disruption of a longer march of progress and prosperity than as a manifestation of the deeper failings and destructive consequences of a political and economic system whose success had relied on their subordination. For these Californians, the crisis had more to do with laying bare the interconnectivity and interdependence of grassroots struggles against oppression than with threatening reserves of wealth or prospects of social mobility. They generated a culture of opposition during the 1930s that cut across racial, ethnic, and regional divisions and assumed a wide variety of forms. These included small acts of resistance such as shirking or footdragging at the workplace, expressive culture that ranged from music and murals to stage and screen performances, community ties and circuits of communication forged in neighborhoods, migrant camps, pool halls, and breadlines, innovative organizing practices that sought workplace democracy, and coordinated confrontations with urban and rural employers, including major strike actions. The Californians who built the region's culture of opposition during the 1930s rejected the racial capitalist development of preceding decades and gave expression to social visions that elevated the dignity of ordinary people over the



imperatives of nation and market building.<sup>31</sup> They exacted important concessions from elites in the age of the New Deal, but also had a lasting impact on the political imagination and social movements that shaped working-class struggles in subsequent generations.

California's grassroots oppositional culture was shaped by the wide range of progressive currents that converged and evolved in the southwestern United States during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Historic challenges to dominant institutions had made California a laboratory of the political left. California fostered vibrant and variegated traditions of socialism, anarchosyndicalism, and social-democratic progressivism. It was home to an influential branch of the Communist Party USA, as well as an assortment of progressive and left-wing Party detractors. It provided a fertile ground for advocates of a leftward shift in the Democratic Party and the New Deal, independent progressives who supported Upton Sinclair's campaign to End Poverty In California, and those who spurned the nation's electoral system altogether. Californians were Trotskyists, Wobblies, Italian anarchists, and Magonistas. They promoted an array of ethnic-oriented agendas against discrimination and segregation. They included advocates of racial internationalisms and diasporic anti-imperialisms.<sup>32</sup> The multifaceted terrain of left politics in California calls into question the tendency of scholarship on

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<sup>31</sup> My use of the term "racial capitalism" draws on Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Shelley Streeby, *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence, and Visual Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); Douglas Monroy, "Fence Cutters, *Sedicioso*, and First-Class Citizens: Mexican Radicalism in America," in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, ed. Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11-44; Daniel Rosenberg, "The IWW and Organization of Asian Workers in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America" *Labor History* 36, no. 1 (1995): 77-87; Michael Kazin, "The Great Exception Revisited: Organizer Labor and Politics in San Francisco and Los Angeles, 1870-1940," *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (August 1986): 371-402; Fay M. Blake and H. Morton Newman, "Upton Sinclair's Epic Campaign," *California History* 63, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 305-312.

interwar social movements to treat the Communist Party as the central pivot of popular efforts for social change.<sup>33</sup> As historian Robin D. G. Kelley has underscored in his study of the Communist Party in Alabama, California was a great distance, both physically and psychologically, from Party headquarters in New York, not to mention Moscow, and Party-affiliated movements that took hold in the region were fundamentally shaped by local conditions and locally-driven concerns.<sup>34</sup> In this respect, the work of Party organizers might best be viewed, not as an emblematic expression of political radicalism, but as part of the “movement of many movements” that comprised California’s popular front political milieu.<sup>35</sup> Proceeding from this broadened framework, the history of the popular front that this dissertation seeks is one from below that illuminates how people made sense of the multiplicity of ways in which emancipation and liberation were presented to them. It aims to shed light, in other words, on how people sought to define freedom for themselves in a world where freedom held different meanings for different

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<sup>33</sup> Works in this vein range widely in their orientations and approaches. Key examples include, Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: Viking, 1957); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic, 1984); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York: Twayne, 1992); as well as Maurice Isserman, “Notes From Underground,” *Nation* 260, no. 23 (June 12, 1995): 846–856; Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), xiii-xiv. See also, Robert W. Cherny, “Prelude to the Popular Front: The Communist Party in California, 1931-35,” *American Communist History* 1, no. 1 (2002): 5-42; Michael K Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers, Working Class in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Gerald Horne, *Communist Front?: The Civil Rights Congress, 1946-1956* (Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexican Press, 1987); Bruce Nelson, “Unions and the Popular Front: The West Coast Waterfront in the 1930s,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 30: The Popular Front (Fall 1986): 59-78; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983);

<sup>35</sup> My framing of the 1930s political left in California as a “movement of many movements” draws on the theoretical contributions of late-twentieth and early-twenty first century anti-globalization movements. See, for example, Tom Mertes, Walden F. Bello, Bernard Cassen, and Jose Bove, et. al., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (New York: Verso, 2004).

people.

The oppositional culture that crystallized in the 1930s was not monolithic. It was neither an expression of political unity nor of a common identity. Rather, it was an outgrowth of the multifaceted, heterogeneous, and sometimes contradictory efforts of aggrieved people and communities to defend their dignity in the face of varied experiences of oppression. It had roots in a wide range of geographic, intellectual, ideological, and cultural traditions. Yet, it was also more than the sum of its parts. Working people's culture was the channel through which they made sense of the social conditions they confronted, critiqued racial capitalist power, and mobilized against it. While its forms and impact varied across different locations and communities, it was marked by common threads. Specifically, it gave expression to grassroots efforts to navigate and stand up to the varying forms of dehumanization they faced. Against the universalizing logic of modernization, Californians who contributed to the era's oppositional culture sought to reclaim a sense of dignity that embraced and valued difference. Against the atomizing forces of the economy, they pursued visions of working-class autonomy that affirmed the interconnectivity and interdependence of grassroots struggles. Against dominant structures of governance that revolved around centralized, representative styles of leadership, they advanced notions of democracy that prioritized direct participation and community-based organization. Against ideologies that treated freedom as either an abstract ideal or a distant goal, they treated the concept as an urgent and integral feature of the practice and process of politics.

On one level, *Grassroots Surrealism* tells a tale of how California's grassroots struggles for dignity and self-definition contributed to the making of a broader

oppositional culture. It examines how insubordinate subjects drew on established ties of community and kinship, how they forged new channels of collectivity and coalition and negotiated commonalities and differences as they moved from efforts for “endurance and subsistence toward affirmation and resistance.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, inseparable from this story is an additional one that traces the contradictions and contestations that characterized the process of grassroots political struggle. Studying the era’s culture of opposition from the bottom up reminds us that the making of movements was not, and has never been, an orderly event, carefully planned and thoroughly disciplined. Rather, this was a process marked by disorder, chaos, and emotion. People struggling for dignity and autonomy were fueled not purely by public and collective concerns, but also at times by individualistic and materialistic motives. They often reinscribed racial, gender, and class divisions even as they strove to move beyond them. Indeed, the coalitions that formed during this period neither transcended nor elided cultural, racial, and ideological differences, but, on the contrary, were shaped and often disrupted by them. In attending to these points of contestation, the present study pursues a fuller understanding of the tensions and conflicts that shaped life in California during the Great Depression, and the political practices that helped sustain grassroots notions that prevailing arrangements of power and domination were not inevitable—that living with pride and dignity, and building a world that facilitated doing so, were things worth struggling for.

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<sup>36</sup> My use of this phrase describing the shift from “endurance and subsistence toward affirmation and resistance” derives from Clyde Woods, qtd. in George Lipsitz’s lecture, “Space, Place, and Race: Rebuilding L.A. through Art,” presented at “L.A. Xicano: A Symposium on Art and Place over Time,” organized by UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center at The Fowler Museum at UCLA, November 6, 2011.

***Labor, Culture, and Politics in the 1930s***

Working-class culture is widely regarded as a critical axis of the conflicts and crisis that punctuated the early New Deal era. Too frequently, however, the study of culture has been constrained by efforts to find internal cohesion and consistency in the objectives of the era's movements. More to the point, scholars have tended to take the social democratic and corporatist agendas advanced by union leaders and politicians as reflections of the aspirations of working people in general. They have focused overwhelmingly on the ways working people became oriented around a left-liberal progressive politics and an inclusionary, multicultural brand of Americanism.<sup>37</sup> Of course, one of the most prominent templates we have for examining the culture and politics of working people in the 1930s is Michael Denning's notion of the "cultural front," whose central legacy he defines as a thoroughgoing "laboring of American culture."<sup>38</sup> Seminal as Denning's work has been in shifting our gaze beyond the activities of formal political organizations and bringing culture into focus as a category of historical analysis, in using "labor" as a thematic conceit for interpreting working-class struggles and politics his work also confines our understanding of the popular front in significant ways. Such an approach not only eclipses the heterogeneous and contested nature of the era's movements but also short-circuits the insurgent character of the imagination that animated them. Most gravely of all, in binding the fate of multiethnic

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<sup>37</sup> How and why working people became oriented around a social democratic politics and corporatist agenda, and what happened as a result, has been a central question pursued by scholars of the era's social movements. See, for example, Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*; Fraser and Gerstle, ed., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*; Elizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1991); Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

<sup>38</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

communities to a trajectory of a “laboring,” such an analysis risks re-imposing the very structures of oppression from which these communities sought liberation. As historian David Roediger has urged, while “[l]abor radicalisms are *part*” of what fueled working-class struggles in the 1930s, “they do not exhaust dreams for a new world.”<sup>39</sup>

To account more fully for the scope of political possibilities opened up by grassroots struggles in the Depression era, I take cues from contemporary surrealist theorists, who saw in the uprisings of the interwar era not a common political agenda, but a common emancipatory impulse. For surrealists, the deepening global crisis of the Great Depression was accompanied by the making of an international revolutionary movement—one anchored in a desire for freedom, and oriented toward the freeing of desire from the strictures of rationalism imposed by modern and Western thought.<sup>40</sup> Surrealism provides crucial insight into the historical moment of the Great Depression not simply because this period marked the peak of the endeavors of André Bretón, Louis Aragon, and others to elaborate surrealist ideas as part of a self-conscious aesthetic and intellectual enterprise. Rather, it is useful especially because it captures a way of thinking about politics that helps us to move beyond the constraints of worn ideological categories and toward a more open-ended exploration of what moves people. Surrealists advanced a critique of capitalism that simultaneously denounced the role of colonialism, imperialism, and White supremacy in shaping the modern world. They exalted the value

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<sup>39</sup> Italics mine. Roediger, *History Against Misery*, 27. Roediger’s fuller critique of Denning’s work can be found in 12-27 of this same text. See also, George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 31-56. For additional analysis regarding the limits of labor as a frame for examining grassroots struggles and culture, see Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1993), 137-8.

<sup>40</sup> Roediger, *History Against Misery*, 19-20; Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 4-6; Gavin Grindon, “Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work.”

of imagination, creativity, and improvisation for the pursuit of social transformation, and championed efforts to breach the distinction between art and life, dreams and reality, ideas and actions. Perhaps most importantly, in advancing a vision of revolution without a fixed or predetermined end, surrealism gives us a valuable epistemological frame for investigating—and seeing the potential power of—the practices of self-definition and self-activity engaged by working people as they sought to make life livable on their own terms.<sup>41</sup>

The conceptual tools that surrealism offers prove especially vital when we consider how centering the struggles of working-class communities in a study of Depression-era California requires broadening the way we traditionally think about political activity. Indeed, most of the poor, racialized, and immigrant women and men who comprised California's working-class populations during the 1930s did not have full access to participation in the formal institutions that usually define the edges of what is political. Marginalized by dominant conceptions of national identity and "rational" or "authentic" political subjectivity, they commonly drew on a wider range of social and cultural resources—from music and games to community ties—as they fashioned identities for themselves and evaded, confronted, and challenged the circumstances of their everyday lives. Taking seriously the self-activity of working-class communities thus mandates that

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<sup>41</sup> In the words of Robin D. G. Kelley, the conceptual tools that surrealism provides have "no birth date, no expiration date, no trademark." Kelley sees a surrealist genealogy as traceable from "the ancient practices of Maroon societies and shamanism back to the future, to the metropolises of Europe, to the blues people of North America, to the colonized and semicolonized world that produced the like of Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and Wilfredo Lam." Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 4-5. With Kelley, I argue that surrealist "dreams" are part of a part of a protracted struggle that extends forward to the present as well, and that bears a strong resonance with reconceptualizations of revolution by current antiglobalization movements, which also inform this work. Of particular note are theorizations by the EZLN in Chiapas, Mexico. See, John Holloway and Eloína Peláez, "Introduction: Reinventing Revolution," in *Zapatista!: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, ed. John Holloway and Eloína Peláez, (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 14-17.

we heed Robin Kelley's assertion that "[p]olitics is not separate from lived experience or the imagined world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things."<sup>42</sup>

Rather than fitting neatly into dominant narratives of an emergent, nationalist political consensus, the movements under examination here—and, I argue, significant currents of working-class movements in 1930s California more broadly speaking—engaged a politics born out of the embattled circumstances of everyday life, and driven toward the manifold goal of making life livable. Theirs was a politics I characterize loosely as “grassroots surrealism.”<sup>43</sup> At their heart was a refusal of the conditions and classifications that capitalist modernization imposed on their lives and an impulse to move beyond them. Grassroots surrealists struggled to define and organize their lives according to their desires, at the same time that they drew on modes of historical memory and social learning that underscored the interdependence of their struggles with those that surrounded them. The identities they forged and the sense of autonomy they sought were anchored—not tidily within the boundaries of national, racial, and industrial categorizations so frequently ascribed to them—but in a sense of the multiplicity,

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<sup>42</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994, 1996), 9. In addition to the work of Robin D. G. Kelley, my interpretation of the political is informed by the broader contributions of subaltern, feminist, and cultural studies. For seminal examples, see Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, ed., *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Sub-cultures in Post-war Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976); James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Faue, *Communities in Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 107-146; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> In linking the terms “grassroots” and “surrealism” here, my intention is not to chart out a new school of surrealist thought but rather to underscore the anchoring of surrealism in popular struggles and to challenge conventional assumptions about the distinction between the intellectual/artistic on the one hand and the grassroots/popular on the other. In doing so, I draw on Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash's theorization of the relationship between “grassroots” and “postmodernism” in late-twentieth century social movements, as traced out in *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), 3.



variability, and intersectionality of a wider array of popular struggles against subordination. Theirs was a multiracialist politics of working-class autonomy that challenged the social divisions of capital at the local level while contributing to a global circulation of struggles against the subjugating forces of Western imperialism and racial capitalism. At once oppositional and prefigurative, the movements of working-class Californians that are the subject of this study underscored the value of regarding democracy and freedom not strictly as political objectives but as actually-lived and embodied elements of the process of political struggle.<sup>44</sup>

Considering the politics of Depression-era social movements through the frame of grassroots surrealism reshuffles the ways we understand the key political dilemmas confronting working people in the 1930s. For most, the problem of politics in this period had less to do with deciding how to cast electoral ballots or determining which political organization to join than with developing methods for pursuing broad visions of social transformation without sacrificing priorities of creative autonomy and democratic participation.<sup>45</sup> For many people at crucial junctures, industrial labor provided a generative site for such pursuits. Mobilizing at the workplace around labor-oriented concerns exerted pressure at one of the most vulnerable sites in capitalism's circuitry, dramatized the power of working people in the economy, and carried the potential to

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<sup>44</sup> Regarding the rethinking of revolution, freedom, and democracy articulated here, see Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, 218-219, 224-225.

<sup>45</sup> The dilemma organizational discipline and working-class self-activity sat at the heart such foundational texts of the political left as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "What Is to Be Done?" in *Essential World of Lenin: 'What Is to Be Done?' and other Writings*, ed. Henry Christman, 53-176 (New York: Dover Publications, 1987) and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, *"Left-Wing" Communism and Infantile Disorder: A Popular Essay in Marxian Strategy and Tactics* (Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2001). For more contemporary analyses regarding the centrality and pervasiveness of this dilemma within struggles for social change, see, for example, Geoff Eley's work on the European left in Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Paul Gilroy's work on Black cultural politics in Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 15.

wrest otherwise unimaginable concessions from political and economic elites. All of these factors helped to make labor a central rallying point for nationwide progressive and radical political organizations, which in turn provided crucial resources and comradeship to working people. Certainly, some of the most historic gains made by working people in this era occurred at worksites, in moments and places where popular desires to utilize the resources and political avenues that national progressive organizations made available to them corresponded with the imperatives of those organizations to draw on the energies of mass working populations.

Yet, workplace-centered politics never encompassed the totality of grassroots political activities or emancipatory hopes. For many aggrieved and working-class communities in the 1930s, life conditions demanded not only a fairer distribution of resources or the fulfillment of modernity's promises but a reconceptualization and transfiguration of the very terms that organized the modern world. In the words of writer Ralph Ellison, to struggle for freedom in the face of oppression was as much an artistic as a political task, one that required the invention of "new definitions of terms like *primitive* and *modern*, *ethical* and *unethical*, *moral* and *immoral*, *patriotism* and *treason*, *tragedy* and *comedy*, *sanity* and *insanity*."<sup>46</sup> Resisting dehumanization implied the cultivation of new ideas about labor and leisure, new ways of living and belonging, and new modes of social relations.<sup>47</sup> For innovations of this sort, established discourses, aesthetic conventions, and avenues of political participation were important and strategic but never

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<sup>46</sup> Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," *Harper's Magazine* (August 1964): 54.

<sup>47</sup> Gilroy, *Small Acts*; Kelley, *Race Rebels*; Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals*; George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

sufficient modes of expression. It is for this reason that much of the work of libratory struggle occurred, as anthropologist and political scientist James Scott has put it, “like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum,” on that wider terrain of politics we call culture.<sup>48</sup> As cultural theorist Paul Gilroy notes, some of the most radical challenges to modernity have not been spoken or written but “played, danced and acted, as well as sung about, because words . . . will never be enough to communicate [their] unsayable claims to truth.”<sup>49</sup> Culture provided a repository for social visions that not only “reveal[ed] the internal problems in the concept of modernity” but also “partially transcend[ed] modernity,” thus providing a pathway toward “individual self-fashioning and communal liberation.”<sup>50</sup>

Framing this inquiry into California’s working-class struggles as an examination of the region’s culture of opposition is one way to begin to think about the multitude of grassroots movements for dignity and autonomy that emerged there in the 1930s as part of a wider field of struggle for transformation and hegemony.<sup>51</sup> It should be emphasized that the point here is not to posit work and art, labor and culture, as distinct, binary realms of activity. Rather, my objective is to explore how, in the context of early-twentieth century capitalism, these categories presented a dialectical contradiction that Californians worked to resolve in a multiplicity of ways. I hope to illuminate how the art of labor protest and the labor of artistic production together provided grounds for reimagining life and producing new, oppositional modes of being and belonging.

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<sup>48</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

<sup>49</sup> Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 134, 137-138.

<sup>51</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

Cultural expressions in themselves cannot transform the world. They do not “topple regimes, break chains, or stop bullets.”<sup>52</sup> In fact, they often reinforce prevailing structures of power and provide means of accommodating to existing conditions. However, as culture theorist Stuart Hall insists, they are one of the arenas where the “struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” and where a newly democratic culture “might be constituted.”<sup>53</sup> In the words of cultural critic George Lipsitz, “Politics and culture maintain a paradoxical relationship in which only effective political action can win breathing room for a new culture, but only a revolution in culture can make people capable of political action.”<sup>54</sup>

### ***Difference, Solidarity, and the Surrealist Imagination***

Taking grassroots struggles on their own terms gives new meaning to established categories of analysis. In a significant sense, this dissertation is a study of class struggle, though the concept of class is intended here in a particular way. Drawing on a political vocabulary that has emerged from a long history of grassroots self-activity, I place the

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<sup>52</sup> Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London and New York, 2002), 192.

<sup>54</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 16. As literary scholar Lisa Lowe puts it, “Some cultural forms succeed in making it possible to live and inhabit alternatives in the encounter with [dominant] prohibitions; some permit us to imagine what we still have yet to live.” See Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, x.

Sociologist Larry Isaac has underscored how social movements themselves produce new cultural forms. In his words, “At root, movements are cultural production agents. Regardless of whatever else they accomplish, they produce new cultural forms in the course of the struggle; they often change and augment mainstream cultural stock in the process, and sometimes live on for generations in collective memory.” Isaac explains, “Movements sometimes change structural realities, but they also change our awareness, perceptions and sensibilities regarding those realities; they *move* our culture.” See Larry Isaac, “Movement of Movements: Culture Moves in the Long Civil Rights Struggle,” *Social Forces* 87, no. 1 (September 2008): 36, 47.

antagonism between struggles for and denials of dignity at the center of the study of capitalist formation.<sup>55</sup> This means understanding capitalism not as a preconstituted system that divides two groups of people, capitalists and workers, but rather—in the vein of an analytic tradition that links Marx, E. P. Thompson, and John Holloway—as a system that is always in the making, that is constituted and reconstituted through the subjection of human creativity to the market, and that sets human dignity in conflict with the process of its denial.<sup>56</sup> In other words, rather than a reductive focus that treats class as a fixed category, bound to points of production and defined by subordination to capital, this approach treats class fundamentally as a category of struggle—a social and cultural, as well as economic, phenomenon that is inextricably tied to political activity and *insubordination*.<sup>57</sup> Moving beyond a fixed definition of class enables a wider view of class interests that accounts for the ways struggles for material survival are inseparable from struggles for dignity, identity, and pleasure. Moreover, it urges an understanding of dignity itself as a “class concept.” As Holloway emphasizes, the struggle for dignity

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<sup>55</sup> John Holloway, “Dignity’s Revolt,” in *Zapatista!: Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, ed. John Holloway and Eloína Peláez, (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 169. For exemplary texts that incorporate this line of analysis into the study of grassroots struggles, see Luis Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot: Youth Culture and Resistance during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) and “Reggae Rhythms in Dignity’s Diaspora: Globalization, Indigenous Identity, and the Circulation of Cultural Struggle,” *Popular Music and Society* 31, no. 5 (December 2008): 575-597.

<sup>56</sup> Marx and Engels, “Feuerbach,” 39-91; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966); Holloway, “Dignity’s Revolt,” 159-198, see esp. p. 181-183, and *Change the World without Taking Power* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2002, 2005, 2010), esp. 54-56, 143-144. The longer trajectory of Marxist scholarship informing this approach includes the foundational contributions of the New Labor History. Key texts include, in addition to E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (New York: Norton, 1959, 1965); Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-Class and Social History* (New York: Knopf, 1976); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); David Montgomery, *Workers Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>57</sup> On the subject on subordination and insubordination in class struggle, see Holloway, “Dignity’s Revolt,” 182. See also Hall, “The Problem of Ideology,” 28-44.

begins in “the struggle against subordination,” the “negation of humiliation,” and entails “a constant moving against the barriers of that which exists, a constant subversion and transcendence of definitions.”<sup>58</sup> This, to be sure, is what labor organizer and organic intellectual Stan Weir meant when he described the 1934 Pacific coast waterfront strike as a mobilization that “did not arise only out of economic need” but represented, rather, “a successful bid for dignity.”<sup>59</sup>

Approaching class as a category not strictly rooted in production also enables fuller inquiry into the ways in which class struggle is inextricably linked with—indeed, constituted through—struggles over race, gender, and sexuality. Of course, social relations of capital are, fundamentally, relations of power; and power, as Michel Foucault has helped us to see, is not centralized in the state but is mediated by daily interactions between people and the system of meanings ascribed to them.<sup>60</sup> What cultural critic Lisa Lowe has called the “social production of difference”—of race, ethnicity, gender, and geographic origin—played a critically important role in the making of the power relations of modern nations and transnational capitalism precisely because it generated an infrastructure of classificatory knowledge capable ordering and managing society.<sup>61</sup> Racial and gendered meanings that became attached to individual bodies and mass populations carried assumptions about people’s inherent capacities as well as expectations for proper social behavior. At the same time, evolving notions of

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<sup>58</sup> Holloway, *Dignity’s Revolt*, in *Zapatista!*, 169, 183.

<sup>59</sup> Stan Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 257. See also Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, “17 March 1976,” in “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 239-264.

<sup>61</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1996), 27-28.

civilization and primitiveness, social progress and social decay, what was good for the public and what threatened it, positioned differently racialized and gendered subjects at varying distances from, and in varying kinds of relations to, the dominant national culture. Elaborated through an intricate web of law, custom, and culture, this system of knowledge facilitated the subjugation of labor from diverse sites across the globe, while marshalling the boundaries of social membership and participation that gave cohesion to regional hierarchies and the national body politic.<sup>62</sup>

California, as historians David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch have shown, was at the “leading edge” in the production of racial managerial strategies that facilitated national and capitalist development through such productions of difference.<sup>63</sup> Between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, accompanying successive waves of labor recruitment and migration from China, Japan, the Philippines, Mexico, and the U.S. South, the common sense of race that took hold in California promoted forms of intergroup competition and conflict that, by inhibiting working-class unity, contributed to the ascendance and durability of regional hierarchies. Racial divisions among working people were a driving force behind Indian removal, Asian exclusion, the quota system inaugurated by the 1924 Immigration Act, policies prohibiting miscegenation and interracial marriage, and those authorizing Mexican and Filipino repatriation—all projects that were foundational to California’s annexation, incorporation, and maintenance as part of the American nation-state. What emerged in the region as a result

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<sup>62</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*; Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005); Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 15.

was a distinct, patriarchal and multiracist pattern of White supremacy, in which difference and domination often reinforced each other.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, difference was a site of constant contestation, not just the source of fragmentation that California's capitalist elite imagined it to be. The same oppressive forces that confined people to specific locales, neighborhoods, and economic sectors also served as potentially generative sources of identity, collectivity, and struggle.<sup>65</sup> In places like East Los Angeles' Boyle Heights, San Gabriel Valley's citrus groves, and San Francisco's Chinatown, studies of ethnic community formation have revealed how race and space structured the contours of daily life as well as patterns of resistance.<sup>66</sup> Neither bounded nor static, the varied histories of California's ethnic communities were intimately intertwined with and contingent upon each other, as were their struggles for resources, community control, and empowerment. The recent scholarship of transnational, comparative, and relational ethnic studies has shed valuable light on the overlapping, interacting, and dialogical relationships that have taken shape between and across racialized ethnic communities, and across the social geographies of racial capitalism and imperialism.<sup>67</sup> Yet, a great deal remains to be learned. As a study of

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<sup>64</sup> My use of the concept "multiracism" draws on Vijay Prashad, "Bruce Lee and the Anti-Imperialism of Kung-Fu: A Polycultural Adventure," *positions* 11, no. 1 (2003): 59-90. Also see, Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*.

<sup>65</sup> Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Binghamton: SUNY Department of Art and Art History, 1991): 41-68;

<sup>66</sup> George Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican America: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Matt Garcia, *A World of Its Own: Race, Labor, and Citrus in the Making of Greater Los Angeles, 1900-1970* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Shah, *Contagious Divides*; Yung, *Unbound Feet*.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013); Scott Kurashige, *The Shifting Grounds of Race: Black and Japanese Americans in the Making of Los Angeles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*; Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S.*



multiethnic working-class struggle during the Great Depression era, this dissertation illuminates an understudied dialectic between racialized communities and multiracial coalitions and seeks to deepen understandings of how people navigated commonalities and differences, affinities and tensions, as they sought dignity and social change. It is worth noting that the point here is not to fetishize the coming together of people across lines of difference, but rather, as historians Luis Alvarez and Daniel Widener have put it, to contribute to a fuller picture of how differentiated subjects and communities engaged each other as they collectively “share[d] and contest[ed] the past, present, and future.”<sup>68</sup> Such an approach might help us to rethink basic assumptions about the meaning and practice of solidarity, by enabling us to see that difference—and the differentiated nature of struggles for liberation—is not “something that undermines the democratic project” but, as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe suggest, may well be “its very condition of possibility.”<sup>69</sup>

Centering difference in the study of the making of California’s grassroots oppositional culture destabilizes universalizing notions of political subjecthood and reminds us of the fluid, mulifaceted, and multivalent nature of human identities. Drawing especially on the contributions of radical, postcolonial, and women of color feminists and queer studies, this approach helps us to see how identities were shaped by specific historical circumstances at the same time that they were actively constructed and

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*Third World Left* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Daniel Widener, “‘Perhaps the Japanese Are to be Thanked?’: Asians, Asian Americans, and the Construction of Black California,” *positions*, 11, no. 1 (2003): 135-181; Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

<sup>68</sup> Luis Alvarez and Daniel Widener, “A History of Black and Brown: Chicana/o-African American Cultural and Political Relations,” *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 145.

<sup>69</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition, (New York and London: Verso, 1985, 2001), xviii.

deployed by historical subjects as part of the weaponry of libratory struggle.<sup>70</sup> It reveals the contradictions of grassroots identification practices and illuminates how struggles for dignity by some subjects frequently disavowed and denigrated those of others. For example, one of the key insights that emerges from this line of analysis centers the ways that masculinity often provided the shortest route to multiracial organization for working-class men, at the same time that it reinforced the marginalization of women, especially women of color. Another underscores how racialized and gendered performances of respectable womanhood served as a gateway to social access and inclusion for some, while further distancing others from the same. Building from these insights, we might conclude more broadly that, much like its relationship to centralized modes of political organization, the relationship between grassroots surrealism and exclusionary gender essentialisms was inconsistent, sometimes strategic, and generally marked by contradiction.

At least as important as its role in deepening our understanding of social movements' inherent contradictions and limitations, a dynamic and differentiated understanding of identity also renders visible the ways some subjects envisioned and enacted more expansive, and more radically democratic, modes of affiliation and belonging. It becomes possible to trace how aggrieved subjects have constructed

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<sup>70</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981); Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988), 575-599; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 1-24; Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999); Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time & Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005).

political meanings that destabilize the binary distinctions that typically organize understandings of the world in the sense that Black studies scholar Sara Clarke Kaplan describes, disrupting dichotomies between “not only masculine and feminine, or black and white, but also their connoted cousins: radical and reform, active and passive, oppositional and complicit, public and private, life and death.”<sup>71</sup> It becomes possible to see how some people at the grassroots engaged what Chela Sandoval calls “differential consciousness,” that is, a political subjectivity that defined itself not only in opposition to dominant ideologies and structures of power but also in a refusal to treat “any one ideology as the final answer.”<sup>72</sup> As a rubric for historical excavation and narration, such a perspective enables us to see the possibilities for liberation and social transformation that have emerged out of conditions of oppression. It enables us to explore how people have begun to build, or at least pointed the direction toward building, what the Zapatistas have described as “a world in which many worlds fit.”<sup>73</sup>

As it illuminates the alternative modes of identification and affiliation that Californians engaged in the course of their struggles, this study remaps the way we see 1930s California in both temporal and spatial terms. Early-twentieth century California contained one of the most diverse landscapes of any region of the continent, including natural and cultural resources that varied widely across different localities. It was a driver of the national economy and of U.S. imperialism. It was a global crossroads for capital and labor and a site for the production of the kinds of mutually-impacting

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<sup>71</sup> Sara Clarke Kaplan, “Love and Violence/Maternity and Death: Black Feminism and the Politics of Reading (Un)representability,” *Black Women, Gender, and Families* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 106.

<sup>72</sup> Sandoval, “U.S. Third World Feminism,” 14.

<sup>73</sup> Alex Khasnabish, *Zapatistas: Rebellion from the Grassroots to the Global* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 204.

transnational patterns that Brent Hayes Edwards has called “overlapping diasporas.”<sup>74</sup> In the midst of the global crisis of the 1930s, California was also a land of many possible futures. Although historians in retrospect have drawn a fairly direct line from California’s emergence as ground zero for Anglo-American conquest and capitalist modernization in the mid-nineteenth century into a fully industrialized and multicultural Golden State by the mid-twentieth century, this dissertation urges attention to the fissures and breaks in that narrative that the 1930s represented. This study traces how the global crisis of capitalism in the 1930s was experienced by Californians across a range of difference localities and valences—across what Latino cultural critic Juan Flores has described as the “cross” (as in cross-racially and cross-ethnically), the “intra” (considering intra-ethnic relations of class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship), and the “trans” (highlighting the transnational reach of local grassroots experiences).<sup>75</sup> It tracks how Californians confronted the uncertainties of the era and sought to redefine the contours of their lives in a multitude of ways, with many possible outcomes for the trajectory of California’s development. Against dominant inclinations to hunt out traces of historical inevitability, I hope to recapture a sense of the 1930s in California as an era of disruption and unpredictability, a conjuncture where “history’s continuum shatter[ed]” and “new horizons shimmer[ed].”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, “Shadow of Shadows,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 13.

<sup>75</sup> Juan Flores, “Reclaiming Left Baggage: Some Early Sources for Minority Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 59 (Winter 2005): 187-206.

<sup>76</sup> Eley, *Forging Democracy*, viii-ix.

## ***Organization***

What follows is an examination of the making of California's grassroots oppositional culture as an interethnic, multiracial, and transregional phenomenon. It begins in the rural, industrialized agricultural region of the Imperial Valley, where a strike led by ethnic Mexican cantaloupe workers in spring of 1928 marked one of the earliest upsurges of collective direct action during the Great Depression era. Occurring over a year before the Black Tuesday stock market crash that is typically seen as the starting point of the Depression, the 1928 Imperial Valley cantaloupe strike illuminates the deeper historical roots of 1930s social movements and underscores that the crisis of capitalism unfolded in different places at different times, and in different ways. Chapter 1 takes the cantaloupe strike as a point of departure for examining how farm working communities responded to the dehumanizing effects of agricultural development and the agricultural recession that plunged the Imperial Valley into a state of depression in the years the preceded 1929 crash. As it traces the shifting contours of farm worker political activity leading up to the larger, state-wide strike wave of 1933-1934, this chapter illuminates how oppositional, surrealist epistemologies that emerged out of farm workers' daily struggles both contributed to and were impacted by processes of collective struggle, cultural production, and social and organizational learning.

Chapter 2 takes us from California's rural interior to the major port city of San Francisco, the epicenter of the 1934 coastwise waterfront strike and the site of the largest and longest general strike in the history of the United States. As the "Wall Street of the West" and a key center for coastal and transpacific trade, San Francisco was vital to the

advancement of both financial and commercial sectors of the U.S. economy. Yet, its development was also shaped by a longstanding tradition of political radicalism and labor militancy that was largely organized around racist and anti-immigrant politics. This chapter investigates how mobilizations for workplace democracy on San Francisco's waterfront in the summer of 1934 became a site on which Black, Asian, Latino, and White workers linked wide-ranging struggles against racial capitalist development in the city. It traces how the collective actions, social visions, and strategic maneuverings of the city's multiracial workforce transformed the 1934 strike into a multiracial struggle that challenged White supremacy as well as economic exploitation. It reveals how grassroots surrealists advanced a multiracialist vision of political solidarity that linked people across racial, ethnic, and national lines around a sense of interdependence and shared vulnerability.

Chapter 3 shifts the lens away from sites and moments of direct industrial confrontation to examine the production and circulation of surrealist oppositional culture in wider ambits of grassroots struggle. For many Californians, national organizations and workplace confrontations were less accessible or less viable means of political struggle than community networks and artistic expressions. Whether this was because they faced exclusion from labor unions, experienced repression for associating with them, or because their desires for autonomy could not be met within them, these Californians found in culture an especially important vehicle for expanding political horizons through the crafting of new modes of meaning, political identity, and solidarity. In Los Angeles—the capitol of the culture industry and a national pacesetter for open shop unionism and terroristic forms of urban race management—I examine how ethnic

Mexican, African American, Asian, and White working communities contested the legitimacy of urban development patterns through art. Exploring public works of visual art, a community based theater arts movement, and the musical productions of young jazz musicians, I illustrate how cultural expressions channeled grassroots struggles for autonomy along a range of different frequencies. This chapter shows how grassroots surrealists found in culture a widened terrain for nurturing anti-essentialist visions of themselves and dreams of the future.

As a corporatist liberal consensus crystallized within mainstream channels of government and nationwide progressive and labor politics, finding its most concrete expression in the second wave of New Deal legislation between 1935 and 1938, expressive culture served as a particularly vital avenue for sustaining grassroots struggles and the alternative social visions that they produced. Of course, some Californians were no strangers to the task of sustaining protracted struggles for autonomy and dignity in times where broader social transformation felt out of reach. The Native Californians who lived in and around Mendocino County's Round Valley Reservation were among these. Chapter 4 examines the centrality of cultural innovation to the struggles of Round Valley Indians in the wake of the enactment of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act, which sought to consolidate federal political control over American Indian populations. As I examine how they experienced and responded to the upheavals of the era, I illuminate how Round Valley Indians engaged a wide range of aesthetic, leisure, spiritual, and other cultural practices that helped redefine their relationship to the land, tribal affiliations, and other ethnic working populations during the 1930s. I demonstrate how, against federal efforts to tighten managerial control over them by confining their lives more tightly

within the boundaries of the reservation, Round Valley Indians asserted a surrealist vision that affirmed their position as part of a broader, global social majority—one that sought dignity through the embracement of difference and autonomy through intersectional struggle.

Examining how Depression-era Californians sought to make their lives livable across each of these four, perhaps seemingly disparate sites does not provide us with a comprehensive or conclusive account of the era's social movements. However, it does offer us a new way of looking at them. Considering these four sites as a small sampling of the many movements that comprised the region's Depression-era political landscape illuminates how grassroots surrealism energized popular struggles across a wide range of different valences and by a multitude of means. An imaginative and open-ended politics rooted in the everyday lives of aggrieved communities, grassroots surrealism manifested itself in the libratory desires and hopes of people in rural and urban regions, at the workplace and in the neighborhood, in places of labor and of leisure, in political confrontations and artistic expressions, in forms of coalition, community, and even in expressions of identity that reinforced social exclusions and divisions. Grassroots surrealism was not a current of politics that was confined to a specific location, nor to a group of people with a specific racial, ethnic, or gender affiliation. It cannot properly be understood as a specific strategy of organizing or protest. It was not an ideology. As movements that unfolded in the Imperial Valley, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Round Valley reveal, grassroots surrealism embodied the pervasive contradiction of the age between aspirations for dignity and those for social transformation. In the struggles that it animated lie crucial lessons concerning the relationship between struggle, imagination,



solidarity, and social change.

## Chapter 1

### Everyday Insurrection and the Making of California's Agricultural Crisis

*These are upheavals like earthquakes. The revolution, the upheaval of the masses of the population, is a tremendous event that people cannot control.*

—C.L.R. James<sup>77</sup>

On May 7, 1928, as the Imperial Valley's cantaloupe fields became ready for harvest, fifteen ethnic Mexican workers on Sears Brothers Company Ranch, roughly nine miles northwest of the town of Brawley, refused to work. The immediate issue that spurred them to action was grower E. L. Sears' rejection of a set of demands that they and roughly 1,200 other workers from throughout the valley had set forth, through a union they had formed during the preceding month. When Sears responded to the act of rebellion by discharging the workers and ordering them off company property, they resisted, provoking a call to the district attorney and county sheriff. By the time the sheriff arrived on the premises, eleven of the striking workers had scattered, while four held their ground and faced arrest on charges of "disturbing the peace." Similar confrontations occurred on other ranches across the valley's cantaloupe district that morning, and by the afternoon the sheriff had deputized over forty "willing assistants" to aid in restoring order. Over the next two days, more than sixty ethnic Mexican residents in the Imperial Valley were arrested, and measures were taken to prohibit workers from meeting or picketing, including closing down the union's offices, local pool halls, and other gathering places in the workers' communities. By May 18, the cantaloupe harvest

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<sup>77</sup> C.L.R. James, "Walter Rodney and the Question of Power" (lecture originally presented at memorial symposium, *Walter Rodney, Revolutionary and Scholar*, University of California, January 30, 1981), transcribed by Race Today Collective (Montreal: Blackrose Press, 1982).

resumed, and the local press lauded the county's contingent of official and unofficial law enforcers for crushing a movement of "dangerous proportions."<sup>78</sup>

Whatever credit the sheriff and his deputies received for "subduing" worker unrest in spring 1928, the upheaval was only an early spark of a much larger conflagration that swept California agriculture between the late 1928 and 1934. Against the imperatives of county officials and agricultural employers to restore stability in the fields and reassert control over the region's insubordinate workforce, Imperial Valley workers struck again during lettuce season in January 1930 in an action involving an estimated 5,000 workers. In the decade that followed, cropping up in and beyond the Imperial Valley and peaking in 1933-34, hundreds of mobilizations involving hundreds of thousands of people shook the foundations of agribusiness' power structure and crippled crop production up and down the state.<sup>79</sup> Reflecting on the rebellion of farm labor, journalist Frank J. Taylor wrote in 1936, "When the 'salad bowls' of America—Salinas, Arizona, the Imperial Valley—turned lettuce growing into a precision, mass-production industry, they left out one factor," that is, "the 'stoops' who pick the crop." As he noted, "These refractory parts of the machine are showing minds of their own and have organized, making the lettuce deal a highly speculative and dramatic business."<sup>80</sup>

As Taylor's words suggested, the crisis that unfolded in California agriculture

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<sup>78</sup> *Imperial Valley Press*, May 8 and 12, 1928; *Brawley News*, May 10, 12, 14, 18, and 23, 1928. The story of this strike is recounted in Charles Wollenberg, "Huelga, 1928 Style: The Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Workers' Strike," *Pacific Historical Review* 38, no. 1 (Feb. 1969): 45-58; Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture* (United States Government Printing Office, 1945), 75-78; Louis Bloch, "Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers," *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 135-147; Paul S. Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States: Imperial Valley* (University of California Press, 1928), 45-52.

<sup>79</sup> Approximately 140 strikes involving an estimated 127,000 people occurred in California during the 1930s. Rudy P. Guevarra, Jr., *Becoming Mexipino: Multiethnic Identities and Communities in San Diego* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 107.

<sup>80</sup> Frank J. Taylor, "Hot Lettuce," *Collier's*, Sept. 26, 1936.

between 1928 and 1934 laid bare the volatility of modernization processes and the vulnerability of power relations that had come to define the region's rural economy since the late-nineteenth century. Contrary to traditional analyses that cast farm-based economies as primitive remnants of a pre-capitalist past, agriculture was a driver of capitalist production in California. Agricultural industrialization fueled urban expansion and commerce in the region, along with the kind of wealth that came to define the California dream. It also served as a laboratory for the innovation of modern strategies of race management. Following experimentations with Chinese immigrant labor after the Gold Rush, agricultural employers increasingly recruited and relied on non-White and immigrant workers in their efforts to harness a cheap and flexible labor pool. Global economic dislocations resulting from industrialization generated a ready supply of precisely this sort of labor for agricultural development in the U.S. Southwest, especially first from China, subsequently from Japan, and by the 1910s predominantly from Mexico and the Philippines.<sup>81</sup> These transnational migrants were joined by African Americans from the Deep South during the early-twentieth century, and by poor Whites who came from Southern and Midwestern regions of the country in relatively small numbers during the 1910s and 1920s and en masse during the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s.<sup>82</sup> At the same time that these migratory streams fueled the region's economic growth, the legal and cultural marginality of new immigrant workers from the U.S. national polity helped

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<sup>81</sup> Adam McKeown, "Global Migration, 1846-1940" *Journal of World History* 15 (2) (2004): 155-89; and June Mei, "Economic Origins of Emigration: Guangdong to California, 1850-1882," *Modern China* 5, no. 4 (Oct. 1979): 463-501; Gilbert González and Raúl Fernández, *A Century in Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003), Chap. 2.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 8-10.

to uphold Whiteness as a source of power in California's fields.<sup>83</sup> When conditions of deprivation and disfranchisement failed to cultivate obedience among the region's multiracial workforce, a broader climate of vigilante violence helped to reinforce the region's infrastructure of class and racial subordination. While these conditions produced severe inequalities of wealth and power in California's farming regions, these structures of domination, and the modes of modernization they sustained, were far from totalizing.

Just as the events of 1928-1934 exposed the deep-rooted social tensions that accompanied capitalist agricultural development, they also fed the production of alternative visions of development at the grassroots. Despite the tenor of mainstream accounts that tended to frame the strikes as products of farm labor's allegedly "sudden" politicization, the historical roots of these events ran far deeper than such narratives conveyed. As a coordinated, collective, and frontal assault against farmers and the power they wielded, the strike in the Imperial Valley's cantaloupe fields in 1928, and subsequent work stoppages throughout the state, made the struggles of the region's farm working populations visible—indeed, unavoidable—to those who otherwise did not, or at least preferred not to acknowledge them. Yet, these mobilizations relied on solidarities and a broader oppositional culture that had been nurtured over the preceding three decades of agricultural advancement in the Southwest, albeit by practices that did not match dominant definitions of proper political behavior. Central to the burgeoning struggles in Imperial Valley fields were desires for autonomy and dignity that linked farm working communities in the face of dislocating and dehumanizing development forces.

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<sup>83</sup> Regarding the role of White supremacy in structuring California's agricultural economy, see Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*.

The strikes also impacted the trajectory of farm workers' struggles in turn by generating new modes of grassroots knowledge and organizational learning. They revealed the interdependence of differentiated struggles among workers, reshaped political ties among ethnic working communities, and facilitated the emergence of new coalitions that were multiracial and transregional in their composition as well as their impact. They thus offer a generative point of departure for examining California's emergence as a key node for the production of grassroots surrealist currents in the Great Depression era.

This chapter examines the emergence of agricultural strikes between 1928 and 1934 to shed light on how farm working communities responded to the devastating effects of agricultural development and depression in late-1920s and early-1930s California. It focuses particularly on the making and aftermath of a cantaloupe strike by ethnic Mexicans in the Imperial Valley in spring of 1928, to illuminate how oppositional epistemologies that emerged out of farm workers' daily struggles both contributed to and were impacted by interlinked processes of collective direct action, social learning, and cultural production. It illuminates how sites of industrial production and male-centered modes of political organization became a fulcrum for collective action, at the same time that it underscores the role of domestic spaces and women-centered networks in shaping grassroots identities and imaginations. On one level, the strikes reflected the strategic unity that workers forged around immediate and agreed-upon objectives for improved wages and working conditions. On another, they served as a vehicle for a variety of political aspirations and modes of meaning making, which often conflicted with each other. They were an avenue for ethnic identity formation as well as for interethnic political dialogue. They provided a channel for grassroots claims on patriarchal

masculinity as well as for female empowerment. They served as a means for pursuing enhanced autonomy and dignity for farm workers at the same time that they nourished further reaching visions of social transformation. These struggles, with all their inherent contradictory impulses, reshaped grassroots identities and politics among ethnic Mexican, Filipino, Asian, African American, and White workers and organizers, and helped open space for reimagining development in Depression-era California.

### ***The Social Synthesis of California Agriculture in the Late 1920s***

On the eve of the Depression era, California stood at the forefront of American agricultural production. The region supplied roughly one-third of the nation's fruit, one-fourth of its vegetables, and nearly all of its almonds, artichokes, walnuts, olives, and a great many other specialty crops. It established itself as a pacesetter in the mechanics of large-scale corporate farming and, correspondingly, in the dynamics of generating the kind of massive, cheap, and flexible labor force on which such farming relied.<sup>84</sup> Enabled in significant part by technological advances in the production of intensive crops as well as the expansion of western railroads and irrigation systems, the scope and directions of California's agricultural growth also hinged on a constellation of interrelated political developments.<sup>85</sup> By the 1920s, progressive reforms that had weakened partisan influence in government combined with deepening internal divisions in the region's Democratic and Republican coalitions, consequently yielding greater influence to growers'

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<sup>84</sup> Alan L. Olmstead and Paul W. Rhode, "The Evolution of California Agriculture, 1850-2000," in *California Agriculture: Dimensions and Issues*, ed. Jerome B. Siebert (University of California Press, 2004), 5; Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 41-42.

<sup>85</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 27-28; Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 41; Olmstead and Rhode, "The Evolution of California Agriculture," 6.

associations—and industrial and financial interests who depended increasingly on agricultural investments—within local and state politics.<sup>86</sup> At the same time, a wider milieu of anti-foreigner hysteria culminated in the 1924 enactment of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which shored up the racial boundaries of U.S. national identity and reinforced the political and cultural exclusion of non-European immigrant populations on which the nation's economy relied.<sup>87</sup> Together, the enhanced political power of large farming interests and the increasingly precarious social status of migratory working populations provided the groundwork for the broader synthesis of class exploitation, racial domination, and gender and sexual regulation that characterized the California's agricultural system by the mid-1920s.<sup>88</sup>

A crucial aspect of this synthesis was the way in which structures of production had taken shape in California's fields during the early-twentieth century. Of course, it must be remembered, agriculture's dependence on both nature and human labor made it a fundamentally unstable and risky enterprise. The possibility always loomed for an entire crop to be destroyed by bad weather, pests, or the noncompliance of workers with production demands. Consequently, the entire growing cycle required tenuous regulation. Harvests were particularly critical periods in which the full season's investment hung in the balance. Indeed, many farm owners dreamed of the day when

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<sup>86</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 27-28.

<sup>87</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 50-51, 57-58; Alicia Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008), 28-29.

<sup>88</sup> My notion of social synthesis draws on John Holloway's theorization of the concept. According to Holloway, "Any society is based on some sort of social cohesion, some form of relation between the activities of the many different people. In capitalist society, this cohesion has a particular logic often described in terms of the laws of capitalist development. There is a systemic closure that gives the social cohesion a particular force and makes it very difficult to break. To underline the close-knit character of the social cohesion of capitalist society, I refer to it as a *social synthesis*." Emphasis in original. John Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 52.



mechanization could help them overcome their reliance on land and labor and, in the words of one cotton farmer, make high-profit production possible “without the importation of hordes of undesirable people and the creation of troublesome social problems.”<sup>89</sup> Beginning in the 1890s, a widespread trend toward specialization reflected growers’ efforts to assert fuller control over production. The transition ushered a shift away from extensive ranching and grain-growing operations, toward higher-quality, higher-yield crops.<sup>90</sup> While these changes helped offset some of the risks posed by the caprices of nature, cash crops intensified the farm economy’s vulnerability to market fluctuations and natural disasters as well as its dependence on heavy amounts of capital and labor.

Specialized agriculture shifted wealth upward, sharpening inequalities among farmers and facilitating the growing dominance of large-scale, high-value, and labor-intensive crops.<sup>91</sup> By 1929, California contained nearly forty percent of all the large-scale farms (producing at least \$30,000 per year) in the United States.<sup>92</sup> Although they comprised just 2.1 percent of all the farms in California at the time, these large farms produced roughly one-third of the state’s agricultural output and fueled the expansion of the state’s agricultural workforce from 109,000 in 1879 to 332,000 in 1929, approximately fifteen percent of California’s total waged workforce.<sup>93</sup> Efforts to secure, manage, and maximize profits from this massive labor pool meant that agricultural

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<sup>89</sup> Cotton farmer, qtd. in *Imperial Valley Press*, May 28, 1910.

<sup>90</sup> Olmstead and Rhode, “The Evolution of California Agriculture,” 3-4; Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 29.

<sup>91</sup> Mark Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow: Mexican Immigrant Labor in the United States, 1900-1941* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1976), 61.

<sup>92</sup> “Large-scale” farms were defined by the Departments of Commerce and Agriculture as those which raised produce at an annual value of \$30,000 or more. See Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 79.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-79; Olmstead and Rhode, “The Evolution of California Agriculture,” 4, 19.

expansion went hand in hand with the institutionalization of labor contracting and foreman oversight, piece-rate wages that bound workers' income to their ability to produce profits for growers, and temporary, seasonal patterns of work that tied the rhythms of workers' lives to those of the agricultural market.<sup>94</sup> They also relied on multiracial strategies of labor segmentation and management that pitted differently racialized workers against each other to keep labor costs low and laboring people divided.<sup>95</sup> To be sure, the same conditions that empowered growers deepened the insecurity and exploitability of agricultural workers. As one farm laborer in Brawley remarked of local farm owners, "they control everything, such as City Councils, committees, [and] don't care what kind of houses we live in, or if we starve. . . . Unconsciously," he went on, "we [workers] lower the wages, because we go away to look for work, not knowing beforehand if work is to be had. We go from place to place and as we have to eat, we offer our services for less, in order to be able to work. Capital likes to pay us as little as they can."<sup>96</sup> George P. Clements, of the Agricultural Bureau of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, summed up many aspects of California's booming farm system at a 1926 growers' conference:

The old fashioned hired man is a thing of the past. He has left the farm. There is no place for him, and the farmer, who does not wake up to the realization that there is a caste in labor on the farm, is sharing too much of his dollar with labor. . . . California requires a fluid labor. We are not husbandmen. We are not farmers. We are producing a product to sell. . . .<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 83

<sup>95</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 193-204.

<sup>96</sup> Theodosia M. Samano interview with Mexican laborer, Brawley, Calif., June 16, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers (BANC MSS 84/38c), Carton 15, folder 9, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Calif.

<sup>97</sup> Chamber of Commerce of the United States, *Proceedings of Agricultural Conference of Chambers of Associations of Commerce*, Fresno, March 26-27, 1926, qtd. in Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 79.

By the time that Clements made this statement, California growers had, indeed, found themselves an ideal “caste” for farm labor, specifically in ethnic Mexican populations. The widespread agricultural labor shortage that resulted from the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen’s Agreement led to an increasing reliance of farms on Mexican as well as African American, Filipino, South Asian, and poor White workers beginning in the 1880s. The labor shortage in southwestern agriculture corresponded with social turmoil within Mexico under Porfirio Díaz and, subsequently, the tumult of the Mexican Revolution, which uprooted vast numbers of Mexican nationals and sent many of them northward in search of work.<sup>98</sup> Between 1900 and 1910, the Mexican-born population in the United States grew from 103,000 to 220,000, many of them helping to fill the persistent labor demand on farms across the southwest. By 1920, that figure more than doubled, to over 478,000 people, approximately half of whom entered into California’s migratory agricultural circuit, amounting to approximately three-quarters of the state’s total farm labor pool.<sup>99</sup> Although the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act did not impose numerical restrictions on Mexican immigration, the establishment of the U.S. Border Patrol and the construction of the new category of the “illegal alien” criminalized Mexican migration and entrenched the stigmatization of ethnic Mexicans—citizen and noncitizen, documented and undocumented—as foreign intruders within the United States.<sup>100</sup> As a result, the Mexican migrant subject became what Mae Ngai identifies as

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<sup>98</sup> González and Fernández, *A Century in Chicano History*, Chap. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 45.

<sup>100</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 67-68; 131-132; Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 28-29.

the “prototypical illegal alien,” whose deportability made Mexican-origin populations a distinctly flexible and especially desirable workforce in the eyes of employers.<sup>101</sup>

Importantly, the 1924 Immigration Act also did not establish quotas for Filipino-origin populations, who were American “nationals” under U.S. colonial law. This legal loophole stimulated the immigration of some 47,000 Filipinos to the U.S. west coast by the end of the decade (adding to a population of 5,600 already on the mainland according to the 1920 census). Ten thousand of these came via Hawaii, where many of them had worked on sugar and pineapple plantations.<sup>102</sup> Just as the mass circulation of other Asian workers had previously provoked fears of racial and sexual contagion, the growing presence of an overwhelmingly young, single, and male segment of the U.S.’s colonial workforce in agriculture and fish canning across California, the Pacific Northwest, and Alaska provoked similar and deep-seated fears about race mixing and threatened prevailing visions of a properly race and gender-ordered society.<sup>103</sup> Although their proportion of California’s agricultural workforce never approached that of ethnic Mexicans, Filipino workers became an increasingly prevalent and economically crucial source of farm labor in the region throughout the 1920s.

By the time of the 1928 cantaloupe strike in the Imperial Valley, the local farm working population across Imperial County included ethnic Mexican, Filipino, African American, Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and some White workers. The overwhelming presence of ethnic Mexican labor as a proportion of the local workforce (an estimated 90 percent, according to one study) led some observers to assume that Imperial Valley farm

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<sup>101</sup> Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 71, 132-133.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 103, 110-111.

labor “has come to mean Mexican” labor generally speaking.<sup>104</sup> Yet, such a description obscures the extent to which labor management on the region’s farms remained a distinctly multiracial enterprise. In fact, Mexican labor was constructed as widely favorable precisely by weighing its advantages against those of differently racialized working populations.<sup>105</sup> For instance, as a representative of Fresno Farms Company explained in 1928, “The Filipinos have a higher standard of living and for that reason some farmers prefer them,” but at the same time, they also had a reputation for being more militant and tending “to ask for more wages than the Mexicans.”<sup>106</sup> Investigators from the California Department of Industrial Relations reported being told that Filipino workers were “steadier, more tractable, and more willing to put up with longer hours, poorer board, and worse lodging facilities,” especially compared to White workers.<sup>107</sup> Yet, at the same time, many California farmers and boosters argued that Mexican workers’ supposed backwardness and docility suited them ideally for farm labor.<sup>108</sup> “Mexicans are very appreciative and easy to get along with,” one Hemet farm owner noted.<sup>109</sup> A grower from Calexico further elaborated, “Mexican people are people of the earth. See how happy they work. If whites worked under such conditions they would go

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<sup>104</sup> Paul Taylor, qtd. in Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 197. The estimate of ethnic Mexicans as 90 percent of Imperial Valley’s farm labor force by 1928 comes from Wollenberg, “‘Huelga’ 1928 Style,” 47. Regarding further information on demographics in the regional economy, see “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee* (California State Building: San Francisco, 1930), 136; Guevarra, *Becoming Mexipino*, 100; Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 38-40.

<sup>105</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 197-198.

<sup>106</sup> Woman Secretary at Fresno Farms Company, Kerman, California, Sept. 10, 1928, Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I, 190, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8.

<sup>107</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 198.

<sup>108</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 46, 49; Mark Reisler, “Always the Laborer, Never the Citizen: Anglo Perceptions of the Mexican Immigrant during the 1920s,” *Pacific Historical Review* 45, no. 2 (May 1976): 231-254.

<sup>109</sup> Theodosia Samano interview with farmer, Hemet, Calif., July 14, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

nuts.”<sup>110</sup> Others emphasized the value of what they insisted to be the foreign and “impermanent” nature of Mexican migrant labor, which enhanced their fitness for low wage labor while limiting the threat they posed to local culture.<sup>111</sup>

Of course, a central imperative of labor management on farms in California in general and the Imperial Valley in particular was to maintain a level of social division that would preclude destabilizing forms of labor organization. To this end, agricultural employers actively promoted competition and conflict among workers across racial lines.<sup>112</sup> According to a labor report concerning Filipino workers in California, “At times growers prefer to have the contractor employ a mixture of laborers of various races speaking diverse languages and not accustomed to mingling with each other,” with the explicit purpose of “avoid[ing] labor troubles.” As the report explained, “Laborers speaking different languages and accustomed to diverse standards of living and habits are not as likely to arrive at a mutual understanding which would lead to strikes and other labor troubles during harvesting seasons, when work interruptions would result in serious financial losses to growers.”<sup>113</sup>

This logic was not lost on farm workers themselves. Many farm laborers became acutely attuned to the patterns of hiring that pitted racialized immigrant populations against each other, driving down wages for all workers and helping to keep the working populations divided. For example, Filipino laborer Manuel Luz characterized patterns of racialized economic competition among workers as expressions of a perpetual “cycle to

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<sup>110</sup> Theodosia Samano interview with farmer, Calexico, Calif., July 12, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

<sup>111</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 54; Reisler, *By the Sweat of their Brow*, 178; Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 49.

<sup>112</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 198.

<sup>113</sup> Qtd. in Guevarra, *Becoming Mexipino*, 104.

demoralize the newcomers to this country.” Drawing on his observations in Imperial Valley, San Joaquin Valley, Santa Barbara County farms during the 1930s, Luz explained, White workers “claimed that we [Filipino workers] were to blame for lowering the wages. But these people wouldn’t work in the fields anyway. . . . [and] when we tried to organize ourselves to get higher wages, so we could be equal to them, we didn’t get their support. That’s the irony of the whole thing.” Luz recognized that the experiences of his community were not exceptional, however. Rather, he described them as a reflection of an established custom of race and labor in Southern California fields. “[T]his boss I had in Fresno,” Luz recalled, “He was Armenian. He told me that they experienced the same thing when they first were getting started in this country.”<sup>114</sup> Racial tensions resulting from the “cycle of demoralization” that Luz described would only intensify later in the 1930s, when poor White migrants flooded into the state from the Midwest. As Pixley-born farm worker John Sánchez recalled, “[W]hite people would come up and tell my dad, ‘Why don’t you Mexicans stay in Mexico? Why do you have to come over and take our jobs? . . . And then, it wasn’t too long afterwards—several years afterwards that the Okies started coming over and taking our jobs. . . . And so we got to where we hated the Okies that was coming over to take our jobs, you know.’”<sup>115</sup>

Beyond specific arrangements of race and labor in the fields themselves, racialized forms of cultural marginalization deepened the vulnerability of farm working populations, helping to make them into the cheap and flexible labor force that growers

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<sup>114</sup> Manuel Luz Oral History, “Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s,” interviewed by Joan L. Zoloth, November 1976, 41-42, 45, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California.

<sup>115</sup> John Sánchez Oral History, interviewed by Harvey Schwartz, March 31, 1998, Tape 1, Side 1 (A), Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California.

sought. Non-White farm workers were criminalized for their gender and sexual deviance, as well as their allegedly “backward” family and kinship patterns.<sup>116</sup> Anglo observers derided the “poverty and squalor” in which farm workers lived, while neglecting the responsibility of employers and segregation patterns for producing inadequate living conditions.<sup>117</sup> Others feared the proliferation of venereal disease by Mexican and Filipino workers, based on hyper-sexualized imaginings of non-White laboring bodies and a belief in these individuals’ tendency toward sexual immorality and vice. That “venereal disease is widespread among the peons,” a 1927 study by C. M. Goethe explained, was due to distinctively transgressive sexual practices that were bound up in racial difference. “There could hardly be a greater gulf between the peon’s attitude toward his women folk and that of the typical American.” Goethe continued, “Eugenically as low-powered as the Negro, the peon is, from a sanitation standpoint, a menace. He not only does not understand health rules: being a superstitious savage, he resists them.” Such characterizations fueled the notion that migrant workers in general and migrating ethnic Mexicans in particular were “contagion carriers” who posed a severe sexual and biological threat that needed to be contained.<sup>118</sup>

Women in farm working communities faced distinct challenges that were shaped by intersecting forces of racial, gender, and class oppression. Single women were most likely to work outside the home, in fields and packing sheds alongside their male

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<sup>116</sup> George H. Bieverling, qtd. in “The Future of Mexican Immigration,” San Diego, 1932, 4, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 11, folder 1.

<sup>117</sup> Director of the Los Angeles Health Department’s Division of Child Welfare, qtd. in “The Future of Mexican Immigration,” San Diego, 1932, 4, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 11, folder 1; J. H. Dodge, qtd. in “The Future of Mexican Immigration,” San Diego, 1932, 5, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 11, folder 1.

<sup>118</sup> C. M. Goethe, “The Influx of Mexican Amerinds,” Sacramento, Calif., 3 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 11, folder 7.



counterparts. While married women often tended to work in the home and in the camp, tending to domestic duties and caring for the family, they often supplemented their husband's income by doing laundry and housework for others or performing other types of waged work. Necessary as women's waged and unwaged work was to sustaining farm working families and communities, it was largely denigrated by patriarchal cultural traditions and the public at large.<sup>119</sup> In addition to shouldering responsibilities for economic production and social reproduction, farm working women also faced particular forms of gender and sexual harassment. Conditions of economic deprivation, racialized preconceptions about the supposed hyper-sexuality of non-White women, and patriarchal assumptions about men's access to women's bodies combined to make women within agricultural working communities especially vulnerable to a variety of forms of sexual exploitation and violence.<sup>120</sup>

In significant ways, the very processes of dislocation that drew working populations into California's farm labor circuit reinforced their dispossession and disfranchisement. For many of the people working in California agriculture in the late 1920s, entry into the region's harvest-driven migratory labor circuit was only the most recent episode in a longer series of social dislocations. Processes of industrial expansion that occurred between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries had forced many people off of land they either owned or tended in Mexico, the Philippines, the Deep South, and other areas across and beyond the U.S. These displaced populations subsequently entered into migratory flows that took them first to cities, then often to

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<sup>119</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 58-59. Fran Leeper Buss, Introduction to *Forged Under the Sun/Forjada Bajo el Sol*, by María Elena Lucas (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>120</sup> Buss, Introduction to *Forged Under the Sun*, 13.

work in railroad construction or mining, before bringing them to fields across the southwest and California.<sup>121</sup>

Across California's agricultural regions, the seasonal character of work meant that most laboring families did not settle in a single place but moved with the harvests. George P. Clements noted that the California system of farm production made people into "nomads" and "drifters."<sup>122</sup> As cultural critic Lisa Lowe demonstrates, in the context of a liberal democratic society whose political life is oriented around the protection of individual rights to property, the state functions not as the defender of "the right to liberty in civil society" but "a guarantor of capitalist relations of exploitation."<sup>123</sup> To the extent that the migratory circuit denied racialized farm workers an anchoring in place or in property, it also operated to deny them full inclusion into the national polity. As scholar Alicia Schmidt Camacho explains, "The economic demands placed on Mexican workers precluded the resolution of the political status: they were more valuable to the nation as surplus labor than as citizens."<sup>124</sup> For ethnic Mexican and Filipino immigrants, as well as for American-born Mexicans and Filipinos, African Americans, and poor Whites, who were in some cases racialized as "not-quite-White," agricultural work thus reinforced modes of racial formation that distanced them from dominant channels of social membership and political participation. As one farmer's servant in Hemet noted "It is the

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<sup>121</sup> González and Fernández, *A Century in Chicano History*, Chap. 2.

<sup>122</sup> George P. Clements, letter to Alfred I. Nicholas, April 19, 1932, 2, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 31.

<sup>123</sup> Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 25.

<sup>124</sup> Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries*, 48

brown arms that have picked the oranges, lemons, cantaloupes, . . . pitched the watermelon for year in and year out, and some have nothing left but a broken body.”<sup>125</sup>

Within the Imperial Valley, a larger proportion of the farm working population was comprised of settled residents than in other regions of the agricultural economy.<sup>126</sup> This may have contributed to a strengthening of community ties and solidarities that animated early strike actions in the region by 1928. It also bolstered the imperatives behind local structures of racial segregation. Through a wide range of methods, explicit and inexplicit, formal and informal, the exclusion of non-White individuals from spaces reserved for “Whites Only” was widespread during the late 1920s in the towns that dotted the California hinterland. From restaurants to theaters, churches, schools, and residential neighborhoods, the practice of restricting access in designated districts and public facilities to non-White populations fused strategies of spatial regulation with imperatives for racial control.<sup>127</sup> Indeed, far more than a system of physical separation, segregation played a vital role in the making and maintenance of a fragile, asymmetric distribution of power. For example, intimately linked with fears about the degrading influence of non-White children on White children, school segregation was also a method of regulating the forms of education that non-White students received. School officers at a school near Tamarack Ranch, just outside the town of Imperial, rationalized that local African American and ethnic Mexican children required different schools largely because of

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<sup>125</sup> Theodosia Samano interview with “humilde servidora,” Hemet, Calif., July 12, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

<sup>126</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 19.

<sup>127</sup> Paul Taylor, Westmoreland map in field notebook, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 16; Theodosia Samano, “Field Notes of Migratory Laborers, Imperial Valley, California,” 1-2; Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

concerns that they might “read enough to read the wrong kind of literature,” and that such literature would “make them dissatisfied with their lot.”<sup>128</sup>

Of course, where official regulations, social customs, and discourses about social order and cultural propriety faltered, violence served as a common means of regulating racial boundaries, disciplining sexual deviance, and sustaining exploitative class relations. Drawing on a long history of vigilantism in the region, raids, race riots, and lynchings provided a brutal but commonplace means of policing social boundaries and enforcing farm workers’ subordination. Filipino worker Manuel Luz recalled experiencing “what they called race riots” in Southern California. “Hundreds of carloads of other races came in there and tried to drive us out. They gave us 24 hours to clear out or else.” In another incident, Luz noted that “homemade bombs [were] thrown into the open camp,” where Filipino workers had their cots spread under orange trees to sleep. “In the Imperial Valley, the same thing happened, but someone was killed.”<sup>129</sup> Thus, despite embodying progress, modernity, and wealth in the visions promoted by its boosters, California agriculture operated in significant ways as an economy of violence, repression, and dehumanization.

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with school officers, Imperial, Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Interview with Mr. Gruell, El Centro, Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Notes regarding “Segregation—Imperial Schools,” Imperial Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12.

<sup>129</sup> Manuel Luz Oral History, “Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s,” 41-42.

*The Politics of Daily Life in California Agricultural Working Communities*

Yet, the social synthesis of industrialized agriculture in California was neither stable nor fixed. Farm working communities contested the patterns of cultural marginalization and economic exploitation that governed regional development as they resisted their own dehumanization. Examining the quotidian social and cultural struggles of these communities helps to illuminate how they forged a grassroots culture of opposition in California agriculture on the eve of the Great Depression.

The oppositional culture that crystallized among California's farm working communities in the late 1920s was informed by a longer history of insurgency, one that stretched across generations as well as national borders. Indeed, the historical legacies of multiple revolutionary movements converged in California's agricultural fields. For Mexican-origin communities in the region, the 1910 overthrow of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship in Mexico was an active memory, either experienced firsthand or inherited through the stories of a parent generation. A significant number of those who participated in California's strike mobilizations in the late 1920s and 1930s had themselves fought in the Mexican Revolution during the preceding decade.<sup>130</sup> Popular corridos that celebrated the heroism of revolutionary figures like Pancho Villa proliferated in the region, helping to sustain affective links to the revolutionary struggle and energizing oppositional epistemologies north of the border.<sup>131</sup> Local Filipino communities had an analogous relationship to the revolutionary victory against Spanish

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<sup>130</sup> Paul Taylor field notes, interview with Benito Juarez Society president Ben Saenz, 1928, Brawley, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Monroy, "Fence Cutters, Sediciosos, and First-Class Citizens."

<sup>131</sup> See, for example, "Corrido de Pancho Villa," "Corrido de Obregón," and "Corrido 'Nacional,'" Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 1, folder 26.

colonialism in the Philippines and subsequent efforts to end U.S. domination on the islands. Similarly, many African Americans who lived and worked in the area had grandparents who helped bring an end to slavery, and whose battles continued into the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries against Jim Crow in and beyond the Deep South. For some workers, local traditions of radicalism and multiracial organizing within California also figured prominently as features of a shared historical memory. As farm worker Frank Maneze recalled, “Before us, . . . the IWW had planted the seed, they did organizing around here. In fact, the IWW is the foundation of most of the organizations around here. It was the necessary forerunner to the CIO and started things that didn’t necessarily die.”<sup>132</sup> While these memories evoked different meanings for everyone who held them, they served as historical coordinates that located California agriculture’s multiracial workforce within a longer genealogy of shared struggle, one shaped by, and that impacted the trajectory of, global racial capitalist development.

While the struggles of agricultural workers and their communities thus had deep historical and transnational roots, they were continually reshaped at the local level by the immediate circumstances of daily life. For people who made their living in California agriculture and its various spinoff industries, the nature of work itself became a key battleground for quotidian contestations over power and dignity. For workers in all arenas of agricultural production, time-work discipline was a constant source of

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<sup>132</sup> Frank Maneze Oral History, “Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s,” interviewed by Joan L. Zoloth, November 1976, 81, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California. For additional reference to the relevance of historical memories of multiracial struggle, including the IWW’s multiracial organizing as well as Mexican-Japanese collaboration in the 1903 Oxnard beet strike, see Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 76.

conflict.<sup>133</sup> On the one hand, time-work discipline was a mechanism that was structured by, and in turn helped to sustain, the asymmetric power relations between farm owners and farm laborers. On the other hand, it was also a perpetual source of many of the physical and psychic manifestations of exploitation for workers. As one man who worked with his family on a farm in Hemet observed, “This rancher is rich but he pays wages according to the time.”<sup>134</sup> Efforts to assert fuller control over their bodies and the temporal rhythms of the workday thus challenged a key axis on which the grower-worker relationship turned and reflected a fuller drive for autonomy. As one worker named Mr. Martinez explained, “We Mexicans do not mind working hard but we do not like to be driven. We will do much more work if we are allowed to work undisturbed and set our own pace.”<sup>135</sup> Farm workers’ efforts to push back against growers’ constricting demands for production efficiency, and against the forces of their dispossession and disfranchisement more broadly, ranged from work slowdowns, to stealing from farmers and their families, to property destruction and violence.<sup>136</sup> One intense but not extraordinary upheaval was reported in spring of 1927 by Gladstone Reed, a Southern California grower with an open disdain for “buckskin labor,” which he admitted he only employed for want of a more profitable alternative. In the incident he described, Reed’s

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<sup>133</sup> See E. P. Thompson’s important work on this issue, in E. P. Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,” *Past and Present* 38 (December 1967): 56-97.

<sup>134</sup> Theodosia Samano interview with farm worker, Hemet, Calif., June 22, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

<sup>135</sup> Paul Taylor interview with Mr. Martinez, Clovis, Calif., Sept. 5, 1928, 1, Paul Schuster Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 9.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with Stillwell, Nov. 26, 1926, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 84, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4; Interview with Giffen, Mendota, Calif., Sept. 7, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 84, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Interview with Sr. Estrada, Calexico, Calif., n.d. Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 14; Interview with Mr. Pisquerra, Brawley, Calif., April 26, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15; Interview with Gladstone Reed, Los Angeles, Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 23; John Sánchez Oral History, Tape 1, Side 2 (B).

\$9,000 barn was burned to the ground and his home broken into by a group of farm workers. “They tried to assault [my] house and wife,” he decried, “We had a little gunplay.”<sup>137</sup>

Of course, not all forms of work-related resistance reached such a level of conflagration. Instances abounded of workers quitting or deserting without fulfilling their contracts in response to being affronted on the job. As one grower explained, one of the major obstacles to a regimented work discipline was that workers “can leave readily and are apt to do so. If you wish to correct them they will answer back, and if you stick to your point they may all quit.”<sup>138</sup> Mr. Rowe, of the Los Angeles-based Southern California Employment Agency, explained that one “cannot easily pay Mex[icans] and whites differently on [the] same job as Mex[icans] will quit when they find it out.”<sup>139</sup> Quitting, in this sense, was an act of refusal to withstand unfair and degrading treatment. It also manifested an insistence on the possibility of more dignified mode of survival. In withholding their own labor power from offending bosses, deserters provoked adjustments in labor management practices by farmers and foremen, who sought to maintain wage rate discrimination by assigning different racial groups, who received different rates of pay, to distant sections of the fields with the intent of averting communication between them. These mundane acts of resistance not only exposed the instability and unevenness of prevailing structures of domination but also enacted a pursuit—or even, a seizure, ephemeral as it may have been—of freedom.

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Gladstone Reed, Los Angeles, Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 23.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Giffen, Mendota, Calif., Sept. 7, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 84, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with Mr. Rowe, Los Angeles, Calif., March 30, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 24.



Beyond the sites and structures of agricultural production, farm working populations engaged in a wide range of practices that troubled prevailing conceptualizations of social order and norms of gender and social behavior. Employers, civic officials, and local residents frequently complained about non-White farm workers' excessive affinity for leisure. They also decried the "failure" of agricultural communities to conform to idealized habits of industriousness and thrift, which were the cornerstones of liberal individualist ethos and assumed prerequisites to upward mobility. Mexican and Filipino workers frequented pool halls after work hours, gambled their earnings, and drank regularly. "Even the women are drinking beer," one South Asian farm owner gawked.<sup>140</sup> El Centro Chief of Police Sterling Ostwalt described "moral laxity" and habitual "vagrancy" as problematic tendencies among local Mexican populations.<sup>141</sup>

Patterns of cultural consumption among non-White workers also disturbed the sensibilities of many White and middle-class observers. According to one grower, "It doesn't make any difference if you pay them 15 cents or 20 or 35 cents an hour. They buy Buicks and Chevrolets and don't know how to spend it intelligently."<sup>142</sup> Others also noted that many workers preferred to buy new cars rather than save and invest in a home.<sup>143</sup> While many onlookers regarded such spending as irrational and irresponsible, however, purchasing a car on a farm worker's wages was an intensely politicized act. Of course, a car provided mobility to workers in an industry that required it. Yet, at a time when the automobile came to symbolize capitalist modernity and independence for

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<sup>140</sup> Theodosia M. Samano interview with "Indian" farm owner, Heber, Calif., June 20, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Mr. Ostwalt, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15.

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Gladstone Reed, Los Angeles, Calif., 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 23.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Mr. Ostwalt, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15.

White, middle-class heads-of-household, the purchase of such a commodity by a working-class Mexican or Filipino person also enacted a claim on notions of modernity and manhood that were routinely denied to them. Such an act, deemed by dominant White society to flout standard principles of rational behavior, in fact marked the internal racial and gender contradictions of those principles and illuminated alternatives to them. In this respect, pursuits of pleasure, leisure, and style by non-White farm workers in late-1920s California challenged the hegemonic ideal of the restrained, frugal, and relentlessly hard-working individual as the model of rational subjecthood and reflected grassroots efforts to defend their own dignity in the face of processes of cultural marginalization.

In view of the social and political forces that distanced them from national culture, migrant farm workers also challenged the discursive constraints of the systems of racial and national classification that structured U.S. immigration policy, census data, and the labor market. For non-White working communities within the xenophobic and racially hostile environment of late-1920s California, the task of articulating an identity entailed its own process of political negotiation and maneuvering. “Am I Americanized?” one young, Mexican-origin woman reflected in a 1927 interview with sociologist Paul Taylor. “Yes. . . . Well,” she equivocated, “Amer[ica] has not meant happiness to me. It has made it hard to find friends, taken me from my people, without giving me Amer[ican] friends.”<sup>144</sup> Of course, how people situated themselves in relation to contemporary categories of “American,” “White,” “Mexican,” “Spanish,” Filipino,” or otherwise depended in large part on the given context and listening audience. For example, Ted Wilson, a road worker who oversaw Mexican “chain gang” labor in El

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with Mrs. Sinclair, El Centro, Calif., April 23, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15.

Centro, reported that some ethnic Mexicans who worked under him identified themselves as “‘Spanish’ . . . due to a desire to avoid stigma” associated with Mexican-ness, while others proudly claimed a “Mexican” or sometimes “Indian” identity.<sup>145</sup> When Paul Taylor conducted his extensive study on *Mexican Labor in the United States*, interviewing hundreds of ethnic Mexican workers throughout California, the question of whether his interviewees identified more closely as ‘American’ or ‘Mexican’ was one of the ones he posed most commonly and one of the ones that proved most problematic. While the vast majority of respondents, including a large proportion of American-born citizens of Mexican descent, claimed for themselves a “Mexican” identity, they typically supplemented their responses with stories about their confrontations with violence, racism, and exclusion in the United States, connections to family and friends who lived across the border, and references to a desire to visit or live in Mexico some day. Many also pointed out that at the same time that they considered themselves more Mexican than American, they held a mixture of both “Mexican and American ideals.”<sup>146</sup> Significantly, in this sense, while the construction of a “Mexican” identity by these communities signified a certain distance from categories of “Americanness” and “Whiteness,” it did not necessarily reflect nationalist or patriotic sentiments toward Mexico itself. For many, “Mexicanness” registered a political valence rather than a fixed set of characteristics. In important ways, it marked the limitations of existing classifications of identity and often

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<sup>145</sup> Interview with Ted Wilson, Calipatria, Calif., April 23, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with Christine Solano, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Interview with Nicolas Estrada, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 20, folder 12; Interview with Elvira Corral, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 20, folder 12.

expressed efforts to navigate a sense of selfhood that was either alternative to or a hybridized version of extant meanings and associations.<sup>147</sup>

Just as they utilized and altered the meanings of resources available to them in arenas of work and culture, the political struggles of working people in California agriculture also drew on and reconstituted the geography of the migratory labor circuit itself. Whenever and wherever they were able, workers sought control over the direction of their own migratory route and chose to work, or not work, at particular sites based on their own needs and desires. They turned down jobs in crops they disliked and pursued work in ones they considered comparatively favorable.<sup>148</sup> Many sought to avoid or at least limit the time they spent in climates they found particularly oppressive. “[We] don’t go to Fresno annually,” a Mexican worker in Santa Ana explained, for example. “It is too hot and it is better to stay here if one has a steady job.”<sup>149</sup> Relative degrees of racial hostility, access to public facilities, proximity to family and kin, and the dynamics of association and intimacy within different localities also factored into working people’s navigation of the migratory circuit.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> For further analysis regarding the complex relationship between national associations and identity formation, see David G. Gutiérrez, “Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the ‘Third Space’: The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico,” *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (Sept. 1999): 481-517.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with “Mexicans in camp,” Kerman, Calif., “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 184, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Interview with “Mexicans at Nightschool,” Santa Ana, Calif., “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-B, Set-I,” 5, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 5.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with “Mexicans at Nightschool,” Santa Ana, Calif., “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-B, Set-I,” 5, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 5.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with “Mexican Boy and Campomento Mejicano,” Reedley, Calif., Sept. 8, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 180, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Theodosia M. Samano interview with “Family living in Santa Fe Railroad section,” Hanford, Calif., June 26, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9; Interview with W. C. Nestler and Trinidad Romero, Nov. 7, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 16, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4; Theodosia M. Samano interview with “Young Mexican laborer,” San Bernardino, Calif., June 24, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

The point here is not to suggest that farm laborers had a free range of choice within the agricultural market. To be sure, not all farm workers had the ability to work at sites they preferred, and it is crucial to keep in mind the social and economic restraints that brought these populations into California's farm labor circuit in the first place. Rather, while the dislocating force of capitalist industrial and agricultural development combined with the structures of exploitation, classification, gender norms, and violence in a way that aimed at keeping non-White working subjects "in their place," California's agricultural communities actively carved out space within the migratory circuit—utilizing and expanding what maneuvering room they had—for the sake of their own survival, pleasure, and empowerment. For growers, this meant that workers' mobility—the precise feature of the labor circuit that was meant to serve their demands for a flexible, replenishable workforce—was also a source of instability. "There should be an organization to take care of the Mexicans and distribute them better," Dr. J. P. Clemens of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Agriculture Department assert urged in a November 1928 interview. "They won't [distribute themselves evenly] unless they are forced to do it."<sup>151</sup> Clemens' logic was shared by the large number of employers who mobilized behind a program to contain and control worker mobility by "fixing" and regulating migrant settlements in towns, as well as those who ultimately formed the Associated Labor Board.<sup>152</sup>

As farm working populations created space for themselves in the localities where they lived and worked, they opened up new possibilities for forms of collectivity and

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<sup>151</sup> Interview with Dr. J. P. Clemens, Nov. 15, 1928, "Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I," 94-95, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4.

<sup>152</sup> Reisler, *By the Sweat of Their Brow*, 61.

social relations alternative to those which governed their relationship to the market and the state. Against growers' pressures to settle in camps close to ranches where they could be kept under regular surveillance, working communities often moved their settlements some distance away, to enhance their sense of autonomy. As Clovis laborer Mr. Martinez explained, "I prefer living here under the trees here than living out at the camps. We are our own masters here and have our own little things."<sup>153</sup>

Spaces of home and community like those that Martinez described drew largely on ties and social networks that were fostered by farm working women. Historian Devra Weber has highlighted the significance of women's informal networks in shaping farm working communities and social worlds. Women forged bonds around common concerns and practices of resource sharing that included not only sisters, mothers, aunts, and cousins, but also women they met on different ranches. The forms of mutual support and friendship that they generated provided an important foundation not only for the making of grassroots identities and modes of collectivity; they also served as a political resource and an informal organizational basis for mutual aid and labor organizations that ultimately emerged in California agriculture.<sup>154</sup>

The social networks that emerged in California's field nurtured ties of kinship and community among workers, along with a sense of their shared needs, vulnerabilities, and desires. It was not uncommon for such ties to link workers across lines of race,

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<sup>153</sup> Paul Taylor interview with Mr. Martinez, Clovis, Calif., Sept. 5, 1928, 4, Paul Schuster Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 9; Interview with Mexican boy, Reedley, Calif., Sept. 8, 1928, "Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I," 180, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8.

<sup>154</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 11, 58-59, 66; Devra Anne Weber, "Raiz Fuerte: Oral history and Mexicana Farmworkers," *The Oral History Review* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 1989): 53-59.

nationality, and gender that so deeply structured their experiences in the workplace and local society. For example, as John Sánchez explained:

[W]e'd gather at different Mexican families in the evenings to eat. One day, one family would cook a big pot of beans and make a lot of tortillas, and we'd all gather at this one house: three, four, five, six families—and some of the colored families, black families, too, would gather there—and we'd eat all that food. And then, the next day, they have another food gathering at another place and the same thing would be over and over again. You know: making tortillas and beans and stuff like that—and that's the ways we kept from getting hungry. . . .<sup>155</sup>

The informal networks that working communities built around basic elements of survival, such as food, functioned as spaces of sharing, reciprocity, cultural production, and dialogue. They also facilitated social relations that challenged dominant patterns of competition, engaging instead an ethos of mutuality and collectivity. For example, as Sánchez explained:

[O]f course we didn't have anything—of course we didn't have doors to lock or anything—we just left our stuff like that opened as it was, you know. And there was many times we'd come back from work and we'd find a note on the stove and whoever it was: 'Sorry we had to come into your house, but we was hungry and we just cooked a few little things to eat and we thank you.'<sup>156</sup>

Within the camps, workers also sang, danced, and played music, forging ties out of shared challenges and values while learning about differences and particularities of each other's experiences.<sup>157</sup> Through oral traditions, folk tunes, and other modes of cultural production, farm workers circulated a shared system of knowledge about the depredations and possibilities of life on California's farms. Often, such traditions captured experiences and modes of identification that were familiar and translatable

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<sup>155</sup> John Sánchez Oral History, Tape 1, Side 2 (B).

<sup>156</sup> John Sánchez Oral History, Tape 1, Side 2 (B).

<sup>157</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 60-61.

across different immigrant working communities. For example, one corrido that circulated among Mexican origin populations in the border region during this period sang about the evils of “unkind employers / who don’t give their people / enough money to buy trousers.” The ballad proceeded,

I’m not criticizing the country;  
But I can certainly tell you  
That many of the laborers  
Are naked up to their navels.

The rich go in automobiles  
A good horse and a good saddle  
And the poor peones  
Go digging wild radishes.

The peon is always stooping  
Working at it so hard  
That they always expect to see his head  
When they look toward his feet.

They treat him like a slave,  
Not like a useful helper  
Who pours out for the rich  
Up to the last drop of sweat.<sup>158</sup>

Songs such as this reflected and nurtured a collective critique of prevailing power arrangements while validating the grievances of many agricultural workers. The experience of exploitation and oppositional sentiment conveyed by the corrido would likely have been recognizable not only to ethnic Mexican but also Filipino and other non-White workers during the 1920s. Of course, later in the 1930s, when an influx of poor White Midwesterners poured into the region in search of work, songs they brought with them would pick up similar themes. For instance, one sang, “How in the world can a poor man eat? / Flour up high, cotton down low / How in the world can you raise the

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<sup>158</sup> “Defensa de los Norteños,” Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 1, folder 26.



dough? / Clothes worn out, shoes run down / Old slouch had with a hole in the crown /  
Back nearly broken, fingers all worn / Cotton going down to raise no more.”<sup>159</sup>

By encouraging new forms of dialogue among California’s diverse farm working communities, the modes of cultural practice and production in which workers engaged carried the potential to generate a sense of shared struggle. Interracial affinities that emerged among these communities breached the social divisions promoted by the agricultural market. As John Sánchez noted of the African American neighbors and friends with whom he worked, attended school, and spent time, “Well they was treated like we were; they was treated pretty bad, you know. . . . they was mistreated by white people just like we were—the Mexican kids, you know.”<sup>160</sup>

Beyond the camps, cross-racial affinities and relationships also developed in districts of local towns where farm workers congregated during their time away from the fields. Often, workers gathered in places that were segregated or deemed peripheral to the town, where they could avert regulations that aimed to prevent large assemblies of non-White residents. In Salinas, for instance, Filipino workers who were attuned to the dangers involved in strolling down Main Street sought out refuge and socialization in Chinatown. According to Manuel Luz, “Chinatown was the only place we could feel like human beings—we were equal.”<sup>161</sup> In Imperial Valley towns such as Brawley, Westmoreland, and Calexico, businesses owned by African American or Mexican American proprietors were generally regarded as friendly to non-White working people.

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<sup>159</sup> “Eleven Cent Cotton and Forty Cent Meat: A Sharecropper’s Lament,” song collected by Tom Collins, Bakersfield, Calif. (Sept. 5, 1936), WPA Folk Music Project, University of California, Berkeley, Music Library, Carton 5, folder 201.

<sup>160</sup> John Sánchez Oral History, Tape 1, Side 1 (A).

<sup>161</sup> Manuel Luz Oral History, “Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s,” 45.

Brawley's G St. in particular had a reputation as a place where Mexican residents enjoyed "more liberties" than other parts of town. Many people in surrounding White and middle-class neighborhoods condemned the district as a locus of vice, liquor, and "mujeres malas," a site that nourished offensive behaviors and threatened the propriety of decent and upstanding citizenship. For the people who frequented the restaurants and pool halls that dotted G St., however, these were vibrant sites of socialization, affiliation, and intimacy.<sup>162</sup>

Of course, the practices through which people in California's farm working communities sought to resist their dehumanization were not politically pure or free of contradiction. Nor did people's efforts to defend their dignity always necessarily reflect progressive values or contribute to the making of more just social relations. Frequently, people seeking to improve their lot did so by distancing themselves from others, reaffirming dominant structures of privilege and standards of cultural propriety. Some spent long hours in school, spurned leisure and vice, and worked hard to make a good impression on teachers and bosses, in order to reap the benefits of upward mobility, despite earning a reputation among their communities for "trying to climb."<sup>163</sup> Some individuals claimed an "American" identity, rejected the category of "Mexican" and derided the "pochos" who speak "bad Castilian and bad English."<sup>164</sup> Efforts to construct

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<sup>162</sup> Interview with Abel Patillo, Brawley, Calif. 1927, Paul Taylor field notes, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 13.

<sup>163</sup> Qtd. in interview with Elvira Corral, El Centro, California, April 1927, Paul Taylor field notes, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; see also, for example, Interview with "Texano Woman near Biola, September 10, 1928, "Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I," 192, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Interview with Luz Romero, April 1927, Brawley, California, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 13.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Luz Romero, April 1927, Brawley, California, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 13; Interview with Arturo, Sanger California, September 11, 1928, "Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I," 198-199, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8.

and American identity were often bound up in claims on Whiteness. Some people sought to take advantage of the legal Whiteness of Mexican ethnicity and to capitalize on relatively light skin to “pass” as White. Some even used bleaching treatments in order to lighten the physical appearance of their skin.<sup>165</sup> One drug store owner in El Centro reported that even some poor women would pay \$5.00 for a jar of bleaching powder or cream but “don’t like to tell you what for.”<sup>166</sup>

Efforts to seek individual empowerment often reinscribed racial and patriarchal power relations. For instance, working men’s struggles to make claims on masculinity often corresponded with the intensification of pressure on working women to conform to standards of domesticity that were frequently beyond the reality of women who had to perform wage work in order to survive and support their families.<sup>167</sup> Male workers’ maneuverings and struggles for autonomy also frequently corresponded with patriarchal pursuits of sexual domination through access to women’s bodies. For example, one young Mexican laborer in San Bernardino remarked that he preferred to seek work on larger farms because “there people come from all over the state and we can have lots of sweethearts and people won’t say anything.” As he pointed out, the freedom of such anonymity was absent in smaller camps where “every family knows each other and we

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<sup>165</sup> Interview with Americanization Teachers, Santa Ana, California, 1929, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-B, Set-I,” 4, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 5; Interview with Mr. Cunningham, El Centro, California, April 18, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15; Interview with Luz Romero, Brawley, California, April 1927, Brawley, California, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 13.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Mr. Cunningham, El Centro, California, April 18, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15; Interview with Mr. Ritter, Santa Ana, California, February 13, 1929, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-B, Set-I,” 4, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 5.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Rafael Flores, Brawley, California, April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Interview with Elvira Corral, El Centro, California, April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Interview with Luz Romero, April 1927, Brawley, California, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 13; Theodosia M. Samano interview with Elvira Corral de Argulez, Imperial Valley, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9; Theodosia M. Samano interview with Vicenta Haramillo, Brawley, California, June 16, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

boys have to be very careful with the girls.”<sup>168</sup> The means by which ethnic Mexican workers pursued their own survival also in some cases reinforced the marginalization of other ethnic groups, whether they were complaining about the threat that African American children posed to Mexican children in segregated non-White schools, or whether they were working as strikebreakers against Filipino farm workers.<sup>169</sup> As Frank Maneze noted as he reflected on his and his friends’ role in breaking a strike agreement with Filipino workers, “I guess we were just out for ourselves then.”<sup>170</sup>

All of this reminds us that the contradiction between people and capital, dignity and its denial, humanity and dehumanization is not something that exists outside working-class communities—setting group against group in some simple or straightforward way—but is internal to them. Struggle was marked by uses of power and domination not only by corporate farm owners but among workers. As one worker, Mr. Martinez, explained, “I would like to have you think that most of the Mexicans are good at heart, that they are not cutthroats and paupers as the papers say they are. There are bad people among all nationalities.”<sup>171</sup>

Organizing practices within California’s agricultural communities were part and parcel of these communities’ ongoing, everyday efforts to challenge the constraints of the societies in which they lived and to link their daily struggles to broader visions of institutional change. With historical roots in mid-nineteenth century Mexico, and a

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<sup>168</sup> Theodosia M. Samano interview with “Young Mexican laborer,” San Bernardino, Calif., June 24, 1935, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 15, folder 9.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Rafael Flores, Brawley, California, April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12; Interview with Juan Mugias, El Centro, California, April 16, 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 15; Interview with Christine Solano, El Centro, Calif., April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12.

<sup>170</sup> Frank Maneze Oral History, “Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s,” 81.

<sup>171</sup> Paul Taylor interview with Mr. Martinez, Clovis, Calif., Sept. 5, 1928, 6, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 9.

widespread presence throughout the U.S. Southwest by the 1870s, an evolving tradition of mutual-aid organizing built on the daily resistance strategies and informal social networks that characterized grassroots social and cultural practices in California's fields.<sup>172</sup> Locally based and locally oriented, mutual-aid societies known as mutualistas did not fit the mold of most U.S.-based political organizations and parties. Indeed, many of them explicitly banned discussion of political issues in their meetings. Yet, mutual aid societies were far from apolitical. Despite often eschewing conversations about official partisan platforms and electoral politics, they served as vital spaces for dialogue about—and collective action in response to—the myriad issues facing ethnic Mexicans in the United States. Rather than existing outside of politics, they embodied an alternative form of politics to that which dominated national culture, one based on a sense of mutual interdependence, solidarity, and the shared pursuit of dignity.

As they provided unemployment insurance, medical insurance, funeral care, and legal aid, mutualistas combined workers across ranks of skill and lines of citizenship status and gave expression to forms of collectivity that challenged the individualism of the market. Membership in these societies was usually comprised of a large proportion of day laborers, semi-skilled and skilled workers, along with a comparatively modest contingent of middle-class entrepreneurs and small business owners. As Margaret Harper noted, “Both Old Mexico Mexicans and United States born Mexicans are members. They are all called Mexicans, and call themselves Mexicans.”<sup>173</sup> These included a significant number of “formerly organized revolutionary activists on this side,” as

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<sup>172</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 95.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Margaret Harper, Marfa, Texas, November 26, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 78, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4.

Sociedad Mutualista Benito Juárez president Ben Saenz noted, who brought with them strategies of organizing and anarchist influence.<sup>174</sup> According to historian David Gutiérrez, “By providing a place where immigrants and citizens of Mexican descent could speak the same language, discuss common problems, and cooperatively provide themselves with needed services, mutualistas allowed immigrants to learn the ropes of living in the United States in a nonthreatening, supportive environment [and] helped to break down barriers between the two groups, improved communication, and promoted a spirit of cooperation among them.”<sup>175</sup> In a sense, “the activities of mutualistas should be viewed as manifestations of the first efforts at concerted collective action.”<sup>176</sup>

The cooperative nature of mutualistas did not mean that these organizations were fully and equally accessible to all members of the local communities in which they arose, however. Many reserved leadership positions for men and restricted membership to Mexican-origin populations. In the late-1920s nearly all either explicitly or inexplicitly excluded Filipinos. “I don’t think anybody wants Filipinos in the union,” El Centro resident and Benito Juárez member Juan Estrada asserted.<sup>177</sup>

While mutualistas dealt with a wide range of economic, social, and cultural issues and were not exclusively focused on the workplace, by the late 1920s the increasingly centralized nature of the agricultural power structure, the virtually unfettered strength of corporate growers, and the growing segmentation of the agricultural workforce prompted

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<sup>174</sup> “Mutual Benefit Societies,” Paul Taylor field notes, Brawley, California, April 1927, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 12.

<sup>175</sup> Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 97.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with Juan Estrada, El Centro, California, October 14, 1929, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 9.

many in California's Mexican communities and mutualistas to orient their political work around work-related concerns.

### *Cantaloupe and Crisis in the Imperial Valley*

The spring 1928 harvest season brought competing dominant and grassroots narratives of regional development into direct confrontation with each other. In May 1928, *Brawley News* excitedly reported that Imperial Valley towns “teem[ed] with activity, the shrill whistle of the busy switch engine; the rumble of heavily loaded trucks; and the hustle and bustle [that] give evidence that the cantaloupe deal is on in full blast . . . just waiting—Waiting for the majic word [sic]—Action!”<sup>178</sup> Beyond the sights of the press, however, as local elites awaited the start of the cantaloupe harvest, local workers devised alternative plans for the season. During April of the same year, members and organizers of the Benito Juárez Society held a series of public meetings in El Centro and Brawley with the aim of forming an agricultural labor union. In the same meeting halls that housed local chapters of the Benito Juarez Society, farm workers and community residents discussed local concerns and the ways in which the conditions of agricultural work impacted their broader community. One of the most immediate complaints in the community centered on the agricultural contracting system, which facilitated the unchecked problem of contractors skimming off the top of workers’ pay and sometimes running off with their wages altogether. Pressing as this concern was, it was just one part

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<sup>178</sup> “Population Gets Larger Awaiting Cantaloupe Deal,” *Brawley News*, May 3, 1928, 1. Also see “First Cantaloupes will Leave Depot Soon,” *Brawley News*, May 4, 1928, 1.

of a larger web of problems that confronted farm workers and their communities. As day laborer and contemporary Benito Juarez Society president Filemon Gonzalez explained, workers faced a number of “untold difficulties” in obtaining their pay. “[W]ithout the least consideration, they get into trouble; bills are piled up against them for expenses started at the very places where they must live.” Moreover, Gonzalez asserted, “they are compelled, without any consideration whatever, to stand the inclemencies of the weather, [especially] that terrific heat” that so typically plagued the Imperial Valley.<sup>179</sup>

As Gonzalez and the many people who gathered to discuss these issues recognized, the indignities that farm workers suffered in the workplace were fundamentally tied to the broader disparities of power that characterized the agricultural regime. According to Gonzalez,

We have worked as strangers in this country and the authorities have arbitrarily intervened against us. Several of our countrymen have been imprisoned only for having presented such petitions and they have been accused of overthrowing the order of things. . . . They have been threatened by armed authority with a view to compel them forcibly to work for as little as one single cent. . . . In short, we have been oppressed in a mean and apparent manner in order to provoke quarrels and dissensions, the authorities standing always against us.<sup>180</sup>

These concerns lay at the heart of “the idea of forming the Union as a protection against such abuses and exploitations and a source whence the laborer may get some consideration.” In this spirit, building on the “idea originated with the ‘Benito Juarez’ Mutual Benefit Society in El Centro, California,” local communities established the

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<sup>179</sup> Letter from Filemon Gonzalez to Director of “El Universal,” May 13, 1928, 1, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19.

<sup>180</sup> Letter from Filemon Gonzalez to Director of “El Universal,” May 13, 1928, 2, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19.



Imperial Valley Workers' Union with headquarters in Brawley and branch chapters in the surrounding towns of El Centro, Westmoreland, and Calipatria.<sup>181</sup>

The movement afoot among ethnic Mexican workers presented a challenge not only to exploitative practices that shortchanged them, but to some of the basic divisions that structured the local workforce. As Gonzalez declared, the purpose of the union "can be realized only if the working element constitutes itself in such a powerful manner that it can claim with sufficient force whatever is due and coming. . . . This concerns all those in charge of work."<sup>182</sup> Refusing many aspects of the compartmentalizing forces of the labor market that set ethnic Mexican and Latino workers in conflict with one another, the union joined farm laborers, contractors, and some local shop owners in mutual struggle. The union admitted all Latino populations, though its membership was overwhelmingly of Mexican origin.<sup>183</sup> It is especially noteworthy that the union chose to include labor contractors alongside farm workers, since relations between them were such a source of tension. This exhibits a response to a structural critique of industrial power relations and a keen understanding of the ways in which the segmentation of labor functioned to weaken worker collectivity. The fact that upwardly mobile ethnic Mexican shop owners also joined the union suggests a departure from the logic of liberalism that would have encouraged these individuals to utilize what social capital they had as citizens and property owners, to advance their social status at the expense of others. Together, organizers and members of the new union set about the immediate task of mobilizing

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<sup>181</sup> Letter from Filemon Gonzalez to Director of "El Universal," May 13, 1928, 2, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19; Devra Anne Weber, "The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers: Imperial Valley and Los Angeles 1928-1934, An Oral History Approach," *Aztlan* 3, no.2 (1973): 316.

<sup>182</sup> Convocation announcement from Board of Directors of the Imperial Valley Workers' Union, El Centro, California, April 25, 1928, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19.

<sup>183</sup> Weber, "The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers," 316.

around the upcoming cantaloupe harvest, with goal “of obtaining a fundamental improvement in whatsoever refers to the task of picking melons which is rapidly approaching, as well as to work of any other description where a higher compensation and due legality are required.”<sup>184</sup>

At the same time that it solidified political solidarities between workers in significant ways, the new union also reinforced deep divisions within the workforce, especially along lines of race and gender. Despite Gonzalez’s overture that the struggle at hand concerned “all those in charge of work,” the union’s organizers excluded Filipino workers, who they continued to regard as competitors rather than allies.<sup>185</sup> The new organization also did not include Punjabi, Chinese, Japanese, or other non-Latino workers.<sup>186</sup> These racial exclusions undoubtedly constrained the union’s potential as a force of change in the local economy. Recognition of the limiting effects of these divisions would contribute to the reshaping of farm labor organizing leading into the 1930s.

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<sup>184</sup> Letter from Filemon Gonzalez to Director of “El Universal,” May 13, 1928, 2, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19; Convocation announcement from Board of Directors of the Imperial Valley Workers’ Union, El Centro, California, April 25, 1928, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 19. According to Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” “The picking of cantaloupes in the Imperial Valley begins early in May and lasts about eight weeks. Approximately, between 4500 and 5000 male workers are engaged in the harvesting of this crop. The preponderant majority of these men are Mexicans, but Filipinos and other Orientals are also working on some ranches as cantaloupe pickers. The bulk of the cantaloupe is around Brawley, Westmoreland, and Holtville.” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 136.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Juan Estrada, El Centro, California, October 14, 1929, 2, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 9; Interview with “Mexican Boy at Campamento Mejicano,” Reedley, California, September 8, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 180-181, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Interview with Arturgo, Sanger California, September 11, 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-E, Set-I,” 198-199, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 8; Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 54.

<sup>186</sup> Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 140. Weber, “The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers,” 316.

It is also worth noting that in prioritizing the workplace as a site of struggle, the union marginalized other spaces and forms of political activity, setting aside the issues confronting many workers who held jobs beyond the fields, including the vast majority of women in these communities. While women played a central role in the organizational and protest activities of farm workers in this period, their activities often defied the expectations of male working-class leadership, who generally did not intend to disrupt norms of patriarchal masculinity and female deference. Rather, the union's organizers sought to challenge barriers facing male workers while leaving gender inequalities undisturbed.

One of the union's first actions was to appeal to local officials and growers to support a raise in wages—15 cents per crate or 75 cents per hour for the cantaloupe season—the furnishing of picking sacks, ice for drinking water, materials for the construction of sheds for the workers, and insurance coverage by employers in case of accident or illness on the job.<sup>187</sup> The El Centro Chamber of Commerce was quick to reject a petition by the union to serve as an intermediary between workers and growers.<sup>188</sup> The reaction of growers to the petitions, and to the union's existence more generally, is palpable in a description by Governor C. C. Young's Fact Finding Committee. According to a study that this committee published in October 1930, upon receiving the union's letters, "The growers became genuinely alarmed." The report stated that agricultural employers in the Imperial Valley "have been accustomed to considering the Mexican workers as bovine and tractable individuals, best adapted to the climatic

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<sup>187</sup> Louis Bloch, "Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers," *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 138-139; Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 46-47.

<sup>188</sup> Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 77.

conditions of the Imperial Valley and therefore the most desirable workers in the valley. The organization of a union of Mexican laborers seems to have evoked in the growers an ardent wish for its earliest demise.”<sup>189</sup>

When the workers resolved to strike at the beginning of the cantaloupe season on May 7, 1928, their so-called “spontaneous” action was enabled by their longer history of struggle, the formal and informal networks and organizational ties they had forged, and the myriad spaces of political activity they had carved out for themselves. The strikers themselves were part of a shared, ongoing dialogue about social and political conditions, and had been collectively devising strategies to survive and defend their dignity in and beyond local mutual aid societies long before the formation of the union. Moreover, people throughout the community who came out to support the strike utilized many of the same public spaces in which they congregated for more casual occasions. According to Governor Young’s Fact-Finding Committee, “They gathered in pool rooms and on street corners in Brawley and Westmoreland, discussing loudly and vociferously the affairs of their union, their difficulties with their employers, and the jailing of their countrymen.”<sup>190</sup> The May 7 mobilization thus had many fronts and a much longer history.

At the same time that it was enabled by established networks and traditions, the strike also generated new experiences and new social formations among those who participated. Gatherings of hundreds of workers in local pool halls, meeting halls, and public street corners enacted a claim on public space by farm working communities that

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<sup>189</sup> Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 140.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

challenged the spatial and political constraints of segregation.<sup>191</sup> Such gatherings both reflected and nurtured a sense of empowerment among workers, energizing “loud and vociferous” discussions concerning the strike and mobilizing political debates among them.<sup>192</sup> Working-class residents’ refusal of the racial restraints of the local geography mirrored the strikers’ refusal to work in asserting the prioritization of grassroots needs and dignity over the imperatives of efficient production and social order.

While local authorities moved quickly in their attempts to break up workers’ assemblies, their efforts to enforce the law escalated social tensions and in some cases precipitated further acts of rebellion from the grassroots. Responses from the grassroots sometimes upended norms not only of racial and class subordination but also those of gender. For example, the local press expressed particular dismay at the fact that a woman, Francisca Rodriguez, led an attack on the local sheriff at a Westmoreland pool hall. As the press reported, Rodriguez “along with three men, Thomas and Felix Rodriguez and Abraham Perez, who followed the woman’s lead, were locked up at the county jail” on charges of “resisting an officer of the law.”<sup>193</sup> Such boldly transgressive action was a manifestation of a new kind of social power, which local communities forged across many of the divisions that helped constitute the local hierarchy and status quo. Despite what patriarchal tendencies existed among union leadership, acts like these offer examples of grassroots political performance that dramatized a sense that racialized

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<sup>191</sup> Sheriff Gillett reported to the *Imperial Valley Press* that over one thousand Mexicans gathered in a single location in Westmoreland. “Mexicans Rush at Sheriff,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 10, 1928, 1. Also see “Sheriff Issues Warning to All Valley Mexicans,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 9, 1928, 1.

<sup>192</sup> Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 141.

<sup>193</sup> “Mexicans Rush at Sheriff,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 10, 1928, 1.

labor exploitation on Imperial Valley farms was not strictly a problem of male workers but a problem of the entire community.

At the same time that the strike gave expression to new forms of collective and empowerment at the grassroots, it also sharpened political conflicts among local working communities. Conservative segments of local non-White populations were quick to disassociate themselves from events unfolding across the valley. Some spurned the radicalism of the activities unfolding there and affirmed the need to restore order. For example, union organizers and Mexican consuls denounced the strike as an action that lacked official sanction from the union.<sup>194</sup> One conservative spokesperson for the Imperial Valley Workers Union submitted a letter to the local press decrying the strikers' actions as "absurd" and "not in harmony at all with the ideals of this society." Attempting to court the favor of dominant forces in the Imperial Valley, the writer of the letter proclaimed that the union's purpose was not to disrupt the social order but "to protect Mexican laborers as much as possible . . . in conformity with the laws of this country, for which we have the highest respect. . . . Please feel assured that it is our desire at all times to remain peaceful, law abiding residents, and we wish at all times to work in harmony with all authorities as well as the employers . . . and furthermore," the letter continued "we will gladly [sic] cooperate with you in any way possible in smoothing out any difficulties that may arise, [to] see any agitators that try to commit unlawful acts punished in accordance with the law."<sup>195</sup> Such assertions by politically cautious segments of the local community supported a narrative that "The developments of this

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<sup>194</sup> Weber, "The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers," 318-319.

<sup>195</sup> "Mexican Labor Union Disowns Connection with Radicals," *Imperial Valley Press* May 10, 1928, 1.

week are not the kind Imperial Valley people want, nor are they the kind that the better class of Mexican people living here desire.”<sup>196</sup> Conservative ethnic Mexicans were not the only non-White residents who regarded the strike as a threat. Those who opposed the strikers’ actions included members of the Japanese Association, who declared themselves “hardly in sympathy” with the strike. “The price of 15 cents per box in the field, together with the other demands, may be reasonable,” one of the Association’s representatives proclaimed, but the effort to seek union recognition appeared to carry the movement too far. “[W]ith a union there is no limit in most instances” to what Mexican workers might demand in the future, he noted.<sup>197</sup>

The political power exhibited by the grassroots strengthened the determination of authorities to subdue the upheaval. “The full weight of the law was called into action,” reported Young’s Fact-Finding Committee. “The sheriff was authorized to deputize willing assistants. About forty men were made deputy sheriffs, some of whom were the field inspectors, foremen and superintendents of the growers.”<sup>198</sup> At least sixty arrests were made in connection to the strike over the course of two days, and three Mexican men who were determined to have played organizing roles were deported.<sup>199</sup> Additional measures were taken to close down local pool halls, meetings halls, and gathering places, in order to regulate public space and prevent further mass action by working communities. As Paul Taylor wrote, “Four pool halls in Westmoreland, three run by

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<sup>196</sup> “Radicals to Blame,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 12, 1928, 4.

<sup>197</sup> “Mexican Labor Situation in Cantaloupe Fields Flares to Open Demand for Higher Wage,” *Brawley News*, May 8, 1928, p 4.

<sup>198</sup> Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 141.

<sup>199</sup> Wollenberg, also 4792. Interview with Mr. Moore, Brawley, California, October 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 76, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4; Wollenberg, “Huelga, 1928 Style,” 54-55; Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding*, 141-142.

Mexicans and one by a Negro, and the union office at Brawley were closed by order of the sheriff on the technical ground that they had not been licensed. The reason they were closed at this time was manifestly not failure to hold a license, but because Mexicans congregated in them and opportunity was thus afforded for strike agitation.”<sup>200</sup> Indeed, the physical congregation of Mexican workers in these spaces was a visible manifestation of the kind of collectivity and solidarity that threatened the agricultural regime. As the Secretary of Brawley’s Chamber of Commerce asserted shortly after the strike, “We did not like them holding meetings. No, we did not fear violence but they were going to hold up the cantaloupe industry.”<sup>201</sup> As Elmer Heald, District Attorney of Imperial County, explained, “Yes, under the constitution they have the right to hold meetings if there is not talk of violence and seditious literature but I don’t know what three thousand Mexicans might do when they get together. It would be all right if the conservative leaders were at the head.”<sup>202</sup>

The crackdown did not end with the arrests, deportations, and the legally rationalized shutdown of public facilities, however. A widespread climate of vigilantism and terror functioned to try to subdue mass unrest and solidify the subordination of workers and their communities. Authorities warned workers that “those that are not satisfied with conditions here . . . might better return to Mexico” and suggested that “at the first outbreak of any kind as a result of the movement now afoot, a general

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<sup>200</sup> Taylor, *Mexican Labor in the United States*, 48.

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Mr. Moore, Brawley, California, October 1928, “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 76, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4.

<sup>202</sup> Interview with Elmer Heald, Imperial, California, n.d., “Mexican Labor in U.S., Field Notes: Series-A, Set-I,” 75, Paul Taylor Papers, Carton 10, folder 4.



deportation movement of all Mexican laborers employed in the valley would begin.”<sup>203</sup> Such threats of using deportation as a mechanism of labor discipline presaged repatriation campaigns that culminated in subsequent years.

Central to local campaigns of repression were efforts to re-order grassroots solidarities by cultivating working-class loyalty to employers and the Anglo-dominated social order. Anonymous letters circulated throughout the valley after the strike, warning workers, “If you fail to cooperate the same men who have given their time and their money to get you into this country and to protect you here . . . will turn against you. They will use their funds and their influence to have you brought back to your country. . . . Remember this carefully before cooperating with those who are working solely for their own interests and who enrich themselves at your expense.”<sup>204</sup> Other letters sought to promote suspicions and divisions among workers by threatening the use of strikebreakers. One read,

At the present time the Imperial Valley planters have mobilized, all through Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, thousands of Mexican laborers who are ready to come to the Imperial Valley at short notice and who will seize your work. The railway is prepared to bring these workers to the valley within twenty-four hours. . . . Many of you have your families and your homes in the Imperial Valley. If they introduce outside workers there, you and your families will have to suffer. . . . Many of you have prospects of obtaining work. Accept it at once. Tomorrow it may be too late.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> “Sheriff Issues Warning to All Valley Mexicans,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 9, 1928, 1.

<sup>204</sup> “Workers Look Out,” circular reprinted in Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 144-145.

<sup>205</sup> “Attention Mexican Workers” circular reprinted in Louis Bloch, “Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers,” *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 145.

The force exerted by local elites through arrests and intimidation succeeded in pressuring most workers back into the fields and bringing an end to the strike without settlement by the middle of May 1928. As historian Devra Weber notes, “Major issues of the strike remained: Housing was not improved, no proper insurance was instigated, no safeguards were erected against defaulting contractors, and no mechanism had been devised to insure just wages for the work performed.”<sup>206</sup> Consequently, political discontent continued to spread among local workers. Despite the amount of effort that farming interests had to expend in order to restore a sense of order in the valley and to get the cantaloupe harvest underway, authorities worked hard to construct a narrative of stability that downplayed the power wielded by working communities. By May 15, 1928, the *Imperial Valley Press* reported, “With the Mexican labor situation showing no effect in the picking and shipment of cantaloupes and the ‘strike’ movement apparently at the end of its rope, quietness reigned over the situation in the valley,” and cantaloupe shipments had returned to their regular levels.<sup>207</sup>

### ***Resonance and Expansion of the Agricultural Crisis***

Although the Imperial Valley’s cantaloupe strikers and their supporters did not exact the concessions they desired from farmers in spring of 1928, their actions contributed to the ascendance of a broader culture of opposition in and beyond the local region. For its part, the Imperial Valley Workers’ Union survived the reactions of local

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<sup>206</sup> Weber, “The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers,” 318.

<sup>207</sup> “Mexican Labor Affairs Quiet,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 15, 1928, 4; “Federal Bureau of Markets Opens for Melon Season,” *Imperial Valley Press*, May 15, 1928, 1.

authorities, though it remained a politically divided force. Moreover, the local upheaval registered sharpening antagonisms in the agricultural economy and the emergence of new modes of political identification and collectivity among farm working populations. While the strike itself was shaped by specific local conditions, it also expressed forms of politics that resonated among working communities across rural California. Similar strike mobilizations erupted later that same year, among pea pickers in Monterey County in October, and among cotton pickers in Merced County in November.<sup>208</sup>

The aftermath of the 1928 strike also reveals how ongoing circulations of grassroots struggle contributed to the production of new forms of multiracial and transregional insurgency. Notably, the years that followed the cantaloupe strike in the Imperial Valley witnessed the forging of new political solidarities across racial lines. By winter of 1928-1929, unrest in the Imperial Valley continued to intensify as the overproduction of winter vegetables led many local growers to try to avert “spoiling the market” by passing on costs to field and packing-house workers. These workers formed committees in Brawley, El Centro, Holtville, Heber, and Calexico and elected representatives to a central committee to negotiate for the region. Beginning on January 1, 1930 a coalition of local shed workers, loaders, and trimmers walked off their jobs. Marking a departure from the cantaloupe strike two years earlier, the mobilization included not only ethnic Mexican but also Filipino, Chinese, Japanese, and Punjabi workers.<sup>209</sup> While the historical record does not make clear precisely how these new

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<sup>208</sup> Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 77; Weber, “The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers,” 319; *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young’s Mexican Fact-Finding Committee*, 150.

<sup>209</sup> Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 81; *Daily Worker*, January 6, 1930; Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices*, 139-140; Guevarra, *Becoming Mexipino*, 107.

alliances took shape, we can reasonably speculate that lessons derived from the cantaloupe strike's limitations, combined with ongoing practices of social and organizational learning among workers, contributed to their formation. Within a few days the striking coalition grew to include 5,000 people.<sup>210</sup> The political collaboration of local working-class populations across racial lines suggests a redefining of the political basis of solidarity and an increasing embracement of differentiated notions of working-class dignity.

As a structural response to the multiracist patterns of subordination that structured California agriculture, the strike was effective in wresting important concessions from local growers. The strikers achieved a reversal of the recent wage cut and the dismissal of extra inspectors. Further, as a powerful expression of multiracial solidarity that won important concrete gains, the 1930 lettuce strike also caught the attention of a wider community of activists who were centered in California's cities and who had previously been unengaged from the political activities of California farm workers.<sup>211</sup> Radical activists affiliated with Southern California's Communist Party were among the earliest to tune in to and join forces with the movements taking shape in the fields. Having long been oriented around efforts for economic justice and working-class empowerment, activists on the far left recognized a common cause in the struggles of farm workers against the exploitative regime of capitalist agriculture. At a time when the mainstream of the American labor movement was marked by the American Federation of Labor's (AFL) longstanding neglect of unskilled and non-White workers, the Communist Party's

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<sup>210</sup> Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 79; Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870-1941* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 111.

<sup>211</sup> Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 79.

transition toward a strategy of dual unionism, and its establishment of the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) in late summer 1929, provided a broader framework in which Communist organizers and farm workers became natural allies. While a widespread belief among the hegemonic left that capitalism was on the brink of its demise informed CP activist imperatives to organize the unorganized, it is important to note that the activism of CP members on the ground was shaped first and foremost, not by the dictates of the Comintern, but by local conditions and concerns.<sup>212</sup>

Indeed, Communist activists had at least as much to gain from farm workers' struggles as they had to contribute to them. In addition to knowledge about local social and economic conditions and the structures of power and inequality in rural regions of California, CP activists' political coalescence with farm workers turned their attention to the relationship between race and class. In a letter that CP activist Oscar Erickson wrote to Sam Darcy in 1931, after being imprisoned for his activities in the fields, Erickson sought to alert Darcy and the upper echelons of the Party to the specific racial dimensions of working-class struggles in California agriculture. "Special consideration must be given the race prejudice," he urged. This meant not only that the Party needed to make organizational literature available in languages other than English—"Spanish at least"—but also that since a "large portion of these workers come from Latin American and colonial, and semi-colonial countries. . . . [t]heir struggle must be linked with the struggle against imperialism."<sup>213</sup> In important ways, as they listened to and learned from the region's farm workers and their struggles, many of the local CP organizers who

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<sup>212</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 86-87. See also Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.

<sup>213</sup> Letter from Oscar Erickson to Trade Union Unity League, n.d., written from San Quentin Prison, 4, Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 26.

collaborated to help build California's agricultural coalitions turned traditional models of top-down organizational structures on their head. As CP activist and CAWIU organizer Dorothy Healey recalled,

I can remember meetings we'd have when I'd be discussing why they should become communists, and they'd all listen very tolerantly and sweetly. I was telling them something they knew far better than I did as to the evils of capitalism. When I was all done they would all smile benignly and say, "Dorothy, it's all right. When the revolution comes, we'll be on the barricades, but don't bother us with organization now."<sup>214</sup>

As might be inferred from the slippage between Healey's imperative to educate farm workers about the evils of capitalism and farm workers' longstanding and intimate knowledge of these issues from personal experience, the collaboration between Communist organizers and Southern California farm workers was not necessarily marked by a perfect synchronicity of interests or seamless cooperation. To be sure, to the extent that some CP activists envisioned themselves to be organizing workers among whom there was no previous organization at all, these activists overlooked the alternative political practices and forms of organization through which these communities' longstanding struggles had taken shape.<sup>215</sup> To a certain degree, these competing notions of what properly constituted political organization discredited the self-activity of farm working communities, and reinforced a dynamic of White supremacy. For all these reasons, some farm workers were suspicious of Anglo organizers or resisted their influence altogether. At the same time, however, and despite these internal contradictions, the activists who demonstrated an openness to collaboration, dialogue,

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<sup>214</sup> Dorothy Healey, qtd., in Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 86.

<sup>215</sup> For instance, Oscar Erickson's letter continually refers to the "lack of organization" among Imperial Valley farm workers. Letter from Oscar Erickson to Trade Union Unity League, n.d., written from San Quentin Prison, Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 26.

and solidarity with Mexican and Filipino farm workers and made an active effort to learn from the struggles in which they participated, revealed radical alternatives to dominant notions of Whiteness that were being consolidated at this time.<sup>216</sup>

Between 1930 and 1934, the efforts of California farm workers to broaden their political activity and impact through coordinated direct-action campaigns, and the formation of new coalitions that included CP activists, fueled the upsurge of strikes throughout the state. The turbulence reached its peak in between April and December 1933, when a wave of thirty-seven strikes, involving 50,000 workers, erupted up and down California's fields, culminating in the San Joaquin Valley, where in September 1933 over 18,000 cotton pickers walked off their jobs.<sup>217</sup> As Salinas-based organizer Irene Johnston recalled in an oral history interview, "A strike would travel from the Imperial Valley, up here [Salinas Valley] and back down again. Strikes would travel as the seasons did. And you know, the people themselves put out leaflets and lead the strike. Not some big outfit back east."<sup>218</sup>

The waves of strikes that swept the state embodied ascendant conceptualizations of working-class dignity that accounted for the differentiated and interdependent character of grassroots struggles in the face of dominant development patterns. They included insurgent communities as diverse as the transnational, multiracial workforce on which California agriculture relied. At the center of the agendas advanced by these

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<sup>216</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Jennifer L. Hothschild and Brenna M. Powell, "Racial Reorganization and the United States Census, 1850-1930: Mulattoes, Half-Breeds, Mixed Parentage, Hindoos, and the Mexican Race," *Studies in American Political Development* 22, no. 1 (2008): 59-96.

<sup>217</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 79.

<sup>218</sup> Irene Johnston Oral History, "Oral Histories of Workers in California Agriculture: The 1930s," interviewed by Joan L. Zoloth, November 1976, 5, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California.

mobilizations were many traditional concerns that were vital to working people's efforts for increased autonomy, including wages, hours, and working conditions. At the same time, the rhetoric of the strikers often reflected a mixture of strategies and aspirations that combined calls for better wages, sick pay, unemployment insurance, and the abolition of child labor with symbolic references to the inspiration of Mexican revolutionary figures, articulations of demands for civil and human rights, invocations of American democratic traditions and discourses of fair play.<sup>219</sup> In all cases, they struck at the core of agricultural development patterns that hinged on racialized working-class subordination and manifested efforts to advance grassroots empowerment and autonomy.

### ***Beyond the Fields***

In spring of 1934, painter John Langley Howard put the finishing touches on a mural that he entitled "California Industrial Scenes," which included a prominent panel depicting a multiracial mass of striking workers, marching together through an industrial agricultural landscape. The image is a depiction of militant multiracial solidarity, with a Latino worker, a Black worker, and an Anglo worker at the helm of the march and in the foreground of the fresco. It makes clear reference to the agricultural labor movement that culminated in the months that preceded Howard's completion of the mural. Rather than appearing on the wall of a building in an Imperial Valley or San Joaquin Valley town as one might expect, however, Howard's mural stood on an interior wall of the newly

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<sup>219</sup> Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors*, 106.



constructed Coit Tower, overlooking the city and port of San Francisco from the top of Telegraph Hill.<sup>220</sup>

Howard's mural was commissioned by representatives of District 15 of the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the first government program to employ artists as part of the Works Project Administration (WPA). Along with twenty-five other local artists and ten assistants in San Francisco, Howard was charged by local authorities with the task of producing a monument to the city's beauty and modernity in a project entitled "Aspects of California Life." For the project's commissioners, plans for the murals carried forth the attempts of city leaders to reinscribe a narrative of social cohesion, order, and faith in urban progress in a period of social turmoil and political unrest. Yet, for many of the murals' painters, the project presented an opportunity to convey and support the expressions of political insurgency crystallizing at the grassroots. Rather than the picturesque cityscapes and landscapes that local PWAP coordinators envisioned, they painted scenes that Bernard Zakheim, one of the leading artists and spokespersons for the project, described as "not so much historical as actual," inextricably linked with "what is happening right now in the United States."<sup>221</sup>

The painting of the murals had occurred simultaneously not only with California's agricultural strikes but with mounting unrest among working and unemployed people in the city of San Francisco. The turmoil unfolded with particular intensity on the waterfront, where longshoremen, seamen, teamsters, and municipal workers walked out on their jobs on May 9, beginning a massive and extended strike that paralyzed the port

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<sup>220</sup> Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 94-95.

<sup>221</sup> Anthony Lee, *Painting on the Left: Diego Rivera, Radical Politics, and San Francisco's Public Murals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 143.

of San Francisco and obliterated the farcical sense of order, stability, and social consensus that city leaders strived to cultivate. The relevance of Howard's rendering of the agricultural labor movement for the contemporary moment in San Francisco is indicative of critical continuities between the oppositional struggles that unfolded across the rural-urban divide.

## Chapter 2

### Crossings and Convergences in the Imperial Metropolis: Building a People's Front in San Francisco

*You see . . . in a small way, temporarily a strike is a small revolution. . . . A strike is a very serious thing. . . . It simply means a form of revolution because you take over an industry or a plant owned by the capitalists and temporarily you seize it. Temporarily you take it away. . . . That's another way of saying to an employer or an industry—in this case, we said it to the shipowners of the whole world—You might be worth millions or billions—we don't say you own this until we tell you to operate.*

—Harry Bridges<sup>222</sup>

The summer of 1934 was a season of upheaval for San Francisco. As thousands of workers on local docks and ships walked off their jobs beginning on May 9th and vessels throughout the harbor came to a standstill, the Pacific coast's chief entrepot became the epicenter of a massive coastwide strike that lasted eighty-three days, caused a breakdown in coastal and transoceanic commerce, and culminated in a citywide general strike in July of that same year.<sup>223</sup> It also inaugurated a system of workers' control in the maritime and longshore industries that would endure for the following quarter-century. On one level, the strike was a manifestation of the wider economic and social crisis that marked the contemporary moment. As an open and direct confrontation waged by waterfront workers and their allies against local employers and business leaders, the strike exposed the ruptures of prevailing patterns of economic development and undermined municipal efforts to cast the city as a well-ordered model of cosmopolitan

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<sup>222</sup> Harry Bridges, "Harry Bridges: An Oral History about Longshoring," July 27, 2004, ed. Harvey Schwartz, ILWU Oral History Collection, [http://www.ilwu.org/?page\\_id=2616](http://www.ilwu.org/?page_id=2616), accessed September 23, 2013.

<sup>223</sup> For accounts of the strike, see Irving Bernstein, *Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970), 252-298; Charles P. Larrowe, *Harry Bridges: The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the United States* (New York: Lawrence Hill and Co., 1972), 32-93; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 127-55; Mike Quin, *The Big Strike* (Olema, Calif.: Olema Publishing Co., 1949); David F. Selvin, *A Terrible Anger: The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996).

modernity. At the same time, as it drew together overlapping networks of working-class communities, across craft lines as well as racial and ethnic divisions, the mobilization also marked new directions and experimentations in the forging of grassroots solidarities.

For everyone involved these were days of disorder, chaos, and conflict. Yet for the strike's participants and supporters they also ushered in a palpable sense of political possibility. In the words of sailor and journalist Paul William Ryan, "an almost carnival spirit" filled the streets of local working-class neighborhoods. Across the city, meetings, picket lines, and informal gatherings joined Latino, Filipino, Black, Asian, and White ethnic workers who were usually divided by the fact that they performed different jobs under different conditions, and lived in different parts of the city.<sup>224</sup> According to Revels Cayton, organizer within the segregated local of the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union and seasoned advocate of racial justice and Black equality, "We were a great crowd during [those] days," not only because of the sense of empowerment that accompanied the act of standing up against employers, but because "the union [itself] was afire and alive [with] great feeling[s] of brotherhood and camaraderie."<sup>225</sup>

The "spirit" and "brotherhood" that Ryan and Cayton described were unlike other expressions of working-class collectivity that San Francisco's waterfront had previously seen. Indeed, in many other times and contexts, it is unlikely that these men would have found themselves in the same coalition. Ryan, the San Francisco-born son of Irish

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<sup>224</sup> "Mike Quin" was Paul William Ryan's penname. Quin, *The Big Strike*, 148. Sociologist Paul S. Taylor also described a "holiday mood in the air" in his observations of the strike. Paul S. Taylor, "Trouble on the Waterfront," August 1, 1934, 8, Paul Schuster Taylor Records, BANC MSS 84/38c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Carton 6, folder 32.

<sup>225</sup> Revels Cayton Oral History Transcript: BBC interview, July 1975, 43, Richard S. Hobbs Oral History Interviews with Revels Cayton, Box 1, folder: BBC interview, July 1975, Accession Number 5483-001, University of Washington Libraries.

working-class parents, was a writer of prose and poetry from a young age. He worked as a seaman throughout the 1920s. By 1930, he returned to San Francisco, where he worked as a journalist, pamphleteer, contributor to a range of both mainstream and radical newspapers, and for a time a writer for the Federal Writers' Project on the California cotton industry. Under the penname "Mike Quin," Ryan garnered a reputation as an emblematic popular front activist writer and one of the most prolific documentarians of the 1934 strike.<sup>226</sup> For his part, Cayton came from a prominent Black middle-class family in Seattle, where he became active in the local labor movement and Communist Party. A vocal advocate for the rights of Black workers, he moved to San Francisco in the middle of the strike that began in May 1934, to serve as head of the Bay Area's branch of the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. Historic tensions between Black and Irish populations in the United States broadly, and the deep roots of White working-class racism in San Francisco in particular raised questions about how these men's political paths crossed along the waterfront in 1934.

Historical inquiry in recent decades has helped to deepen our understanding of the 1934 strike's significance, especially regarding the role of grassroots radicalism in its making and the impact that it had on the larger trajectory of popular front politics.<sup>227</sup> The strike produced what has been heralded as "one of the most democratic labor unions in

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<sup>226</sup> Joseph G. Ramsey, "Red Pulp: Repression and Radicalism in Mid-Twentieth Century 'Genre' Fiction," Ph.D. dissertation, Tufts University, 2007, 217.

<sup>227</sup> See, for example, Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, "The 'Lords of the Docks' Reconsidered: Race Relations among West Coast Longshoremen, 1933-61," in *Waterfront Workers: New Perspectives on Race and Class*, ed. Calvin Winslow (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 155-192, and "Unions and the Popular Front: The West Coast Waterfront in the 1930s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 30 (Fall 1986): 59-78; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?: The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Nancy Quam-Wickham, "Who Controls the Hiring Hall?: The Struggle for Job Control in the ILWU During World War II," in *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, ed. Steven Rossworm (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 41-68; Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front," 5-42.

the country”—first the Pacific Coast Branch of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA) and subsequently the International Longshoremen’s and Warehousemen’s Union (ILWU). Together, San Francisco’s waterfront labor movement and the organizations it generated provided an important model not only of rank-and-file empowerment but of interracial unionism.<sup>228</sup> These developments have been held up as an embodiment of the kind of racially-inclusive, social-democratic impulse that sits at the heart of what Michael Denning refers to as the era’s “cultural front.”<sup>229</sup>

That San Francisco provided the pulse for such an immense mobilization is, in a significant sense, no surprise. As a capitol of global finance and commercial shipping, San Francisco was a critical juncture, and fault line, in the broader capitalist market economy. The overwhelming focus of the city’s development throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was on facilitating the movement of goods and capital over land and sea, making the work of moving cargo along the docks an especially crucial site for labor management as well as for grassroots resistance.

While the location of the strike’s nexus in San Francisco is thus relatively unsurprising, the formation of a broad-based, multiracial front in the city as a key source of the strike’s political momentum remains a remarkable development that requires further examination. Of course, San Francisco was the main entry point for international migrants on the west coast. It was also a highly spatially concentrated city. These factors combined to make the city a site of intercultural crossing for working people from across the Americas and Pacific World. Yet, the political coalescence of diverse Latino,

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<sup>228</sup> Quam-Wickham, “Who Controls the Hiring Hall?” 48; Nelson, “The ‘Lords of the Docks’ Reconsidered,” 157.

<sup>229</sup> Denning, *The Cultural Front*.

Filipino, Black, Asian, and White ethnic populations within the city was far from an inevitable consequence of their coexistence. Indeed, San Francisco employers viewed the political potential of the city's multiracial workforce in quite the opposite light—that is, as a reliable source of working-class social division. Unlike California's agricultural fields, where structures of domination relied more directly for their maintenance on the threat of physical violence, San Francisco's urban developers prided themselves on their ability to bring diverse cultural elements into the fold of an urban cosmopolitan model of racial capitalist modernity. Put another way, if California farmers pioneered multiracist patterns of labor management in the U.S. west, San Francisco employers and business leaders perfected these strategies and made them a cornerstone of their efforts for economic stability. In fact, the comparatively strong foothold that organized labor had in San Francisco relative to most other U.S. cities in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries can be seen, at least in part, as an expression of employers' willingness to grant some concessions to exclusionary White craft unions in order to minimize the potential impact of labor on the urban economy as a whole.

San Francisco's "Big Strike" of 1934 thus represented an extraordinary shift from the historical conventions of organized labor and presents a valuable window on the making of popular front solidarities amid the crisis of the Great Depression. However, we still have a great deal to learn about how the interracial solidarities that distinguished San Francisco's waterfront labor movement were forged and negotiated on the ground, by the individuals and communities who comprised the city's multiracial working class. How did San Francisco's aggrieved populations, especially its racially marginalized populations, navigate their relationship to the city's labor movement amid the upheaval

of the 1930s? How did the strike figure into their lives and political imaginations? What might attention to the self-activity of these communities tell us about San Francisco's trade union movement, the racial politics of popular front coalitions, and the practice of solidarity more generally? In seeking answers to these questions, this chapter highlights the mixture of resonance and tension that characterized relationships within and among San Francisco's working-class communities, and it illuminates the heterogeneous and contested nature of the coalitions they built in a moment of deep social and economic crisis. It highlights the centrality and strategic utility of essentializing notions of working-class masculinity to the forms of multiracial organizing that took shape on the waterfront, at the same time that it illustrates the challenges that the strike posed to normative codes of gender relations. Ultimately, as the global crisis reached its peak levels of intensity and undermined any sense of certainty about the future, this chapter illustrates how grassroots surrealists advanced a multiracialist vision of political solidarity that linked people across racial, ethnic, national, gender, and craft lines around a sense of their mutual interdependence and shared vulnerability.

### ***Struggle and Community Formation in Early-Twentieth Century San Francisco***

The kinds of affinities that animated San Francisco's waterfront trade union movement in the summer of 1934 were not entirely new in that moment. Rather, they had roots in a protracted history of struggle, and in the processes of dislocation, dispossession, and subordination that marked people's varied experiences of capitalist advancement in the region between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.



Deepening our understanding about the political solidarities that took shape on the waterfront and in the city in that moment thus requires that we situate the strike amid patterns of political and economic development and working-class community formation in the city during the decades that preceded the strike.

By the early-twentieth century, San Francisco had garnered the stature of a “world-class city” and a symbol of urban cultural modernity.<sup>230</sup> Indeed, local patterns of urban development had made the city a key nerve center in the global economy and U.S. imperial expansion since the 1870s. As the West Coast’s chief port city and a major nexus of commerce, finance, and manufacturing, San Francisco provided an important lifeline for, and profited richly from, economic growth in California and the broader coastal region as well as colonial ventures beyond U.S. borders: from gold mining in the Klondike in the late 1890s, to the acquisition of Hawaii and the Philippines in 1898-1899, and the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914.<sup>231</sup> Visions of modernization that equated urban progress with expanded influence and industrial prosperity guided the main currents of the city’s public culture and had visible manifestations in its evolving urban landscape. Along with its docks, factory buildings, and warehouses, the ascendance of new skyscrapers, monuments, museums, and an opera house at the turn of the century dramatized the city’s position on the world stage.<sup>232</sup> As reflected in the words of locally-based Bank of Italy president James Bacigalupi in 1923, financiers and political architects of San Francisco’s development often imagined the city as a “budding empire,” a “great economic, social, and cultural area . . . which stretches [beyond formal

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<sup>230</sup> Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 116; Brian J. Godfrey, “Urban Development and Redevelopment in San Francisco,” *Geographical Review* 87, no. 3 (July 1997): 314.

<sup>231</sup> Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, Chap. 2, 83.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 113; Godfrey, “Urban Development and Redevelopment in San Francisco,” 313-314.

municipal boundaries] from the sun-scorched Tehachapi Mountains to the snow-capped peak of Mt. Shasta; from the sentinel Sierras to . . . an awakening Orient.” Adequately nourished by a spirit of entrepreneurialism and properly managed to promote growth, Bacigalupi remarked, San Francisco had the potential to become a metropolis “as mighty, if not mightier, than the world has ever known.”<sup>233</sup>

The outward thrust of city leaders’ imperial ambitions, combined with the labor demands of industrialization within the city, helped to make San Francisco a key intersection for global circuits of working-class migration during the half-century that preceded the Great Depression.<sup>234</sup> San Francisco served as a primary point of entry for new immigrants to the United States throughout this era, and first- and second-generation immigrants continuously comprised the majority of its resident population.<sup>235</sup> While the proportion of Chinese and Japanese-origin residents remained relatively steady after the turn of the century as a result of exclusionary immigration laws that targeted those populations, they were joined by ever-growing numbers of newcomers from across the United States, Southern and Eastern Europe, and various sites throughout the Western hemisphere and Pacific Rim leading into the twentieth century.<sup>236</sup> While immigrants coming from Italy, Russia, Greece, Turkey, and the Balkans made up the bulk of San Francisco’s foreign-born population between 1900 and 1920, these groups became the

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<sup>233</sup> James Bacigalupi, qtd. in *San Francisco Business*, Nov. 11, 1925. For additional discussion of the relationship between San Francisco’s public culture and imperial status, see Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 109; Judd Kahn, *Imperial San Francisco: Politics and Planning in an American City, 1897-1906* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 62.

<sup>234</sup> Regarding larger trends in global migration during this period, see McKeown, “Global Migration, 1846-1940,” 155-189.

<sup>235</sup> According to Issel and Cherny, between 1870 and 1930, people of foreign parentage constituted more than half of the city’s population, and at some points over 70 percent. Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 55.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

focus of anti-immigrant campaigns that led to the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Restriction Act in 1924.<sup>237</sup> Around this same time, local employers seeking to fill low-skilled and low-wage positions especially in the city's maritime, service, canning, and fishing industries turned increasingly to ethnic Mexican, Filipino, and African American working populations, each of which grew substantially during the 1920s.<sup>238</sup>

The majority of San Francisco's wage earners made their living in jobs related to the moving of cargo along the waterfront, and while the city's growing numbers of non-White immigrants could be found in nearly all lines of waterfront work on the eve of the Great Depression they were largely excluded from positions of authority and most heavily concentrated in what were widely deemed as menial and service-oriented jobs.<sup>239</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Chinese residents in San Francisco totaled 13,954 in 1900 (4.1 percent of the total population) and 16,303 in 1930 (2.6 percent of the total population). Japanese San Franciscans totaled 4,518 in 1910 (1.1 of the city's population) and 6,250 in 1930 (1.0 percent of the total population). Brian J. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition: The Making of San Francisco's Ethnic and Nonconformist Communities* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1988), 68. Between 1900 and 1930, the city's foreign-born White population declined in overall proportion from 30.4 percent to 24.2 percent of the local population. Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 55-56. Also see Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 174-175; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 21-25.

<sup>238</sup> By the 1920s, ethnic Latin American residents in San Francisco numbered between 15,000 and 20,000. Of these, an estimated 7,606 were of Mexican descent. Tomás F. Summers Sandoval, Jr., *Latinos at the Golden Gate: Creating Community and Identity in San Francisco* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 97; Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 56. Between 1920 and 1929, the rate of Filipino immigration to California increased from 618 per year to 5,408 per year. An estimated 82.3 percent of these arrived via in San Francisco. Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Migration and Empire in Filipino America, 1898-1946* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 66. Although San Francisco's Black population remained comparatively small during the pre-World War II era, it, too, experienced an increase from 1,642 to 2,414 between 1910 and 1920, to 3,803 in 1930, and to 4,806 by 1940. Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 68. Also see, Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 186-204; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 54-55; Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 21-22; Tomás F. Sandoval, Jr., "Mission Stories, Latino Lives: The Making of San Francisco's Latino Identity, 1945-1970," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2002, 22.

<sup>239</sup> By 1930, 45.2 percent of San Francisco's workforce worked in the city's trade and transportation sectors, as compared to 27.1 percent in manufacturing and mechanical industries, 18.3 percent in domestic and personal service, and 8.3 percent in professional services. See Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 54; Quin, *The Big Strike*, 29.

For example, while African Americans worked as seamen, longshoremen, and in a range of other positions, most of them served as cooks and stewards on ships. Filipino workers were found in highest concentrations among the ranks of deckhands, while Mexican and other Latino workers were represented most heavily among ship scalers.<sup>240</sup> The selective and highly racialized hiring practices that prevailed on the waterfront reflected the efforts of employers to manage working populations by nourishing and exploiting racial divisions among workers.<sup>241</sup> They also reinforced a broader infrastructure of power relations that extended well beyond the workplace.

At the same time that San Francisco's resident population was becoming increasingly heterogeneous, wealth, political power, and the capacity to speak on behalf of the general welfare of the city at large became increasingly concentrated in the hands of local captains of industry, finance, and commerce. Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the city's business leaders had played an active role in shaping policy at local, state, and federal levels. They not only occupied public offices but also organized through a range of private and semipublic channels to represent their interests and to enact and oversee urban policy measures. They provided a dominant force in the coordination of activities in fields of housing, education, and immigration and in the making of major water, power, transportation, and military base projects.<sup>242</sup> As it turned out, according to San Francisco historian William Issel, "The New Deal . . . posed less of

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<sup>240</sup> Revels Cayton, BBC Interview transcript (July 1975), 57, Richard S. Hobbs Oral History Interviews with Revels Cayton, 1976-1987, Box 1, folder: BBC Interview, July 1975; "Seamen arrested during 1934 strike," Elaine Black Yoneda Collection, Accession No. 1992/033 & 1992/055, Labor Archives & Research Center, San Francisco State University, Box 2, folder 5; Quin, *The Big Strike*, 29.

<sup>241</sup> Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*, 11.

<sup>242</sup> William Issel, "'Citizens outside Government': Business and Urban Policy in San Francisco and Los Angeles, 1890-1932," *Pacific Historical Review* 57, no. 2 (May 1988): 117-145.

a threat than it might have [to the political influence of San Francisco businessmen] had business leaders not occupied such a secure place in the policy-making process by the beginning of the 1930s.”<sup>243</sup> Viewing their private interests and civic responsibilities as fundamentally contiguous, San Francisco business leaders worked to foster urban-industrial advancement in the name of the public good. Their agenda was fueled in part by competition with rapidly-growing cities in the East Bay, especially Oakland, and along the coast, from San Diego and Los Angeles to Seattle.<sup>244</sup> Yet, many of them also recognized that San Francisco’s potential to outpace its rivals hinged on their ability to maintain some semblance of civic unity and cooperation within a rapidly-changing urban community. To this end, they promoted a spirit of civic nationalism that often ran at odds with the realities of the city’s growing ethnic and cultural diversity.<sup>245</sup>

As in many cities across the United States during the 1910s and 1920s, the influx of new migrant groups raised anxieties among many San Franciscans regarding the sustainability of urban progress and the preservation of American institutions. The seeming unassimilability of “these chaotic elements,” as San Francisco educator John Swett put it, threatened the sense of unity that city leaders strove to cultivate.<sup>246</sup> As the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported, “excessive immigration” of “morally and physically very undesirable persons,” “stimulated by foreign steamship companies” was “straining

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>244</sup> Richard Walker, “Industry Builds the City: The Suburbanization of Manufacturing in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1940,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 27, no. 1 (2001): 36-57; Roger W. Lotchin, “The Darwinian City: The Politics of Urbanization in San Francisco between the World Wars,” *Pacific Historical Review* 48, no. 3 (Aug. 1979): 357-381.

<sup>245</sup> Hiram Johnson, qtd. in Issel, “Citizens outside Government,” 127.

<sup>246</sup> John Swett, qtd. in Issel and Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865-1932*, 102.

our assimilating powers to a very dangerous degree.”<sup>247</sup> At the same time that some waterfront employers feared that immigration restriction would disadvantage San Francisco by strangling commerce and countering the city’s role as a port of entry for migrants, workers, and travelers, there was widespread concern that waves of non-White immigration especially from Latin America and across the Pacific would encourage “another race agitation on the pacific coast.”<sup>248</sup> In the words of California governor Hiram Johnson in 1912, “If the immigration that is coming to us through the [Panama] Canal is permitted to congest in our cities . . . ultimately the conditions of awful poverty presented by our Eastern Cities will be reproduced in our centers of population in California.” In Johnson’s assessment, proper measures needed to be taken in order to determine “the best means for taking care of and distributing the immigration” and to prevent such conditions “from becoming a part of our social structure.”<sup>249</sup>

In the city at large, racialized patterns of marginalization, segregation, dispossession, and disfranchisement were sustained not only by employers and elites who promoted exclusionary visions of urban progress and prosperity but by a local tradition of organized labor that had been forged in the crucible of White supremacist and anti-immigrant politics.<sup>250</sup> To borrow historian Alexander Saxton’s phrasing, hostility toward new immigrant populations had proven to be an “powerful organizing tool” for White

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<sup>247</sup> “Controlling Immigration: The Asiatic Problem Not the Only One Which Troubles,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 11, 1907, 6.

<sup>248</sup> Jerry Scanlon, “Immigration Laws Work to the Disadvantage of San Francisco” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9, 1922, 18; “Immigration A Big Problem Yet Unsolved: Commissioner-General Caminetti Tells of Conditions in Annual Report,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 16, 1915, 86.

<sup>249</sup> Hiram Johnson, qtd. in Issel, “Citizens outside Government,” 127.

<sup>250</sup> See, for example, Douglas Henry Daniels, *Pioneer Urbanites: A Social and Cultural History of Black San Francisco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991); Broussard, *Black San Francisco*; Yung, *Unbound Feet*; Shah, *Contagious Divides*; Sandoval, “Mission Stories, Latino Lives,” Chap. 2.

workers and a “common ground” from which to negotiate with the city’s progressive Republican political leadership.<sup>251</sup> The construction of the White workingman subject as the standard of working-class masculinity, and the White workingmen’s brotherhood as the proper vehicle for working-class justice, established a dynamic in which efforts to improve the lot of labor tended to sharpen the exclusion of non-White and non-male workers.<sup>252</sup> White unions played a decisive role in the making of exclusionary legislation targeting Chinese and subsequently Japanese populations. By the 1910s, they redirected their antagonism against newcomers from Southern and Eastern Europe and, increasingly during the 1920s, those from Latin America and the U.S. South.<sup>253</sup>

This is not to suggest that the racist attitudes which imbued the main channels of the local union movement reflected the views of all advocates of labor. San Francisco was a site of convergence for an array of progressive political traditions during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, from various branches of socialism and anarchism to ethnic-oriented progressivisms and racial internationalisms. Even though they did not dominate the dynamics or directions of working-class organization in the city during its early history, some of these currents presented significant challenges to the racial divisions and craft loyalties promoted by the market and mainstream unions. By far the most powerful of these challenges came from local activists in the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), popularly known as the Wobblies. The Wobblies

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<sup>251</sup> Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 156, 241-243, 261, 265. Other seminal examples of analyses of racism and anti-immigrant hostilities within the labor movement during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries can be found in David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Volume I: Racial Oppression and Social Control* and *Volume II: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 2012); Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*.

<sup>252</sup> Michael Kimmel, “Men at Work: Captains of Industry, White Collars, and the Faceless Crowd,” in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Chap 3.

<sup>253</sup> Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 259-261, 278.

emboldened workers across lines of race, gender, religion, and trade to recognize their common deprivation and resist their collective dehumanization, pressing listeners through such songs as the following: “Are you cold, forlorn and hungry? Are there lots of things you lack? Is your life made up of mis-ry? Then dump the bosses of your back!”<sup>254</sup> While they came under fierce attack by city leadership following the First World War, the Wobblies contributed to an undercurrent of radicalism, syndicalism, and inclusionary unionism that invigorated significant segments of the rank and file leading into the 1930s.<sup>255</sup>

What the dominant culture of White supremacy and racial management meant for the city’s growing number of non-White working-class residents was that their cultural and political lives occurred largely on the edges or outside of the main currents of public culture and formal channels of civic participation. In the words of Lora Toombs Scott, an African American resident of San Francisco’s Western Addition during the 1930s, “We lived in a world apart.” As she put it, “when we had White friends, . . . they were either neighbors or storekeepers or people with whom we had done business. . . . We were friend-ly, not intimate.”<sup>256</sup> As Edward Alley, another Western Addition resident described, “[T]hey [White San Franciscans] went one way and we went a different way.”<sup>257</sup> As Chinatown resident Edwin Low put it, “you knew your place like, you know. You associated with them [White people] but . . . you weren’t connected with

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<sup>254</sup> “Dump the Bosses Off Your Back,” *The Little Red Songbook: Songs to Fan the Flame of Discontent*, Intl. Edition, 36<sup>th</sup> Edition (Ypsilanti, MI: Industrial Workers of the World, 1995), 27

<sup>255</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, Chap. 2; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, Chap. 2.

<sup>256</sup> Lora Toombs Scott oral history interview transcript, 4, 23-24, interview by Jesse J. Warr, (Aug.-Nov., 1978), “Oral History Project: African Americans in San Francisco prior to 1945,” San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, Calif.

<sup>257</sup> Edward Alley oral history transcript, 18, interview by Jesse J. Warr, (Sept. 19, 1978) “Oral History Project: African Americans in San Francisco prior to 1945.”



them.”<sup>258</sup>

On the one hand, the racial boundaries imposed by norms of social propriety, racial deference, and economic competition encouraged the formation of ethnically based communities, especially in the city’s Western Addition and South of Market districts.<sup>259</sup> At the same time, everyday practices of survival, struggle, and community formation often brought communities of color into close relations with each other and fostered ties of interdependency and collectivity among them. Non-White communities frequented many of the same restaurants, pool halls, and other establishments and entered into common networks of friendship and affiliation. As African American San Franciscan Earl Watkins described, “The Japanese would rent to you, they were our friends, Filipinos too. We would go to their pool halls and shoot pool as teenagers.”<sup>260</sup> In some cases, non-White residents also spoke back against the exclusionary boundaries of local society in each other’s defense. According to Edward Alley, “We got along great with the Japanese. The Japanese and the Negro got along great. I always had a good relationship. . . . A Japanese, if we were in a restaurant and a White fellow came and said he didn’t allow Blacks to come in there and eat, the Japanese would say, ‘If you don’t like it we will go some place else to eat.’”<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> May and Edwin Low, oral history transcript, 3, Combined Asian American Resources Project Interviews (BANC MSS 80/31c), Box 1, folder: May and Edwin Low, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>259</sup> Godfrey, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 70-71.

<sup>260</sup> Earl Watkins oral history transcript, 13-14, “Earl T. Watkins: Jazz Drummer and Union Official,” Regional Oral History Office, University of California, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California; Edward Alley oral history transcript, 30-31, interview by Jesse J. Warr, (Sept. 19, 1978) “Oral History Project: African Americans in San Francisco prior to 1945.”

<sup>261</sup> Edward Alley oral history transcript, 30-31, interview by Jesse J. Warr, (Sept. 19, 1978) “Oral History Project: African Americans in San Francisco prior to 1945.” Also see Jane Lee oral history transcript, 7, Combined Asian American Resources Project Interviews, Box 1, folder: Jane Lee; Frances and Howard Low oral history transcript, 12, 15, Combined Asian American Resources Project Interviews, Box 1, folder:

Mundane as they may seem at a glance, the incipient forms of interracial collaboration that Watkins and Alley described signified a deeper dialectical process at work, resulting from the development patterns that had solidified San Francisco's position as an imperial metropolis by the late 1920s. The same shifting patterns of labor recruitment and employment that aided the production of a cheap, flexible, and divided workforce, and the same institutions of racial and class segregation that helped to preserve the city as a stronghold of White supremacy, generated new and otherwise unimaginable forms of relations between people from across the globe—people who had roots in widely different geographies, nations, ethnicities, and cultural, intellectual, and political traditions. Although they were as likely to reinforce as to challenge the status quo of power relations, the intercolonial crossings that occurred in the city carried the potential for forms of transnational, multiracial political solidarity and resistance that linked opposition to local indignities with global experiences of displacement, dislocation, and dehumanization. Ultimately, as Brent Hayes Edwards has described of Paris during this same period, the overlapping diasporas that helped to make San Francisco a key nerve center of American imperium and the global market economy also made the city a critical node in global circulations of grassroots struggle by the eve of the Depression.<sup>262</sup>

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Frances and Howard Low; Chalsa Loo oral history transcript, 2, Combined Asian American Resources Project Interviews, Berkeley, Box 1, folder: Chalsa Loo.

<sup>262</sup> Brent Hayes Edwards, "Shadow of Shadows," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 11-49.

*The Evolution of Inter-Community Relations in the Early Years of the Depression*

The Great Depression deepened conditions of deprivation and poverty among all working-class San Franciscans, though its impact was neither homogeneous nor evenly distributed. In a significant sense, the Depression fell hardest on populations who had long been marginalized from access to public resources and institutions. Non-White San Franciscans were disproportionately represented in unemployment rates and among the ranks of the poor, and many were confronted with the additionally irruptive threat of the era's repatriation drives.<sup>263</sup> At the same time, part of what San Franciscans witnessed during this period was a relative generalization of conditions that had previously been restricted to non-White and new immigrant groups onto wider circles of White San Franciscans. This relative democratization of suffering made possible a new sense of the relationships among workers and working-class communities and, for some, put into relief striking parallels between their struggles. A poem that Paul William Ryan directed at newly impoverished populations highlighted how social learning amid the contemporary crisis gave lie to the dominant logics of liberalism:

They've ground it into your thinking  
And hammered it into your bones,  
That the good rise up like bubbles  
And the evil sink like stones. . . .  
Have a look at the hungry men  
Have a look at the lives of workers  
And study your lessons again . . .  
The breadlines stretch for many a block;  
There's room at the end for you<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Yung, *Unbound Feet*, 181; Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 114-117.

<sup>264</sup> Michael Quin, "Graduation Greetings," *Western Worker*, March 12, 1934, 6.

Within this context, and amid the broader political polarization that marked the early 1930s, working-class communities carved out new spaces in city streets, relief shelters, breadlines, and meeting halls, as well as local taverns and nightclubs, where they forged dialogues about the travails of daily life and new interdependencies out of shared vulnerabilities.

Of course, San Franciscans' sense of their own local circumstances was informed by struggles that were occurring beyond the Bay Area. Many local working people had personal connections or familial ties to communities on strike in the agricultural fields and auto and textile plants, or to people engaged in numerous battles across the continent and the globe. A significant proportion of the city's residents performed seasonal work in the fields and fisheries or had themselves been directly involved in contemporary struggles outside the city. To be sure, they brought their experiences and stories with them as they engaged with local working people in a wide range of venues. Community newspapers regularly published articles about labor conflicts and movements occurring throughout California and across the country. Articles about California's agricultural strikes in particular were regular features in the local community press, as was the threat of repatriation drives.<sup>265</sup> A contemporary poem printed by the *Western Worker* sought to alert workers in western cities to the Imperial Valley strikes' lessons about the operations of nationalism and capitalism—operations that were made visible by but by no means exclusive to California's agricultural labor conflicts: “an american

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<sup>265</sup> For example, “Sigue la Huelga en Vacaville” and “A Los Huegistas de Vacaville,” San Francisco *El Imparcial* December 9, 1932, 1; “Cordial Recepción se Hizo a México Liga de las Naciones,” San Francisco *Hispano América*, October 3, 1931, 1; “Los Repatriados Han Encontrado Trabajo,” San Francisco, *Hispano América*, July 7, 1931, 1; “Sigue la Repatriación de Mexicanos,” San Francisco *Hispano América*, December 5, 1931.

valley / with american institutions / dedicated to american profits. . . .Pea Pickers are on strike / and clubs / gas / guns / are on one hundred per cent americanism / defending dollars.”<sup>266</sup>

San Franciscans’ sense of the interconnectivity between their various struggles took fuller shape as they established new social ties and engaged in new forms of dialogue. On November 6 and 7, 1931 San Francisco’s local Unemployed Councils, affiliated with Communist Party’s Trade Union Unity League, held hearings in and around the city. While part of the purpose for the hearings was to gather information about people’s ground-level experiences to inform Party strategy, they created a unique space for political dialogue about the varied struggles of San Francisco residents. The discussions that took place within them undoubtedly heightened attendees’ awareness of their shared challenges and vulnerabilities, as well as the many differences among them. While personal experiences and testimonies varied with differences in age, gender, race and ethnicity, citizenship status, marital and familial status, educational background, work experience, and place of residence, sharing and hearing each other’s experiences provided an opportunity to see how their stories fit together, and to identify commonalities between their struggles. Joblessness, hunger, undernourishment, and illness were common concerns and sources of misery among those who shared their testimonies.<sup>267</sup> Many who fell behind on bills and rent lost power, their homes, and

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<sup>266</sup> Henry George Weiss, “Imperial Valley Notes,” *Western Worker*, March 19, 1934, 3.

<sup>267</sup> Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” and Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

experienced varying forms of displacement and dislocation.<sup>268</sup> Poverty and transiency, in turn, made many into targets of police harassment and both legal and extralegal violence.<sup>269</sup> Discussions about these challenges affirmed people's awareness that their experiences were not anomalous or isolated. As Floyd Torrence noted about his experience as a husband and father of three, who had been unemployed for six months and had seen his children go "without food for 18 hours straight," "We know there are lots of families in the same condition."<sup>270</sup>

At the same time that dialogues like those organized by the Unemployed Councils underscored certain elements of similarity in the challenges people faced, which cut across lines of difference, they also urged an appreciation for the specific vulnerabilities of certain segments of the working-class population—especially those who could be categorized as non-White or noncitizen, as well as the very young and the very old. Non-White, immigrant, and elderly workers were often the first to lose their jobs and had the hardest time acquiring relief, due in large part to discriminatory methods of relief distribution and, for some, because of the added physical challenges of standing in line, whether for soup or a job, for lengthy periods of time.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Mrs. Springer, A. Gilpatrick, Martin Blank, and D. Merrihew, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, "Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25; E. Madsen and Harry Logan, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript "Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>269</sup> I. R. Dawes and Floyd Torrence, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, "Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25; John Bonavito and E. Madsen, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript "Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>270</sup> Floyd Torrence, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, "Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>271</sup> P. Pauv., "Japanese worker," and Joe Comme, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, "Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco," Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25; McCormick and Alfred Fisher, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed

In addition to the material deprivation caused by poverty, unemployment, and homelessness, non-Whiteness and noncitizenship subjected people to added, and additionally dehumanizing, social challenges. For example, a man noted as “P. Pauv,” who lived on 1024 ½ McAllister, and who was a janitor unemployed for 8 months, explained, “I belong among those men who have committed the crime to stay single. Another crime which I am not guilty of is that I am foreign born. They let me into this country when they wanted people to work here. At the present time there is not work. . . . You have to work five or six days to get one day’s work. And those one day jobs are getting scarcer and scarcer. The only solution for me this winter will be the slop line.”<sup>272</sup> A Japanese worker who had been out of work for six months stated, “Am living on what support friends are giving me. Can’t get a job because I am a foreigner, and there is no place to get relief for workers like me either.”<sup>273</sup>

Running throughout these participants’ testimonies was a thread that linked their common deprivation with a shared sense of the tenuousness of their claims to normative concepts of masculinity. W. Williams, an African American worker who had been unemployed for eighteen months noted that he had “worked for the city three weeks out of about 4 months on the bond issue. Been jobbing around and since house work is running out, selling soap. But everybody else is doing the same, and besides I couldn’t

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Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>272</sup> P. Pauv., Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>273</sup> “Japanese worker,” Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

buy anymore. Now, I am not even existing—I am just here, getting by.”<sup>274</sup> Another man explained, “The only way I am getting by is my wife working. I am doing nothing. My wife is getting \$21.00 a week when she works; this week it is her turn to go home. Next week she works ironing.”<sup>275</sup> Joe Comme, a Filipino man who lived at 1972 Sutter St. and made batteries for a living who had been unemployed for seven months explained that he was “Getting along on my savings, and taking a few chances on gambling”<sup>276</sup> A desire to obtain a level of economic stability that was crucial not only to survival but to the construction of an identity as self-possessing masculine subjects carried the potential to provide a catalyst for activism among male workers across racial and ethnic divisions.

Many of the hearings’ participants complained about the limitations of existing unions and charitable organizations, pointing out that these groups were often not only insufficient to meet the grassroots needs they proposed to serve but that they sometimes reinforced existing inequalities by serving a few at the expense of the many.<sup>277</sup> Rather than assist them in times of struggle, some men noted how unions readily suspended their members when finances became too tight to pay dues. Moreover, with respect to the conditions and suffering that rank and file workers experienced, “the AFL did

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<sup>274</sup> W. Williams, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>275</sup> Pat Dougherty, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>276</sup> Joe Comme, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>277</sup> Floyd Torrence, Jack Perry, Wm. E. Tucker, Mr. and Mrs. Lindeman, I. R. Dawes, B. Silver, A. Gilpatrick, H. Adams, P. Pauv, Martin Blank, “Japanese worker,” and P. Barker, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25; Harold Nauss and John Bonavito, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.



nothing.”<sup>278</sup> One worker, John Bonavito, who came to San Francisco from Pennsylvania’s coal camps, recalled how A.F.L. leadership “tells us to go on strike—and after the strike they tell us to go on down and work under the same conditions as we had been striking 3-4 months to get away from.”<sup>279</sup>

Recognizing commonalities between many of their struggles, and the problems with existing institutions and organizations, some saw and pressed the value of organizing collectively. Louis Triuch, an ex-service man who knew that he would not receive his bonus for several years, asserted, “fellow workers I have come to the conclusion there is no chance for us any more except we got to organize—put our shoulder by the wheel and roll them out.” As he explained,

[T]hat is the only chance for us, but it seems to me nobody is going to start it—everybody is getting scared. What are you fellows going to lose? You ain’t got nothing to lose—everything is going to be gained. If you lose it is only one life that is worth nothing to nobody; you have power in your hands and body—put that power all together and come on until we get something out of it. If we go one by one we never succeed nowhere—except to organize and then fight against your rotten conditions, against starvation. We have everything in this world—lots of wealth, lots of food to eat—and we are all born into this world with a right to it—and we have got to fight for this right and get it into our own hands.<sup>280</sup>

J. M. Hafner, a married man with one child, added, “One thing I cannot agree on, comrades—that there is no more work to do. I can not agree with that. I think the world never started yet. I think the work never really started. Our work is just beginning to

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<sup>278</sup> Martin Blank and P. Barker, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript, “Public Hearing—November 6, 1931, Fillmore District, San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>279</sup> John Bonavito, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>280</sup> Louis Triuch, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

start. We got to work damn hard to get started, but we will.”<sup>281</sup>

The discussions and social networks that people were building throughout the city developed with particular intensity along the city’s waterfront, the crux of the local economy and the site of some of the city’s most miserable and dehumanizing patterns of labor. Seafaring and waterfront workers had been subject to historically brutal working and living conditions in and beyond San Francisco. Popular regard for them as “misfits,” “failures,” and part of a “semi-underworld element” only reinforced their subordination to the rest of society.<sup>282</sup> The casualization of labor along the San Francisco waterfront worsened especially after the crushing of local strike actions in 1916 and 1919. During the 1920s, with the establishment of a company-controlled union, the Blue Book union, employers acquired a whole new scale of power over workers. A shape-up system of hiring—a haphazard and unregulated system that required men to line up by the dozens with hope of getting selected for an open position—deepened the insecurity of waterfront workers and encouraged ferocious competition among workers. At the same time, speed-ups enhanced the demands placed on those who acquired work while enabling employers to avoid paying overtime. As a publication by the San Francisco local of the ILA later recounted, what resulted during the 1920s was a system in which “a small minority of men were privileged to work themselves to death while a majority were reduced to the level of casual labor.”<sup>283</sup>

The same kinds of conversations that took place in the Unemployed Council’s

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<sup>281</sup> J. M. Hafner, Trade Union Unity League and Unemployed Council hearing transcript “Public Hearing—Nov. 7, 1931, Unemployed Workers, Held at San Francisco,” Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 25.

<sup>282</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 30.

<sup>283</sup> International Longshoremen’s Association, “The Maritime Crisis,” 1936, qtd. in Quin, *The Big Strike*, 31.

hearings occurred on ships and docks throughout the early 1930s. In 1932, a small mimeographed publication, *Waterfront Worker*, entered into circulation among longshore workers and provided a new channel for circulating ideas and visions of alternatives to the Blue Book union.<sup>284</sup> By the middle of 1933, longshore workers began taking action to form a local chapter of the International Longshoremen's Association, an AFL affiliated union. Of course, this was roughly the same time that the National Recovery Act's Section 7a went into effect, affirming workers' right to join any organization of their choosing and to bargain collectively with employers. The contemporaneous nature of these events has led some historians to treat the NRA as a cause or stimulant of working-class mobilization. However, Paul William Ryan, a participant and documentarian of the 1934 strike, offers a more accurate analysis. As Ryan explains, "both the NRA and the organizational revolt of the longshoremen sprang from the same social causes, occurred simultaneously, and influenced each other."<sup>285</sup>

Waterfront employers' response to the formation of a local chapter of the ILA involved a mixture of refusing to hire ILA members and subjecting them to targeted harassment and threats. These tactics proved effective in preventing longshore workers from joining the union in large numbers early on. While a September 1933 ruling by the Regional Labor Board affirmed the right of workers to join any organization of their choosing and opened the doors for the expansion and strengthening of the union movement, it did little to make employers amenable these developments. Employers persisted in their refusal to recognize or negotiate with the new union.

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<sup>284</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 39.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 40.

In February 1934, longshore workers along the Pacific Coast held a coastwide rank and file convention in order to draft demands for a uniform West Coast agreement to present to employers. The convention took place in San Francisco with elected delegates representing 14,000 longshore workers in various ports along the coast. They demanded an hourly wage of one dollar, a thirty-hour work week, a six-hour day, and a union-controlled hiring. The hiring hall, they acknowledged, was the crux of their agenda without which the other demands were meaningless. As Regional Labor Board director George Creel, President Roosevelt and a mediation board that he appointed, and also ILA leaders William J. Lewis and Joseph Ryan attempted to form an agreement that would settle the conflict, frustrations among the rank and file mounted, as did their collective refusal to negotiate away their demands. When employers failed to accede to the demands of the rank and file by a May 7 deadline that they set, longshore workers collectively called a strike that began on May 9.

### ***Forging a Coalition and (Re)defining Solidarity***

While historical undercurrents of political radicalism, daily struggles and modes of survival, and early-Depression era crossings and convergences helped to prepare a fertile ground for new forms of solidarity, it is important to acknowledge the somewhat straightforward point that the formation of a broad, cross-craft, interethnic, multiracial popular front alliance among waterfront working communities in this period was not a given. Among a working population whose struggles were historically shaped by racial divisions and exclusionary notions of *herrenvolk* republicanism, the very meaning of

collective struggle was deeply fraught.<sup>286</sup> The ILA itself was split on the question of whether to include non-White workers, and although some rank and file militants actively sought to recruit them, few among the segregated ranks of non-White longshoremen joined the union before the walkout began.<sup>287</sup> Indeed, in the mobilization's early stages, there was little reason to expect that employers' classical tactic of exploiting racial tensions by hiring non-White strikebreakers would not succeed in keeping the workforce divided and promptly restoring productivity along the waterfront.<sup>288</sup> In the early hours of May 9, the same morning that longshore workers along the coast walked off their jobs and initiated the strike, a gang of Black and Filipino longshore workers stationed on San Francisco's Pier 35 attempted to unload cargo from the ship, the "Diana Dollar." White strikers were quick to meet them on the scene, and a conflict erupted among the men that quickly broke into violence. Not long after the clash was suppressed by police, another broke out on Main Street where non-White workers were lining up to register as strikebreakers.<sup>289</sup> While the imperative to crush any obstacle to the strike's success provided the outward rationale for unionists' violence against the strikebreakers, these events also registered deep and persistent currents of racism and racial violence within the local labor movement. As these events helped illustrate to union organizers how racial antagonisms played into the hands of employers, they also provided what

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<sup>286</sup> Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 59-60.

<sup>287</sup> Sam Darcy address, "It is commonly agreed on the West Coast . . .," 1934, 11-12, Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 38; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 133. The main channels of support for the ILA among non-white populations came from those who were already actively involved in the Bay Area's organized left. See, for example, letter from the East Bay chapter of the ILD (April 5, 1934), printed in *Waterfront Worker* April 9, 1934, 2.

<sup>288</sup> Some ILA members, who recalled the employers' success in utilizing this tactic in the strike of 1919, anticipated that this would likely be the case in 1934. *Waterfront Worker*, March 12, 1934, 3-4.

<sup>289</sup> "Longshoremen Appeal to Negro for Strike Support; All-White Policy of Union Tottering?" San Francisco *Spokesman* May 10, 1934, 1. Also see Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 133-134; Quin, *The Big*, 50-51.

Communist Party California Chair Sam Darcy cited as one of the early “lessons” of the strike movement.<sup>290</sup>

Following this initial series of confrontations with strikebreakers, ILA organizers made a concerted attempt to win the support particularly of Black longshore workers and their communities, in a campaign that elicited a mixture of responses from those communities. While at least one gang of sixteen Black strikebreakers readily joined the strike, walking off the job with White longshoremen on the spot, others in the community exhibited deeper reservations about doing so. For instance, as the local Black newspaper, the *Spokesman*,<sup>291</sup> reported on the second day of the strike, when two representatives of the ILA approached a group of Black workers with a formal appeal to “refrain from seeking work” for the duration of the strike, their audience responded by “interrogat[ing]” the organizers, pressing them especially on the question of Black workers’ position within the union in the aftermath of the strike. Seeking to ease the obvious skepticism of the crowd, the ILA representatives replied that those “who threw in [their] lot with the union would be recognized,” and an “open policy” with respect to non-White workers would be adhered to.<sup>291</sup> As the stated commitment of ILA organizers to a policy of racial inclusion became a more central component of the union platform, the participation of local communities of color in strikebreaking activities declined significantly. Very few San Francisco residents were reported to have taken work as strikebreakers after the strike’s

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<sup>290</sup> Sam Darcy address, “It is commonly agreed on the West Coast...,” 1934, 11-13, Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 38.

<sup>291</sup> “Longshoremen Appeal to Negro for Strike Support: All-White Policy of Union Tottering?” San Francisco *Spokesman* May 10, 1934, 1.

earliest days.<sup>292</sup>

Whether they recognized that their position as a strategically important part of the union's political base gave them a certain degree of leverage in their relations with the ILA, or whether they simply wished to distance themselves from the kind of antagonism with which the union had historically confronted them, it is important to view Black longshore workers' initial reluctance or refusal to support the strike not strictly as a product of employers' manipulation but as a politicized response to the longstanding hostility of organized labor toward their communities. Moreover, their actions had an important impact on the course of the movement and the meanings attached to its notions of collective struggle and workplace democracy. Ultimately, attention to their actions urges us to view the ILA's adoption of a policy of racial inclusion not strictly as a measure handed down from union leadership but one that was forged by pressure from the bottom-up.<sup>293</sup>

As local longshoremen, strikebreakers, and potential strikebreakers redefined the contours of solidarity within the ILA, other waterfront workers, especially among the lower-skilled and racially marginalized ranks of seamen, seized the opportunity to advance their own struggles in the wake of the walkout. Within hours of the longshoremen's initiation of the strike on May 9, seamen "of all ratings" walked off the

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<sup>292</sup> "Longshoremen Appeal to Negro for Strike Support; All-White Policy of Union Tottering?" San Francisco *Spokesman* May 10, 1934, 1; Sam Darcy address, "It is commonly agreed on the West Coast..." 1934, 12, Sam Darcy Papers, Box 2, folder 38; Quin, *The Big Strike*, 51. Most of those who served as strikebreakers throughout the longer fetch of the strike were brought in from the East Bay (especially white college students and football players from UC Berkeley) and elsewhere. See Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 133.

<sup>293</sup> "Longshoremen Appeal to Negro for Strike Support; All-White Policy of Union Tottering?" San Francisco *Spokesman* May 10, 1934, 1.

ships to join the picket lines.<sup>294</sup> They included a large proportion of ethnic Mexican, Latino, Filipino, Chinese, and Black deckhands, scalers, cooks, and stewards. Many among this diverse contingent were traditionally excluded from A.F.L.-affiliated International Seamen's Union (ISU) and had been a critical source of political energy within the local chapter of the Marine Workers' Industrial Union (MWIU), a radicalized affiliate of the Communist Party's Trade Union Unity League, in the years that preceded the strike. Significantly, the actions of striking seamen were driven not only by their support for the longshoremen's battle but by their recognition that the mobilization presented a "golden opportunity for seamen" to "strike for our own demands."<sup>295</sup> By the end of the strike's first day, the seamen set about organizing a mass strike conference for the evening of May 10. The meeting resulted in the formation of a United Front Strike Committee, a channel through which strikers aimed to build "ONE rank and file controlled UNION" for "all seamen"—"employed or unemployed," "on a ship or on the beach," "organized or unorganized, regardless of affiliation" and across lines of "race, political opinion, religion, or anything else."<sup>296</sup> Meeting participants also drafted their

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<sup>294</sup> *Waterfront Worker*, May 21, 1934, 1; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 134.

<sup>295</sup> "To All Ship's Crews," MWIU flyer announcing Final Strike Conference, May 10, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934), BANC MSS 2004/187c v. 2, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. See also "The Seamen's Strike," *Waterfront Worker* May 21, 1934, 3; Joint Marine Journal, July 26 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>296</sup> "Seamen Endorse and Fight for One Union of All Seamen," pamphlet issued by Marine Workers Industrial Union, n.d., San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 1 (1934); "Fellow workers—do you have to have fakers make a code..." flyer issued by United Front Seamen's Strike Committee, n.d., San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "To All ISU Members!" flyer from United Front Seamen's Strike Committee, MWIU, n.d., San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "To All Bargemen, Ferryboatmen, and Harborworkers," San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 1 (1934); "To All Striking Seamen, Organized or Unorganized Regardless of Affiliation," flyer issued by United Front Seamen's Strike Committee, MWIU, May 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "To All Seamen, Organized and Unorganized, On Ships and on the Beach!" flyer from United Front Strike



shared demands for a wage increase based on the 1929 scale, an increase in the number of watches on duty (to a total of three), the formation of a seamen-run shipping bureau, and use of a rotary system of hiring.<sup>297</sup>

In fusing their efforts for improved wages and work conditions with demands for rank and file control and inclusionary popular front unionism, San Francisco's striking seamen not only pushed back against the dehumanizing pressures of the commercial and labor market; they also departed from the MWIU national leadership's policy of dual unionism and defied the limits of the ISU's organizational identity as a "white workingmen's brotherhood."<sup>298</sup> Through their efforts to build a trade union that joined the forces of "every seaman," the strikers claimed space for themselves in the central currents of the local labor movement.<sup>299</sup> In the process, they actively challenged the racial and gendered constraints that had historically anchored and nurtured that movement. Their actions offended the political and racial sensibilities of ISU organizers, who derided the MWIU activists as adherents of a "communist organization whose membership [is] largely Mexican and Filipino" and overwhelmingly made up of "SCALERS," not "bona fide seamen."<sup>300</sup>

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Committee, MWIU, May 26, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>297</sup> "To All Ship's Crews," MWIU flyer announcing Final Strike Conference, May 10, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934). Also see "The Seamen's Strike," *Waterfront Worker* May 21, 1934, 3.

<sup>298</sup> Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front," 5-42; Nelson, "Unions and the Popular Front," 59-78; Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*, 86.

<sup>299</sup> "Final Strike Conference" flyer issued by the Marine Workers' Industrial Union, May 10, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>300</sup> Carl Lynch, "Open Letter to Seamen," *Marine Joint Journal: Atlantic and Gulf*, August 4, 1934, 1, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 1 (1934); Herman Mills, "An Editorial," Joint Strike Committee of the International Seamen's Union Pacific Coast District, *Strike Bulletin #4*, June 29, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 1 (1934); ISU of A Journal, Vol. 2, no. 1, August 1934, 1, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 1 (1934).

Conservative unionists were not the only ones discontented by the actions of the multiracial rank and file. Many middle-class activists within non-White communities saw little to be optimistic about in the mobilization unfolding on the waterfront. In view of the local labor movement's long history of racism, San Francisco journalist and *Spokesman* editor John Pittman observed that "the kind of labor represented by the striking longshoremen—union labor—never seems to need the loyalty of Aframerican workers until it calls a strike." On the one hand, he explained, "The employers use him for a cat's paw, discarding him no sooner than he has done the dirty work of breaking the strike," and on the other hand, "[t]he unionists use him for a 'good thing,' c[h]asing him out of jobs which he has helped them win." This pattern drove Pittman to the conclusion that "Union labor has kept as ruthless a heel on the Negro worker's throat as has the exploiting employer. And there is only a small sign that it is changing its tactics."<sup>301</sup>

While Pittman saw in the embedded racism of organized labor grounds for dismissing the current mobilization as one that was fueled by forces "as ruthless" as waterfront employers, many of the people working on the waterfront took a different perspective. In fact, the relative genuineness of White workers' commitment to racial equality seems to have been less significant in shaping the actions of non-White workers than the perceived possibility for advancing their own struggles and enhancing their autonomy through their own self activity. As Kenneth Finis explained, "this is one of the

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<sup>301</sup> John Pittman, San Francisco *Spokesman*, May 17, 1934, 6. Langston Hughes wrote a letter in response to Pittman's editorial, stating: "You did not differentiate or make your readers understand that it is always the A.F. of L. unions that discriminate against Negroes, or set up Jim Crow locals. This the Communists led unions have not and never did do, and some of their unions are already powerful—so you do not want to give the idea that all American labor unions discriminate against the Negro. Let him know that there are some that do not, and that the faster he joins them, the quicker will his own labor power be felt. Letter from Langston Hughes to John Pittman, May 28, 1934, John Pittman Papers, (TAM 188), Box 1, folder 19, Tamiment Library/Wagner Archives, New York University.

things that divide . . . the Black bourgeoisie from the labor movement, is that the people who have never held a union card are very quick to denounce the labor movement as racist.”<sup>302</sup> While the solidarities that workers forged around the agenda of trade unionization neither transcended nor elided the internal racial contradictions of the labor movement, in identifying the movement as one that belonged to them non-White workers helped to redefine its composition and political directions.

Rather than accept the trade union movement to be the exclusive domain of White men, as many union leaders had historically insisted, movement participants recognized it as a vehicle for their own needs and desires and claimed it as their own. The Filipino section of the MWIU, which organized to address the particular concerns of Filipino seamen within the broader movement, asserted in a flyer the importance of Filipino support for the longshore strike based on the fact that “THEIR WELFARE IS OUR WELFARE!!!”<sup>303</sup> The predominantly Mexican scalers’ section of the MWIU drew also demands of their own to pursue alongside those of the broader seamen’s and longshoremen’s movements.<sup>304</sup> The sense of solidarity that was articulated through these assertions hinged less on a unified set of objectives than a sense of shared vulnerability and mutual interdependence. As an African American representative of the East Bay chapter of the ILD, observed, “Many Negro workers are beginning to realize . . . that they can not better their conditions at the expense of the white workers, no more than the

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<sup>302</sup> Kenneth Finis oral history transcript, 46, interview by Jesse J. Warr, (June 7, 1978) “Oral History Project: African Americans in San Francisco prior to 1945.”

<sup>303</sup> “Lahat Ng Marino Filipino,” flyer for the Filipino section of the MWIU, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>304</sup> “Scalers’ Section of the Marine Workers Industrial Union: Scalers’ Demands,” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

white workers can better their conditions at the expense of the Negroes.”<sup>305</sup> All this contributed to a sense that, as an editor of the *Waterfront Worker* put it, “this is not a white man’s strike, but a strike of all workers, regardless of race, color, creed, or nationality.”<sup>306</sup>

These expressions of solidarity spread beyond the ranks of longshore workers and seamen, to workers throughout virtually all industries related to the waterfront. By May 13, San Francisco Teamsters joined the longshore workers and MWIU seamen on strike. The following day, Oakland Teamsters did the same, along with the Boilermakers and Machinists union, who declared a boycott against all ships worked by scabs. Between May 15 and May 16, strikes were declared by the Sailors’ Union, the Marine Firemen, Oilers, Watertenders and Wipers, and the Marine Cooks and Stewards, all of which were affiliates of the ISU. At this point, conservative ISU leadership had little choice but to declare a strike as well. The Ferryboatmen’s Union, the Masters, Mates and Pilots, and the Marine Engineers Beneficial Association also began demanding pay increases and improvements without declaring strike. Thus, by the middle of May, the vast majority of workers on the waterfront and related trades were on strike, advocating their own lists of demands as well as those of the longshore workers, and practically the entire port of San Francisco was tied up. A poem that appeared in *Western Worker* depicted the power exerted by San Francisco’s striking coalition through its description of halted commerce:

Oh glorious Armada of dead ships,  
With smokeless stacks and anchors biting deep,  
And empty holds and cargoes lying fast,  
And slow paralysis spreading o’er the port,

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<sup>305</sup> *Waterfront Worker* April 9, 1934, 2

<sup>306</sup> *Waterfront Worker* May 21, 1934, 3

And o'er the state from labor's withdrawn hand—  
 What battle fleet held half the thrill as this  
 Mute evidence of workers' stubborn fight,  
 Glad portent of the final fight to come!<sup>307</sup>

As established AFL union leadership, employers, and government officials sought to settle the strike in its early stages by purporting to represent the best interests of the public—declaring that a speedy end to the strike was “in public interest” and vital to the maintenance of “industrial peace”—the strikers solidified and articulated their own vision of the political process.<sup>308</sup> As the ILA’s Strike Bulletin put it, “Governor Merriam in his statement in the Sunday papers takes the position that ‘THE STRIKE SHOULD BE SETTLED IN THE INTERESTS OF THE PEOPLE—and in the interests of the State of California.’ This has always been the stand of the International Longshoremen’s Association. . . . THE LONGSHOREMEN ARE THE PEOPLE. We certainly should be the ones to be considered.”<sup>309</sup>

On May 19, in response to the latest effort by Assistant Secretary of Labor Edward McGrady to achieve a settlement with employers without consulting the striking rank and file, the longshore workers passed what Paul William Ryan described as “the most important resolution of the strike” by a unanimous vote.<sup>310</sup> Specifically, they ruled that, first of all, any negotiation related to the strike must be referred back to the rank and file for approval and, secondly, that the longshoremen would not return to work until the

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<sup>307</sup> R. J. Pearsall, “Closed Port,” *Western Worker*, June 25, 1934, 5.

<sup>308</sup> Western Union telegram from Franklin D. Roosevelt to W. J. Lewis, March 22, 1934, William J. Lewis Collection, Box 1, folder, 3, Accession No. 1997/021, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University; Western Union telegram from Joseph P. Ryan to William Lewis, March 22, 1934, William J. Lewis Collection, Box 1, folder, 3; Western Union telegram, Robert Wagner to William Lewis, March 22, 1934, William J. Lewis Collection, Box 1, folder, 3.

<sup>309</sup> Strike Bulletin #4, Issued by Local 38-79 I.L.A. Publicity Committee, June 25, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>310</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 52.

seamen also achieved some settlement of their grievances. The resolution reflected a strategic unity among workers that aimed to wrest concessions from power and contribute to broader structural change at the workplace. At the same time, it fused grassroots imperatives for structural change with an innovative vision of the process of political protest—one anchored in priorities of rank and file autonomy, democratic and inclusionary participation, and political solidarity across racial and craft lines.

### *Possibilities and Contradictions*

As working-class San Franciscans redefined the bases of political solidarity on the waterfront, they challenged some of the basic structures of regional capitalist development and contributed to the formation of a wider culture of opposition. The waterfront strikers and their allies not only rendered inept the efforts of union leadership, employers, and government officials to represent the needs and interests of the working public; they confronted, challenged, and experimented with alternatives to some of the basic cornerstones of established systems of rule. At perhaps the most foundational level, the assertions of power by waterfront workers eroded the legitimacy of presiding channels of authority and representative leadership. When Joseph Ryan, national leader of the ILA, arrived in San Francisco to try to negotiate a settlement deal with shipowners and employers, he, like McGrady and others, claimed to represent the voices of longshoremen while dismissing their key demands for a union-controlled hiring hall and expressing apathy about a policy of closed shop unionism. Rank and file workers were quick to speak for themselves and denounce Ryan as their supposed spokesperson. They

not only printed articles about his efforts to sell them out in their papers but also held a mass meeting on the night of June 19 to address the problems they had with him and the question of how to proceed politically.<sup>311</sup> At the heart of their efforts was a conviction that a more democratic alternative to top-down methods of union representation was possible.

As the fraudulent nature of those who attempted to represent the interests of the strikers became increasingly obvious, the crisis of power for established authorities intensified. Indeed, one measure of the extent to which the waterfront mobilization threatened the local power structure was the increasing reliance of city and business leadership on force and coercion to subdue it. On the same day of Ryan's failed attempt to bring an end to the strike, San Francisco's police department began to enforce a longstanding anti-picketing law. Violence ensued as the police unleashed full force against a youth anti-fascist demonstration (a spin on the day's Memorial Day festivities), injuring dozens of young protestors as well as innocent bystanders in the process. The Memorial Day assault galvanized the public and intensified political divisions throughout the city. The day's events contributed to a fuller sense that, as 1934 strike veteran Blackie Soromengo described of this historical moment, "no matter what direction you looked, there was a failure of leadership of all the nation's institutions. That went for the people who headed our unions as well as those in political parties and the government."

There was an urgent need to build "a different kind of union" and to reenvision social and

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<sup>311</sup> "Joint Marine Strike Committee: Hear Why the Ryan Agreement was Rejected, All Strikers, Every Union Man, Every Sympathizer, Invited to CIVIC AUDITORIUM," June 9, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); MWIU flyer, "Ryan Sells Out I.L.A.: Unity Our Only Weapon of Defence," June 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); Rank and File Committee flyer, "Frisco Rejects Sellout, Pedro Must Do the Same," June 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

power relations more broadly.<sup>312</sup>

In a significant way, the failure of leadership that Soromengo described opened up new space for grassroots communities throughout the city to define and pursue their own needs and desires. To this extent, the strike became a locus for surrealist imaginings about the possibilities of social change and the future of social relations. By the time of the Memorial Day assault, the strike came to occupy the headlines of all major newspapers and was a centerpiece of popular discussions across the Bay Area. According to Paul William Ryan,

San Francisco was living and breathing strike. Everyone was discussing it. Everyone was trying to understand it. Everyone had something to say about it and something to ask about it. Homes, restaurants, and public places became virtual open forums, and people were rapidly taking sides. Bitter disagreements were splitting homes and friendships; at the same time new bonds of sympathy and common viewpoint were being forged—bringing people together, creating new ties.<sup>313</sup>

Part of the process by which working-class San Franciscans created the “new ties” and affinities that Ryan described entailed a refusal of the categorizations ascribed to their communities, and the divisions promoted among their communities, by the nation’s political institutions and labor market. Displacing the established imagery of the European-American workingman as the embodiment of working-class dignity and rational political subjecthood, the articulations of solidarity that emanated from the waterfront strike cast the trade union movement as a people’s movement in a much broader sense. In drawings and photographs that appeared in radical and labor presses, the waterfront strikers and their supporters circulated images that set differently

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<sup>312</sup> Blackie Soromengo, qtd. in Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity*, 127.

<sup>313</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 68.



racialized bodies side by side in mutual struggle and collectivity.<sup>314</sup> The organ of the Communist Party USA's Pacific Coast chapter, *Western Worker*, lauded that "Greetings of solidarity were given by Levino of the striking cooks, Ben Fee of the Chinese seamen, Paul Valdez of the Filipino Seamen's Club, Fritz Deuer of the Typographical Union, and Elaine Black of the International Labor Defense." The same article announced, "Negro strikers were fighting side by side with the whites," and despite "the efforts of the capitalist press to split the workers on color lines . . . all colors are represented among them."<sup>315</sup> Similar declarations appeared throughout ILA and MWIU publications and urged, "Let's stick together. Black and White—Unite and fight. Nothing can defeat us."<sup>316</sup> These messages intended as much to reflect as to foster a sense of shared struggle across racial, ethnic, and craft lines, and to encourage the idea that, as one writer for the ILA's Publicity Committee put it, "All nationalities were represented [in the strike], but this mixture of races had no effect on the solidarity of the strike," a fact that "surely explodes the old theory that the workers must be of one nationality to present a united front."<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> *Waterfront Striker* (MWIU publication) May 30, 1934, 2, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "The Power on the Front," *Waterfront Worker*, May 21, 1934, 1; "Join the United Front!" *Western Worker*, April 2, 1934, 6; "Step in the Longshoremen's Fight—Scenes of the San Francisco Waterfront," *Western Worker*, May 21, 1934, 4; "Undaunted by Police Attack," *Western Worker*, June 11, 1934, 2; "On Hunger Strike for Reduced Bail," *Western Worker*, August 13, 1934, 1.

<sup>315</sup> "5,000 Stevedores, Families, Sympathizers in S. F. Parade: Workers Cheer as Greetings are Voiced from Other Organizations, Negroes, Chinese, Filipino Seamen," *Western Worker*, May 21, 1934, 4.

<sup>316</sup> "Solidarity!," *Waterfront Worker*, August 28, 1934, 8; *Waterfront Striker* (MWIU publication) May 30, 1934, 2, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "Bosses Spread Lies, Use Negroes as Scabs," *Waterfront Worker*, May 21, 1934, 3; "The Power on the Front," *Waterfront Worker*, May 21, 1934, 1; "Lies to Split Workers on Color Lines Nailed" and "Arrest Chinese Picket," *Western Worker*, *Bulletin No. 2* (bulletin authorized by Publicity Committee of the Strikers), Labor Archives and Research Center Ephemera Files: San Francisco Maritime and General Strike, 1934-1936, Box 1, folder: San Francisco Maritime and General Strike--Handbills and Leaflets.

<sup>317</sup> I.L.A. Strike Bulletin #27, July 26, 1934, 1, Archie Brown Collection, Box 2, folder 6, Collection no. larc.ms.0087, Accession no. 1992/005, Labor Archives and Research Center, San Francisco State University. Also see, "5,000 Stevedores, Families, Sympathizers in S. F. Parade: Workers Cheer as

While the forms of multiraciality that the strikers engaged challenged the racial segmentation of workforce that had been so crucial to local development, they did little to challenge—arguably, they never intended to challenge—gendered divisions of productive and reproductive labor. Gender relations proved to be a highly contested arena of struggle among the many people involved in the strike and the varying aspirations they attached to it. For waterfront workers, heteronormative masculinity served as a kind of currency that helped bolster rank and file claims to political power and to undergird newly constructed affinities across racial and craft lines. Traditional, patriarchal notions of masculinity imbricated the strikers’ articulations of their struggles and political objectives. It was on the grounds of “the right to be a real union man” and the goal of earning “enough wages to feed their wives and kids” that many waterfront workers fought.<sup>318</sup> They frequently characterized the strike itself as a movement of “real m[e]n,” a battle that required “GUTS AND MANHOOD,” and often had a difficult time envisioning a place for women beyond domestic, subservient, and auxiliary roles.<sup>319</sup> In this respect, the strikers’ efforts to challenge the emasculating forces of exploitation, starvation, and suffering tended in significant ways to reinforce the marginalization of women and non-normative masculinities.

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Greetings are Voiced from Other Organizations, Negroes, Chinese, Filipino Seamen,” *Western Worker*, May 21, 1934, 4.

<sup>318</sup> Flyer announcing June 1, 1934 meeting, “Down with Police Brutality! Break the Ship-Owners Dictatorship in San Francisco!! Mass Meeting!” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); “OUR BROTHERS: Howard S. Sperry—a longshoreman—a World War Veteran—and a real man . . .” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>319</sup> Joint Marine Journal, July 26, 1934, “OUR BROTHERS: Howard S. Sperry—a longshoreman—a World War Veteran—and a real man. . .” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); *Waterfront Worker* March 22, 1934, 4; *Waterfront Striker*, May 30, 1934, 2, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); I.S.U. of A. (International Seamen’s Union of America) Journal 2, no. 1 (n.d.) “The seamen of the Pacific Coast have shown themselves, and the ship-owners, and the general public, what we can do . . .” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); I.L.A. Strike Bulletin #27, July 26, 1934, 1, Archie Brown Collection, Box 2, folder 6.

This is not to suggest that women did not play an important role in the strike. Women provided both material resources and political guidance throughout the strike's duration. They spearheaded the collection and distribution of relief to strikers and organized a Women's Auxiliary to the ILA in order to coordinate their activities.<sup>320</sup> They provided input on movement strategies and tactics, in informal venues, public speeches, and written publications. They boycotted stores who sold goods that were loaded and shipped by scabs. They circulated leaflets and other agitprop materials, rallied public support for the mobilization, and encouraged fellow women, friends, and neighbors to view the strike as a movement of and for all people.<sup>321</sup> Women's support for the strike reached beyond working-class communities and revealed gendered political divisions within more well-to-do San Franciscans as well. As Edith Jenkins, a descendant of two generations of successful San Francisco businessmen, recalled, "the dinner tables of the upper-middle-class families were like armed camps. The women and children had taken the strikers' side. The men were in favor of the Industrial Association."<sup>322</sup>

Indeed, some of the women involved in the strike were veteran activists who were no strangers to direct action political confrontations. For instance, ILD organizer Elaine Black used her experience in the ILD and in mass movements in Southern and Central

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<sup>320</sup> Flyer, "To Wives, Daughters, and Friends of I.L.A. Members, the shipowners are determined not to grant . . ." June 5, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); Vivian McGucken Raineri, *The Red Angel: The Life and Times of Elaine Black Yoneda* (New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1991), 68-69; Quin, *The Big Strike*, 82-83.

<sup>321</sup> Karl Yoneda, *Ganbatte: Sixty-Year Struggle of a Kibei Worker* (Los Angeles: Asian American Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, 1983), 77; "A Militant Wife Speaks an Appeal to All Women," *Waterfront Worker*, March 22, 1934, 4.; I.L.A. Strike Bulletin #9, July 2, 1934, issued by Publicity Committee, Local 38-79 I.L.A., San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); Strike Bulletin #27, July 26, 1934, issued by I.L.A. Publicity Committee, Archie Brown Collection, Box 2, folder 6.

<sup>322</sup> Joseph Blum and Lisa Rubens, "STRIKE," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, July 8, 1984, 12, Labor Archives and Research Center Ephemera Files: San Francisco Maritime and General Strike, 1934-1936, Box 1, folder: San Francisco Maritime and General Strike, 1934-.

California to contribute to the strike's momentum while helping to defend strike participants from repressive reactions, in the courtroom as well as in the streets. As she worked with fellow ILD activists to provide legal support to arrested strikers, Black also distributed copies of the Bill of Rights to strike participants and worked to educate strikers and their supporters about what to do if they were arrested. Her lessons included particular provisions for foreign-born strikers, which advised them never to provide law enforcers with "free information," such as their place of work, address, country of origin, date of arrival or citizenship status.<sup>323</sup> Contrary to the image that emerges from some of the movement's more masculinist rhetoric, women's activities in the strike were far from benign. In fact, they performed such work at immense personal risk, facing arrest and physical violence.<sup>324</sup> Black herself was arrested four times during the course of the strike.<sup>325</sup> Like many other individuals and groups who were traditionally marginalized from the local labor movement, women asserted their own claims to the political space of the strike and utilized what maneuvering room they had to reimagine and alter the norms of gender relations.

While women's political activities stretched conventional definitions of proper femininity and proved vital to the ultimate success strike, they did little to shift the dominant attitudes of strikers and their supporters concerning the subordinate status of women and women's work. Union media outlets actively strove to confine the significance of women's political actions to the domestic arena. The examples of female militancy that abounded in the city were overshadowed in strike-related media by

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<sup>323</sup> Raineri, *The Red Angel*, 69.

<sup>324</sup> Yoneda, *Ganbatte*, 77.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

representations of women as innocent victims of police brutality, or as helpless dependents whose livelihood, along with that of children, relied on the brave sacrifices of their male counterparts.<sup>326</sup> When strikers did acknowledge women's contributions the strike, their reports focused not on the significance of their political work in its own right, but on the extent to which their actions supported the political work of striking men. In contrast with male strikers, strike reporters portrayed women not as independent political actors but as wives, mothers, and daughters who had a social obligation "to help in any manner in which they can," to serve "[their] men work[ing] on the waterfront, be it husband, father, or son."<sup>327</sup> Thus, even when they did acknowledge women's capacity for political influence, those seeking to manage public relations around the strike continually circumscribed women's actions as subservient and ancillary to those of men.

Significantly, strike media also reflected a tendency to universalize the voices of White women as representative of all women. There is little to no documentation of the involvement of women of color in the mobilization. There is virtually no mention of them in the strike related press. No photographs or sketches contain imagery of them. Much less do their voices appear in the platforms of the ILA or other striking organizations. Given the role of men of color in the strike, and considering that we know women of color figured prominently in the activities of the ILD, the Communist Party, and other organizations that supported the strike, we can assume that the absence of non-

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<sup>326</sup> For example, see Flyer announcing June 1, 1934 meeting, "Down with Police Brutality! Break the Ship-Owners Dictatorship in San Francisco!! Mass Meeting!" San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "Preliminary Testimony Taken by the San Francisco Committee against Police Brutality, Sponsored by Twenty Three San Francisco Organizations: A Pamphlet Dealing with Events on San Francisco's Waterfront, May 30, 1934," New Economics Group of San Francisco, 6, 8, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>327</sup> "A Militant Wife Speaks an Appeal to All Women," *Waterfront Worker*, March 22, 1934, 4; "To Wives, Daughters, and Friends of I.L.A Members . . .," flyers dated June 5 and June 6, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

White women from the historical record had less to do with a lack of interest or engagement on their part and more to with a failure or unwillingness among union channels to give women of color a platform in the movement.<sup>328</sup>

The masculinist rhetoric of strike related media also existed in constant tension with—and might be understood as part of an effort to manage—the gender identities and behavior enacted by male strikers. Some segments of the waterfront coalition were eager to shore up definitions of proper masculinity that were continually blurred by the daily practices of men on strike. On the front lines of the waterfront pickets and beyond them, male strikers bent the constraints that typically defined normative expectations of masculinity, as well as those of racial deference and competition. The forms of solidarity they enacted challenged gendered assumptions of masculine self-sufficiency by requiring men to lean on each other for sustenance and emotional support. Beyond the docks, the strike drew together overlapping community networks and fostered new kinds of social relationships, which played a critical role in undergirding what activist Revels Cayton described as the feelings of “brotherhood and camaraderie” among White and non-White longshoremen, seamen, and their allies.<sup>329</sup> In a variety of formal and informal spaces, waterfront workers congregated to relax, rejuvenate, and to talk about life amid the strike. Such spaces nurtured discussions about the challenges they faced and the political possibilities of the future. These same spaces also provided such vital resources as food and shelter to workers going without an income for an extended period. For example,

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<sup>328</sup> Regarding the prominence and activism of women of color in the International Labor Defense and Communist Party, see Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>329</sup> Revels Cayton Oral History Transcript: BBC interview, July 1975, 43, Richard S. Hobbs Oral History Interviews with Revels Cayton, Box 1, folder: BBC interview, July 1975.

Cayton recalled living for a time with writer and labor organizer with Ben Fee and his wife in their two-bedroom apartment in Chinatown. According to Cayton, Fee and his wife took in up to nine waterfront workers at a time, feeding them and allowing them to sleep under their roof.<sup>330</sup> The threat that these forms of interdependency posed to the privileges and power associated with masculine self-possession fueled anxieties among some strikers about the stability of heteronormative manhood and motivated their injunctions toward fellow strikers to display “guts” and behave like “real men.”<sup>331</sup> Indeed, while the waterfront movement challenged the ethnic and craft divisions of the labor market, in significant ways it strove to keep conventional gender divisions and relations intact.

At the same time that the strike generated new articulations and raised new anxieties about social relations in racial, industrial, and gendered terms, it also laid bare the connectivity between local struggles and global circulations of grassroots insurgency in the historical moment of the Great Depression. Against San Francisco elites’ discourses of civic nationalism and New Dealers’ overtures about American exceptionalism, the crossings and convergences that animated the movement on the waterfront challenged assumptions concerning the geopolitical space of the nation as a natural basis for social belonging and put into relief the transnational and global dimensions of grassroots solidarities. The mobilization drew people and communities

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<sup>330</sup> Revels Cayton Oral History Transcript: BBC interview, July 1975, 43, Richard S. Hobbs Oral History Interviews with Revels Cayton, Box 1, folder: BBC interview, July 1975.

<sup>331</sup> Joint Marine Journal, July 26, 1934, “OUR BROTHERS: Howard S. Sperry—a longshoreman—a World War Veteran—and a real man. . .” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); *Waterfront Worker* March 22, 1934, 4; *Waterfront Striker*, May 30, 1934, 2, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); I.S.U. of A. (International Seamen’s Union of America) Journal 2, no. 1 (n.d.) “The seamen of the Pacific Coast have shown themselves, and the ship-owners, and the general public, what we can do . . .” San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); I.L.A. Strike Bulletin #27, July 26, 1934, 1, Archie Brown Collection, Box 2, folder 6.

together across lines of race, ethnicity, gender, craft, neighborhood, and nationality, in pickets as well as strike relief kitchens and events that people organized to benefit the strike and relief kitchens.<sup>332</sup> It drew support from solidarity networks that extended well beyond the city, to other regions of California and across the globe. One of the groups that was regularly involved in the coordination of San Francisco's strike relief kitchens and its benefit events was the Workers' International Relief. Workers' International Relief had been actively involved over the preceding fifteen years organizing relief kitchens and securing food and clothing for strikers and their families in many different locations and mobilizations—in Russia, China, the Mississippi Delta, as well as the Imperial and San Joaquin Valleys during the recent and ongoing agricultural strikes.<sup>333</sup> Outside San Francisco, small farmers sent produce to the strikers' relief kitchen. Organizations nationwide held public meetings and invited west coast longshoremen to send speakers to explain and promote their cause.<sup>334</sup> Workers in major ports worldwide, from Auckland to Havana to Baltimore, refused to unload cargo that had been loaded by scabs in San Francisco.<sup>335</sup> As they leveraged the resources placed at their disposal by the

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<sup>332</sup> R. N. Mallen, "An Open Letter to the General Public and to All Organizations in the Bay Area," San Francisco, June 6, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "Minutes of Strike Picket Committee Meeting, May 14, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "An Appeal to All Trade Unionists: The longshoremen of the entire coast . . ." San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); "Strike Bulletin: Latest Reports on Negotiations, etc.," July 26, 1934, Archie Brown Collection, Box 2, folder 6; Flyer from Workers International Relief and Marine Workers Industrial Union, "Strike Relief Entertainment Dinner—Dance," July 1, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); Workers International Relief flyer, "Come to Solidarity Day Event 121 Haight St, Sunday June 3<sup>rd</sup> at 8pm," San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>333</sup> Flyer from Workers International Relief and Marine Workers Industrial Union, "Strike Relief Entertainment Dinner—Dance," July 1, 1934, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); Workers International Relief flyer, "Come to Solidarity Day Event 121 Haight St, Sunday June 3<sup>rd</sup> at 8pm," San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934).

<sup>334</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 55; Yoneda, *Ganbatte*, 73.

<sup>335</sup> Marine Workers Industrial Union flyer, "ATTENTION! Fellow Longshoremen: While your brothers on the West Coast are being shot at . . ." Baltimore, n.d., San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-



very patterns of racial capitalist development they aimed to challenge, working-class communities in San Francisco transformed the imperial metropolis into a key center of the global crisis.

As the strike carried on into early July, the city leaders and the Industrial Association grew more impatient. As they continued on their usual course of blaming the strike on “communist infiltration” of the workforce, they set about coordinating a campaign to open up the port by force. The Industrial Association sent a telegram to President Roosevelt warning that if a settlement did not bring an end to the strike in the upcoming few days, “efforts will be made to start movement of cargoes to and from docks and it appears inevitable that an industrial conflict of character too serious to contemplate will be the outcome.”<sup>336</sup>

On July 5, Industrial Association began its campaign to open the port. As the onslaught unfolded, the police opened fire into a crowd of protestors, injuring many and killing two men, Nicholas Bordoï and Howard Sperry, in an event became infamously known as Bloody Thursday. In the aftermath of Bloody Thursday, thousands of people filed down Market Street in a funeral march commemorating the slain strikers and demonstrating their solidarity. The momentum of public support for the strike and opposition to the civic and industrial leadership culminated in a general strike that shut down the city for three days, from July 16 to 19.

The largest and longest general strike in history, San Francisco’s three-day

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1948, vol. 2 (1934); “New Zealand Refuse to Touch Cargo of “Monterey” in Auckland!!!” in Joint Marine Journal, July 14, 1934, 2, San Francisco Waterfront Strikes Scrapbooks, 1934-1948, vol. 2 (1934); *Waterfront Worker*, March 12, 1934, 8.

<sup>336</sup> Telegram from San Francisco Industrial Association to Franklin D. Roosevelt, qtd. in Quin, *The Big Strike*, 82.

general strike in July 1934 marked a widespread popular refusal of the city's established political and economic order. Although the formal beginning of the general strike was not until 8 a.m. on Monday, July 16, preparations began sooner and, to borrow from sociologist Paul Taylor's observation, "[T]here was a holiday mood in the air."<sup>337</sup> According to Taylor, "There was more traffic than usual in the city streets. People jammed the restaurants. . . . Pictures shows were crowded for tomorrow they would not open. . . . [By] Monday morning even the Municipal Cars stopped running. The streets were unusually quiet."<sup>338</sup> General Hugh Johnson, head of the National Recovery Administration flew into town on a military jet but "could not land at Presidio on the San Francisco side so we landed on the Oakland side of the Bay expecting to take an automobile to San Francisco. There just weren't any automobiles. The general strike had closed the filling stations and paralyzed the transportation of the city."<sup>339</sup> As Paul William Ryan described, grocery stores hung signs in their windows reading "CLOSED TILL THE BOYS WIN," or "CLOSED FOR THE DURATION OF THE GENERAL STRIKE." Workers across the city "drained out of the plants and shops like life-blood, leaving only a silent framework embodying millions of dollars of invested capital." In labor's absence, "giant machinery loomed as so much idle junk."<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Paul S. Taylor, "Trouble on the Waterfront," August 1, 1934, 8, Paul Schuster Taylor Records, BANC MSS 84/38c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Carton 6, folder 32.

<sup>338</sup> Paul S. Taylor, "Trouble on the Waterfront," August 1, 1934, 8, Paul Schuster Taylor Records, BANC MSS 84/38c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Carton 6, folder 32.

<sup>339</sup> General Hugh S. Johnson, "The Blue Eagle from Egg to Earth," qtd. in Quin, *The Big Strike*, 155.

<sup>340</sup> Quin, *The Big Strike*, 146-147.

***“A Strike is a Small Revolution”***

In an oral history interview, Harry Bridges described what he saw as the revolutionary implications of the 1934 strike: “You see,” Harry Bridges explained, “in a small way, temporarily a strike is a small revolution.” As Bridges put it, “A strike is a very serious thing. . . . It simply means a form of revolution because you take over an industry or a plant owned by the capitalists and temporarily you seize it. Temporarily you take it away. . . . That’s another way of saying to an employer or an industry—in this case, we said it to the shipowners of the whole world—You might be worth millions or billions—we don’t say you own this until we tell you to operate.”<sup>341</sup> The strike, in other words, was a performance of working-class power that dramatized the vulnerability of reigning employers and city leaders as well as their dependence on working people. It was a reclamation of working-class dignity in the face of the dehumanizing forces that structured their lives. At the same time, it advanced a particular vision of dignity that acknowledged the differentiated nature of the oppressions that waterfront workers faced. In this respect, the strike was a performance of new kinds of solidarities and social relations that prefigured radical alternatives to prevailing social norms and hierarchies.

In connecting their immediate grievances with management to a broader, intersectional struggle for dignity and more participatory and democratic kinds of social relations, participants in San Francisco’s trade union movement challenged conventional notions of working-class solidarity, which had tended to hinge on claims to Whiteness

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<sup>341</sup> Harry Bridges, “Harry Bridges: An Oral History about Longshoring,” July 27, 2004, ed. Harvey Schwartz, ILWU Oral History Collection, [http://www.ilwu.org/?page\\_id=2616](http://www.ilwu.org/?page_id=2616), accessed September 23, 2013.

and masculine self-possession. Instead, they advanced an alternative basis for political collectivity among working-class communities that was grounded in a sense of mutual interdependence and shared vulnerability. By the time the Longshoremen's Board handed down its arbitration award on October 12 granting longshore workers a six-hour day, ninety-five cents per hour, overtime pay, and a jointly run union hiring hall, the strikers and their allies not only achieved most of the demands they had been striking for; in linking acts of self-definition and self-determination with wider efforts for a more democratic workplace, they contributed to a wider sense of grassroots empowerment and altered the terrain of struggle for the movement as a whole.

Of course, the increasingly inclusive character of labor politics amid the strike did not by any means resolve or transcend differences and tensions within the movement. As we have seen, the grounds of masculinity and productive labor on which the movement evolved carried their own inherent contradictions and exclusions, and the struggle against racist and anti-immigrant forces among workers was necessarily an ongoing one. Nor did the victories of the local confrontation suggest that similar achievements were imminent elsewhere. In fact, in some places, the waterfront strike intensified concerns about the threat of grassroots insurgencies, accelerated efforts at political repression by local authorities, and sharpened hostilities toward racial inclusion among union leaders. As we shall see in the following chapter, an intensified commitment to established traditions of open shop unionism and racial segregation in the wake of the waterfront strike in Los Angeles meant that many working-class Angelenos had to seek out alternative avenues for dignity and social change. For many, organized labor did not carry the possibility for pursuing workplace gains without sacrificing a significant degree of rank and file

autonomy and democracy. In some cases, unions seemed to carry less potential for altering people's experiences of everyday life than art, music, and the community networks that both nurtured and were nurtured by expressive culture. Shifting our gaze to examine working-class struggles in California's "open shop city" reminds us that the making of the region's culture of opposition is not just a story of industrial confrontation; rather, it is one rooted in the political energies of grassroots imaginations and non-negotiable desires for dignity.

### Chapter 3

#### Unusual Weather in the Land of Sunshine: Los Angeles' Cultural Front from Below

*...There's a hammering at your gates, California.  
There's a swelling chorus roaring,  
'Let us in! Let us in!'*

*You look worried....But wait...  
Don't telephone the Chamber of Commerce.  
These aren't invaders swooping down on you  
They're not even people...  
They're ideas...  
Real ideas...  
Not hit-and-run propositions  
Nor real estate balloons  
Nor Ouija board religions  
Nor high colonic panaceas...*

*...You were once just an idea yourself—  
How about giving other ideas a chance?  
Let them in, California...*

*...It's unusual weather all over the world,  
A hurricane's blowing in from the Orient  
Storm clouds from Germany.  
An earthquake in Mexico.  
Why, the ground is rocking right under our feet.  
It's an international typhoon!*

—Edward Eliscu, *Sticks and Stones* (1938)<sup>342</sup>

On the evening of the Fourth of July, 1934—the eve of the violent clash in San Francisco that would become known as Bloody Thursday—a crowd gathered in the auditorium of Los Angeles' downtown Cultural Center for a theatrical production featuring select scenes from the play, *Stevedore*. The evening's show was quintessentially a community affair, staged by and for local residents of Central and South Los Angeles. It drew together an eclectic community of middle-class activists as

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<sup>342</sup> Edward Eliscu, "Sticks and Stones," (1938), Edward Eliscu Papers (TAM 270), Box 2, folder 6, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University, New York, New York.

well as impoverished working and unemployed residents of the racially mixed Black, Asian, Latino, and White neighborhoods that surrounded the city's major industrial districts, between South L.A.'s Central Avenue corridor, Boyle Heights to the east, and Little Tokyo to the north.<sup>343</sup> *Stevedore* had opened on Broadway in April of that same year, and the amateur performers, community members and organizers who had coordinated the night's events were preparing their own rendition of the show for a full run in the fall. In a sense, then, the Fourth of July performance served as a preview of what was to come. Yet, the troupe had reasons for staging an incomplete and minimally rehearsed set of segments from the show that reached beyond generating anticipation for the full-length debut. To a significant extent, the event's organizers were driven by their recognition of the particular relevance that the show bore for Central and South L.A. residents during the summer of 1934. That summer rounded out a year that had confronted these communities with the deepest and most widespread conditions of deprivation in the city's history, the most intense political repression they had experienced in over a decade, and new levels of interethnic rivalry and targeted racial scapegoating. In presenting a few portions of the play at such an early stage of the production process in response to these developments, coordinators of the show seized on an opportunity to join performers and audience members to grapple collectively with social problems that were both present and pressing.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," in *Metropolis in the Making*, 100-101; Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early-Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>344</sup> "Group Gives 2 Scenes from 'Stevedore', 4th," *California Eagle* July 6, 1934, 1. Since its New York debut, *Stevedore* had roused controversy over its representation of the nature of "human passions and race hatreds." It garnered fierce reactions from those who feared its "propaganda implications" and acclaim from those who admired the "crusading" manner in which it addressed "real people and real problems" of

The play itself depicted the story of a White woman in contemporary New Orleans, who is beaten by her illicit lover and, rather than tell the truth to authorities and expose the scandal, claims that she was raped by a Black man. In the upwelling of racial hostility that ensues, as police scour the city to round up as many Black men as they can and force them into lineups, waterfront employer Jeff Walcott recognizes an opportunity to oust one of the leading organizers of a movement for union rights and workplace equality that was taking shape on the levees, Lonnie Thompson. After Walcott has Thompson arrested and the White woman alleges him as her assailant, Thompson manages to escape and go into hiding. The incident stirs up the ire of a White mob, which riots through the streets and begins raiding the homes of Black residents. Ultimately, it takes the solidarity of men from the waterfront, across racial lines, to fight them off.<sup>345</sup>

In foregrounding the criminalization of Black masculinity, the impulse to protect White womanhood, the terror of racism, the twisted relationship between justice, law, and power, and the difficulties of navigating racial and class divisions amid broader struggles against oppression, the show not only registered such highly publicized contemporaneous events as the Scottsboro trial and the coastwise waterfront strike as key political and ideological coordinates; it told a story that working-class Angelenos could identify as “typical” in a local sense, “true to life in every detail.”<sup>346</sup> As the local Black weekly, the

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the day. “Three Contrasting New Plays,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1934, BR13. For additional examples of popular reactions to *Stevedore*’s Broadway run, see Brooks Atkinson, “The Play: The Drama of the Race Riot in ‘Stevedore,’ Put On by the Theatre Union,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1934; Percy Hammond, “‘Stevedore’ Another Crusading Stage Play,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1934, 9; M. M. “A Vigorous Play,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 17, 1934, A7.

<sup>345</sup> Paul Peters and George Sklar, *Stevedore: A Play in Three Acts* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935).

<sup>346</sup> L. S. H., “Group Gives 2 Scenes from ‘Stevedore’, 4th” *California Eagle*, July 6, 1934, 1.



*California Eagle*, put it, the scenes from the play that the Cultural Center performers excerpted that Fourth of July evening resonated with the lives and struggles of the people who filled the auditorium with a degree of “[r]ealism that makes one shudder and squirm.”<sup>347</sup> Significantly, Los Angeles did not give rise to the multiracialist brand of labor unionism that took hold in San Francisco in this same moment. The Southern California metropolis’ more mixed economic base, the wider spatial scattering of its working-class populations, the firm grasp of eugenic, White supremacist thinking on its dominant political culture, and the severity of anti-union repression in the city—epitomized most notoriously by the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Red Squads—militated against the potential for making the workplace a site for broad-based political mobilization. Perhaps more visibly and persistently than any other major Western metropolis, Los Angeles emblemized the reliance of urban capitalist development on the forms of violence and racial terror that *Stevedore* depicted onstage. Moreover, as evidenced by the local ILA’s intransigent resistance to inclusionary unionism along the docks in San Pedro, the city also offered a grim illustration of the common tendency of labor’s representative spokespeople to secure their own partial gains at the expense of significant segments of working populations. These conditions made the kind of solidarity invoked in *Stevedore*’s conclusion simultaneously as urgent and as challenging as ever.<sup>348</sup>

The significance of the evening’s performance derived not strictly from the ways it reflected conditions and experiences that were familiar to working-class Angelenos,

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<sup>347</sup> L. S. H., “Group Gives 2 Scenes from ‘Stevedore’, 4th” *California Eagle*, July 6, 1934, 1.

<sup>348</sup> Nelson, “The ‘Lords of the Docks’ Reconsidered.”

however, but from the ways it enabled forms of affiliation and social imagination that were unwelcome—perhaps unthinkable—in other venues throughout the city. In defiance of the racial limits of organized labor’s main institutional channels and dominant notions of proper civic behavior, the Cultural Center performance linked Black, Brown, and White residents from Central and South L.A. in the construction of a shared past, one shaped by patriarchal racist violence and anti-unionism. It nurtured a sense that their personal struggles and respective stakes in the future were intimately linked with one another. The people onstage and in the seats of the Cultural Center that evening were urged by the performance to actively and collectively work through questions to which there were no immediate answers—questions about how solidarities might be built and nurtured in the face of prevailing social divisions; how grassroots struggles might be carried forth against the seemingly overwhelming forces of racial capital; what democracy meant in practice, and what comprised a dignified existence. Against a dominant culture that sought to manage popular desires by binding them to a trajectory of racial capitalist development, grassroots cultural expressions like the Cultural Center *Stevedore* performance encouraged imaginings of alternative possibilities—blueprints of “another Los Angeles,” as George Sánchez has put it.<sup>349</sup>

Far more than benign entertainment, artistic expressions were critical to the structuring of power relations and to the crafting of visions for the future of development in California generally and Los Angeles specifically during the 1930s. Art was a key terrain on which understandings of the past and present were worked out and on which

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<sup>349</sup> George Sánchez, qtd. in Daniel Widener, “‘Perhaps the Japanese are to be Thanked?’: Asia, Asian Americans, and the Construction of Black California,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 147.

the horizons of the imaginable and the possible were drawn. For Southern California elites throughout the early-twentieth century, art provided a fruitful avenue for the production of ideas about what kind of city Los Angeles ought to be. They worked hard to fashion an urban aesthetic capable of supporting their aspirations for regional capitalist development. What emerged from their endeavors was a dominant culture that combined conventional notions of high art with boosterist imagery that promoted visions of the city as an eden of leisure and prosperity, particularly for a narrowly defined imagined community of White Protestant migrants, consumers, national investors, and financiers.<sup>350</sup>

For a majority of international migrants and non-White workers who helped build the city—including many of those who filled the Cultural Center on the Fourth of July—the art of the powerful offered little beyond tokenization, denigration, and erasure. Yet, racial capitalist elites never exerted a monopoly over cultural production in the city, and art proved to be a distinctly malleable, and uniquely valuable, tool for those pushing back against the forces of their subordination. Just as it carried the potential to fortify municipal power hierarchies and enforce exclusionary social boundaries, artistic production also held the capacity to widen the conditions of political possibility for people seeking to challenge those same boundaries and to make their lives livable.<sup>351</sup>

In forms that ranged from theater performances to murals to music, expressive

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<sup>350</sup> Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City: Civic Imagination and Cultural Authority in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 12-13.

<sup>351</sup> As George Lipsitz has put it, while cultural forms “engender accommodation with prevailing power realities, separating art from life, and internalizing the dominant culture’s norms and values as necessary and inevitable,” they also “create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future.” Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 16. Also regarding art as a contested, “elastic and exceedingly useful tool” for Los Angeles’ diverse political struggles, see Schrank, *Art and the City*, 8.

culture linked diverse communities across the city and helped generate new kinds of relationships among them. It helped foster modes of historical memory and insurgent knowledge that could provide sources of empowerment in the face of seemingly overwhelming forces of subordination. In a way that differed from more directly confrontational modes of politics, which drew people together around strategic forms of political unity and hopes of securing immediate, agreed-upon objectives, art functioned as a prism through which differentiated struggles in the city redefined themselves and their relationships to each other. Hinging less on the construction of strategic essentialisms than forthrightly open-ended anti-essentialisms, expressive culture mediated more flexibly than most other political domains between the commonalities of working-class experiences and the constitutive particularities of local ethnic communities and individual subjectivities. Less viable than organized politics for the task of securing concrete concessions from power, art was nonetheless vital to the cultivation of the kind of grassroots self-empowerment on which more organized movements relied.

During the 1930s, Los Angeles gave rise to a grassroots surrealist counterculture that placed art at the center of struggles for liberation. Multiracial, interethnic, and cross-generational in its composition, Los Angeles' oppositional culture was animated by the shared, albeit varied and sometimes conflicting, struggles of local communities for dignity, self-definition, and empowerment, and by an intuitive sense of the integral relationship between creative practice and social change. It had expressions in major works of public visual art by left-leaning professional artists, who used murals to critique the city's development narrative and contribute to the making of a popular historical counter-memory. It included a community-based, community-oriented, and largely

female-led arts movement that flourished through overlapping networks of community activists, who saw theatrical performance as a crucial avenue for empowerment and public dialogue. It was also animated by the creative expressions of local youth culture, which energized the city's jazz scene and underscored the centrality of collaboration, experimentation, and improvisation to the pursuit of emancipation.

This chapter examines how grassroots artistic expressions across each of these valences helped expand political possibilities for people facing tremendous barriers to social inclusion and political participation, while contributing to an oppositional, surrealist cultural milieu in 1930s Los Angeles. It highlights the non-negotiable nature of grassroots priorities of creative autonomy and democratic participation and reveals the distinctly vital role that grassroots artistic expressions had to play in securing these priorities. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates that grassroots surrealists found in culture a widened terrain for nurturing anti-essentialist visions of themselves and a means for sustaining and regenerating broader dreams for the future of social relations.

### ***Culture and Power in the Open Shop City***

Throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, expressive culture in general, and art in particular, had served as a key terrain for political contestations within the city, and for battles over the city's development future. From its early transformation from a backcountry town in the 1880s to a booming center of citrus groves, tourism, and real estate speculation by the 1910s, to its emergence as a sprawling industrial metropolis by the end of the 1920s—complete with one of the world's most

ambitiously constructed irrigation systems, its most productive oil derricks and refineries, and the fastest growing manufacturing district in the country—the production of narratives about the city and what it had to offer the world was a central and indispensable function of its political economic development.<sup>352</sup> As much as the natural resources that would provide the raw material for its infrastructure, urban growth in the L.A. basin relied on the efforts of city builders and boosters to appeal to the desires of prospective investors, residents, home buyers, tourists, and entrepreneurs—to enable the city to be seen as a fertile ground for unfilled promises, a “last best hope” for people seeking a wide range of opportunities. As writer and satirist Morrow Mayo wrote in 1933, “Los Angeles, it should be understood, is not a mere city. On the contrary, it is, and has been since 1888, a *commodity*; something to be advertised and sold to the people of the United States like automobiles, cigarettes, and mouth wash.”<sup>353</sup> During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the expansion of Los Angeles went hand in hand with the construction of a dominant vision of the city as a land of sunshine and prosperity, where residents could be free of the squalor and cultural degeneracy associated with eastern cities and where business growth could proceed without the troublesome interference of union activity.

Far from a naturally occurring phenomenon, the making and selling of a vision of Los Angeles as a land of sunshine and prosperity required a great deal of work on the part of city builders. As historian William Deverell has shown, Los Angeles’ emergence as of

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<sup>352</sup> From a city that produced negligible manufactured exports in 1905, Los Angeles became the nation’s eighth largest manufacturing center in 1924. By 1930, Los Angeles ranked as the fourth largest metropolitan district nationwide. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 25, 117; Davis, “Sunshine and the Open Shop,” 96-97.

<sup>353</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, 17.

beacon of racial capitalist progress—a celebrated “city of the future”—required the construction of a whitewashed mythology of its past, the disavowal of the contributions made by Native and Mexicano populations to the historical development of the region, and the suppression of alternative and oppositional visions of the city that its inhabitants advanced.<sup>354</sup> At the same time that lynch mobs and vigilante raiders worked to purge undesirable elements from public spaces and the mainstream of civic culture, tourist pamphlets and real estate advertisements recreated the city in the popular imagination as one ripe for new business ventures, where folks on the make could find wealth and good health in a life of leisure on the beach.<sup>355</sup> As Deverell notes, the fact that Los Angeles became a booming industrial metropolis structured by White dominance by the 1920s was not a manifestation of “a city that got what it wished for”; rather, this was “a city that wished for what it worked diligently to *invent*.”<sup>356</sup> By 1934, the *Los Angeles Times* heralded the city as “the new cultural center of the world,” a status it acquired by becoming “a land not fettered by custom or tradition” but instead “giving the world something new, permeated by California sunshine.”<sup>357</sup>

A central pillar of Los Angeles’ development during the first three decades of the twentieth century lay in the process by which city builders constructed the metropolis as an open shop city. More than a policy that aimed to cripple union power by affirming the right of employers to hire non-union members, the open shop was a core element of the

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<sup>354</sup> Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*.

<sup>355</sup> Daniel Widener, “Another City is Possible: Interethnic Organizing in Contemporary Los Angeles,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 1, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 193; Ken Gonzales-Day, *Lynching in the West, 1850-1935* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 207-208.

<sup>356</sup> Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*, 4-5.

<sup>357</sup> “A Center of Culture,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 1934, C15.

broader hegemonic order of early-twentieth century Los Angeles.<sup>358</sup> It was the fulcrum of local boosters' campaign to grow the city's industrial base by attracting entrepreneurs, industrial branch plants, and investors to the region, and a vital means for maintaining a cheap and flexible supply of industrial labor. Los Angeles was neither the first nor only city in the United States to organize its infrastructure around the open shop. In fact the open shop became common practice in many cities across the country following the upsurge of labor in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Nonetheless city boosters loved to boast about Los Angeles' role in setting a precedent for capitalist modernization nationwide. In 1930, the *Times* proudly declared that "the one great difference which has outweighed all natural handicaps and has made this city one of the first manufacturing centers of the country—is the fact that, from its beginnings, Los Angeles industry has been maintained under the open shop as against union rule in San Francisco, in Portland, and in Seattle."<sup>359</sup>

Both accompanying and facilitating the tremendous expansion of Los Angeles' economic infrastructure on the basis of the open shop during the early-twentieth century was the ascendance within the city of one of the most highly centralized arrangements of employer power that the world had ever seen. The cornerstone of this development was the Merchants and Manufacturers Association (M&M). Founded in 1896 under the leadership of *Times* editor Harrison Gray Otis and his son-in-law, Harry Chandler, M&M coordinated the efforts of local magnates in industry, banking, and transportation to safeguard industrial freedoms and prosperity from disturbances from below. Especially

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<sup>358</sup> See Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 96-122.

<sup>359</sup> "An Open Shop Milestone," *Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 1930, qtd. in Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 113-114.



after the metal trades strike and bombing of the *Times* building in 1910, the M&M devoted itself explicitly and entirely to the struggle against trade unionism. Along with their political allies in the Chamber of Commerce, M&M-affiliated employers in Los Angeles stood at the front lines of the city's industrialization campaigns. Collectively, they worked to ensure the exclusion of existing trade unions from the political process, the virtual prohibition of picketing, and outlawing of political dissension.<sup>360</sup>

The political successes of M&M and its allies in promoting the city's industrialization reshaped the Los Angeles' urban geography during the 1920s. Burgeoning motion picture, aircraft, oil, and aggregate producers gave rise to clusterings of very large plants in the city's agricultural and suburban periphery. Meanwhile, the bulk of industrial activity—including the sweatshop-style production of apparel, furniture, and food processing as well as newer "Fordist"-style production of tires and automobiles—concentrated around the city's urban core. From the old industrial district just east of downtown, sprawling southward along Alameda Street and eastward along the Union Pacific line, cheap land, access to road and rail networks, and abundant electric and water power made possible the emergence of a dense archipelago of factories, branch plants, and warehouses. Correspondingly, an array of businesses, saloons, night clubs, churches, and employment agencies sprung up in adjacent districts to cater to working populations who flooded into the city in massive numbers to fill its demands for

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<sup>360</sup> Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 102; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 25; Louis B. Perry and Richard S. Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, viii, 5-6, 21. According to Perry and Perry, in 1910, the Merchants and Manufacturers Association included in its membership nearly 750 firms, or about 80 to 85 percent of the larger establishments in the city. Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 21.

industrial labor.<sup>361</sup> Surrounding these districts, neighborhoods filled with subdivided lots and relatively low-cost bungalow-style homes sprung up to house these same populations.<sup>362</sup>

The open shop formalized employers' control over production and authorized the implementation of discriminatory hiring practices and wage rates that helped keep workers divided and vulnerable. Such practices provided L.A. business leaders with a crucial mechanism for managing a workforce that grew and changed rapidly along with the city's industrial base.<sup>363</sup> To be sure, for those who preferred to view Los Angeles as a place where "Anglo-Saxon civilization must climax in the generations to come," industrial expansion in the region proved to be a mixed blessing.<sup>364</sup> The industrialization of Los Angeles not only contributed to the overall growth of the local population, from 50,000 in 1890 to 1.2 million in 1930 (2.3 million if one includes its surrounding metropolitan districts); it also transformed its composition. The active recruitment of low-cost labor sources from across the Pacific, south of the U.S.-Mexico border, and the far reaches of the continent contributed to the remaking of Los Angeles not only as the fastest growing but also the most ethnically diverse city in the country. The number of African Americans in Los Angeles doubled between 1920 and 1930, and the ethnic Mexican population more than tripled during that same period. The region was also the main entrepot for Japanese-origin immigrants. By the 1930s, Los Angeles' non-White

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<sup>361</sup> Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 98-101; Wild, *Street Meeting*, 10-12.

<sup>362</sup> Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 112-113.

<sup>363</sup> Regarding discriminatory employment practices, see Wild, *Street Meeting*, 40-41; Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 245-247; Ruiz, *Cannery Women Cannery Lives*, 15, 30-31. Regarding the broader implications of employer power and anti-unionism for race management, see Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*.

<sup>364</sup> Qtd. in Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*, 4.

population constituted 14.2 percent of the total population, exceeding the proportion of non-White residents in such major cities as San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia.<sup>365</sup> On the one hand, the diversity of Los Angeles' workforce was a condition for its growth and economic modernization. On the other, it also disturbed the racialized visions that Los Angeles' builders and boosters had cultivated about the city as a stronghold for White supremacy.<sup>366</sup>

At the same time that Los Angeles became one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, it also became one of the most racially polarized. One of the great migrations to Los Angeles during the early-twentieth century was that of Anglo-Protestants from the midwest. Lured to the city by myriad different forces, including the prospect of a supposedly endless supply of jobs and freedom from the presence of large numbers of southern and eastern European, Jewish and Catholic immigrants that increasingly characterized other major cities, these transplants helped bolster the image of Los Angeles as a haven of White racial purity and the destined "world capital of Aryan supremacy."<sup>367</sup> Some researchers have estimated that the proportion of L.A. housing that was subject to racially restrictive housing covenants during the period, prohibiting the sale of property to non-White residents, may have been as much as 95 percent.<sup>368</sup> Local boosters sought to capitalize on the appeal of racially-restrictive and Anglo-only neighborhoods taking shape across the city, boasting that various enclaves contained "no Negroes and very few Mexican and Chinese" or that their resident populations that were

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<sup>365</sup> Widener, "Another City is Possible," 194; Rick Moss, "Not Quite Paradise: The Development of the African American Community in Los Angeles through 1950," *California History* 75, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 228; Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 5.

<sup>366</sup> Davis, "Sunshine and the Open Shop," 117.

<sup>367</sup> Davis, *City of Quartz*, 28, 114-115.

<sup>368</sup> Widener, "Perhaps the Japanese are to be Thanked," 148.

“100% American of the White race.”<sup>369</sup>

The relatively few neighborhoods that were open to poor, immigrant, and non-White residents became densely concentrated hubs of working-class life. Segregated and multiethnic enclaves that included ethnic Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, African American, Italian, Russian, and Jewish residents expanded in the areas that surrounded the city’s industrial core, especially in the districts that stretched between the downtown neighborhoods of Chinatown and Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights to the east, the neighborhoods that surrounding Central Avenue, and Watts to the south.<sup>370</sup> Interactions across ethnic and racial groups within these neighborhoods are well documented and created the potential for new forms of interethnic tension as well as collaboration. In spaces ranging from schools to markets to nightclubs and dance halls, Central and South L.A. neighborhoods provided a setting in which the lives of the city’s multiracial workforce became interwoven with each other.<sup>371</sup> They were “economic and cultural meeting point[s] for many ethnic groups,” not only for those who lived within them but also many “who passed through them on their way downtown.”<sup>372</sup>

Changing demographics and the emergence of newly non-White spaces in the city raised anxieties about the possible directions of Los Angeles’ development future, and gave new intensity to the efforts of city builders to control that future. Within this context, tightened segregation and zoning policies aimed not only to control human

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<sup>369</sup> Davis, “Sunshine and the Open Shop,” 117.

<sup>370</sup> Wild, *Street Meeting*, 10-14; Widener, “Perhaps the Japanese are to be Thanked,” 148.

<sup>371</sup> Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*; Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*; Scott Kurashige, “The Many Facets of Brown: Integration in a Multiracial Society,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 56-68; Anthony Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935-1968* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Widener, “Perhaps the Japanese Are to be Thanked”; Wild, *Street Meeting*.

<sup>372</sup> Wild, *Street Meeting*, 10.

movement across the urban landscape but also to determine the accessibility of different kinds of public spaces, resources, and modes of civic participation for different segments of the local population. Residents of non-White neighborhoods in the city came increasingly to occupy a second-class status of citizenship, distanced from dominant definitions of social membership and from the main channels of civic life and participation. They also became primary targets of a new policing offensive. In the wake of the Mexican and Russian Revolutions and the upsurge of domestic radical movements at the end of the First World War, fears about the threat that foreign and dissident subjects posed to the health and stability of the city provoked a wave of political repression. Aggressive assimilationist projects and anti-Red raids ensued, making working-class Angelenos in the Central and South L.A. into the main subjects of efforts to secure local power blocs, fortify the open shop, preserve the sanctity of White spaces, and subdue seditious political activity.<sup>373</sup> Seeking to crush unionization efforts and other perceived threats to employer power, the M&M expanded and reorganized its operations, establishing its own hyper-patriotic offshoot, the Better America Federation. It also backed the militarization of the local police force and the creation of the LAPD Red Squads. Imbued with the explicit mission of eradicating disturbances to the social order, the Red Squads and broader M&M and LAPD activity severely constrained available avenues for political engagement in the city by attaching a high price and potentially

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<sup>373</sup> Regarding the impact of revolutionary internationalisms in general and Mexican Revolution in particular, see Christina Heatherton, *The Color Line and the Class Struggle: The Mexican Revolution and Convergences of Radical Internationalism, 1910-1946*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 2012; Monroy, "Fence Cutters, *Sedicioso*, and First-Class Citizens," 11-44. Regarding public health concerns, see Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens?*. Regarding World War I era labor radicalisms in Los Angeles, see Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, Chap. 6.

harrowing consequences to oppositional activity.<sup>374</sup>

Official law enforcement bodies were by no means the only ones responsible for maintaining the hegemony of the open shop and racial capitalist development in Los Angeles. The wider climate of racial hostility on which the open shop relied drew on reactionary currents that ascended among working- and middle-class Angelenos during the 1920s. During this period, the city became a capitol of the eugenics movement and a bastion for the rapidly growing Southern California section of the Ku Klux Klan. These forces terrorized the city's growing non-White populations, reinforced established regional hierarchies, and helped bind definitions of social progress to the preservation of White racial dominance.<sup>375</sup> Together, the many forces of racial and political repression—their official and unofficial varieties—severely limited the political possibilities that existed for immigrant and non-White working people in early-twentieth century Los Angeles, especially in realms of formal municipal politics and labor unions.

While threats of physical violence and repression were critical components of the open shop city's municipal power structure, these forces relied for their legitimacy on a broader civic culture that upheld Los Angeles' image as a land of leisure, prosperity, and consumer pleasure. In this respect, the making of social order in the city was in significant part an artistic task. Art was as critical to the work of policing social

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<sup>374</sup> As Perry and Perry note, an expression of the business community's investment in the work of the M&M is evident in the fact that the organization doubled its membership between 1920 and 1923. Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 201.

<sup>375</sup> Significantly, it was not uncommon for Los Angeles' Red Squads and KKK to collaborate directly in the suppression of political dissenters and undesirables. See for example, Perry and Perry, *A History of the Los Angeles Labor Movement*, 190. Regarding the eugenics movement in Los Angeles, see Lily Kay, *The Molecular Vision of Life: Caltech, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Rise of the New Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 63. Regarding expansion of the KKK in Los Angeles and Southern California, see Davis, *City of Quartz*, 116, 162 and Flammig, *Bound for Freedom*, 200-202. Also see Wild, *Street Meeting*, 40-42, 60-61; Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven*, 157-158.

boundaries as were the LAPD's Red Squads and as vital to advancing the city's position on the global stage as were the wealth and goods it produced. For these reasons, throughout the early-twentieth century L.A.'s power brokers made the cultivation of a civic identity through art a top political priority. L.A. business leaders and boosters joined forces with classically trained professional and amateur artists to form the California Art Club and other art clubs, which dominated the local artistic scene for most of the 1910s and 1920s. These exclusive, patrician-led bodies acted as gatekeepers to the local art world, controlling much of the city's exhibition space and establishing the parameters for its urban aesthetic. They promoted traditional notions of a transcendent high art that separated thought from experience, seeking idealized refinement over organic expressions of life, alongside a commercial culture that could help market the city on a national and global stage. The dominant artistic culture was, above all, a visual culture, emphasizing landscape and representational styles of painting along with boosterist modes of commercial imagery. Rather than expressing the concerns and imaginations of Angelenos themselves, it sought to enlighten and uplift them in ways that suited elite notions of proper citizenship. In other words, this was an art that aimed to serve the city's booster machine while spreading culture among those who presumably lacked it.<sup>376</sup>

The transformations of the 1920s brought new challenges to the dominance of L.A.'s conservative art elite. For one thing, growing local interest in the concerns of modernism raised new questions about elitist high art and gave rise to new institutional spaces—organizations as well as art schools—which loosened the grip of elite-led clubs

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<sup>376</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 14-15.

on artistic production in the city. For another, new technologies of cultural production and consumption created new avenues for Angelenos to define for themselves their relationship to the world around them, to each other, to the past and the future. The increasing prevalence of mass cultural forms—from movie theaters to radio programs and records—contributed to the formation of new public spheres and new vehicles for popular expressions of identity. Neither necessarily conservative nor inherently oppositional, the ascendant mass culture reflected the contradictions of life in early-twentieth century America. Fordist mass production, the deskilling of labor, and the tendency toward vertical integration, standardization, and Taylorization contributed to the tightened concentration of wealth and power and to new levels of inequality in all areas of society. In the industries of cultural production and distribution, these developments generated new avenues for the making and maintenance of hedonistic forms of consumerism and racial capitalist hegemony. At the same time, the rise of mass culture and consumerism also helped widen the field of possibility for new forms of engagement, congregation, interaction, and identification by and among working people.<sup>377</sup> As Lizabeth Cohen describes, “Although they did not always recognize it, workers [during the 1920s] increasingly were shopping at the same chain stores, buying the same brand goods, going to the same chain theaters, and listening to the same radio programs on chain networks.”<sup>378</sup> The experiences that accompanied these developments contained the raw material from which people could construct and circulate new systems of meaning and memory, new languages of struggle, and new social visions.

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<sup>377</sup> Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, esp. Chap. 1 and Chap. 7; Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure*; Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985).

<sup>378</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 157.



Cultural production was as vital to dominant efforts to fashion a whitewashed narrative of the city as a bastion of urban racial capitalist progress as it was to grassroots efforts to make sense of the world around them, to experiment with alternative visions of themselves and the world, and to forge ties of community and collective struggle. The rich literature on culture and community formation in Los Angeles has shown how cultural production and consumption served as crucial channels for the struggles of insubordinate immigrant populations in the face of experiences of displacement, dislocation, racial hostility, segregation, and dehumanization. Until recently, much of this excellent literature has focused on specific ethnic and racial group-oriented histories.<sup>379</sup> Recent studies of multiracial community formation have highlighted how the 1930s marked a high point of interethnic collaboration both within the organized left and in the broader consolidation of a non-White identity.<sup>380</sup> Yet, we have a great deal more to learn about the kinds of social visions and practices that emerged during this period at the intersection between culture and politics. Scholars who have examined the politics of culture and multiraciality in Los Angeles in the World War II and postwar eras have shed important light on the interconnections between and among differently racially populations in the city.<sup>381</sup> Far fewer works have looked at the role of culture in shaping interethnic relations in Los Angeles in the period before World War II.<sup>382</sup>

This study builds on extant literature as it seeks a fuller picture of multiracial

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<sup>379</sup> See, for example, Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*; Lon Kurashige, *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival, 1934-1990* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002); Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*; Widener, *Black Arts West*.

<sup>380</sup> Wild, *Street Meeting*; Allison Varzally, *Making a Non-White America: Californians Coloring outside Ethnic Lines, 1925-1955* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>381</sup> Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*; Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*; Macias, *Mexican American Mojo*; Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*; Widener, "Another City is Possible."

<sup>382</sup> An important contribution to the study of interracial cultural politics during the 1930s is Widener, "Perhaps the Japanese Are to be Thanked."

cultural politics in Los Angeles during the Great Depression era. This chapter underscores how the intensely constrained nature of the formal political arena in 1930s Los Angeles requires that we look more in depth at the political visions that were generated and pursued in grassroots cultural politics. It shows how, during the Depression, as conditions of deprivation and suffering grew deeper and more widespread, the people of Los Angeles drew on the resources available to them, including those provided by the culture industry, as they built dialogues and affinities across cultural and racial difference. As they engaged in innovative forms of artistic production, beyond traditional points of industrial production, these communities gave expression to a collective critique of racial capitalist power in Los Angeles and to shared, though differentiated, desires for autonomy and freedom.

### *Subversive Spectacles*

As the main artistic arena in which city leaders constructed narratives of Los Angeles as a land of sunshine, the visual arts were a critical site of cultural contestation. They were also one of the most conspicuous arenas where the city's grassroots surrealist expressions took shape in the city during the Great Depression. As historian Sarah Schrank has shown, the 1930s marked a period of transition in Los Angeles' visual art world, away from the classical landscape painting and kitschy boosterist imagery that had dominated the preceding decades and toward a modernist approach that combined

American commercial culture and socialist avante-garde aesthetics.<sup>383</sup> While local elites were eager to tap into these artistic streams in order to garner a reputation for the city as a world “cultural center,” they struggled to find ways to control cultural production in its fast-evolving forms. City builders’ efforts to link the production of modern art to the promotion of L.A.’s development facilitated the opening of new platforms for artistic production and display—from gallery spaces, to art schools, to the commissioning of public works of art, especially murals. It also eased the entry of previously marginalized artists onto the local art scene’s center stage. Between 1932 and 1933, Mexican revolutionary muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros accepted a series of commissions to produce massive public works of art in the heart of the city. Painters Luis Bastar, Philip Guston, Reuben Kadish, Harold Lehman, and others followed in Siqueiros’ wake, contributing to a growing presence of ethnic Mexican and Jewish artists in the city. In 1935, sculptor Beulah Ecton Woodard became the first African American artist to display her work in a one-person show at the celebrated Los Angeles County Museum.<sup>384</sup> The inclusion of new communities of artists within the domains of the civic art world should not be seen as a progressive victory in itself. Importantly, city leaders never intended for the shifting parameters of artistic participation to challenge the basic structures of Anglo capitalist dominance and development in Los Angeles. Some conservative elites opposed the new measures of racial inclusion outright, viewing the increasingly multiethnic character of the local art world as a threat to the status quo. However, many perceived in such changes the opportunity to fortify existing hierarchies by incorporating the city’s

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<sup>383</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 43-44.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., Chap. 2; Widener, *Black Arts West*, 84-86.

diverse popular elements into a nationalist, “middlebrow” American culture.<sup>385</sup> Despite their best efforts, however, local elites never fully controlled the modes of artistic production and expression over which they presided, and visual arts provided an important channel for cultural politics among the artists and audiences who obtained access to them. As we shall see, during the 1930s a growing cohort of left-leaning artists in the city used these channels toward subversive ends.

For many L.A.-based artists, the city’s art galleries, museums, and mural walls were sites where it was possible to fuse struggles for access and inclusion in dominant institutions with efforts to promote grassroots self-definition and self-representation. In these venues, some Angeleno artists helped to advance ideals of cultural democracy at the same time that they affirmed the particularities of grassroots experiences and identities. In varying ways and contexts, their work used visual imagery to subvert dominant discourses of development, resignify established definitions of progress, and challenge bounded notions of national cultural unity. In the process, they contributed to the making of a popular historical memory that critiqued the city’s power structure while linking its multiracial working communities around shared, differentiated, and open-ended struggles for dignity.

The interconnection between grassroots struggles for cultural inclusion and self-definition in 1930s Los Angeles was perhaps nowhere more visible to the public than in the battles that occurred over murals in the city during this period. Of course, public muralism in Los Angeles was shaped to a significant degree by the desires on the part of

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<sup>385</sup> Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 4.

commissioners to see the city at the helm of modern arts movements and to take advantage of the widened audience for visual art that had been created by circulations of mass culture. To the extent that muralism carried the potential to generate and reinforce narratives about the city as an embodiment of racial capitalist modernity, city leaders hoped that completed murals could represent Los Angeles' preeminent status to the public and the world. While muralists sometimes conformed to these desires, they also challenged them in some cases.

The artist who was perhaps most responsible for exposing the radical possibilities of public muralism to Angelenos was David Siqueiros. Mexican revolutionary artist who helped launch a mural renaissance in Mexico along with contemporaries Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco, Siqueiros was particularly driven to use muralism as a vehicle for building dialogues about the disavowed histories of oppressed peoples. According to him, contemporary artists had a responsibility to learn and “borrow from the synthetic energy” of “Negro art” and “primitive art” in the Americas—traditions whose “clarity and depth [had been] lost for centuries,” obscured from forces of colonialism and imperialism. While he insisted that it was critical to “avoid lamentable archaeological reconstructions so fashionable” and fetishized as “Indianism,” “Primitivism,” “Americanism,” Siqueiros saw that there were deep lessons to be drawn from their “admirable human content.”<sup>386</sup>

Siqueiros' relocation to Los Angeles in spring of 1932 was driven partly by pressure from the Mexican government and the threat he faced as an internal exile

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<sup>386</sup> Qtd. in Laurance P. Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 196-197.

Mexico. Yet, there is no doubt that he was also moved to a significant degree by a sense of the city itself as a generative site for radical art.<sup>387</sup> After accepting an invitation from the Chouinard Art Institute to teach a fresco course and to paint a mural in the Institute's courtyard, he set about the production of his first mural north of the border. With the sponsorship of Nelbert Chouinard, he enlisted the latest technologies of the motion picture industry in the project. Film projectors as well as airbrushes, blowtorches, waterproof cement, and spray guns, all of which had become commonplace tools for the building of movie sets, enabled Siqueiros to produce a mural that was massive enough to occupy the entire 24 by 19 foot wall he was allotted and durable enough to survive the elements of the outdoors. Rather than painting the mural on separate smaller canvases to be fixed onto the wall, Siqueiros insisted on painting directly on the wall itself, incorporating older methods of fresco painting within a contemporary context. The finished product could not be broken down, bought, and sold. Rather, his intent was that it be free and accessible to the public.<sup>388</sup> In appropriating modern industrial technologies within the capitol of the film industry and a key nerve center of the mass consumer economy to produce such a work, Siqueiros' mural embodied what he called "dialectic-subversive painting."<sup>389</sup>

As his description suggested, Siqueiros conceived of muralism as an artistic practice that contained transformative political potential in the context of 1930s Los Angeles. The Chouinard mural, which he entitled *Workers' Meeting*, was an opportunity to experiment with that potential. The mural itself depicted a scene in which workers,

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<sup>387</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 46.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 46-48; Hulbert, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 206-207.

<sup>389</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 46.

including a Black man and a White woman who each hold children in their arms, take a break from their jobs to listen to a speech by a labor agitator. The painting's subject matter centered themes of political activism, interracial affinity, the relationship between industrial production and social reproduction, and disrupted labor discipline. As such, it attracted the ire of art critics and local civic elites. It was whitewashed by an unknown source shortly after its unveiling in July 1933.<sup>390</sup> Yet, a critical aspect of its production outlasted the mural's destruction. To complete the project, Siqueiros called on the assistance of a cross section of the city's most skilled and innovative resident artists. They included Luis Bastar, resident painter from Mexico and co-founder of the radical Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionarios and, later, Taller de Gráfica Popular; Reuben Kadish, Chicago-born Jewish radical sculptor and painter who was active in opposing U.S. imperialism in Nicaragua; Philip Guston, Canadian-born Jewish painter who, along with Kadish, Siqueiros regarded as "the most promising painters in either the US or Mexico"; Harold Lehman, radical surrealist painter who helped found a post-surrealist school and artistic movement in Los Angeles; and Paul Sample, a watercolorist known for his social realist style and rendering of popular struggles; among many others. Significantly, the mural project nurtured the formation of new ties among these artists and lent new creative energy to their work. The experience galvanized a number of them to form a muralist bloc of their own, in order to continue experimenting with the medium beyond the discretion of Siqueiros himself. Many of them would also become leading figures in the Public Works of Art and Works Projects Administration arts projects.<sup>391</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 48; Hulbert, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 207.

<sup>391</sup> Schrank, *Art and the City*, 47, 51; Hurlburt, *The Mexican Muralists in the United States*, 206.

The capstone, and most controversial, work that Siqueiros completed in Los Angeles during his stay there in 1933 was a commissioned mural on the second story of the old Italian Hall on Olvera Street, entitled *Ámerica Tropical*. The commission was extended to Siqueiros by Plaza Art Center director F. K. Ferenz, who hoped the project would help propel Los Angeles into the national spotlight as a leading site in a growing civic arts movement. The assigned theme—an idealized tropical landscape representative of California’s imagined pre-modern past, complete with colorful flora, fauna, and Native peoples—intended to serve and support the commercial culture of the mural’s venue. Olvera Street, after all, was an invention of civic boosters, who aimed to create an Anglo commercial tourist destination through the commodification of Mexican culture and the cultivation of popular nostalgia for an “authentic” Mexican past. It boasted “70-odd stores and booths,” lined with “gay decorations and displays of Mexican foods, pottery, and trinkets.”<sup>392</sup> In the minds of its funders, *Ámerica Tropical* would not only boost tourism in the district but would also bolster the image of contemporary, Anglo-dominated Los Angeles as a model of urban modernity vis-à-vis its juxtaposition to romantic, primitivist fantasies of the region’s history.

The finished product, however, diverged starkly from the commissioners’ intentions and aimed instead to drum up a different, darker memory of the region’s past. Unveiled on October 9 in its completed form, Siqueiros’ *Ámerica Tropical* was an insurgent indictment of racial violence and settler colonialism which accompanied the advancement of dominant notions of civilization and progress in the Americas.

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<sup>392</sup> Federal Writer Project of the Works Progress Administration, *Los Angeles in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City of Angels* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011), 153; Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe*, 43.



Stretching a massive 18 by 32 feet overlooking the Plaza, and viewable from three different streets, the public spectacle centered a crucified indigenous subject against the background of an ancient temple. In the upper right corner of the painting, amid the serpentine branches that surround the central subject, a Mexican campesino and a Peruvian Indian ready to shoot down an eagle, an eminent symbol American nationhood and empire. According to Siqueiros, “It is the violent symbol of the Indian peon of feudal America doubly crucified by the nation’s exploitative classes and, in turn, by imperialism. It is the living symbol of the destruction of past national American cultures by the invaders of yesterday and today. It is the preparatory action of the revolutionary proletariat that scales the scene and readies its weapons to throw itself into the ennobling battle of a new social order.”<sup>393</sup>

Although *Ámerica Tropical* did not survive long before its whitewashing, and Siqueiros was forced to leave Los Angeles in fall of 1933 due to the government’s refusal to renew his visa, experimentations with radical muralism continued to reverberate through the work of the artists who collaborated with him, and others who drew inspiration from the innovative art form and the movement it created. Harold Lehman recalled how his participation in the work of the Siqueiros murals along with his peers gave rise to a newly politicized collective. According to Lehman, while working with Siqueiros, he and his artist colleagues “had at our disposal this shed, which we used for the fresco paintings. So we all got together every chance we could,” to collaboratively learn the methods of fresco painting and large-scale canvass construction, to experiment with techniques as well as the political and thematic content of their work. As Lehman

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<sup>393</sup> Siqueiros, qtd. in Schrank, *Art and the City*, 49.

described, “We learned how to construct these things up to the finished surface of the fresco paintings. And we painted these things in a group—we each had our own sets of the paint—but we painted them together along the wall. We would line one up after another.”<sup>394</sup> Their work focused on themes of multiraciality and intersectional working-class struggle that marked their interpretation of contemporary circulations of social movements. “[E]ach of us had a subject to paint,” Lehman recalled, “in fact we had two subjects to paint. One was the exploitation of labor by capital in America, and the other was the persecution of the Blacks, or at that time whom we called the Negro in America: those two subjects. So we each painted frescoes on each one of those subjects. I did too.” The experience they gained “instigated us to come and form this group [the Bloc of Mural Painters], and we were eager to get going and do it because we all wanted to be mural painters.”<sup>395</sup>

As city leaders and boosters well understood, the movement that emerged around radical muralism in 1930s Los Angeles, and the frequently explicit political messages that its artwork conveyed, posed a threat to the city’s dominant culture. It is for precisely this reason that elite forces sought to eradicate the cultural influences of radical muralists. On February 11, 1933, shortly after artists from the Bloc of Mural Painters had transported a collection of their paintings to the John Reed Club in Hollywood for what was to be their first official exhibit, the city’s Red Squad raided the Club and broke up a gathering that was being held there by members of the radical Japanese-language paper,

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<sup>394</sup> *Oral history interview with Harold Lehman*, March 28, 1997, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, originally recorded on 7 sound cassettes, transcribed and digitized in 2010, <http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-harold-lehman-12894>, accessed December 11, 2013.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

*Rodo Shimibun*, the Japanese Proletarian Cultural League, and the International Labor Defense. The officers went to extra lengths to destroy the artwork that covered the walls. The mutilated murals included three large portable mural panels that the Bloc had devoted to the Scottsboro Nine—one depicting the Scottsboro defendants in a courtroom setting with an electric chair in the background, one with a Black man tied to post getting whipped by a masked member of the KKK, and another of a Black man with his hands and feet bound lying on the floor of a prison cell. Images taken of the paintings in the aftermath of the raid show the canvases ridden with gashes and bullet holes, including deliberately located bullet holes in the forehead and groin of the Black subjects.<sup>396</sup> Far from an arbitrary act of destruction, the LAPD officers who raided the John Reed Club sought not only to ensure that the murals would not see the light of day; they also offered a clearly legible threat to Club-affiliated activists who dared to challenge the racial status quo. In typical fashion, the press narrated the incident not as an act of aggression by the LAPD but as a measure taken to secure public safety against left-wing political subversives. Days after the raid, the *Illustrated Daily News* warned readers of the insidious threat of radical art in the city, underscoring that the “so-called harmless writers’ and artists’ club—the John Reed club of Hollywood—is in reality just another communist tentacle, reaching into the artistic and intellectual life of Los Angeles.”<sup>397</sup>

The impulse to manage radical elements in the city, which drove the repressive tactics of Los Angeles’ Red Squads, also shaped municipal efforts to institutionalize a

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<sup>396</sup> Photographs: “Three of the Scottsboro Nine paintings mutilated 2/11/33,” Feb. 11, 1933, Karl Yoneda Papers (Collection No. 1592), Box 1, folder 6, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Special Collections, Los Angeles, Calif.

<sup>397</sup> “Reed Club Denied Hynes Indictment for Recent Raid,” *Illustrated Daily News*, February 16, 1933, clipping in Karl Yoneda Papers, Box 1, folder 6.

Public Works of Arts Project (PWAP) in the city. A precursor to the WPA's Federal Art Projects, the PWAP was coordinated by civic officials with relatively conservative intentions for the program. In contrast with public arts programs in other cities across the United States, where arts administrators encouraged popularly-rooted, "middlebrow" notions of art and American culture, Los Angeles' PWAP officials clung overwhelmingly to transcendent visions of high art.<sup>398</sup> They encouraged the production of conventional landscape paintings and historical scenes that were the hallmarks of California's dominant narrative—scenes such as the arrival of Spaniard Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo to the region's shores and the state's 1849 Constitutional Convention.<sup>399</sup>

However, some of the PWAP's commissioned artists seized the opportunity of mural-making to critique prevailing power relations and development patterns. For example, in 1935, artist Hugo Ballin was commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts to paint a mural depicting the early, gold rush-era days of the mail system on an interior wall of an Inglewood post office. Although he ultimately accepted the task, Ballin fiercely criticized the boosterist nature of the project in the context of the Great Depression. Ballin remarked in a letter to the project's commissioners, "It seems a shame that any group of men should be so naive as to ask any serious painter to waste \$680 of government money [on such a project] . . . [T]he people need many things more than a depraved painting of a '49 gold rush bar room episode, which you have asked me to

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<sup>398</sup> Regarding the advocacy of middlebrow culture in public arts projects beyond Los Angeles, see Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture*

<sup>399</sup> Sarah Schrank, *Art and the City*, 57.

do.”<sup>400</sup> After ultimately accepting the terms of the commission, Ballin used the opportunity to pull a stunt on the arts program, to critique what he saw as a misuse of funds by a misguided, antidemocratic patrician-led hierarchy of the civic art world and elitist notions of high art. The mural he produced offered a satirized counter-memory of Los Angeles’ history and the culture of the city’s pioneers and founders. The *Times* spurned the finished product as “a dream-like satire of the fat capitalists,” tinged with “vulgarity and a splatter of revolutionary sentiment.”<sup>401</sup> As the *Times* described, “A group of heavily caricatured miners, gamblers and bartenders are seen in a saloon with two frowsy girls. At the bar a sick drunk is hoisting another shot of red-eye while a worthy behind him draws his knife to stab his companion in the back.”<sup>402</sup> Much to the dismay of *Times* editors and other business interests in the city, Ballin’s mural offered a glaring indictment of the greed, patriarchal entitlement, and violent lust for power that he perceived as hallmark characteristics of Los Angeles’ civic leadership.

Another PWAP artist, Gordon K. Grant, was commissioned by the Section of Fine Arts to produce a mural in Alhambra post office depicting “the development of

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<sup>400</sup> Letter from Hugo Ballin to Edward Rowan Dec. 8, 1935, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection (Accession No. 00-11), Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Archives. Hyde Park, N.Y.

<sup>401</sup> “Ballin Again in Art Hoax,” *Los Angeles Times* January 2, 1936, clipping in Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA.

<sup>402</sup> “Ballin Again in Art Hoax,” *Los Angeles Times* January 2, 1936, clipping in Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA. Also see, Edward Rowan to Merle Armitage, January 17, 1936, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA; Merle Armitage to Edward Rowan, January 7, 1936, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA; Edward Rowan to Arthur Millier, n.d., Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA; “Hoax Painting that Charmed L.A. Brain Trusters,” *Los Angeles Evening Herald Express* January 14, 1936, clipping in Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Inglewood, CA.

California.”<sup>403</sup> Bending the assigned theme in a critical direction, beyond the intentions of commissioners, Grant covered his post office wall with depictions of an oppositional narrative of California’s development. Rather than the celebratory images of the region’s Americanization, Grant’s mural highlighted continuities in regional power relations that shaped structures of Indian, Mexicano, and Anglo labor. The fresco included panels devoted to Native American workers engaged in mission construction, Mexicano farmers and ranch hands, and Anglos panning for gold and branding a horse. While the physical characteristics of the laboring subjects and the specific activities in which they engaged differed across each of the panels, they all performed work that bent their backs in a similar, stooping posture.<sup>404</sup> The commonalities that Grant’s mural expressed across the differentiated populations of workers called attention to the ways in which historical patterns of colonialism commonly relied on the labor of people. Rather than a linear trajectory of development-as-progress, Grant’s work underscored the historical continuity of the oppression of labor and the dignity of laboring people. At a time when popular insurgencies of colonized and working people gained momentum across California and the globe, Grant’s mural can be seen as a representation of longer genealogy of grassroots struggle. Perhaps not surprisingly, Grant’s mural provoked conservative reactions from the public. One complaint characterized the mural as “entirely inappropriate,” sure to “detract from the appearance of a post office lobby,” and aberrations that should be replaced with something “in keeping with the nature of the business transacted in such

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<sup>403</sup> “Mural Painting by Gordon K. Grant: ‘El Indio,’ ‘El Gringo,’ ‘El Paisano,’” Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Alhambra, CA.

<sup>404</sup> Images of “El Indio,” “El Paysano,” and “El Gringo,” marked as “Alhambra, Calif.: Grant, Gordon,” contained in Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 26, Folder: California.

places.”<sup>405</sup> Another declared that the post office’s “beautiful lobby will be ruined by the murals.”<sup>406</sup> In the contestation that surrounded Grant’s post office murals, competing notions of California’s development and competing notions of aesthetic beauty were intertwined.

While radical muralism was an important current of oppositional cultural formation in 1930s Los Angeles, it did not by any means represent the totality of the region’s oppositional culture; nor did it exhaust the full range of radicalisms taking shape among working-class Angelenos in this period. In fact, in a significant way, the privileged access that professional artists had and that enabled them to produce commissioned murals in public spaces made them part of a relatively unique segment within the wider spectrum of Los Angeles’ creative communities. Most of the popular struggles taking shape in the city did not have such resources at their disposal, and the inclusion of non-White and female artists within these formal channels remained severely limited. Moreover, the exposure that muralism garnered—a result of its distinctly public, spectacular form and often explicitly political content—also carried its own inherent political constraints. In many cases, the very boldness with which muralists articulated a counter-narrative of regional history and identity made them readily legible to civic authorities as a threat to the dominant order, ensuring they would become targets of the city’s repressive forces. For this reason, they can and must be considered as partial, incomplete, non-totalizing expressions of the oppositional culture that emerged in the city

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<sup>405</sup> W. J. Beadle to Supervising Engineer, U.S. Treasury Department, March 17, 1938, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Alhambra, CA.

<sup>406</sup> Letter from S. W. Purdum to Procurement Division, Public Buildings Branch, U.S. Treasury Department, July 18, 1938, Marlene Park and Gerald Markowitz New Deal Art Research Collection, Box 7, folder: Alhambra, CA.

at the time.

There was, of course, a wider range of radical art emerging in Los Angeles during this moment, beyond the domains of city-sanctioned art clubs, schools, galleries, and mural commissions. Much of the work of L.A.'s artistic communities hinged less on the advancement of clearly articulated political messages, and occurred in spaces less heavily surveilled by civic authorities, than the murals examined above. Much of it fell beyond the purview of repressive campaigns by LAPD Red Squads and beyond the scope of dominant definitions of politics, within the neighborhoods of working-class communities themselves.

### ***Community Theater and Community-Making in South Los Angeles***

While surrealist currents that animated struggles for cultural democracy in the city contributed to the making of a popular counter-memory of Los Angeles' development, surrealism also figured prominently in local movements that utilized art as a vehicle for community building. The community arts movement that took hold in Los Angeles during this period drew heavily on the leadership and social networks built by local non-White women. Activating the social ties and political resources they had fostered in the course of their everyday lives and work, women of color in South L.A. helped give rise to a creative community that linked local working- and middle-class residents across racial and ethnic lines, around participatory forms of social organization and cultural production. Proceeding from a shared recognition of the interconnected nature of imperatives for material survival and dignified grassroots autonomy, the city's



community arts organizers helped encourage critical forms of dialogue about the functions of power and possibilities of social relations in the city. Placing the arts, especially theater, at the center of their organizing efforts, these activists created new spaces and opportunities for Angelenos to explore alternative imaginings of life in Los Angeles.

A central fixture in the city's community arts movement during the peak years of the Great Depression was the Hawthorne House. The Hawthorne House was, first and foremost, a community center. The Hawthorne House first opened its doors at 837 East 24<sup>th</sup> Street in spring of 1934, "to provide a community center for Eastside activities" and to address what its organizers saw as "an actual need in the community."<sup>407</sup> In a basic and immediate sense, the expressed need that Hawthorne House participants sought to meet revolved around the conditions of material deprivation experienced by local neighborhood residents, which had reached new levels of intensity between 1933 and 1934. While poverty, unemployment, and hunger had been characteristic features of South Los Angeles' multiethnic neighborhoods throughout the 1910 and 1920s, the Depression intensified conditions of deprivation for local residents, confronting them with rising food prices, heightened levels of joblessness, and limited access to the kinds of relief programs that emerged to serve other areas of the city.<sup>408</sup> At the same time, organizers of the Hawthorne House recognized that an effective response to the material needs of South Los Angeles residents had to go hand in hand with a further-reaching and

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<sup>407</sup> "Hawthorne House Informal Opening Sunday Afternoon," *California Eagle* May 18, 1934, 8; "Hawthorne House 'Get Acquainted' Tea Draws Crowd," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 24, 1934, 13; "Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B; "Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor," *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4.

<sup>408</sup> "Young People's Clubs Rallying Around Mrs. C. A. Bass Believing That They Will Benefit Should Final Victory Come," *California Eagle*, July 14, 1933, 1.

more open-ended project for community empowerment. The district in which the new community center emerged—comprised of an African American majority, but also including a diverse scattering of European, Asian, and Mexican immigrants—not only experienced some of the highest levels of unemployment and poverty in the city but also faced some of the most stringent forms of segregation, harassment, and dehumanization.<sup>409</sup> In contrast with other projects across the city that were oriented more narrowly around the distribution of relief, the Hawthorne House sought to provide South Angelenos with a resource center that could equip them to challenge forces of social division, fragmentation, and subordination that they experienced in their daily lives.

The center itself was an outgrowth of, and a nexus for, collaboration among overlapping community networks and progressive activists from across the city. At the center of its administrative corps were “some of Los Angeles’ leading women,” many of whom were veteran professional and amateur artists with backgrounds in the culture industry.<sup>410</sup> For example, Sarah DeCoursey Page, coordinator of Hawthorne House activities from its earliest stages, was an established writer, producer, singer, and teacher and a leading figure in Los Angeles’ community theater movement. After garnering a reputation in New York as “the first Race woman to crash Broadway as a promoter and producer” and “the only Race person in New York to have an hour on the air bearing her name,” DeCoursey returned to Los Angeles with her husband, composer and teacher Eugene Edgar Page, and re-opened their studio at 894 East 46<sup>th</sup> Street to continue

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<sup>409</sup> Wild, *Street Meeting*, 33.

<sup>410</sup> “Hawthorne House Informal Opening Sunday Afternoon,” *California Eagle*, May 18, 1934, 8.

teaching piano, voice, and drama lessons to neighborhood residents.<sup>411</sup> Another of the center's key organizers, Sanoma DeBeal, was a student at the University of Redlands and a gifted singer and stage performer. Originally from Roswell, New Mexico, DeBeal and her family were among the first African American residents to settle in Corona, California.<sup>412</sup> DeBeal was active in civic affairs throughout the Los Angeles and San Bernardino County region in the years that preceded her involvement with the Hawthorne House. She frequently lent her talents to civic and progressive causes, ranging from singing "popular Spanish solos" for the Corona High School Spanish Club to singing "Negro spirituals" for the Cope Cooperative Club in Redlands, to singing solos at a rally protesting the exploitative practices of the Southern California Telephone Company.<sup>413</sup> Other major figures in the organizing and running of the Hawthorne House included South Los Angeles residents and activists Margaret and Earl Jackson, engineer, poet, and community organizer John H. Owens, as well as fellow activists Barbara Capers, Carl Gross, and Harry Penn.<sup>414</sup> Support and resources for the house and its various activities

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<sup>411</sup> Sarah DeCoursey Page is interchangeably referred to by her married and maiden name, "Madame Page" and "Madame DeCoursey," in local newspapers. Because the use of "DeCoursey" is more frequent, I employ it as a referent for her here. "Prominent Artists Return to City After Two Years In New York," *California Eagle*, May 4, 1934, 8; "Madame Page on Western School of Music Staff," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, November 27, 1934, 1.

<sup>412</sup> "DeBeal-Baugh-Critchlow," Biographical Document File Collection, Manuscript Collection M024/1, Corona Public Library, Corona, California: folder 28; "Recent Bride Former Californian," *California Eagle*, June 7, 1937, 1.

<sup>413</sup> "Spanish Club of C.H.S. Enjoys Annual Banquet," *Corona Courier*, May 4, 1928, 2; "Summer Activities at Annual Picnic Held by Cooperative Club," *San Bernardino County Sun*, June 26, 1930, Page 14; Young Peoples' [sic] Clubs Rallying around Mrs. C. A. Bass Believing That They Will Benefit Should Victory Finally Come," *California Eagle*, July 14, 1933, 1.

<sup>414</sup> "Negro Art Group Scores at Downtown Center," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 3; "Skit Wins Applause," *Los Angeles Sentinel* June 7, 1934, 1; "Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor," *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4; "Little Theater Group Presents Strindberg Play," *Los Angeles Times*, May 24, 1934, 4; "E. W. Fisher to Lead L. A. Forum," *California Eagle*, June 30, 1933, 1; "John Owens at Art Reception," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 7, 1936, 6; "Fraternal Order Names John Owens Chairman," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 4, 1938, 5; "Engineers hear Poem by Owens," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, April 2, 1936, 1.

and events regularly came from the Workers' International Relief, League of Struggle for Negro Rights, *California Eagle*, and an array of Hollywood progressives.<sup>415</sup>

On one level, the Hawthorne House's organizers and participants sought to meet needs in the community that were basic, material, and immediate. For example, one of their ongoing programs involved collecting and distributing donations of food, clothing, and other necessities to those who needed them.<sup>416</sup> In an era marked by intense material deprivation and widespread suffering, the delivery of such things to people not adequately served by relief programs was in itself no small matter.

But its objectives reached beyond filling a gap left by state-sponsored New Deal relief. On a broader plane, the Hawthorne House was an experiment in democratic and participatory forms of social organization that prioritized the autonomy of grassroots communities while encouraging their creative self-expressions and empowerment. Its collaborative of organizers, and the constituency it served, breached many of the divisions imposed by the wider society in which it operated, crossing lines of race, ethnicity, and gender, with women playing crucial leadership roles.<sup>417</sup> House organizers welcomed "all residents in the community," including "strangers in the city," to "avail themselves of its facilities" and resources and to participate in its programs. Its ongoing weekly agenda included child care services, a mother's clinic, and lectures on personal health and dietetics, classes in Black history, social problems, art, writing, dance, music,

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<sup>415</sup> "Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor," *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4; "Green Speaks on Liberia Sunday," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 7, 1934, 7; "Hawthorne House Informal Opening Sunday Afternoon," *California Eagle* May 18, 1934, 8; "Hawthorne House 'Get Acquainted' Tea Draws Crowd," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 24, 1934, 13.

<sup>416</sup> "Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B.

<sup>417</sup> "Hawthorne House In Formal Opening Sunday Afternoon," *California Eagle*, May 18, 1934, 8; "Hawthorne House Will Entertain With Tea Sunday," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 17, 1934, 1; "Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor," *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4; "Hawthorne House 'Get Acquainted' Tea Draws Crowd," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 24, 1934, 13.

fashion design, and drama, and dialogues about contemporary events in a House-sponsored city wide forum. All of these programs were “free of charge.”<sup>418</sup> The cost-free nature of the House’s agenda, made possible by the “support for the house coming from those who felt the need for such an institution in the community,” dramatized its organizers’ investment in grassroots autonomy and community building over and against the profit-driven impulses of the market. It also underscored the center’s guiding political priorities of access, inclusion, and collective, democratic participation.<sup>419</sup>

The centrality of the arts to the Hawthorne House project served as a significant measure of House organizers’ sense of the integral relationship between creative practice and social change. In addition to the range of art classes that the House offered on a regular and ongoing basis, its organizers and participants also screened motion pictures and staged plays in the open-air theatre of the facility’s front lawn as well as other venues around the city such as the Los Angeles Cultural Center and the Elks Hall. These events included films like “The Song of the Market Place,” based on a story by radical Russian writer Maxim Gorky. They featured such plays as Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” and Swedish writer August Strindberg’s “The Stronger,” a one-act play that provoked deep questions about normative gender roles, domesticity, and dependency. Other theatrical productions included “Miss Liberty and Little Red” and “The Father,”

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<sup>418</sup> Hawthorne House representatives frequently cast the center as a “non-political and non-religious institution, the facilities of which are open to all residents of the community.” While I argue that the work of House organizers and participants was, in fact, deeply political, this statement highlights their self-conscious anchoring in a community-based politics of inclusion. “Hawthorne House ‘Get Acquainted’ Tea Draws Crowd,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 24, 1934, 13; “Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor,” *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4; “Hawthorne House In Formal Opening Sunday Afternoon,” *California Eagle*, May 18, 1934, 8; “Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program,” *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B; “Skit Wins Applause” *Los Angeles Sentinel* June 7, 1934, 1; “Green Speaks on Liberia Sunday,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 7, 1934, 7.

<sup>419</sup> “Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor,” *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4.

which depicts a story about a woman who defies her husband's adherence to discipline and flees to raise her daughter the way she please, potentially as an artist.<sup>420</sup> The performances sometimes drew crowds of up to 300 people at a time.<sup>421</sup> The works put questions about social norms, hierarchies, power and patriotism on the table for community discussion. They opened up discursive space for collective social and cultural criticism and contributed to a potentially subversive body of shared knowledge and historical memory. Much like the works by radical muralists in other parts of the city, these screenings and exhibitions contributed to a counter-cultural dialogue that nurtured practices of self-definition among working-class Angelenos.

Far from being an isolated example of art-based community making, the Hawthorne House was part of a network of creative communities from across the city. Hawthorne House participants collaborated with other community arts groups in shows and performances in venues outside South Los Angeles and hosted those groups at the neighborhood community center. Groups with whom they collaborated included the Los Angeles Japanese Players, the Hollywood Blue Blouse Players, the Finnish Workers Choral Group, the Ukranian Russian Chorus, and Jose Martinez's Spanish Orchestra.<sup>422</sup> The diverse composition and participatory practices engaged by the Hawthorne House's organizers and constituents were manifestations of a politics that valued multivocality, difference, and dialogue over unity and conformity. Events such as International Theatre

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<sup>420</sup> The Hawthorne Neighborhood Center, advertisement for screening of "The Song of the Marketplace," *California Eagle*, April 6, 1934, 11; "Popularity of Hawthorne House Winning Favor," *California Eagle* May 11, 1934, 4; "Little Theatre Group Presents Strindberg Play," *Los Angeles Sentinel* May 24, 1934, 4; "Skit Wins Applause," *Los Angeles Sentinel* June 7, 1934, 1; "Negro Art Group Scores at Downtown Center," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 3.

<sup>421</sup> "Skit Wins Applause," *Los Angeles Sentinel* June 7, 1934, 1.

<sup>422</sup> "Negro Art Group Scores at Downtown Center," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 3; "Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program," *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B.

Group Night held at the Los Angeles Cultural Center and the Workers International Solidarity Day held at the Hawthorne House itself presented organizers, community members, and the broader public with opportunities not only for entertainment and celebration but for collective learning and dialogue.<sup>423</sup> As one Hawthorne House representative explained, these events presented opportunities to build a “finer type of racial expression.” While such a statement might be interpreted to suggest the pursuit of a purified or civilized mode of expression, in accordance with dominant notions of high art, it might also be read to signify a more fully situated kind of collective knowledge capable of empowering community members and equipping them to confront the forces of racial oppression.<sup>424</sup>

On October 15, 1934, the Musart Theater, on Figueroa in downtown Los Angeles, the local full-length rendition of *Stevedore* debuted under the auspices of the Hawthorne House. The cast was comprised of members of the Hawthorne House’s theatre troupe, “the Hawthorne Players, a cooperative group of unemployed Negroes and whites and ought to answer some of the questions of those jittery people who whine about the jobless wasting their time.”<sup>425</sup> According to the *LA Times*, “The Hawthorne Players present a unique perspective inasmuch as one half of the company are white people, while the remainder of the cast consists of twenty Negro players.”<sup>426</sup>

The show was a hit among local working-class people. As the local black paper *Los Angeles Sentinel* underscored, criminalization and false accusations of rape by a

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<sup>423</sup> “Negro Art Group Scores at Downtown Center,” *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 3; “Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program,” *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B.

<sup>424</sup> “Hawthorne House Offering Varied Community Program,” *California Eagle* June 8, 1934, 2-B.

<sup>425</sup> J.A.C. “Stevedore, Water Front Drama, is Exiting [sic.] Play,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Oct 18, 1934, 1.

<sup>426</sup> Katherine von Blon, “Studio and Theatre Comings and Goings: Vitality Seen in Community Drama Season,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 14, 1934, A2.

black man were a storyline “all too familiar” to local African Americans.<sup>427</sup> One editor affirmed the connection between the theatrical production and the lived reality of South Angelenos, reporting, “[b]y a curious coincident the play revolves partially around another such incident as that which occurred here last week when a hysterical white woman told a story of attack by Negroes.”<sup>428</sup>

The Hawthorne Players kept prices for the show between twenty-five cents and one dollar, depending on the days and time of the performance, in order to “attract the largest possible crowd.”<sup>429</sup> They announced on Oct. 18 “that 25 tickets will be given free each day to unemployed Negroes. Clubs and organizations wishing to see the drama may purchase 35 cent seats in blocks of 12 or more for 25 cents each. Seventy five cent seats bought on a similar scale will be sold for 45 cents each.”<sup>430</sup> The show was a huge success, and spurred requests for a repeat production of the play after it closed.<sup>431</sup> “This demand has come from many people who have heard the play discussed, but did not get an opportunity to see it.”<sup>432</sup> The widespread interest and participation of Los Angeles residents in the Hawthorne Players’ showing of *Stevedore* reflected and contributed to an emergent counter-culture in the city. Theirs was a counter-culture rooted in an oppositional worldview and collaborative critique of racial capitalist power, and driven toward the collaborative pursuit of multiracial working-class autonomy. At the same time that South L.A.’s community arts movement encouraged grassroots creativity and

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<sup>427</sup> J.A.C. “Stevedore, Water Front Drama, is Exiting [sic.] Play,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Oct 18, 1934, 1.

<sup>428</sup> “Stevedore, Drama of Water Front, To Open Next Mon.” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Oct. 11, 1934, 1. Also regarding the role of the Los Angeles Police Department in reinforcing racial divisions within the city, see Report on Police Relations (1930), Charlotta Bass Collection (MSS 002), Additions—Box 1, folder: Articles, 1930s, Southern California Library, Los Angeles, Calif.

<sup>429</sup> “Stevedore, Drama of Water Front, To Open Next Mon.” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Oct. 11, 1934, 1.

<sup>430</sup> J.A.C. “Stevedore, Water Front Drama, is Exiting [sic.] Play,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Oct 18, 1934, 1.

<sup>431</sup> “Group Plans to Repeat ‘Stevedore’” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Mar. 28, 1935, 1.

<sup>432</sup> “Group Plans to Repeat ‘Stevedore’” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Mar. 28, 1935, 1.



self-definition, it also helped foster a sense that dominant patterns of development—of dehumanization, division, and marginalization—were not the only ones possible.

### ***Jazz and the World of Popular Front Youth Culture***

If the radical muralism of David Siqueiros and those inspired by him dramatized the disruption of the city's dominant narrative with a political language that was readily legible to civic authorities as subversive, and the Hawthorne House's community theater worked to cultivate community dialogues among Angelenos, the improvised creation of new languages of struggle by working-class communities themselves was epitomized by the local jazz scene that took hold in the city, especially among South and East Los Angeles youth. In a way that was less shockingly controversial than the murals of radical artists, and less scripted and choreographed than the plays that community organizers created with South Los Angeles residents, the music of young jazz players in the city charted new paths for expanding the boundaries of political activity, and for generating and enacting new visions of a dignified social existence.

For young people growing up in South and East Los Angeles during the 1930s—where unemployment and poverty rates were exceptionally high, access to relief was severely constrained if it existed at all, and the city's dominant narrative offered little place for them and little in the way of hope for the future—musical improvisation helped to expand the horizons of what was politically possible. In significant ways, jazz music provided a model for empowerment, dialogue, and social action. With historical roots in Afrodiasporic traditions, jazz was part of a musical genealogy that linked the blues,

ragtime, gospel, and swing in a common “poetry of revolt.” To borrow from Paul Garon’s analysis, jazz was “a language of the richest complexity,” one defined by its distinct capacity to articulate dreams “for gratification of repressed wishes.”<sup>433</sup> In this sense, the young Angelenos who took up jazz as a practice and a way of life carried forth a repository of historical oppositional knowledge at the same time that they employed it to situate themselves in the present and to reinvent the future. As Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz have argued, “[a]daptability, improvisation, and invention are the weapons of the weak.”<sup>434</sup> In this respect, to examine the improvisational musical culture of young working-class Angelenos can help us to uncover the heart of grassroots self-activity and self-definition in Depression era Los Angeles.

Of course, examining the cultural practices and politics of youth in 1930s Los Angeles requires attending to the distinct position of young people within the wider context of the open shop city and the emergent movements taking shape within it. On the one hand, young people’s lives were shaped by the same economic and structural forces, and patterns of exclusion and exploitation, that shaped those of their parents. They similarly faced racial segregation, discrimination, and economic deprivation in their daily lives. Yet, their relationship to the world around them, to capital, and to the creative process also differed from their elders in important ways. As Robin Kelley describes, “unlike more mature adults, young people are in the process of discovering the world as they negotiate it. They are creating new cultures, strategies of resistance, identities, sexualities, and in the process generating a wider range of problems for authorities whose

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<sup>433</sup> Garon, qtd. in Roediger, *History Against Misery*, 24-25. Also see Woods, *Development Arrested*.

<sup>434</sup> Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), xvi.

job it is to keep them in check.”<sup>435</sup> As Lizabeth Cohen has shown, working-class youth in the 1930s engaged mass culture more readily and more fully than their parents. They often used the spaces of theaters, clubs, and dance halls as arenas to forge new identities for and among themselves, not only against the prescriptions of dominant culture but also against the expectations of their parents and ethnic communities.<sup>436</sup> Generally less constrained by the inhibitions that encumbered older residents in the city, youth culture was an important site for the production of Los Angeles’ culture of opposition during the 1930s. It also offers a valuable site for exploring grassroots surrealist political imaginings amid the crisis of the Great Depression.

Music was integral to the lives of young people growing up in Los Angeles during the 1930s and a key part of the circuitry of everyday life and struggle. The creation and circulation of music was part of the process of community formation and part of the dialogue that occurred across generations. In the words of drummer William Douglass, “The music was always around.”<sup>437</sup> Born in Sherman, Texas, Douglass moved with his parents to Los Angeles before his first birthday and considered himself a “native of Los Angeles.” For him, familial bonds and musical collaborations had a close and symbiotic relationship. Douglass grew up in the care of parents and extended family members for whom music provided both emotional and financial sustenance. Douglass recalled how his father made time outside his schedule as a parent and custodian in the local school

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<sup>435</sup> Kelley, *Race Rebels*, 11.

<sup>436</sup> Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 143-147.

<sup>437</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 9, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Virtually all of the musicians interviewed UCLA’s Central Avenue Sounds oral history collection share memories of growing up around music, including through their parents’ and grandparents’ traditions, community institutions and churches, and radio waves.

system to sing regularly in a vocal quartet. Douglass' grandfather was a skilled professional violinist, and his uncle, a guitarist. Douglass credited his uncle with teaching him "a few little chords" early on and introducing him to a musical community that included such famed musicians as saxophonist Floyd Turnham and alto sax player Marshall Royal, with whom his uncle played in Les Hite's orchestra.<sup>438</sup> "So I used to see and hear all this kind of stuff at the family picnics and things," Douglass recollected.<sup>439</sup>

Across the diverse neighborhoods of South Los Angeles, music assisted patterns of community and identity making among residents. In La Colonia, an ethnic Mexican enclave in Watts where saxophonist Anthony Ortega grew up, a mixture of live music and radio waves regularly filled the streets for a variety of formal and informal gatherings among residents. Neighborhood festivals such as La Jamaica drew people who lived in the vicinity to the grounds of the local church, where they socialized and danced along to a soundtrack that ranged from traditional Mexican songs and polkas to popular swing tunes like Glenn Gray and the Casa Loma Orchestra's "No Name Jive" and Artie Shaw Orchestra's "Frenesí." Such gatherings not only created spaces of leisure and laughter for people who faced pressures and restrictions in other parts of the city; they also fostered the bonds of community and facilitated the production of multivalent, cross-generational identities among ethnic Mexicans within the multiracial city.<sup>440</sup>

In addition to musical traditions fostered by families and communities, proximity to Central Avenue, the main hub of the west coast's jazz scene, ensured a connection to

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<sup>438</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 1-2, 5, 9, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

<sup>439</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 9, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

<sup>440</sup> Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 7-8. "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

the jazz world in the lives of South L.A. residents. Central Avenue ran through the heart of Los Angeles' racially mixed and predominantly Black residential districts. It was a main artery on which South L.A. residents traveled to get to other parts of the city, and through which Angelenos from other districts passed to get between the city's industrial centers, downtown, neighborhoods further south and to the west, and the San Pedro waterfront. As William Douglass explained, from the house he grew up in on East Fifty-sixth, just two blocks from Central Avenue, "I had to go down Central to get wherever I was going. If I wanted to go downtown, I had to get the "U" car on Central and take it all the way downtown."<sup>441</sup> For young people like Douglass, however, Central Avenue was more than a passageway to someplace else. It was a global cultural and artistic center that they could rightly identify as their own. It was "a way of life," as Douglass put it.<sup>442</sup> Trumpeter Clora Bryant moved with her father from Denison, Texas to Los Angeles in 1945. Her father moved to work in the shipyards, and she enrolled to study music at the University of California, Los Angeles. As she described, "there was so much activity on Central Avenue when I got there. It was like a beehive. It was people going in and out of everywhere, out of the clubs, out of the restaurants, the stores." There were "a lot of young kids just hanging there just to be on the scene and to learn."<sup>443</sup>

Many young people growing up in the vicinity worked at venues along or near Central Avenue while going through school, and these jobs provided an entry into the

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<sup>441</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 34, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>442</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 34, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>443</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 100-101, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

local music scene.<sup>444</sup> For example, tenor sax and clarinet player Buddy Collette recalled that he began working alongside Vernon Slater as a shoe shiner around the age of eleven or twelve.<sup>445</sup> From the neighborhood in Watts where they lived, Collette and Slater would ride up through Central Avenue and downtown to offer shoe shines to passersby. According to Collette, shoe shining enabled young men from South Los Angeles to feel good about “earning our own thing” but it also “helped us musically, because we found all the music stores.”<sup>446</sup> Between shines, “we’d go hang out in music stores or something and meet the people who would come in from the bands. . . . We were fascinated by the music stores and the musicians and the mouthpieces and the horns and everything.”<sup>447</sup> It was often through their jobs they young South Angelenos met each other and forged lasting friendships. For example, Collette met bass player Charles Mingus while they were both shoeshining.<sup>448</sup> Through the work they performed in these early years, South L.A. youth built relationships, acquired firsthand knowledge about the city, and developed strategies for navigating racial and class boundaries outside the boundaries of their home neighborhoods, all of which proved to be valuable resources and skills that they carried into their musical careers.

In a significant way, the ways in which young South Angelenos utilized circuits

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<sup>444</sup> Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 76-77, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program; Don Tosti oral history transcript, 12, interview by Anthony Macias, 8/20/98, Don Tosti Papers, (CEMA 88), Box 1, folder 16, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>445</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 62, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>446</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 62, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>447</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 63-64, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>448</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 42, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

of labor to navigate the city's racial and spatial boundaries reveals that their work was about much more than earning an income. Saxophonist and clarinetist Jackie Kelso grew up on East Twenty-sixth Street, just across the railroad tracks from the Long Beach Avenue thoroughfare. Kelso got hooked on playing the clarinet after seeing some family friends playing the woodwinds. He became friends with drummer Chico Hamilton in grade school, whom he described as "a creative artist from the word go."<sup>449</sup> Hamilton and Kelso began shoeshining together around the same time they started playing music together. While shoeshining and music may seem on the surface to be disparate arenas of activity, Kelso's experience suggests that the spontaneous, creative spirit that animated their music also shaped their activities and experiences as shoeshiners. According to Kelso, shoeshining offered a means to an enhanced sense of autonomy. It was a good way not only to "pick up some change" but "to have untold adventures."<sup>450</sup> As he described, "[Y]ou build a little box and you walk around town anywhere, hopping trucks, stealing rides, jumping on streetcars, not having to pay, you know, in the days they had streetcars."<sup>451</sup> There was a certain performative artistry to the way they approached their job that enabled them to evade and defy certain racial and social restrictions. "A shoeshine boy can go in and out of everywhere," Kelso explained. "It's almost like down South. Put a white coat on a black man, he can go anywhere, because that white coat—indicates, 'He's a good one. He's got a job. He can be trusted.' It's like *The*

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<sup>449</sup> Jackie Kelso interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-May 1990, 23, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>450</sup> Jackie Kelso interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-May 1990, 35-36, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>451</sup> Jackie Kelso interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-May 1990, 35, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

*Invisible Man.*<sup>452</sup>

While South L.A. youth were exposed to a range of musical forms between their homes, neighborhoods, and jobs, the means by which they developed their personal tastes in music, likes and dislikes, was a key part of the process of self-definition and identity formation. Many young people seeking to define their musical preferences began by rejecting the forms either inherited or imposed on them by their parents, grandparents, or teachers. Bass player Don Tosti, for instance, described how he grew up surrounded by traditional styles ranchera and mariachi music but never did like them. He found these styles to be “too simple, too stupid. . . . We used to call it ‘shit-kicking’ music.”<sup>453</sup> In contrast, as he put it, jazz music appealed to as something “more advanced, more interesting.”<sup>454</sup> Buddy Collette remembered feeling stifled by his grandmother’s insistence that he learn piano. “[S]he was so set on me being a pianist. She could see me as a classical pianist,” he reflected. Around the age of ten, when his grandma started picking him up from his parents’ house to bring him to piano lessons every weekend, he found it to be “a lot of pressure” and overwhelmingly “boring.” It was in his efforts to find a way out of piano lessons that Collette discovered his desire to play the saxophone. “Now, that would be a nice way to go,” he recalled thinking. In addition to giving him access to a style of music that appealed to him, “I’d have something to take to school and

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<sup>452</sup> Jackie Kelso interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-May 1990, 35-36, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program. See also Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 76-77, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program; Don Tosti oral history transcript, 12, interview by Anthony Macias, 8/20/98, Don Tosti Papers, (CEMA 88), Box 1, folder 16, Department of Special Collections, University Libraries, University of California, Santa Barbara.

<sup>453</sup> Don Tosti oral history transcript, 7, interview by Anthony Macias, 8/20/98, Don Tosti Papers, Box 1, folder 16.

<sup>454</sup> Don Tosti oral history transcript, 7, interview by Anthony Macias, 8/20/98, Don Tosti Papers, Box 1, folder 16.



show off.”<sup>455</sup>

Young Angelenos who gravitated toward jazz and swing styles developed role models among the icons who frequented joints along Central Avenue. As Douglass noted, “Like our idols were the Count Basies, Jimmie Luncefords, Duke Ellingtons, and what have you.”<sup>456</sup> Star jazz players displaced the kinds of heroes celebrated by civic nationalists in the city—the European explorers, settlers, and urban developers—and provided an alternative source of identification for local youth. More than trite celebrity worship, young Angelenos’ reverence for such musicians gave them a sense of connection to creative communities that enhanced their own sense of creative and political possibility. As Douglass recalled, “All of us as young kids, when we got out of school and were on our way home, we would walk right down Central Avenue just for a chance to pass by the Dunbar Hotel, because that’s where all the big bands stayed. . . . [I]t might be Basie or whatever.” He explained,

We’d watch these guys climb off the bus and go upstairs to their hotel rooms, and we just hung around. And then, if they opened in a theater, you know, no school for us! . . . We’d just sit through that movie over and over again just to catch the next show. . . . [W]e’d run out in the alley and watch them come out of the backstage entrance, in and out. That kept on until we got a chance to get acquainted with the guys, and then they knew we were musicians.<sup>457</sup>

To have their role models recognize and acknowledge that they were musicians provided these young people with a form of affirmation and belonging alternative to that which

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<sup>455</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 23-26, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program. Also see Leroy Hurte oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, July 1995, 4, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>456</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 8, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>457</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 21-22, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

was offered to them by family, school, or other neighborhood or civic institutions.

Of course, young people also had their hometown heroes, and a corresponding sense of their connection to locally based creative communities. For example, the Woodman Brothers, who were from Watts, jumpstarted much of the local swing scene during the 1930s. According to Collette, the Woodman brothers were responsible for “setting the stage” for South L.A. youth in 1930s. They helped Collette to see “what musicians could do” and to establish “what kind of musician I had to be.”<sup>458</sup> Having role models from their own community to look up to helped local youngsters to expand their visions of their own capabilities as well as the potential that existed for their future. The affiliations and aspirations that emerged from these relationships posed significant challenges to the boundaries of the social visions celebrated by Los Angeles’ elites in this same era.

Many youth utilized the resources at their disposal to make music. For example, William Douglass recalled how he and tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon learned to drum by using chairs, tin cans, and a washtub.<sup>459</sup> Anthony Ortega honed his skills on the saxophone by following the lead of Charlie Parker records on his family’s wind-up Victrola. “I’d put the old 78 [rpm record] on there, and if a run was real fast, I could just slow it down,” he explained.<sup>460</sup> Improvised jam sessions made from the raw materials of everyday life disrupted the dominant rhythms of the city and gave expression to new ones. These forms of cultural production also diverged starkly from the forms of

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<sup>458</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 58-59, 77, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>459</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 6-7, 10-11, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>460</sup> Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 26, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

production that dominant forces in the city wanted working people of color to perform.

By the 1930s, South Los Angeles, Watts, and East Los Angeles had developed a vibrant community infrastructure of music instruction and education, which played a vital role in nourishing the creativity and cultivating the skills of local youth. It was through the available channels of music instruction that they not only learned basic rudiments of music, but also developed the links between creativity and life. Many working-class young people's first introduction to playing an instrument was through the public school system, and the schools in these communities had no shortage of talented and generous music teachers. "[W]e had voice lessons and instrumental lessons and music theory and all that sort of thing," with instruments provided by the schools, Leroy Hurte recalled.<sup>461</sup> In the words of Buddy Collette, who attended Jordan in Watts for middle school and high school, the teachers who came to work in the area "were very special people" in part because they "had to be special people. . . . They didn't just come for the money, because, you know, long ride, no freeways, and they knew they had to really teach," since they were given plenty of warnings from school administrators that the area was "rough," with "a lot of black kids" and "a lot of Mexicans."<sup>462</sup> According to Collette, and the descriptions of other students from Jordan and Jefferson, the music instructors in the local area shared and transmitted the same spirit of community building and grassroots empowerment that animated the Hawthorne House as described above.<sup>463</sup> They were "dedicated," the kind of teachers who "knew they had their work cut out for them," but

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<sup>461</sup> Leroy Hurte oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, July 1995, 8-9, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>462</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 10, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>463</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 10, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

were committed to “see if [they] can build,” and not just give lessons and assign homework.<sup>464</sup>

It was not uncommon for instructors to stay after class to train their students, or to help their students organize bands beyond the regular orchestra or forge valuable connections in the music world.<sup>465</sup> In the words of William Douglass, “They sort of looked out for our needs quite a bit.”<sup>466</sup> Of course, by the late 1930s, legendary instructors Samuel Browne and Lloyd Reese were also teaching in the area. As Ortega noted, in exchange for private lessons with Lloyd Reese that typically cost about three dollars per hour, “Eric Dolphy used to cut Lloyd’s grass or do the work around there like washing dishes. . . . He used to do chores for his lessons.”<sup>467</sup>

Music was fundamentally a collective practice for Los Angeles’ young musicians. Collaboration, of course, was at the heart of the act of forming and playing as a band. One had to be “concerned about the whole orchestra” and not just oneself as an individual, as Buddy Collette described.<sup>468</sup> The collaborative ethos reflected in the bands that these youth formed went beyond music itself, however. As young people growing up in the community together, their experiences and struggles were intimately bound up in each other’s. This reality seems to have fostered a sense of mutual interdependence

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<sup>464</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 10, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>465</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 8, 30-31, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>466</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 30-31, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>467</sup> Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 21-22, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>468</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 71, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

among many of them, albeit if sometimes with a dose of “healthy competition.”<sup>469</sup> After all, in Douglass’ words, everyone was in the “same school, same band. . . . Everybody played. Everybody was working jobs at night.”<sup>470</sup> As Collette explained, whether they lived in South Central and attended Jefferson High School or in Watts and attended Jordan, the generation of young musicians that came of age in the 1930s “had a kinship,” one that stemmed as much from mutual respect as from collaborative learning. “Nobody was making any records or anything, but every now and then, for example, maybe we’d do something up in the L.A. area or maybe one of the guys would hear us, or then, later on, as we got a little older, then we’d remember Ernie Royal or somebody. And the influences would go back and forth.” One band member might “bring us a little something that we’d think, ‘Oh he does something different.’ And then the same thing: he might see that I would. So that was all a part of us growing closer together.”<sup>471</sup>

Collette reflected on the experience of forming a band along with Vernon Slater, Minor Robinson, Charlie Martin, and Crosby Lewis during the mid-1930s, when they were all in their early teenage years. “We had to have that band,” he asserted. It was not the most tightly organized affair, and “a couple of them weren’t serious about playing.” Yet, as he put it, “kids will do it. When you get older you got to have everything just right, but kids will say, ‘Well, this is two altos, we’ll play.’ ‘An alto and a drum, we’ll play.’ And that’s what it’s all about. It doesn’t have to be perfect. You will learn more by getting together than playing alone.” Collette’s memories of his early band days reflected

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<sup>469</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 162, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>470</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 16, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>471</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 68-69, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

an alternative approach to learning than the dominant model that suggested practicing in isolation was the key to mastery. Someone used to playing a instrument in solitude was of little use when it came to the task of “interplay,” that is of “playing with one more or two more people.” As Collette put it, “A lot of people say, ‘Well, let's practice and practice and you'll be good.’ Yeah, but there's a line that's stronger than that.” What was most important was “to listen.” Listening was the key to musical collaboration and collective modes of improvisation. It was “part of the discovery period” that enabled them to recognize “‘Hey, I got that with you, haven't I?’ . . . ‘Oh, I got 'ta-da ta-da ta-da-da' with you.’ And I'd say, ‘Yeah, you got it.’ So we were smart at the time, but I'm saying togetherness. We learned a lot.”<sup>472</sup>

The collaborative ethos of the jazz world had its limits. As a generally masculinized arena of cultural activity, it reflected the tendency of many grassroots struggles for dignity to advance the autonomy of some while reinforcing the marginalization of others. As Clora Bryant explained, jazz on Central Avenue and the broader South L.A. region was overwhelmingly a “male thing.”<sup>473</sup> “[T]hey weren't looking for any females to be a part of that,” she noted. “Nobody was knocking the door down to record women. . . . There was no push for us, for women, to do it. And the men were trying to get themselves in, so they definitely did not want that kind of competition.”<sup>474</sup>

The resistance that female jazz players like Bryant encountered in Los Angeles

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<sup>472</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 35-36, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>473</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 239, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>474</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 239, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

did not come strictly from male musicians and producers, however. Frequently, audiences and the broader public frowned on, or were even outright hostile toward, women who entered the jazz world. Racialized assumptions about female musicians as sexually promiscuous, or as an embodiment of gender impropriety, subjected them to rude treatment and sometimes violence. Bryant recalled how the seemingly mundane experience of calling her male musician companions on the telephone to coordinate gigs and rehearsals provoked wild reactions from her friends' significant others. "You'd call the fellows up about rehearsal or something and they'd [the wife or girlfriend would] say, 'Well, who's that bitch?'" she recollected. One of the times that Bryant called saxophonist Clifford Scott for such a reason she overheard his wife in the background, "You know, 'Is that your bitch?'" to which she quipped back, "Tell that bitch I ain't no bitch."<sup>475</sup> In another instance, Bryant remembered playing at the Onyx Club on Fair Oaks Avenue in Pasadena, "I was playing drums and trumpet at the same time, when Charles Norris was on guitar and Elyse was on piano and George Morrow was the bass player. . . . I played with my eyes closed. I never saw what was going on, you know." Apparently a man in the audience was looking at Bryant in a way that led his wife to believe Bryant was "going with her husband." As the woman sat there "and just g[ot] very upset," Elyse noticed the woman "pulling her knife out of her purse . . . and I had my eyes closed, and Elyse said, 'Look out, Clara!' I said 'Oh, my God.'"<sup>476</sup> She added, "I wasn't the only one. I mean, any girl musician you know can tell you stories like

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<sup>475</sup> Clara Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 203, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>476</sup> Clara Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 202, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

that.”<sup>477</sup>

This is not to suggest that the hostility that women encountered as jazz players necessarily defined their experience of the jazz scene as a whole. In certain spaces, the jazz community provided what Bryant characterized as “a lot of camaraderie” and “caring.” “That’s why I became a part of it,” she asserted.<sup>478</sup> An extension of its reliance on musical experimentations and innovations, the jazz world also contained a certain openness to unconventional social and gender behavior that was unavailable in other areas of society. That women like Bryant managed to carve out space for themselves within the jazz world is a testament to the fact that the music scene was loosely defined enough to nurture alternative expressions of femininity and masculinity. This relative openness to social experimentation, and the general ethos of collectivity that nurtured it, was undoubtedly no small factor in keeping Bryant and other female musicians in the jazz world despite the harsh reactions they confronted.

In a variety of ways and contexts, the relationships that young Angelenos forged around music challenged the norms of social divisions and competition promoted by wider society as they joined people across lines of race and gender. For example, Leroy Hurte formed an a capella choir while attending Jefferson High School. They called their choir the Four Blackbirds and billed themselves as “three boys, a girl, and a guitar.” The choir included a young woman named Geraldine Harris as first tenor, David Patillo as second tenor, Richard Davis as bass, and Hurte himself as baritone and guitarist. The choir itself was a product of relationships forged in the local interracial school system,

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<sup>477</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 203, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>478</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 100-101, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.



and also had a life beyond schools themselves. After graduating high school, the Four Blackbirds continued meeting to rehearse at each other's houses and sang at such celebrated venues as Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club and the 1935 world's fair in San Diego.<sup>479</sup> Jackie Kelso recalled establishing some success playing with Chico Hamilton and ethnic "Mexican piano player" Jesus "Chuy" Reyes while in junior high school. Especially after Hamilton and Reyes took home first prize in an amateur contest in the Burbank Burlesque Theatre, music increasingly enabled their band to transgress the city's racial and generational boundaries and to secure in different neighborhoods around town. As Kelso described, "[W]hile still in junior high school, somebody in Jesus Reyes's family gets married, so Chico, Jesus, and I provide the music. I play the clarinet [at the] reception or house party. At night, too. Twelve, thirteen years old. . . . I don't think we made any money. We were just happy playing together." They so enjoyed the event that they made an agreement, "Chuey, we played free for you, so, Chuey, you're going to play free for a Hamilton party and a Kelson party."<sup>480</sup> These kinds of convergences and collaborations across normative social boundaries created potential for new kinds of subjectivities and resonances between different struggles.

Young musicians in South L.A. recognized that music enhanced their autonomy and mobility—geographically and socially—and actively sought out opportunities play in different parts of the city. Buddy Collette recalled doing jaunts around 30-40 miles

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<sup>479</sup> Leroy Hurte oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, July 1995, 11, 15-17, 19-20, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

<sup>480</sup> Jackie Kelso interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-May 1990, 37-38, "Central Avenue Sounds," Oral History Program.

outside home neighborhood, even down to San Diego.<sup>481</sup> Hurte seized the opportunity to sing on “just about every radio station in Los Angeles” and performed in motion pictures.<sup>482</sup> Ortega and the Frantic Five played at a Hollywood nightclub and got their names in the paper, an experience that he recalled as just about the “greatest thing that ever happened.”<sup>483</sup> Douglass also recalled how the opportunity to play music around town provided a source of autonomy from parents’ regulations, as he remembered his own parents disapproval of the times he played late at places where booze was being served.<sup>484</sup>

Much like the kinds of innovations they engaged in musically, when they rearranged music and played their own style to create something new, as they moved into spaces such as dance halls and night clubs, they, along with audiences and attendees, transformed those spaces. As historians Luis Alvarez and Anthony Macias have shown, informal clubs and dance halls were sites where multiethnic working-class youth created new social space and often subverted the norms of the city’s dominant racial order and norms of gender and sexual propriety. Within these sites, swing music nourished a wider youth subculture that combined zoot suit fashions with pachuco slang and politics of self-expression that challenged the social and cultural norms of middle-class Anglo-Americanism.<sup>485</sup> The activities that went on in these spaces so disturbed the status quo

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<sup>481</sup> Buddy Collette interview transcript, oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, August 1989-January 1990, 78, 181-182, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>482</sup> Leroy Hurte oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, July 1995, 17, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>483</sup> Anthony Ortega oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, September-November 1994, 61-62, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>484</sup> William Douglass oral history transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, February-March 1990, 20, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>485</sup> Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*, 131-134, 138-152; Macias, *Mexican American Mojo*, 17-18. Also regarding the politics of race and culture in multiethnic dance halls, see Robin D. G. Kelly, *Race Rebels*,

that they frequently provoked reactions from civic officials. For example, one of the city's dance halls got shut down because it was going to allow Black, Mexican, Filipino, and White youth to dance altogether.<sup>486</sup>

### *A Central Avenue State of Mind*

In a 1990 oral history interview, Clara Bryant described Central Avenue not just as a place in her life and in the world, but as a “spirit” and a “history” that helped her to redefine her own place in the world. “It became more than a street, you know,” Bryant explained. “The street was over there, but it was all over L.A. . . . Wherever we congregated, that was our Central Avenue.” Bryant’s description could be generalized beyond the jazz community that Central Avenue so famously fostered, to characterize the surrealist ethos that animated Los Angeles’ culture of opposition more broadly. As she noted, it was not the bricks and mortar, the buildings, or bandstands that defined Central Avenue’s significance, even if these provided the physical structures and roots that nurtured the modes of gathering she described. Rather, “There was an aura. There was a feeling” about the place. “And it’s something that I think only people who are really in tune to whatever—No matter whether it’s music or if you’re a clerk or a steel mill worker, when you get around certain things, it’s something that you—If you’re really into that and you feel it, you know that this is where you’re supposed to be. . . . [I]t’s just a feeling. It really is.” In times of chaos and in the face of glaring injustice, “it gave me

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168; Les Back, “X Amount of Sat Siri Akall!: Apache Indian, Reggae Music, and Intermezzo Culture,” in *Essays on Immigration and Culture in Present-Day Europe*, ed. by Aleksandra Alund and Raoul Granqvist (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), 145.

<sup>486</sup> Macias, *Mexican American Mojo*, 17.

the motivation, the inspiration, enthusiasm, the desire, joy, you name it.” It was “where I found out who Clora was and what Clora wanted to be.”<sup>487</sup>

In describing Central Avenue as a source of self-definition and social belonging, Bryant calls our attention to a key aspect of the relationship between place and politics that defined the circulation of grassroots surrealism in 1930s California. While surrealist imaginings emerged out of and were fundamentally shaped by specific local conditions and on-the-ground experiences, they contributed to a broadened way of knowing and viewing the world. As Bryant put it, “I can get my Central Avenue in a lot of different places. . . . I was in Russia and I heard some music. That was Central Avenue. I’ve had it in New York . . . [and in] Kansas City.” As she explained, “There’s a Central Avenue in every large city or any city that had a black congregation where they started their music. . . . It might be called Main Street or whatever, but, you know, like 125<sup>th</sup> [Street] was Central Avenue.”<sup>488</sup> Less important as a geographic place than as an epistemological vantage point, Bryant’s Central Avenue provided her with a means of understanding and navigating the world around her. It was a resource that helped her define her relationship not only to immediate local conditions but to broader arrangements of power and circulations of struggle.

Like the Central Avenue that Bryant described, grassroots surrealist currents were marked by a high degree of local variation, while at the same time they contributed to the making of a wider culture of opposition that linked divergent struggles for dignity and liberation. Grassroots surrealism, like Central Avenue, helped people facing varied forms

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<sup>487</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 229-234, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

<sup>488</sup> Clora Bryant interview transcript, interview by Steven L. Isoardi, March-April 1990, 231-232, “Central Avenue Sounds,” Oral History Program.

of subordination across California to redefine their relationship to the world around them not strictly as one of oppression but of affirmation, to see themselves not strictly as a regional or national majority, but as part of a global social majority.

The oppositional culture that crystallized in Los Angeles during the 1930s, while shaped by the specific local context of the city in this period and by the specific practices of local actors, should not be seen as a parochial or exclusively local phenomenon. Rather, it was part of a wider circulation of grassroots struggle throughout and beyond California, which linked popular struggles for dignity and self-definition among Angelenos not only with the mass movements in the fields and on the docks but also with other cultural struggles of aggrieved populations. Turning to northern California's Round Valley Indian Reservation gives us an opportunity to bring this fuller circulation of struggle into view.

## Chapter 4

### The Politics of Multiracial Autonomy and the Culture of Opposition in 1930s Round Valley

*First there is the word  
The word is the song...  
Song gives birth to the song and dance  
As the dance steps  
The story speaks*

—William Oandasan<sup>489</sup>

*The Music, The Music, this is our history.*  
—Amiri Baraka<sup>490</sup>

It was at the night school near the hop fields in Covelo, California during the late spring planting season in 1937 that Pomo-Little Lake Indian Elizabeth Willits began learning to play the trumpet. She would have been in the eighth grade at the time, had she not recently dropped out of the reservation school following an argument with her teacher.<sup>491</sup> Instead, she took to spending her days training the fields for the growing season, and her evenings taking music lessons from an instructor who was in charge of entertaining local farm working children who “didn’t have too much to do” while their parents took adult classes in a separate room.<sup>492</sup> There was “a bunch of us,” Willits recalled. It was “[q]uite a big class [the music teacher] had of Indian people.”<sup>493</sup> Willits

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<sup>489</sup> William Oandasan, *Round Valley Songs* (Minneapolis: West End Press, 1984), viii-2.

<sup>490</sup> LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 1963, reprint edition 1999), ix.

<sup>491</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 1, 3-4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits, Round Valley Public Library, Covelo, Calif. Regarding Willits’ tribal ancestry, see William J. Bauer, Jr., *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here: Work, Community, and Memory on California’s Round Valley Reservation, 1850-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 102; *U.S. Census, 1930: Indian Census Roll: Census of the Round Valley Reservation of the Sacramento Agency*, June 30, 1930.

<sup>492</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>493</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 5, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

eventually picked up a “little ABC’s” on the banjo, guitar, violin, and drums from her brother and a few others in the community, and “formed a group” with her friends, Concow-Yuki-Wailacki brothers Albert and Everett McLane and a local “Hawaiian man” who went by the name of “Buck” Potter.<sup>494</sup> The group played at house parties around the reservation and at several venues in the town of Covelo itself. They played “all kind [of] music. . . [w]altzes an’ two-steps an’ . . . in jazz world what they call Bye-Bye Blues and all that stuff.”<sup>495</sup> They worked with special focus to advance their technique in “more a rhythm type of jazz music.”<sup>496</sup> She noted, “It was more of a jazz [that appealed to her and her friends] in those days when we learned to play.”<sup>497</sup>

The musical collaborations of Willits and her friends serve as a register of changes underway in indigenous and immigrant communities in the vicinity of Mendocino County’s Round Valley Indian Reservation during the 1930s.<sup>498</sup> Against a background shaped by assimilationist pressures and homogenizing notions of Americanism that threatened the survival of nonconforming subjects, the modes of

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<sup>494</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 5, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits. While Elizabeth Willits’ oral history transcript refers to an Albert and Everett McClean, the 1930 Round Valley census contains no such names. The census does, however, list an Albert and Everett McLane, Concow sons of John Wilsey and Carrie Heath McLane, as residents of the reservation. It is most likely that this signals a slippage in the transcription and that these are the same people to which Willits refers. *U.S. Census, 1930: Indian Census Roll: Census of the Round Valley Reservation of the Sacramento Agency*, June 30, 1930. Additionally, William Bauer notes that Carrie Heath McLane was of Yuki and Wailacki descent. Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 178.

<sup>495</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 6-7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>496</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 6, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>497</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 6, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>498</sup> Round Valley Reservation began as Nome Cult Farm in 1856, one of the five California Indian reservations that the federal government authorized in 1852. It is located on the ancestral homeland of the Yuki, in the northeastern region of what is now Mendocino County. Following the reservation’s establishment in Yuki territory, the government removed diverse tribes from across Central and Northeastern California to the region, including Nomlackis, Nisenans, Pit Rivers, Concows, Wailackis, and Pomos. Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 2.

cultural production enacted by Willits' band charted an alternative path toward social belonging. The reservation school that Willits left behind was a cornerstone of dominant efforts to secure the "total assimilation" of Native Americans during much of her upbringing, and for that matter, most of the early-twentieth century. It intended to function as a laboratory for cultural uplift that would rearrange Native habits of mind and behavior to mold young women like Willits into proper subjects of head-of-household patriarchy and Victorian domesticity.<sup>499</sup> Following the 1934 enactment of the federal Indian Reorganization Act, reservation schools like the one Willits abandoned took on a new role in assisting government efforts to consolidate control over Native lives, concentrate them more tightly within the boundaries of the reservation, and bring them into fuller accord with the emergent corporatist liberal hegemony. The shifting trajectory of governance on the reservation reflected the new liberal consensus that crystallized within the main channels of American politics by the mid-1930s, promoting stability through enhanced federal regulation and employer-labor-government cooperation. The Reorganization Act, and the nationalist political culture that it aimed to support, established new parameters for the possibilities of grassroots politics and gave renewed urgency to the role of cultural production in sustaining grassroots emancipatory visions. Within this context, the music Willits took up and the band she helped form rejected calls for cultural conformity in favor of forms of cultural experimentation that confounded conventions of race, gender, nation, and genre.

Historian and cultural critic George Lipsitz has done much to illuminate the

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<sup>499</sup> Wendy Wall, "Gender and the 'Citizen Indian'" in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women's West*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 202-209.



potential for popular culture in general and music in particular to serve as “a site for experimentation with cultural and social roles not yet possible in [formal domains of] politics.”<sup>500</sup> Cultural critic Josh Kun has similarly underscored music’s capacity to function as “a mode of relation, a point of contact” for cartographies and cultural formations that are traditionally regarded as wholly distinct.<sup>501</sup> For Native communities in Round Valley and its vicinity during the 1930s, cultural production had a crucial role to play in sustaining struggles for a dignified existence. In a world that largely excluded them from dominant channels of political participation and variably silenced and satirized them in dominant culture, Round Valley Indians used culture to explore and express affinities with other working communities.<sup>502</sup> At the same time that multiethnic organizing in more formal coalitions prompted fierce crackdowns from government officials and business leaders, popular culture enabled forms of collaboration, social organization, dialogue, and intersubjectivity that often flew under the radar of elites.<sup>503</sup> It was through music that Willits and her band helped raise funds for a variety of Native

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<sup>500</sup> George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 17.

<sup>501</sup> Kun, *Audiotopia*, 14. Also see Gaye Theresa Johnson’s work on the ways seemingly distinct communities have used music to create new forms of affiliation and alliance through “shared soundscapes.” Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity*, xiii.

<sup>502</sup> Although initially the federal government’s Round Valley Agency oversaw just the reservation established at Round Valley, during the early twentieth century its purview was expanded to include Indians living and working on “rancherias” in Mendocino, Sonoma, and Lake Counties. In this chapter, I use the term “Round Valley Indians” to refer broadly to all the Indians who wound up under the Round Valley Agency’s supervision during the early-twentieth century. This broader and more flexible usage of the term is also more reflective of Native lives in the region than one that confines itself to the physical space of the reservation. As historian William Bauer has shown, and as this chapter affirms, the lives and subjectivities of Round Valley residents never fit neatly within the boundaries imposed on them by government agents and policymakers. Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*. For more on the establishment of rancherias, also see Albert L. Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 129-130.

<sup>503</sup> As George Lipsitz explains, popular music serves in significant ways as a “repository of collective memory and a vehicle for collective witness,” an “alternative archive of history” that both reflect and transmits the “shared memories, experiences, and aspirations of ordinary people, whose perspectives rarely appear in formal historical archival collections.” George Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xi-xii.

clubs and organizations, and for Native activists traveling to Washington D.C. to fight “for Indians’ rights and to be recognized as people.”<sup>504</sup> It was also through music that the same band expressed its solidarity with anticolonial struggles beyond the United States, including efforts for independence in the Philippines.<sup>505</sup> Willits recalled that she “[p]layed with the Filipinos’ band there [near Hopland Rancheria]. . . . [P]layed for their organization and they were sending money over to their land [because the United States had] invaded the Philippines [sic] island over there. They had an organization to raise money to send to their people. Played with Mr. [Aguilar] down there. He had a band with three Filipinos and I played banjo with them. So I was playing around making my life with them, playing music every other Saturday night.”<sup>506</sup>

Attending to grassroots cultural politics in Round Valley gives us a window on how Round Valley Indians experienced, navigated, and altered the world around them amid the chaos and crisis of the Great Depression. Compared to cities like Los Angeles or San Francisco, Round Valley may seem peripheral, if not altogether separated, from the main centers of California’s capitalist development and Depression-era crisis. It has certainly never attracted the level attention from development scholars that other sites discussed in this dissertation have. It also goes unmentioned in nearly all scholarship on the Great Depression.<sup>507</sup> It is important to recognize the ways in which a place like Round Valley—an Indian reservation located within the overwhelmingly rural county of

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<sup>504</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 9, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>505</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>506</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>507</sup> An important exception is the work of William Bauer. See especially, Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*

Mendocino, in northern reaches of the state—in fact played a pivotal role in California’s global capitalist modernization. Round Valley was the site of some of the worst bloodshed resulting from Anglo colonization and home to one of the vastest cross-sections of the tribes forcibly removed from their lands during the Gold Rush. By the early-twentieth century, it also became one of the nation’s largest hop-producing regions and an important source of agricultural, ranching, and logging-based wealth for the broader California region. In this respect, at crucial historical conjunctures, Round Valley stood at the front lines of battles over California’s development future in both a physical and geographic sense. Importantly, it was also foundational to the construction of popular imaginings of what constituted modernity for California. Contrasting them with Indians in more central and southern regions of the state, who were allegedly more readily assimilated or subdued, Anglo settlers cast Round Valley Indians as distinctively “wild tribes.”<sup>508</sup> Purportedly uncivilizable and culturally irredeemable, Round Valley Indians provided a main counterpoint against which Anglo settlers constructed dominant visions of California’s development future. They also generated some of the most innovative counter-visions of California as the crossroads of an alternative modernity and globality. Among the earliest of California’s displaced peoples, Round Valley Indians experienced Depression-like conditions and the endemic crisis of capitalism before and longer than most other Californians. During the Depression era, they drew on this longer history of struggle as they adapted to the shifting contours of life on and beyond the reservation. The imaginative and improvisational practices they engaged as they fought to endure in an inhospitable world provide us with a vista on the alternative possible

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<sup>508</sup> Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 146

futures they hoped to build.

This chapter examines the music that Elizabeth Willits and her band performed in and around Northern California's Round Valley Indian Reservation as part of a broader matrix of aesthetic, leisure, subsistence, spiritual, and other cultural practices that mediated local indigenous populations' efforts to make their lives livable and situate themselves in relation to wider circulations of struggle during the 1930s. As I examine how Native Californians experienced and responded to the upheavals of the era, I illuminate how they redefined their relationship to the land, tribal affiliations, and other ethnic working populations, and contributed to the making of a broader oppositional culture in the process. Ultimately, I argue that during the 1930s Round Valley Indians asserted themselves as part of a broader circulation of struggles for dignity and autonomy, which linked multiethnic indigenous and immigrant working communities in the face of prevailing forces of imperialism and racial capitalism. Against dominant cultural formations that treated them as a troublingly primitive and disappearing racial minority, and against New Dealer efforts to confine their lives to the geographic space of the reservation, Round Valley Indians affirmed their position as part of a broader, global social majority—one that sought dignity through the embracement of difference and autonomy through intersectional struggle.

### ***Genealogies of Multiracial Struggle in the Lands of Round Valley Indians***

The world that witnessed Elizabeth Willits' early introduction to the trumpet, her affinity for jazz, and the music she played to advance efforts for Native rights and

transnational grassroots self-determination had roots in a longer history of struggle that had been shaped by cultural difference and an ethics of co-creation.<sup>509</sup> California's indigenous populations inhabited one of the most densely populated and culturally diverse regions in North America prior to European contact. Over the course of centuries, they cultivated methods for negotiating linguistic, cultural, and regional differences in tribal relations, alliances, and conflicts.<sup>510</sup> Those who lived north of San Francisco Bay, in what anthropologists have designated as the Central California and Northeastern indigenous cultural areas, would ultimately comprise the bulk of Round Valley Reservation's resident population. Between 1812 and 1850, these tribes found themselves at the crossroads of succeeding and overlapping forces of Spanish, Russian, and Mexican colonization.<sup>511</sup> While the impact of these divergent colonialisms varied

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<sup>509</sup> Here I borrow from Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, who use the concept of an "ethics of cocreation" to describe "an understanding that all things are interconnected cocreatively." Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, xi.

<sup>510</sup> Over one hundred languages were spoken by the over 300,000 indigenous people who inhabited California before contact and conquest. Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 17.

<sup>511</sup> Beginning with the first mission and pueblo in San Diego in 1769, the Spanish colonial system in California consisted of twenty-one Franciscan missions, four military presidios, and three civilian pueblos. The last mission, San Francisco Solano, was established in Sonoma in 1823.

Russian merchants established the first mercantile colony in California at Fort Ross in 1812, on the coast of what is now Sonoma County, and maintained claim on this territory until 1841.

The Mexican Rancho era in California history began after Mexican independence in 1821 and peaked during the fifteen years that followed the 1834 secularization of the region's missions. Rancho Petaluma, the home of Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo and one of the largest and most powerful of all Mexican ranchos, was established just north of San Francisco Bay as well in 1834 and remained under Vallejo's control until 1857. Another of the Mexican era's largest ranchos, New Helvetia, was established by Swiss pioneer John Sutter in 1839 at the juncture of the American and Sacramento Rivers, in what became the city of Sacramento.

For further background on the colonial histories that converged on the ancestral lands of Central California and Northeastern Indians during the early-nineteenth century, see Kent G. Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants: The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2005); Stephen W. Silliman, *Lost Laborers in Colonial California: Native Americans and the Archaeology of Rancho Petaluma* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004); Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*. Regarding anthropological designations of indigenous cultural areas and their connections to Round Valley, see Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 18. Regarding interactions of Yuki Indians, Round Valley's original inhabitants, with Spanish settlers, and Russian, Mexican, and Anglo fur trappers and traders, see Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 31-32.

across specific local contexts, they generally and collectively subjected Native populations in the northern reaches of Alta California to projects of Christianization, racial subjugation, land and resource confiscation, environmental and health devastation, and labor exploitation that were transforming the broader Western hemisphere and the non-Western world.<sup>512</sup> At the same time that these forces worked to alienate indigenous people from their ancestral homelands and lifeways, they also made them part of an emergent, transnational and multiethnic workforce that included diverse tribes from across northern California along with Russian, Mexican, Creole, Native Alaskan, and Native Hawaiian people who were brought to the region as workers by colonial settlers and merchants.<sup>513</sup>

The gold rush solidified northern California's position as a key node in the globalizing economy during the 1850s and turned the ancestral homelands of Round Valley Indians into some of the most violent battlegrounds on which conflicts over the future of the region unfolded during the late-nineteenth century. As fortune seeking migrants flooded into California's mining regions from across the globe, Anglo American settlers intensified their efforts to secure political and economic domination in the region. A complex web of law, custom, and culture facilitated Anglo attempts to shore up social boundaries that marginalized non-White immigrant and indigenous populations, barring many among them from access to necessary resources for survival and channels of political participation. As legal scholar Cheryl Harris notes, the seizure of Native lands

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<sup>512</sup> For seminal works on this broader context, see Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1982); Robinson, *Black Marxism*; Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>513</sup> Lightfoot, *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants*, 5-6; Silliman, *Lost Laborers in Colonial California*, 8-9, 12-13, 16, 54-55, 62-63. Also see, *The Forgotten Californians*

and dispossession of Native subjects served as pivotal components of the process by which Anglo settlers reordered property relations and facilitated the institutionalization of White supremacy on the frontier.<sup>514</sup> As historian Tomás Almaguer has shown, these processes were both enabled and justified by a dominant culture that constructed Native peoples and traditions as irredeemably backward, primitive, and incompatible with modernity and American nationhood.<sup>515</sup> Across northern and central California during this period, the same logic that determined Native territories to be free for the taking cast Native peoples as obstacles to White visions of political economic development in the region, to be subordinated and exploited when possible, and exterminated when necessary.<sup>516</sup>

California's northern and central mining regions experienced some of the most gruesome violence ever waged against Native Americans by Anglo settlers in the history of American nation-building. Along with disease, kidnappings, varying forms of coerced labor, and sexual violence, Indians in these coveted territories became targets of extralegal and state-sponsored killings and extermination campaigns. As a whole, California's Native population plummeted from an estimated 300,000 at the turn of the nineteenth century, to 150,000 by the eve of the gold rush in 1848, to just 30,000 in

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<sup>514</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1721-1724. See also, Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, esp. Chap. 4 and 5; Brendan C. Lindsay, *Murder State: California's Native American Genocide, 1846-1873* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

<sup>515</sup> Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, esp. Chap. 4 and 5.

<sup>516</sup> As historian Richard White has noted, a central and consistent theme in the histories of Native American peoples broadly speaking has been the effort by White Americans "to bring Indian resources, land, and labor into the market." Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaw, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), xv. Regarding the particular histories of labor, land, and resource commodification in Northern California and the genocidal implications of regional development in Round Valley, see Lindsay, *Murder State*; Frank H. Baumgardner, *Killing for Land in Early California: Indian Blood at Round Valley* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006).

1860.<sup>517</sup> The genocidal imperatives and devastating consequences of Anglo colonization have led many scholars to characterize the history of California Indians in general and Round Valley Indians in particular as a linear story of physical destruction and cultural decline.<sup>518</sup> Yet, as historian Albert Hurtado has emphasized, “The same numbers that illustrate the destruction of native populations also show where and how some Indians survived in a land that was starkly different than the one their grandparents had known.”<sup>519</sup>

It is important to consider Round Valley Indians’ struggles for survival amid American colonization not strictly in a physical sense but in a cultural sense as well. To be sure, even after the brunt of mass racial violence against Indians subsided, surviving populations had to cultivate modes of subsistence in response to removal and allotment programs that sought to undermine Native traditions by transforming them into obedient subjects of American imperialism. Attending to Native struggles for cultural endurance should not suggest efforts to preserve fixed identities and lifeways as distilled remnants of some distant past, however. Rather, survival necessarily required constant innovation,

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<sup>517</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 8; Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*, 1; Lindsey, *Murder State*.

<sup>518</sup> The foundational work on this subject is Sherburne Cook, *The Conflict between the California Indian and White Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Also see George Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” *University of California Publications in Anthropological Records* 5 (1900-1947): 155-244; Frank Essene, “Cultural Elements Distribution: XXI Round Valley,” *Anthropological Records* 8 (1945): 1-144; Amelia Susman, “The Round Valley Indians of California,” An Unpublished Chapter in Acculturation of Seven [or Eight] Indian Tribes,” *Contributions to the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 31 (1976); Virginia Miller, *Ukomno’m: The Yuki Indians of Northern California* (Socorro, New Mexico: Ballena Press, 1979); Lynwood Carranco and Estle Beard, *Genocide and Vendetta The Round Valley Wars of Northern California* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981); William Secrest, *When the Great Spirit Died: The Destruction of the California Indians, 1850-1860* (Sanger: Word Dancer Press, 2002); Benjamin Madley, “California’s Yuki Indians: Defining Genocide in Native American History,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 39 (Autumn): 303-332; Baumgardner, *Killing for Land in Early California*.

<sup>519</sup> Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*, 1; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 9.



accommodation, and collective recreation of identities, affiliations, modes of life, and systems of meaning. Anglo settlers, policymakers, reformers, and industrial employers consistently characterized Native peoples as existing outside modernity, as anti-modern, throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Yet, Native Californians themselves worked hard to carve out space for themselves—to remain alive and to make their lives livable—within a rapidly modernizing world that simultaneously changed circumstances for all of its inhabitants. Instead of clinging to an existence outside modernity and its attendant institutions of race, nation, and the market, as dominant social forces imagined, Round Valley Indians appropriated, accommodated, and impacted the evolution of all of these as they fashioned identities for themselves and worked to resist their own dehumanization or obliteration.<sup>520</sup>

In the course of their efforts to adapt and defend their dignity against American colonization, Round Valley Indians continually ran up against a dominant system of cultural representation that portrayed Native Americans as anomalies of the modern world, as people frozen in time, and as obstructions to liberal capitalist progress. The implementation of political projects that aimed to enforce the assimilation of Native populations into American culture and political economy corresponded with the proliferation of widespread popular nostalgia for America's Western past and caricatured

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<sup>520</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*; Hurtado, *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*; Nicolas G. Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth Century Los Angeles* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012). For works that address Native accommodations to modernization and racial capitalism beyond California, see Richard White, *Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Claudio Saunt, Barbara Krauthamar, Tiya Miles, Celia E. Naylor, and Circe Sturm, "Rethinking Race and Culture in the Early South," *Ethnohistory* 53, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 399-405. My framing here is also informed by David Graeber, "The New Anarchists," *New Left Review* 13 (Jan.-Feb. 2002): 61-73.

renderings of its “disappearing” Native cultures.<sup>521</sup> As Mendocino County worked to develop as a center of agribusiness, lumber, and tourism, its self-designated regional identity as the heart of the “Redwood Empire” relied fundamentally on the production of racialized, frontier-driven, settler colonial conceptualizations of “Whiteness” and “Indianness” that supported a self-narrative of racial and cultural progress. Throughout Mendocino County, as in developing regions across the country following the Civil War, traveling shows, expositions, and, from the 1910s on, screenings of Hollywood films, commonly celebrated White valor and conquest on the frontier, while either erasing or satirizing Native peoples. Appropriations of Native culture abounded in the local region, from tokenized enactments of “Indian war dances” at civic events, to the naming of local “Redmen” and “Pocahantas” lodges, to the orchestrations that surrounded annual Fourth of July “Frontier Days” festivals, a tradition that civic leadership in the town of Willits invented in 1927 to capitalize on widespread popular yearnings for frontier imagery in the form “a real old-fashioned wild-west celebration.”<sup>522</sup> The varying forms of racialized masquerade that centered on Native subjects were accompanied by parallel forms of Blackface minstrelsy that had become popular nationwide. Minstrel shows became

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<sup>521</sup> Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 31-32.

<sup>522</sup> Quotation “a real old-fashioned wild-west celebration” is from “Frontier Days Show Will Be Ready Soon,” *Willits News*, June 24, 1932, 1. Also see, “Pocahontas and Redmen Unite in Annual Event,” *Redwood Journal*, March 2, 1934, 4; “Pocahontas and Redmen Prepare for Big Event,” *Redwood Journal*, Feb. 20, 1934, 6; “Frontier Days Plans Indicate Best Show Ever Held in Willits,” *Willits News*, May 10, 1935, 1; “Frontier Days Notes,” *Willits News*, May 24, 1935, 1; “Frontier Days Notes” *Willits News*, June 21, 1935, 1; “Frontier Days Notes” *Willits News*, June 28, 1935, 1; “Willits invites the World to Ninth Annual Frontier Days,” *Willits News*, June 28, 1935, 4; “Great Crowd Here for Frontier Days,” *Willits News*, July 5, 1935, 1; “Attendance at Frontier Days Best in Years,” *Willits News*, July 12, 1935, 1; “Record Tourist Year Predicted for California,” *Willits News*, July 12, 1935, 8; “Songs and Dress of All Nations on the Program,” *Redwood Journal*, Feb. 9, 1934, 4; “Round Valley Items of General Interest,” *Willits News*, April 21, 1933, 3; “Frontier Days Show Will Be Ready Soon,” *Willits News*, June 24, 1932, 1; “Now Listen!” *Willits News*, Nov. 3, 1933, 1-2; “Frontier Days Show is Real Drawing Card,” *Willits News*, July 8, 1932, 1.

regular fixtures in Covelo, Willits, and other nearby towns.<sup>523</sup> As political scientist Michael Rogin has shown, Blackface minstrelsy, as well as Redface and other variations of the form, served as a channel for the loosening of ethnic and class boundaries of Whiteness. It enabled a broader range of European American male subjects to construct and make claims on White American identities while, at the same time, enforcing racial boundaries that denied Black and other non-White people access to modes of self-representation.<sup>524</sup> The emerging dominant culture of racial representation enabled White participants to indulge and inhabit fantasies of conquest, while fetishizing Native culture and shoring up norms of White patriarchal domination and Native subordination.

Of course, Round Valley Indians' own subjectivities and patterns of self-identification were always more complex and multivalent than dominant representations, policymakers, and reformers regarded them to be. The history of Indian removal in Northern California and the creation of Round Valley Reservation offer a case in point. The federal legislation that established Round Valley Reservation (originally Nome Cult Farm) in the center of the Yuki's indigenous homeland was based on racialized assumptions that treated Northern and Central tribes as culturally homogenous and part of a collective racial, political, and social "problem." Yet, the removal policy that forcibly brought indigenous peoples as diverse as the Concow, Pit Rivers, Nomlackis, Nisenans, Wailackis, and Pomo to the region from across Central and Northeastern California conditioned the formation of multifaceted affinities and identities among Round Valley

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<sup>523</sup> "Seventy Five to Take Part in Big Eagle Minstrels," *Willits News*, January 18, 1935, p 1; "Minstrel Show Should Be Best Ever Held Here," *Willits News*, Feb. 1, 1935; "Eagles Benefit Minstrel Show Next Big Event," *Willits News*, Feb. 8, 1935, 1; "Minstrel Show Will Be Given March 1," *Willits News*, Feb. 15, 1935, 1; "Minstrel Show Will Be Feature for Next Friday," *Willits News*, Feb. 22, 1935, 1.

<sup>524</sup> Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996).

Indians.<sup>525</sup> In fact, from its inception Round Valley Reservation was home not only to indigenous Californians but also a small number of Anglo people who had rejected their former lifestyle in favor of living with Native communities, and at least one Native Hawaiian who had forged kinship and familial ties with Concow Indians in the years that preceded removal.<sup>526</sup> The historical record suggests that an immigrant descendant of Hawaiian royalty, by the name of Iona, who came to work on John Sutter's New Helvetia ranch in 1839 had married a Concow woman by the name of Su-my-neh. Despite their claims to royal Hawaiian ancestry, they and their two children were forced on the one hundred mile journey, the so-called "Concow trail of tears" to Round Valley. Eventually, after appealing to the King of Hawaii for support, Iona, Su-my-neh, and their children were released and returned to live on the native soil of the Concow, but maintained ties to Round Valley through the twentieth century.<sup>527</sup> Round Valley Reservation's pan-indigenous and multiethnic character helped to shape the forms of multiracial and transnational politics that crystallized in the 1930s and that were made visible in the band and music discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

Against the grain of homogenized and satirized depictions of "Indianness" in dominant culture, Round Valley Indians formulated their own sense of identity and shared historical memory that was based on experiences of collective struggle. Excluded from self-representation and meaningful political participation in local society, Round

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<sup>525</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 2-3, 37-39, 52-53.

<sup>526</sup> Margaret A. Ramsland, *The Forgotten Californians*, Chico, Calif., 1974, BANC MSS 75/8 c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; William Poole, "Retracing the Trail of Tears," *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, Aug. 7, 1988, 8-9.

<sup>527</sup> Margaret A. Ramsland, *The Forgotten Californians*, Chico, Calif., 1974, BANC MSS 75/8 c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 3-5, 20; William Poole, "Retracing the Trail of Tears," *San Francisco Chronicle: This World*, Aug. 7, 1988, 8-9.

Valley Indians generated a collective historical counter-memory through oral traditions that they circulated among themselves and handed down through generations. Their stories exposed the dark side of the region's Americanization and national fantasies of Manifest Destiny. They also inculcated a sense of the long history of struggle shared by local Native tribes. Their shared memories undergirded a narrative of conquest that centered Indian experiences of forced removal, disease, slavery, massacres, and other forms of calculated cruelty. They recalled how Anglo settlers "made slaves of Indians" and treated them "just like cattle," and when "they [the Indians] began to fight back . . . that's when . . . [t]hey call that Soldier's Quarters all down that way. . . . An they killed lot of em. That's why there's so many graves around there along side the hill there."<sup>528</sup> As Agnes Duncan noted, "even little kids, they were just dyin like flies. . . . Gee whiz they were dyin like flies."<sup>529</sup> Stories like these supplemented rather than displaced older traditions of orality, myths, and creation stories, which had long provided a cultural and spiritual foundation for the making and sustaining of distinct tribal identities. The passing down of specific tribal myths alongside inter-tribal memories of colonization that linked diverse peoples and cultures on the reservation was part of the way in which Round Valley Indians constructed multivalent, pan-Indian identities and decolonial epistemologies.

Round Valley Indians understood the telling of their history to be an oppositional practice. As Lucy Young, a Wailaki Indian living in Round Valley, put it in 1939, "I

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<sup>528</sup> Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy, oral history interview transcript, interviewed by Les Lincoln, (June 22, 1990), 8, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy; Adaline Figueroa, interviewed by Les Lincoln (April 18, 1990), 6-7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Adaline Figueroa.

<sup>529</sup> Agnes Fulwider Duncan, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (June 17, 1990), 4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Agnes Fulwider Duncan.

hear people tell ‘bout what Inyan do early days to white man. Nobody ever tell it what white man do to Inyan. That’s the reason I tell it. That’s history. That’s truth. I seen it myself.”<sup>530</sup> The forms of grassroots historical knowledge derived from lived experience and handed down through oral traditions ran into direct conflict with the narratives imposed by the reservation and Indian boarding school system. Round Valley Indians critiqued and defied the system of knowledge that the schools taught them, regarding it as an identifiably “White” history and curriculum.<sup>531</sup> Filbert Anderson described, “They didn’t teach the stuff I really wanted to learn. . . . I remember . . . They had in there Columbus discovered America, and I said, ‘Why am I saying Columbus discovered America? Hell, I said, I’m the one discovered America.’”<sup>532</sup>

As the school system put into striking relief, the contest over historical memory was part of a fuller struggle over social practice, social order, and power relations. The whitewashed version of history that guided the curriculum at both the reservation school and Sherman Institute boarding school in Riverside was part of a disciplinary regime that sought to reshape Indian students’ view of the world and their place in it. Lessons in so-called “white” history were accompanied by rigid regulations of social and gender behavior, including a disciplinary code for manner of dress, use of language, and general conduct, that aimed to amend the most intimate aspects of Indian life and thereby bring

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<sup>530</sup> Lucy Young, qtd. in Edith V. A. Murphey and Lucy Young, “Out of the Past: A True Indian Story, Told by Lucy Young, of Round Valley Reservation, to Edith V. A. Murphey,” *California Historical Society* 20, no. 4 (December 1941): 358.

<sup>531</sup> Filbert Anderson, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (1990), 2, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Filbert Anderson; Minnie G. Card, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (May 1990), 4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Minnie G. Card.

<sup>532</sup> Filbert Anderson, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (1990), 2-3, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Filbert Anderson.

Indian society into line with Anglo-American ideals.<sup>533</sup> Regarding the teachers at the Sherman Institute, Minnie Card noted, “Oh, they were strict. Every where I went all I knew was just obey rules or get whipped at school or something.”<sup>534</sup> Doran Lincoln explained that “Indians could not wear any tribal wear, not even moccasins, beads, or feathers. If you were caught you were disciplined.”<sup>535</sup> Adaline Figueroa recalled her experience at the Sherman Institute being “like military school.” As she relayed, “boys and girls were separated and every time we turned around, we had a drill. And on the weekends, we had our Regiment Drill. . . . We had companies, different ones, like the Big Girls, the Big Boys, companies.”<sup>536</sup> As Figueroa’s recollection suggested, the cultural agenda of the reservation and boarding school system was deeply gendered. Efforts to expunge Native cultural traditions went hand in hand with efforts to manage the most intimate aspects of gender and sexual behavior to promote proper conceptualizations of patriarchy, domesticity, and nuclear family normativity. To this end, the training of young Native women to adopt proper values of domesticity and deference became a vital hinge of allotment and Americanization efforts. This same fact also made acts of female defiance and rebelliousness—from instances of young women setting fire to portions of the Round Valley school to those of individuals like Elizabeth Willits who argued with

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<sup>533</sup> Wendy Wall, “Gender and the ‘Citizen Indian,’” 202-209; Margaret D. Jacobs, “Resistance to Rescue: The Indians of Bahapki and Mrs. Annie E. K. Bidwell,” in *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West*, ed. Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 230-251.

<sup>534</sup> Minnie G. Card, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (May 1990), 4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Minnie G. Card.

<sup>535</sup> Doran Lincoln, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (April 25, 1990), 2-3, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Doran Lincoln.

<sup>536</sup> Adaline Figueroa, oral history interview transcript, interviewed by Les Lincoln (April 18, 1990), 2, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Adaline Figueroa.

her teacher and dropped out of school—especially troubling to elites and reformers.<sup>537</sup>

As a site of intellectual and cultural colonization, however, the boarding school system, like the reservation itself, was also a site of intercolonial crossing and interethnic and intertribal convergence. As Adeline Figueroa explained, “It [the school] was big. There was people from all over the United States. From New York, you know. There were even people look like full Black; even [Indians who were light-skinned enough to be racialized as] White people, but they came anyway.”<sup>538</sup> The Sherman Institute and other boarding schools like it drew together indigenous populations of diverse backgrounds from disparate geographic locations. As such, these schools proved to be a contested terrain in which efforts to impose a homogenizing discipline on Indian populations from the top-down could be transgressed by students who sought to learn about the differences and affinities that linked each other’s struggles. In a sense, the school created an opportunity to widen the lens of Natives students, revealing the interconnectedness between Round Valley and other indigenous struggles across the broader imperialist landscape.

Just as they constructed identities and historical narratives outside the terms dictated by the dominant culture, Round Valley Indians also struggled to enhance their autonomy within the contours of the local economy. Capitalist advancement in Mendocino County transformed the region into a booming site for industrial development, especially for agriculture, forestry, and increasingly by the 1920s and

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<sup>537</sup> Wall, “Gender and the ‘Citizen Indian,’” 202-203; Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 3-4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>538</sup> Adaline Figueroa, oral history interview transcript, interviewed by Les Lincoln (April 18, 1990), 3, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Adaline Figueroa.



1930s, tourism. Significantly, the discourse of assimilation on which the allotment system relied ran at odds with the evolving demands of the region's growing industrial economy. Indeed, the Indian Agency officials who touted the image of the self-reliant family farm as an idealized future for Native Americans did so at precisely the time that that ideal was becoming eclipsed by large-scale industrial agricultural enterprises. Advancements in irrigation and intensive farming practices provided advantaged large farms and made the average eight and a half acre plots that the Agency distributed to California Indians insufficient for competition in the agricultural market.<sup>539</sup> The Indian Agency hoped that by confining Indians to individualized private parcels allotment would promote a spirit of individualism and self-sufficiency among them. Instead, Round Valley Indians routinely supplemented production on their allotments with wage work off the reservation, planting and harvesting crops, shearing sheep, and raising cattle on farms and Rancherias across the broader Mendocino and Lake County regions, where the demand for cheap and flexible labor expanded rapidly.<sup>540</sup> Native populations never became a primary source of labor in California generally speaking, due to the dramatic decline of their numbers in the late nineteenth century, their perceived unfitness for any serious form of productive labor, and the accessibility of imported Chinese and Japanese labor. However, they were a significant—often preferred—source of labor in Mendocino County.<sup>541</sup> By the 1890s, Indian populations comprised approximately six percent of Mendocino County's total population, yet an estimated twenty five percent of its waged

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<sup>539</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 121-122.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

workforce.<sup>542</sup> They continuously outnumbered the combined total of ethnic Mexican, African American, Chinese, and Japanese populations in the local region between 1870 and 1940.<sup>543</sup>

As historian William Bauer has shown, patterns of work, both paid and unpaid, were key channels through which Round Valley Indians situated themselves in relation to each other and the world around them. According to Bauer, Round Valley Indians utilized a mixture of waged and non-waged labor, on and off the reservation, “to maintain one foot in the growing economy and one foot in an older subsistence economy and to create community.”<sup>544</sup> Many traveled the local circuit following seasonal demands for agricultural and ranch work, while some traveled to cities, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, for jobs in domestic service and other industries.<sup>545</sup> The same structures of labor that were so central to the making of racial capitalism and forces of subordination were, in fact, a contested terrain that also contributed to the formation of new ties among indigenous and non-indigenous working-class communities. Wailacki June Britton noted that, beyond providing a means to a wage, working on hop farms around the local region enabled her to socialize with people with whom she would not otherwise have had the chance to interact, including Indians from distant areas as well as non-Indian workers who were drawn to the region by the labor demands of developing industries.<sup>546</sup> “I enjoyed the company of being out amongst people [picking hops],” she explained, “[W]e were raised up on [the north] end of [Round Valley]. . . . [Our parents] never took us no

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<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>545</sup> Rosenthal, *Reimagining Indian Country*, 2; Susan Lobo, ed. *Urban Voices: The Bay Area American Indian Community* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002), 3-17.

<sup>546</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 94, 100, 102, 104.

place. . . . If I could get out and pick hops I could see different people.”<sup>547</sup> As Concow John Cook described, “It was a mixture [of people working in the hop fields], it wasn’t all Indians; it was Black and Mexicans.”<sup>548</sup> The persistent engagement of Round Valley Indians in the regional labor circuit troubled BIA officials, not only because it meant that these populations were refusing to be the obedient, self-sufficient subjects that the BIA wanted them to be but also because their interactions and collaborations with other ethnic working communities defied the patterns of racial segregation that were so crucial to maintaining structures of subordination. For example, BIA representative Gordon MacGregor expressed concern about the fact that Round Valley Indians who left the reservation tended to spend their free time mingling across racial lines and “mostly with the lowest class” of people.<sup>549</sup> In MacGregor’s words, “White society will receive them [Indians] only on the lowest scale.” He explained that “They associate with the lowest class, play cards with certain classes of white people” and intermarried with non-Indian populations. According to his own estimate, “As far as blood goes, it is centering around the three-quarter mark. . . . Ten to fifteen per cent of the Indians in the area are less than one half blood.”<sup>550</sup>

Mendocino area Indians not only socialized with differently racialized working

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<sup>547</sup> June Britton, qtd. in Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 92. Also see Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 94, 100, 102, 104.

<sup>548</sup> John Cook, qtd. in Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 179.

<sup>549</sup> Transcript of proceedings from a meeting held April 3, 1937, Berkeley Calif., convening representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Resettlement Administration, Indian Service, Heller Foundation, and Indian Defense Association, 23, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 89: 41441-1937,” Round Valley Public Library, Covelo, Calif.

<sup>550</sup> Transcript of proceedings from a meeting held April 3, 1937, Berkeley Calif., convening representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Resettlement Administration, Indian Service, Heller Foundation, and Indian Defense Association, 23, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 89: 41441-1937.” Also see Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 94

populations at work, in labor camps and rancherias, but also after hours in a variety of settings. The emergence of an intertribal, multiethnic, and interracial working-class leisure culture in the area demonstrated that the ways working communities chose to spend their time, energy, and money differed from the logic of the BIA's agenda as well as that of regional industrial employers. Although relations among racialized working populations in the region were by no means free of competition and conflict, spaces of leisure frequently joined working-class communities across racial lines.<sup>551</sup> Like many working-class communities, Round Valley Indians unwound from their workdays over drinks at the same pool halls, movie houses, and house parties that non-Indian workers also attended. They made moonshine, bootlegged, and gambled together.<sup>552</sup> These practices helped working people in Round Valley and the broader Mendocino county region to make their lives a bit more livable. They also situated them in a broader cultural world that prioritized values of leisure, pleasure, and dignity.

By the time that the Great Depression unfolded in Mendocino County, Round Valley Indians had not become the independent, self-sufficient farmers that allotment's crafters, as well as local elites and reformers, had envisioned. Instead, they were part of a broader multiethnic and transnational circuit of grassroots struggles, fighting to survive

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<sup>551</sup> For references to and examples of interracial competition in the local economy, see 3978, Stephen Knight, qtd. in report from hearing held by Senate Committee on Indian Affairs in San Francisco, Calif. (Nov. 28, 1928), 18, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 5: Senate Committee, Nov. 19-20, 1928"; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 71, 104.

<sup>552</sup> Leland Fulwider Junior, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Apr. 23, 1990), 1-2, 6, 7-8, 16, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Leland Fulwider Junior; Armstead Want, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (May 5, 1990), 12, 14, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Armstead Want; Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (June 22, 1990), 5, 9, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy; Doran Lincoln, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (April 25, 1990), 2, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Doran Lincoln; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 92-93, 102-104.

and resist the indignities and dehumanizing forces of racial capitalist development. Their sense of past and present was shaped more by collective memories of colonialism and the racist directions of regional industrialization than by processes of civilization, assimilation, and progress. In a significant sense, they had more in common with other displaced working people of different tribal, racial, and national backgrounds than with farmers and other regional employers whom BIA officials had imagined as their role models.

***The Crisis of Power and Shifting Strategies of Race Management in the Great Depression***

The Great Depression deepened the existing polarizations of wealth and power in Round Valley and the broader Mendocino Country region. It intensified efforts among employers and political leaders to manage the volatile social conditions at hand. It also enhanced the sense of cultural and political affinities that existed among aggrieved indigenous and immigrant working communities. Depression era conditions combined with state and federal law to further undermine Round Valley Indians' ability to supplement their families' food supply by hunting and fishing. Declining agricultural prices not only made it exceedingly difficult for those living on allotted lands to hold on to what remained of their property; it also led employers to pass on their financial burden to workers, contributing to reductions in wages and rising unemployment among both

Native and non-Native working-class communities.<sup>553</sup> By the early 1930s, one White observer noted that “The Indians fall in the same social class as the white fruit tramps.”<sup>554</sup>

Round Valley Indians’ refusal to submit to the subordinating forces of racial capitalist development confronted policymakers and employers with the unsustainability of the allotment system and the existing system of power relations. It became increasingly clear to elites and administrators by the early 1930s that Round Valley Indians had not become, and were not going to become, the obedient capitalist subjects that they wanted them to be. Officials complained that “The Indians of the Sacramento jurisdiction, outside the true reservations, are too scattered for administration, educational and health services, or cooperative enterprise.”<sup>555</sup> Allotment proved to be a failed policy not only because it failed to produce subordinate subjects spatially confined to the reservation but also because it fueled antagonism between reservation residents and the BIA. According to one BIA agent, the threat of allotment to the broader social order lay in the fact that it “thrust the Indians into an economic, spiritual, and social no-man’s land, and reduced some of them to almost psychopathic resentment.”<sup>556</sup> These anxieties encouraged BIA officials and local elites in Mendocino County to understand the crisis of the Great Depression to be fundamentally “a social problem rather than an economic

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<sup>553</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 178-179.

<sup>554</sup> Transcript of proceedings from a meeting held April 3, 1937, Berkeley Calif., convening representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Resettlement Administration, Indian Service, Heller Foundation, and Indian Defense Association, 15, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 89: 41441-1937."

<sup>555</sup> Minutes from meeting held in San Francisco, Calif. (August 27, 1936), 3, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 80: 30358-1933."

<sup>556</sup> "A Birdseye View of Indian Policy, Historic and Contemporary," report submitted to the Subcommittee of the Appropriation Committee of the House of Representatives (Dec. 30, 1935), 2, Mendocino County Historical Society, Ukiah, Calif., Folder: Round Valley Indians.

one.”<sup>557</sup> By 1932, there was pressing concern among government officials regarding the need for a fundamental shift in Indian policy in order to stabilize unrest and resolve “the Indian problems we have here in California.”<sup>558</sup>

The shift toward a policy of promoting liberal self-governance on the reservation, enshrined in the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) in 1934, embodied the federal government’s effort to resolve the so-called “Indian problem” from the top down. The IRA, popularly known as the “Indian New Deal” marked a departure from allotment, established Indian community control over unallotted and trust-status lands, and provided for the establishment of tribal governments and corporate charters. The IRA was part of an effort to restore administrative oversight to the BIA by consolidating the political activities of Native Americans, and to quell unrest and opposition among Native populations.<sup>559</sup> A key feature of the way it operated was that many aspects of tribal governance were required to fit terms prescribed by the BIA. Ultimately, as ethnic studies scholar Thomas Biolsi has argued, the IRA was an instrument of liberal governance and “a tool of domination.”<sup>560</sup>

The ways that Round Valley Indians responded to and utilized the Indian Reorganization Act illustrates that dominant political institutions remained deeply contested amid efforts by the BIA to consolidate a new corporate-liberal hegemony in the

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<sup>557</sup> Transcript of proceedings from a meeting held April 3, 1937, Berkeley Calif., convening representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Resettlement Administration, Indian Service, Heller Foundation, and Indian Defense Association, 16, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 89: 41441-1937.”

<sup>558</sup> Letter from O. H. Lipps to Lynn J. Frazier, Oct. 17, 1932, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, RG 75, California, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 45, Folder: Senatorial Investigation Committee, 1932.”

<sup>559</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 199; Thomas Biolsi, “‘Indian Self-Government’ as a Technique of Domination,” *American Indian Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 23-28.

<sup>560</sup> Biolsi, “‘Indian Self-Government’ as a Technique of Domination.”

wake of the crisis. Attention to practices by which Round Valley Indians contested the policy and its implementation reveals that the aspirations and political imaginations of IRA's subject populations within the Round Valley region often differed from those of the policymakers who crafted the measure. Some Round Valley residents opposed the measure outright, viewing it as a part of a system that would only undermine Native autonomy by deepening their reliance on the government and re-subordinating them to the authority of the Sacramento Agency and Bureau of Indian Affairs. For instance, Ida Mary Willits Soares, who was born in 1917 and was seventeen years old at the time of the IRA's enactment, recalled that her mother and her mother's friend Mary Clark "said that [the IRA] is the worst thing that could happen to the Indian. They done enough. Let him try to go on, let him be responsible for himself. You people going to cause them to be nothing but, but all you fellows gonna destroy us. Don't let us be dependent on that government like that. We got to learn to travel on."<sup>561</sup>

Others saw in the act an opportunity to expand what maneuvering room they had, to gain fuller control over their land, resources, and lives. A flood of letters that the Sacramento Agency received from Round Valley Indians in the wake of the IRA's enactment reveals that Native expectations for the policy frequently exceeded of those who designed the policy. The letters revealed popular attitudes toward many provisions of the IRA. For starters, the specifications of Indian status that the IRA used to determine who could vote on the policy and have access to its benefits—includes such status signifiers as ward or non-ward Indian, living on the reservation or off, as an original

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<sup>561</sup> Ida Mary Willits Soares, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (April 10, 1990), 10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Ida Mary Willits Soares.



allottee or descendant thereof—often had little bearing on the constructions of self-identity among Round Valley Indians. To be sure, many people had to write the Sacramento Agency in order to inquire about their own legal status and to clarify what the IRA meant for them.<sup>562</sup> Many others believed that their self-defined needs and the terms on which they self-identified as Native should qualify them for access to the IRA's benefits and provisions, only to find out that the BIA refused to consider their claims.<sup>563</sup> The divergence between popular and official definitions of who deserved the benefits of the IRA underscored that the status designations outlined by the IRA did not reflect or connect with the ways Native people understood themselves.

Many people asked about or asserted what they believed ought to be the provisions of the IRA, in the process laying bear the limits and contradictions of the policy. For example, As Ivye Ortinier wrote to Roy Nash in August 1935, "Are these homes in this self governing communities to be bought and paid for by the Indians on

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<sup>562</sup> Letter from May Logan Garner to O. H. Lipps, June 8, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from Vera Lesofske to O. H. Lipps, Dec. 17, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3."

<sup>563</sup> Letter from Roy Nash to R. Belden, August 6, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from O. H. Lipps to Georgia O'Connell, July 19, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from O. H. Lipps to Mr. and Mrs. Ed Rea, July 14, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from O. H. Lipps to R. W. Belden, Sept. 4, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from O. H. Lipps to Stephen Knight, Nov. 2, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from O. H. Lipps to May Logan Garner, June 10, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3."

borrowed money from the government, or are these homes to be a payment to the Indians from the government which already owes us?"<sup>564</sup> Many sent letters articulating either hopes or expectations that the IRA should provide them with homes, building supplies, school grounds, or access to historical tribal land claims, all of which exceeded the intentions of officials who oversaw the IRA's drafting and implementation.<sup>565</sup> Some readily identified the IRA as part of a longer history of Indian policy that had been utilized by government officials and their allies to disfranchise and dispossess Native subjects. For example, R. Belden Sr. wrote to O. H. Lipps, noting that he had seen in the newspaper that the government was "going to give the Indian some help." Belden

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<sup>564</sup> Underline in original. Letter from Ivye Ortinier to Roy Nash, August 13, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3." Ortinier received a reply from Roy Nash stating clearly that, "funds will be borrowed and must be repaid." Letter from Roy Nash to Ivye Ortinier, August 16, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3." Ortinier wrote a similar letter to O. H. Lipps, Letter from Ivye Ortinier to O. H. Lipps, July 1, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3."

<sup>565</sup> Letter from Ivye Ortinier to O. H. Lipps, July 1, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from Ivye Ortinier to Roy Nash, August 13, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from Mary Duncan to Roy Nash, Nov. 7, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 262: Native Arts"; Letter from Georgia Campbell to Roy Nash, Nov. 7, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 262: Native Arts"; Letter from R. Belden to O. H. Lipps, Sept. 3, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from R. Belden to "Sir," July 31, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from Georgia O'Connell to O. H. Lipps, July 17, 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3"; Letter from William Stillwell to O. H. Lipps, Aug. 8, 1934, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3."

asserted his need for a house, stating “Ive got no house ase my House Burnt Down and I will need a Plow and Water Pipe and Lumber [sic].” Belden followed his request with a question, however, that revealed his skepticism about the prospect of justice under the new policy: “Hase the Cort of Claim Settle the California Indian Case Yet Ore hase it been Pigeon Hold like they Did in 1852 [sic].” According to Belden, the U.S. government bore responsibility for the destruction of Native lands, economy, and ways of life, and settling the claims of Indians in the region was necessary if “White man is good on his promise.”<sup>566</sup>

Given the divergence between official and grassroots definitions of identity, indigeneity, and indigenous people’s needs and desires, it is not surprising that some Round Valley Indians held a dismissive attitude toward tribal politics after the IRA provided for the organization of a tribal council at Round Valley and the drafting of a tribal constitution. “I never did think much of it [tribal politics],” Rachel Logan noted.<sup>567</sup> Some of those who attempted to get involved in the tribal council were excluded from participation. For example, Ernestine Ray’s mother, Mary Louise Crane “tried to get there [into the tribal council] but they didn’t want her there.”<sup>568</sup> At the same time, some of those who did have access to participation in the tribal council and saw it as a vehicle

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<sup>566</sup> Letter from R. Belden Sr. to O. H. Lipps, July 1935, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 4: Wheeler-Howard Act, #3.” Regarding Belden’s reference to efforts to settle treaty claims, see “Indians Will Meet to Discuss Claims,” *Willits News*, Sept. 1, 1933, 3, and “Indians Will Meet at Cloverdale Sat.,” *Willits News*, Sept. 14, 1934, 4. Also, Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 9, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>567</sup> Rachel Logan, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (April 1990), 4, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Rachel Logan.

<sup>568</sup> Mary Louise Crane can also be found under her married name, Mary Clark. I use her maiden name here, because this is how Ernestine Ray referenced her. Ernestine Ray, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (April 1990), 1, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Ernestine Ray.

for defending the rights and interests of Native people, attempted to use the council toward such ends.<sup>569</sup>

Formal channels of politics remained a severely constrained arena for political engagement throughout the 1930s, offering little opportunity for Round Valley Indians to represent or pursue their needs and desires on their own terms. As Little Lake-Redwood William Frazier remarked in a letter he submitted to the BIA in 1932, the political establishment and mainstream of local society seemed “content with seeing the Indian a vanquished race,” and as a result, “Our true condition has never been know[n], there has never been anyone to look below the surface—the brighter side has always been presented.” Frazier continued, “As I write today my heart goes out to my people. I see and understand the Indian conditions as only an Indian can. . . . We have never had a voice, there has been no one we could appeal to. . . . There must be a voice somewhere where the Indians of Round Valley can make itself heard. There must exist authority somewhere where these conditions and needs can and will be considered.”<sup>570</sup> According to Frazier, the system of political representation that prevailed at the time did little more than make Indians “absolutely dependent but no one to depend on.”<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Letter from John G. Rockwell to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, July 7, 1941, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 21: 76401-1939”; Transcript of proceedings from a meeting held April 3, 1937, Berkeley Calif., convening representatives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Resettlement Administration, Indian Service, Heller Foundation, and Indian Defense Association, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 89: 41441-1937.”

<sup>570</sup> William Frazier to Lynn Frazier, Oct. 2, 1932, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, RG 75, California, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 45, Folder: Senatorial Investigation Committee, 1932.” Regarding Frazier’s tribal heritage as Little Lake and Redwood Indian, see Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 202.

<sup>571</sup> William Frazier to Lynn Frazier, Oct. 2, 1932, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, RG 75, California, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 45, Folder: Senatorial Investigation Committee, 1932.”

*Alternative Visions and Circulations of Struggle in Round Valley*

Against dominant efforts to define the terms of Indian life, land, and identity, Round Valley Indians continued to define themselves through social and cultural practices outside the discretion of BIA officials and the broader political establishment. In the process, they situated themselves as part of a broader culture of grassroots opposition and struggles for dignity, against racial capitalist articulations of power. They gave expression to forms of indigenous subjectivity that exceeded narrow definitions imposed by the BIA from the top-down, and that hinged instead on a more open-ended conceptualization of the struggle for dignity that linked aggrieved communities across lines of race, gender, nationality, and locality.<sup>572</sup>

At the same time that local society and dominant culture promoted narrow and tokenizing depictions of what authentic “Native culture” was and ought to be, indigenous communities projected conceptualizations of themselves as part of a wider world of transnational, multiracial cultural struggle. Culture, as Stuart Hall has urged us to see, is itself “a sort of constant battlefield. A battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost.” It is an arena where struggles both “for and against a culture of the powerful” are engaged, and at the same time, “it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle.”<sup>573</sup> During the 1930s, Native self-assertions and identifications with other ethnic and racial working communities—in the vicinity of Round Valley Reservation and far beyond it—acquired

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<sup>572</sup> Alvarez, “Reggae Rhythms in Dignity’s Diaspora,” 575-597.

<sup>573</sup> Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” 187, 192.

their fullest expression on the terrain of culture. Round Valley Indians did not dismiss formal political channels as necessary sites for addressing the limits and failures of dominant institutions and wresting important concessions from policymakers and elites. Yet, they did recognize that the political possibilities available to them within these channels were inherently confined by the terms of the powerful.<sup>574</sup> Where dominant institutions gave them little room for maneuver, little meaningful participation or self-representation, culture gave Round Valley Indians the space and tools they needed to redefine politics on their own terms. Through culture, Round Valley Indians were able to generate what C. L. R. James characterized as “new words, new verse, new passwords” of struggle, and what Paul Gilroy describes as “qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association.” They created new kinds of relations both among aggrieved communities and between those communities and the dominant bloc.<sup>575</sup> For Round Valley Indians amid the crisis of the 1930s, cultural politics provided an avenue for expressing an alternative vision of the world, of the past, present, and possible futures of development, which departed starkly from that which was imposed on them by forces beyond their control. The vision brought to life by their art, their music, and their spiritual and religious practices, revolved around a politics of dignity and autonomy that

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<sup>574</sup> This description of the necessity and limitations of formal political channels draws on Paul Gilroy’s notion of the “politics of fulfilment,” that is, “the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished.” Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 133-134. To regard culture as a wider arena of political possibility is not to suggest that it is not also (like formal politics) an uneven terrain that is shaped and impacted by dominant forces. As Stuart Hall notes, “there is a continuous and necessarily uneven an unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganize and reorganize popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms.” Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” 187.

<sup>575</sup> C. L. R. James qtd. in Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 374; The quote from Paul Gilroy comes from his definitions of what he calls “the politics of transfiguration.” See Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 133-134.

did not subsume or marginalize difference but embraced it. Theirs was a politics that did not seek to erect boundaries between the struggles of different people but rather was anchored in a sense of their fundamental interconnectivity.

Music was a necessary and constitutive element of the imagining of alternative avenues of belonging, social membership, and participation in Round Valley during the 1930s. Scholars of music have long acknowledged its role in the making of dialogues and collective memories among people across disparate geographies and generations, especially those of non-dominant and aggrieved groups. From the blues people of the Mississippi delta to the *corrideros* of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, historically marginalized groups have fashioned identities and circulated ideas, values, and emotions through music.<sup>576</sup> This is equally true for Native Californians who survived American colonization and removal and who lived in and near Round Valley during the 1930s. As Round Valley resident of Yuki and Filipino descent William Oandasan explains, Round Valley Indians have long harbored a deep-rooted appreciation for the intimate relationship between “song and story.” The link was more than aesthetic, however. “On the broadest level it is a kind of entertainment,” Oandasan notes, “[b]ut it is also a way of teaching lessons,” conveying “stories of origin,” of “creation”, and “implement[ing] history in the telling.”<sup>577</sup> In the words of Hopi-Miwok anthropologist and artist Wendy Rose, the knowledge that has emerged from the historical struggles of those who descended from the first people of California entails a recognition that “song and dance

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<sup>576</sup> For seminal examples, see LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*; Woods, *Development Arrested*; Américo Paredes, *With a Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and His Hero* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).

<sup>577</sup> William Oandasan, “The Poet is a Voice: Interview with William Oandasan 2/12/85,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 4-5.

and story are one; together they are life itself.” As Rose explains, songs simultaneously carry the voices of “ancestor, individual, and descendant” and pulses “of sensation, inspiration, expression and awareness.” She urges attention to the fact that musician, artist, and poet alike are “not blind to what is happening elsewhere” but are animated by “voices [that] pray in suffering and pain” and, through it all, usher forth “the knowledge of continuance.”<sup>578</sup>

Yet, music’s potential to serve as a source of identification, historical narration, and sustained struggle reaches beyond the sustenance of group-based identities. As Josh Kun writes, music can provide us with “identificatory ‘contact zones,’” that is, “sonic and social spaces where disparate identity-formations, cultures, *and* geographies historically kept and mapped separately are allowed to interact with each other as well as enter into relationship whose consequences for cultural identification are never predetermined.”<sup>579</sup> Historian Luis Alvarez has illuminated the capacity for music to nourish transnational political subjectivities and affinities, to form a kind of diaspora “based not on any single race, ethnic, or place-based identity, but on their shared and ongoing struggles for dignity.”<sup>580</sup> In Depression-era Round Valley, music provided a contact zone and catalyst that linked local indigenous people with a broader diaspora and circulation of struggle among a multiracial, transnational, and intercolonial social majority.

Recalling Elizabeth Willits’ decision to drop out of the reservation school and pick up the trumpet at the beginning of this chapter, it is, of course, not entirely clear what personal imperatives motivated her shift in course. Perhaps she was driven by a

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<sup>578</sup> Wendy Rose, “Introduction,” in William Oandasan, *Round Valley Songs*, iv-v.

<sup>579</sup> Italics in original. Kun, *Audiotopia*, 23. Also see Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads* and Alvarez “Reggae Rhythms in Dignity’s Diaspora.”

<sup>580</sup> Alvarez, “Reggae Rhythms in Dignity’s Diaspora,” 576.



refusal to endure any further the rigid discipline that structured the reservation's educational system. Perhaps she desired either to seek or build an arena in which she could define more fully the contours of her own life. Whatever personal imperatives motivated her, she ultimately found in music a channel for creating, improvising, and experimenting on her own terms, and for fashioning new relationships with her peers, siblings, and the local community. For Willits, and for others with whom she lived, worked, and played, music provided a soundtrack for a different way of being in the world, of relating to and inhabiting local society and translocal circulations of struggle. It was an essential feature of Round Valley residents' efforts to set the rhythm and temporality of their own lives. It animated scenes at Rancherias during after-work hours and filled the halls of house parties, bars, pool halls, and dances where Round Valley residents congregated and socialized.<sup>581</sup> Joe Happy recalled how, "They sing all night, you know. . . . Eat, then sing and sing."<sup>582</sup> According to Happy, music facilitated efforts to "have [a] good time" in a world otherwise filled with harsh realities.<sup>583</sup>

Grassroots musical production in Round Valley not only helped constitute an alternative temporality but also reflected and fostered forms of collectivity that deviated from those that the Bureau of Indian Affairs hoped to encourage among local Indians. Against Indian policies that aimed to secure a gendered division of social roles that

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<sup>581</sup> Leland Fulwider Junior, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Apr. 23, 1990), 7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Leland Fulwider Junior; Armstead Want, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (May 5, 1990), 19, 31, 50, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Armstead Want; Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 7, 10-11, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>582</sup> Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (June 22, 1990), 11, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy.

<sup>583</sup> Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy, oral history interview transcript, interview by Les Lincoln (June 22, 1990), 11, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Agnes Duncan and Joe Happy.

revolved around male-headed nuclear families and values of female domesticity, Willits' musical collaborations with her male friends enabled her to place herself on an equal footing with her male counterparts, to hone her skills while contributing to a larger collective creative project. "So we would all join together and change over and play," Elizabeth Willits explained. "The boys would play one song or two for a [quadrille] and then we'd play a waltz," sometimes "just to entertain ourselves," and other times "for the dance to go on—our old time dances and parties."<sup>584</sup>

The instruments and genres that Round Valley musicians played reflected a transregional and transnational cultural dialogue that reached across seemingly distant geographic localities and racial and ethnic communities, well beyond the boundaries of the reservation to which policymakers hoped to confine them, and beyond the boundaries of the nation-state within which reformers hoped to incorporate them. To be sure, the fiddles, guitars, trumpets, and banjos that were used so commonly in the music that Round Valley residents played during the 1930s had historical roots in grassroots struggles far beyond the local region. The tunes that local bands played contributed to a dialogue that linked working-class cultures and communities in Mendocino County with those in the Deep South, the Appalachian Mountains, Harlem, and Los Angeles' Central Avenue. In addition to jazz, waltzes, and gospel, they played "western dances, a lot of that."<sup>585</sup> The freedom with which Round Valley players employed different instruments and moved across boundaries of musical genre suggests a definition of art that centered on collaborative and improvised modes of creativity and performance, rather than

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<sup>584</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 7-8, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>585</sup> Leland Fulwider Junior, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Apr. 23, 1990), 7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Leland Fulwider Junior.

mastery of a specific, compartmentalized craft or canon.<sup>586</sup> Moreover, the variety of popular and folk musics that they performed, with roots in different ethnic and cultural traditions, challenged boundaries of racial essentialism and authenticity and belied the alleged cohesion of American national cultural forms. For example, at the same time that jazz music was increasingly commodified and minstrelized in American mass culture, contributing to a multiethnic but still racially exclusive White melting pot, the affinity that Willits and her band felt for a “rhythm type of jazz” registered an oppositional jazz epistemology that linked them less with a national body politic than with a transnational circulation of grassroots struggle.<sup>587</sup>

At the same time that the music Round Valley residents played linked them to a broader, intergenerational and transregional cultural dialogue, it also enabled them to move about in physical space at the local level in new ways, and to transform the spaces into which they entered. While Native musicians were excluded from many local venues, they created their own spaces to practice and play. Armstead Want noted that “they played down . . . at the dance down there in the grove” and, according to Acklan Willits, in “those little cabins back there.”<sup>588</sup> Edwin Peters noted, “[we] use to have dances all

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<sup>586</sup> Lipsitz, *Footsteps in the Dark*, 84-85.

<sup>587</sup> Regarding oppositional and anti-essentialist epistemologies in jazz, see Kevin Fellezs, “Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz,” in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, ed. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 69-110. Also regarding the politics of difference and racial anti-essentialism in music, see George Lipsitz, “Cruising around the Historical Bloc: Postmodern and Popular Music in East Los Angeles,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York: Routledge, 1997), 350-359. Regarding the commodification of jazz and uses of minstrelsy in mass culture, see Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise* and Graham Cassano, “Working Class Self Fashioning in *Swing Time* (1936)” *Critical Sociology* (3 August 2012): 1-19.

<sup>588</sup> Armstead Want, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (May 5, 1990), 31, 50, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Armstead Want.

the time.”<sup>589</sup> Against the efforts of policymakers to confine Indian life to reservations, Round Valley Indians used music as a vehicle for carving out an alternative social geography. On occasions when a segregated venue would allow Native residents into and establishment, it was typically to play music for Anglo audiences. Most often, however, their bands played for working-class and non-White audiences. “I traveled up and down the country working for different ranches and different places and playing music,” Elizabeth Willits noted.<sup>590</sup>

As they contributed to a dialogue among seemingly disparate working-class communities, Round Valley musicians also challenged the hegemony of a local culture that had historically hinged on the silence and compliance of Native populations. At a time when radio stations “were for white people,” Elizabeth Willits described how “we Indians went up there, had to pay so much, . . . so much a half an hour. We had to pay to get time on the station. . . . So we played. We got on the station to preach the gospel to the Indians. Let them know we were doing something.”<sup>591</sup> According to Willits, she played “in the ole, this KHSL station over in Chico, California for the American Indian Association with Mr. Freeman’s group for the Pentecostal Association over there. I an, an another girl by the name of Marilyn Mitchell. . . . [W]e played in that little ole radio station there for half an hour an sing a few gospel songs. . . . We went on the air over there an we had to, ah, like you, you have a piano sitting here, what you was going to play. Then you had the instruments, played over there in that radio station when I was

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<sup>589</sup> Leland Fulwider Junior, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Apr. 23, 1990), 7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Leland Fulwider Junior.

<sup>590</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 10-11, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>591</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 8, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

young. When we was going around preaching the gospel, we was, and helping the gospel, helping spreading.”<sup>592</sup> To the extent that radio enabled the widened circulation of music by young Native women like Willits and Mitchell, the medium contained generative possibilities for challenging the constraints of race, class, and gender that impinged on the lives of those who lived at the intersection of multiple patterns of social and political oppression. Despite its usually exclusionary boundaries and undoubtedly entrepreneurial motives, the KHSL station’s radio broadcasts perhaps unwittingly provided a vehicle for differentiated visions of dignity and grassroots empowerment.

Moreover, as a channel for spreading local grassroots articulations of Pentecostal religion, Willits’ and Mitchell’s radio engagements also draw attention to the intimate interconnection between the ways Round Valley Indians’ cultural struggles bridged the distinction between art and politics and their deep-seated struggles for spiritual liberation. On the surface, the notion of spreading the gospel to indigenous communities through radio waves might have seemed like a tame and unthreatening act to some observers. However, as a conduit for the construction of grassroots epistemologies, Pentecostalism in fact held transgressive political potential for Round Valley cultural struggles during the Great Depression. Alongside, and sometimes central to, grassroots music and other cultural and leisure practices, Pentecostalism flourished as a religious movement in the vicinity of Round Valley during this period. Given the confluence of multiethnic music and Pentecostalism as modes of cultural struggle in the region, it is not surprising that Elizabeth Willits gained a significant part of her musical education in the Pentecostal

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<sup>592</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 7-8, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

Church. As she put it, “that’s where I got a lot of training from sitting an playing in old Pentecostal Church.”<sup>593</sup> Examining more fully the role of Pentecostalism in shaping and nurturing Round Valley cultural struggles urges consideration of the ways in which grassroots struggles for dignity and autonomy were for many as much a spiritual as a political and cultural endeavor.

From deep-rooted animistic beliefs that emphasized the interconnectivity and interdependency of all living things, to the proliferation of the Earth Lodge Religion (a variant of the Ghost Dance, whereby dancing and living in subterranean houses protected participants from the apocalypse) between the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries—spiritual and religious beliefs had long been part of the way Round Valley Indians established their relationship to the world around them, generated and circulated moral and political values, and defined the contours of their communities.<sup>594</sup> The Depression era witnessed the burgeoning of a Pentecostal movement in Round Valley that not only situated reservation residents within a tradition of worship and fellowship that was embraced by multiethnic working populations across the globe but also helped sustain emancipatory struggles at the local level and in the arena of everyday life.<sup>595</sup>

Pentecostalism first came to Round Valley in spring of 1929, when Pit River Indian and African American Pentecostal preacher E. F. Wilkes led a revival in the assembly hall of the reservation’s Methodist church.<sup>596</sup> Wilkes came at the invitation of

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<sup>593</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 7, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>594</sup> Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 71-72, 93-94.

<sup>595</sup> Allan H. Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>596</sup> Letter from L. A. Dorrington to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Nov. 18, 1929, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75,

Methodist preacher Reverend Leon Schillinger, a longtime Indian rights advocate who had garnered a reputation among local government officials as one who was “not in sympathy with the administration.”<sup>597</sup> The appeal of Pentecostalism spread rapidly not only among Indian communities “representing all tribes on the reservation” but also among both Indian and non-Indian communities beyond the reservation.<sup>598</sup> Among those who were drawn to the Pentecostal movement in this period were many of those who had been at the helm of Native protests in the region during the 1920s, suggesting that participation in the church might be seen as an extension of longstanding struggle and oppositional subjectivity.<sup>599</sup> By 1931, local adherents of Pentecostalism pooled their energy and resources to build a church building of their own. A humble, “barnlike” structure on a half-acre parcel donated by Yuki residents Lucy and Ralph Moore, the church was both an outgrowth of and an engine for community life in Round Valley throughout the 1930s.<sup>600</sup> In 1937, the church reportedly had around 100 regularly attending members, representing an intertribal, multiethnic, and interracial cross-section

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Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches”; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 194

<sup>597</sup> For an example of Schillinger’s advocacy, see Letter from Rev. Schillinger to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 6, 1928, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 79: 17518-1928”; Schillinger was regarded by administrators as “not in sympathy with the administration.” L. A. Dorrington to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Aug. 6, 1928, 3, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--Archives I, RG 75, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, Sacramento Area Office, Box 79: 17518-1928.”

<sup>598</sup> George Foster, “A Summary of Yuki Culture” 219; Letter from L. A. Dorrington to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Nov. 18, 1929, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches”; Letter from Assistant Commissioner to O. H. Lipps, Oct. 2, 1931, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches.”

<sup>599</sup> “Petition: We the undersigned are very much interested in the Penticostal movement [sic.] . . . ,” (n.d.), William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches.”

<sup>600</sup> Foster, “A Summary of Yuki Culture,” 219; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 198.

of the local working-class population.<sup>601</sup>

Not all local residents welcomed the growth of Pentecostalism in Round Valley. Some Round Valley Indians rejected the movement on racial grounds, frowning particularly on the fact that the church's preacher was of mixed "Indian Negro blood."<sup>602</sup> Others saw the church as a cultural aberration and insisted that it was "not preaching or teaching on educating principles."<sup>603</sup> The most hostile reactions against the movement, however, came from more well-to-do Anglo residents in the region surrounding the reservation. While many applauded the way that Pentecostalism seemed to encourage more conservative social behavior among Round Valley Indians—including ushering in a decline in drinking, gambling, and the enjoyment of other "worldly pleasures"—the interracial character of the congregation and the lack of internal hierarchy among members disturbed the region's racial order and upset dominant notions of proper gender and social behavior. As a whole, the movement appeared to many as a serious "detriment to the morals and peace," as well as overall stability, of local society.<sup>604</sup>

Broadly speaking, the appeal of Pentecostalism among Round Valley Indians and other working people in the Round Valley region can be explained in part as a result of

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<sup>601</sup> Foster, "A Summary of Yuki Culture," 219-220.

<sup>602</sup> "Prayer of Petition," Feb. 25, 1930, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches."

<sup>603</sup> "Prayer of Petition," Feb. 25, 1930, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches."

<sup>604</sup> Regarding those who celebrated the apparent social conservatism that Pentecostalism, Letter from L. A. Dorrington to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Nov. 18, 1929, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches"; Foster, "A Summary of Yuki Culture," 221; Bauer, *We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here*, 196, 198; regarding the destabilizing effect of Pentecostalism for social relations in the region, see B. Clark to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, February 6, 1930, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: "National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches."



aspects of the religion that made it popular among working-class communities worldwide.<sup>605</sup> From its inception in the Azusa Street Revival, Pentecostalism drew its congregation overwhelmingly from economically, racially, and culturally marginalized communities. The Pentecostal church's rejection of forms of hierarchy that structured other churches and its insistence on the potential for all people to have a direct and unmediated relationship with God offered an inclusive and participatory environment to people who faced exclusion in many other arenas of life.<sup>606</sup> Moreover, its liturgical emphasis on the poor, uneducated, and working-class character of Jesus' disciples and the corrupting power of wealth bolstered its aura as a religion of the people. The fact that most Pentecostal preachers in the early-twentieth century tended to hail from poor and working-class communities with little or no formal education reinforced Pentecostal churches' tendency to operate with minimal financial resources, in buildings that ranged from storefronts to private homes and granary buildings, in the same regions of cities and towns that were home to aggrieved communities.<sup>607</sup>

While part of a global working-class movement, Round Valley's Pentecostal movement also took on a unique shape of its own, as local adherents both built on and enlisted local traditions of struggle and spirituality in their practice of the religion. In his study of Pentecostalism's ascendance in Round Valley, anthropologist Gordon MacGregor observed in 1936 that local Indians actively and assertively "identified the old Indian religion with the Pentecostal Christian religion." According to MacGregor,

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<sup>605</sup> Regarding the global dimensions of Pentecostalism, see Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth*.

<sup>606</sup> It is worth noting that aspects of the religion that made it distinctly appealing among multiethnic working class people were precisely the features of that elites tended to fear most.

<sup>607</sup> I credit Michael Widener for his insight into the resonance of Pentecostalism among working class communities during the early twentieth century. Conversation with Michael Widener, June 19, 2013.

Pentecostal churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike were accustomed to viewing supernatural figures of indigenous cosmology like the Silver Fox, “representative of the ‘Great Spirit,’” and Coyote, “a mischievous figure in old legends,” as “only Indian terms for God and the Devil.”<sup>608</sup> There were also continuities between Native healing practices and Pentecostalism’s emphasis on faith-based healing. One woman who attended Round Valley’s Pentecostal church witnessed the curing of a fellow member by a Native healer in the congregation who used “ancient medicine and preaching.” According to the woman, the healer “got his power through Jesus Christ” and cured “just like the men in the Bible, by laying on his hands.”<sup>609</sup> The continuities were also clear to anthropologist George Foster, who came to observe the Pentecostal movement in Round Valley for two months in 1937. In Foster’s words, the Pentecostal Church in Round Valley “is interesting both because it is the one really vital force in Indian life today, . . . and because it is, in my opinion, merely the latest recurrence of an aboriginal religious pattern which made the Yuki susceptible to the Ghost Dance of the seventies as well as to foreign beliefs associated with the little understood Central California Kuksu cult.”<sup>610</sup> As they engaged syncretic practices that combined older forms of spiritualism with newer ones, indigenous adherents of Pentecostalism in Round Valley made the religion their own while also giving new meaning to it in the process.<sup>611</sup>

At the same time that its broader transnational appeal and continuities with Native

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<sup>608</sup> Gordon MacGregor, “Report of the Pit River Indians of California,” (Office on Indian Affairs: Applied Anthropology Unit, 1936), digitized version at [http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/tethorne/Historyskills/Dr\\_%20Gordon%20Macgregor%20Pit%20River.htm](http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/tethorne/Historyskills/Dr_%20Gordon%20Macgregor%20Pit%20River.htm), accessed March 4, 2014.

<sup>609</sup> Gordon MacGregor, “Report of the Pit River Indians of California,” (Office on Indian Affairs: Applied Anthropology Unit, 1936), digitized version at [http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/tethorne/Historyskills/Dr\\_%20Gordon%20Macgregor%20Pit%20River.htm](http://faculty.humanities.uci.edu/tethorne/Historyskills/Dr_%20Gordon%20Macgregor%20Pit%20River.htm), accessed March 4, 2014.

<sup>610</sup> Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” 219.

<sup>611</sup> As Kent Lightfoot has underscored, this was an old practice that dated back earlier stages of Spanish missionary colonialism. Lightfoot, *Indians Missionaries and Merchants*, 183.

spiritual traditions help to illuminate the resonance of Pentecostalism among Round Valley Indians, the significance of the movement for these communities cannot be fully understood without considering its implications for their daily lives during the late 1920s and 1930s. Pentecostalism offered an outlet for forms of self-expression, spiritual exploration, and creativity that were discouraged, prohibited, and even punished in broader society. Churchgoers maintained a demonstrative style of worship. They garnered a reputation for singing, shouting, and dancing “with wild and uncontrolled bodily and emotional action” and for speaking fervently in an “unknown tongue.”<sup>612</sup> The congregation’s rituals stood in striking juxtaposition to the practices of the longer-established local Catholic and Methodist churches and defied normative codes of gender and social behavior that governed broader social order.<sup>613</sup>

The church also promoted forms of social relations that deviated—and in the views of some observers, threatened—forces of individualism and competition that settlers and elites had attempted to impose on Native people in Round. The church’s notion of fellowship hinged on the importance of “brotherly love toward all.”<sup>614</sup> Even with masculinist inflection of its notions of “brotherhood,” the value that Pentecostal congregations placed on mutuality, cooperation, and a collective struggle for salvation served as a powerful counterforce to the individualism that structured many other faith traditions as well as the discourse of political economic advancement in the region. The

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<sup>612</sup> Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” 219-200; Letter from L. L. Loofbouroe to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Feb. 20, 1930, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches.”

<sup>613</sup> Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” 219-200; Letter from L. L. Loofbouroe to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Feb. 20, 1930, William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: “National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 173: Churches.”

<sup>614</sup> Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” 219.

communitarian emphasis of the Pentecostal church perhaps cannot be seen more readily anywhere other than in its ritual practice of the testimonial service. Testimonial services were a regular fixture of Pentecostalism. In them, members offered personal stories about the workings of God in their lives, while the group offered support and prayers to each participant. For the aggrieved communities who comprised the local Pentecostal congregation, testimonial services and other similar practices served as a kind of dialogue in which members leaned on each other and helped each other to get through the challenges of the day. It was one of many ways in which the church served as a sort of vessel for building trust and fostering community among the diverse constituents who attended.<sup>615</sup>

Music played an especially critical role in virtually all of the Pentecostal church's activities. Music was a means of gathering the congregation's expressions of praise, sorrow, desire, and tribulation into a common creative endeavor, with a synchronized rhythm and a loose enough structure to allow for spontaneous shifts in emotions to give shape to the songs as the service proceeded. As was common practice across most all Pentecostal churches, Round Valley services opened, closed, and were interspersed throughout with songs. Next to the pulpit at the front of the church, a choir orchestra helped guide the melody of the congregation, though members in the congregation frequently initiated songs that moved them, "suggesting numbers from well-worn hymnals" and altering the course of the gathering as they did so.<sup>616</sup> Instruments that the Round Valley congregation incorporated in their services included a pipe organ, guitar,

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<sup>615</sup> Phone conversation with Michael Widener, June, 19, 2013.

<sup>616</sup> Foster, "Summary of Yuki Culture," 220.

and a whole bunch of tambourines. Members without instruments “tapped [their] feet in time to the music and [clapped their hands,] thighs as well as hinds.”<sup>617</sup> According to George Foster, the music served as accompaniment to “prayers [that] were simple, for the most part repetitions of snatches of the Lord’s prayer, bits of other prayers, original and spontaneous additions, all interspersed with [such praises as] ‘Glory to God,’ ‘Praise the Lord,’ ‘Hallelujah.’”<sup>618</sup> Songs gave expression to desires and pursuits of salvation, emancipation, and empowerment. For example, one hymn went as follows: “Oh, there’s power, power, wonder-working power, in the blood, in the blood of the lamb of the lamb. Oh, there’s power, power, wonder-working power, in the precious blood of the lamb.”<sup>619</sup> Another hymn of Round Valley’s Pentecostal church was “Paradise Valley,” a variation on the classic folk tune, “Red River Valley,” which also inspired a Woodie Guthrie recording and a version about the Spanish Civil War that was entitled “Jarama Valley.”<sup>620</sup>

Altogether, Round Valley Pentecostal musical practices might be considered a means of seeking transformation in the current moment while fostering hopes for a brighter future ahead. According to George Foster, “The valley whites are much opposed to the entire movement, feeling that the strange antics that go on are neither religious nor conducive to quiet among the Indians.”<sup>621</sup> Yet those who were drawn to the movement saw in it a world of transformative and liberatory possibilities. As reservation resident Maggie Dorman explained in 1937, “I’ve been a lifelong Methodist, and was married in the church fifty-three years ago. But I go to the service, and come out feeling just the

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>619</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>620</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., 221.

way I did when I went in. But when I go to the Pentecostal Church, I come out feeling free and uplifted.” This, Dorman asserted, constituted what she considered to be “true religion.”<sup>622</sup>

At the same time that Round Valley Indians’ cultural and religious practices addressed and exceeded the limits of dominant political institutions, they should not be regarded as separate or wholly distinct from the domains of those institutions. In fact, as an arena that nurtured new imaginings of the norms of political participation, cultural production in 1930s Round Valley in many cases reshaped and energized concerted grassroots efforts for structural social change in formal and electoral channels. On the one hand, the cultural worlds generated by Round Valley’s Pentecostal church, its music scene, and other cultural formations during the 1930s reflected and nurtured the multivalent political identities that Round Valley Indians had constructed over the longer fetch of their historical struggles. On the other hand, they also encouraged new forms of political collaborations among local communities on a variety of political valences.

The cultural politics that Round Valley Indians forged in schools, at work, in pool halls and churches animated their coordinated efforts to challenge structures of oppression and imperialism at the local level and beyond. For instance, Elizabeth Willits recalled how she and her band linked their aesthetics to progressive and anticolonial struggles that became organized at in the Round Valley region during this period:

All the Indians then at that time was beginning to fight the federal government . . . for the California Indians Claim Commission. They’ve, they were fighting for their hundred and fifty, whatever they call it on there. . . . So that’s how we ah, begin to form again out band, begin to form to play music to raise money to send our delegates back to

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<sup>622</sup> Maggie Dorman, qtd. in Foster, “Summary of Yuki Culture,” 221.

Washington to talk for our Indians' rights and to be recognized as people. So that we could get some benefits out of the government or see this government for what they was holding back from us. Such as education, and, and schools and not letting us ah, ah, being, going to into public places. . . .

. . . Mr. Cordova down in the Sonoma County area, working to help us Indians getting ahead on these bills to go to Washington, D.C. so that the younger generation of Indians could get their rights to go to school, to get these programs set up an they knew when they went into it and study it for while, these things were set up that the Native Americans had the right to have these educational systems set up for them. . . . [T]hese other Indians organized and found out an they had lawyers. So they all went in, that's how they begin to move and that's how our band got interested in playing music for different organizations.<sup>623</sup>

For Willits, and for other Native women in Round Valley, the struggle against settler colonialism and racism was inseparable from the struggle against sexism and patriarchy. She participated in and played music for several local women's clubs, including the Pomo Women's Club, which formed during this period to address the cumulative vulnerabilities of Round Valley Indian women. Despite the tribal orientation of its name, the Pomo Women's Club linked Indian women across tribal lines "to promote the political and social welfare of our race."<sup>624</sup> As she described, "They formed their little clubs there and we played music there. I and my brother, Richard Willits, an Inez Oliver, she played with us."<sup>625</sup>

At the same time that they organized around the particular needs and aspirations of Native women and those of the pan-Indian community, Willits and her bandmates also

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<sup>623</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 8-10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

<sup>624</sup> Pomo Mother's Club [elsewhere also called Pomo Women's Club] Constitution and By-Laws, n.d., William J. Bauer, Jr. Research Files, Box 1, folder: " National Archives and Records Administration--San Bruno, CA, RG 75, Sacramento Area Office, Coded Records, 1910-1958, Box 25: Pomo Women's Club, 1943."

<sup>625</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.

recognized and mobilized around political linkages between Native struggles for justice and autonomy in Round Valley and battles for liberation in colonized territories beyond U.S. borders. The collaboration between Willits' band and the local band of Filipino musicians described at the beginning of this chapter offers a case in point. In playing banjo with Aguilar's band "every other Saturday night" and "making [her] life with them," she defined for herself a sense of identity and belonging that departed radically from that envisioned by the political establishment and main currents of White society in the transition from allotment to the IRA. Furthermore, in "play[ing] with the Filipinos' band there," "sending money over to their land," and actively supporting people struggling in the Philippines against American imperialism, Willits and her friends contributed to the making of new expressions of libratory politics. They enacted an emergent vision of intercolonial solidarity and multiethnic working-class autonomy that revolved around an awareness of the interdependence of differentiated grassroots struggles for dignity, against the subordinating forces of racial capitalist development.<sup>626</sup>

The definitions of crisis and visions of liberation that Round Valley Indians constructed through their aesthetic, religious, leisure, and other cultural practices presented a radical alternative to those that dominated major channels of political debate and economic planning during the Great Depression. While political leaders at local and national levels clamored to enhance their ability to manage the region's working-class populations, restore stability to the regional economy, and achieve some semblance of social equilibrium, Round Valley Indians intensified their defiance against the social

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<sup>626</sup> Elizabeth Lenore Willits, oral history interview transcript, interview by Acklan Willits (Nov. 11, 1990), 10, Round Valley Oral History Project, Box 1, folder: Elizabeth Willits.



boundaries and divisions that so profoundly shaped their lives. Against the IRA's injunction to tighten structures of political control by spatially consolidating their communities on the reservation, Round Valley Indians continually looked across social divisions to recognize the history of struggle they shared with other aggrieved communities. Without dismissing or eliding the differentiated nature of gender, tribal, ethnic, racial, and national affiliations, the emancipatory visions advanced by Round Valley Indians in this period cast their local struggles as part of a broader, multifaceted struggle that was global in scope.

## Conclusion

*The language and thought of revolution cannot be a prose which sees volcanoes as mountains: it is necessarily a poetry which understands mountains as volcanoes, an imagination which reaches out towards unseen passions, unseen capacities, unseen knowledges and power-to-do, unseen dignities.*

—John Holloway<sup>627</sup>

*History itself has encoded upon it a tool for libratory consciousness. . . . If we choose to enact the tool of history . . . then we begin to build another story, uncovering the untold to consciously remake the narrative.*

—Emma Pérez<sup>628</sup>

Philippines-born author, farm worker, and labor organizer Carlos Bulosan wrote dozens of poems and stories over the course of his years living and working California's fields and cities during the 1930s. He penned the short story, "My California," to convey something of the spirit that animated his writings during that era. As the title suggests, Bulosan's story is driven largely by a desire to reclaim the land of California for its people. Refusing prevailing structures of property ownership and entitlement, as well as dominant systems of capitalist value and virtue, Bulosan used writing as a medium to reimagine the industrial landscape on his own terms. Bulosan described his California as "a magic world," shaped as much by his own "enchanted vision" and deep "feeling of affinity" as by the "signs of industry" that brought him to the place and stretched "for miles around." Where entrepreneurs, planners, and policymakers saw commodifiable resources and potential for profit, Bulosan "found beauty and poetry in every living thing." As he described, "The lettuce fields in Salinas, where I had worked with Mexicans and members of my own race for a while, were like a deep valley inundated

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<sup>627</sup> Holloway, *Crack Capitalism*, 225.

<sup>628</sup> Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 127.

with glittering dews. The grapevines in Bakersfield resembled the inimitable symmetry of the Sierra Madre mountains in my own province. The cantaloupe patches in Imperial Valley were like a motionless, sleeping son, especially at night when the moon and the stars shone brilliantly in the sky.” In Los Angeles, Bulosan “walked around the city a great deal,” taking in the sights of its “streets and buildings and places.” In San Francisco, “I would follow Market Street to the end and then take a bus to the Embarcadero, smelling the salty tang of the sea and hearing the expressive speech of the dock workers.” From Pismo Beach, to Santa Barbara, to San Diego, “I would walk on the beach and look across the water, watching the small ships and barges moving in the wind, . . . I would remember my native land beyond the wide ocean” with a mixture of “great sadness” and “secret pride.” As Bulosan described, “I was beginning to feel that California . . . was not a part of the United States,” but rather, “a complete world in itself.”<sup>629</sup>

The vision of California that Bulosan outlined was defined to a significant degree by the interconnections between its geographic features, natural resources, and people. For him, California was a place where land and ocean, fields and cities, and diverse populations from across the globe met. Rather than an exemplar of American nationhood, Bulosan saw California as a global intersection, a site of transnational crossing and cultural convergence. Rather than a model of social progress or modernity, he cast it as a place where the past shaped the present, and where the future was not predetermined. Yet, the sense of place in California that Bulosan described was inseparable from the sense of belonging that his story conveyed. This was *his* California,

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<sup>629</sup> Carlos Bulosan, “My California,” n.d. Carlos Bulosan Papers, Vertical file, 1534.

after all. “[N]ot a part of the United States” but “a complete world unto itself,” this was a California in which Bulosan situated himself not within tidy categories of national, racial, or place-based identity. Rather, Bulosan saw himself, in California, as part of a wider circulation of grassroots struggle.

This dissertation has pursued the central question of how working-class people and communities in California made sense of prevailing conditions, pursued self-defined needs and aspirations, and sought to make their lives livable during the Great Depression. While most literature on the topic emphasizes the emergence of a unifying social-democratic politics and multicultural American identity among working-class people during the 1930s, my research suggests that significant currents of grassroots movements pursued an alternative politics of grassroots surrealism. Rather than mobilizing around a unifying class-based agenda or a homogenizing national identity, the people and communities at the center of this dissertation coalesced around their shared insubordination to the varied forms of dehumanization they faced. Theirs was a multiracialist politics of dignity and autonomy that was transregional and transnational in scope and open-ended in its ideological orientation. This was a politics grounded in opposition to forces of racism, imperialism, and capitalism in the everyday lives of working people. It pursued social change not strictly through efforts to negotiate with employers at the workplace or to lobby government officials in municipal, state, and national channels, but through the assertive self-activity and self-definition of grassroots communities.

The surrealist expressions of California’s aggrieved communities assumed different forms in different local contexts, with different limits and possibilities for

emancipatory struggles. Evolving reciprocally with the direct-action campaigns and strikes that punctuated the era, grassroots surrealist political imaginations relied fundamentally on political work that occurred on the terrain of culture. While grassroots cultural politics in themselves were not adequate means to wrest concessions from elites, much less to topple structures of power, the direct-action campaigns that proved so critical to the making of structural political and economic change during the 1930s would have been unimaginable without them. Cultural forms sustained and regenerated grassroots struggles for dignity, challenged the legitimacy of prevailing power relations, and generated social visions that fueled social movements.

Just as attention to surrealist currents in California's Depression-era oppositional culture highlights the interplay between culture and politics in the making of struggles for social change, it also underscores the interdependence of movements, places, and people that scholars have tended to treat in isolation. As much in the political economic synthesis that governed regional capitalist development in California on the eve of the Great Depression as in the oppositional culture that crystallized there during the 1930s, urban and rural spaces, industrial, agricultural, and commercial work, and the lives of the diverse people who performed these types of work were fundamentally intertwined. For many of the people and communities who comprised California's multiethnic working class during 1930s, the relationship between differentiated grassroots struggles for survival and dignity was an intuitively interdependent one. Their multifaceted struggles for liberation engendered and affirmed alternative aspirations for the future of development, and alternative visions of global modernization.

Attending to the ways in which grassroots struggles for dignity and autonomy threatened prevailing patterns of regional development in the 1930s underscores the social foundations of the era's crisis and the endemic tendency of capitalism toward crisis. Rather than a strictly economic event, precipitated suddenly by the crash of 1929, the crisis of capitalism that marked the conjuncture of the 1930s had roots in the problems that capitalist development created for people during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. For the displaced, impoverished, and racially aggrieved populations who comprised the region's social majorities, the Great Depression marked not the inauguration but the intensification and generalization of longstanding patterns of dehumanization. It also entailed a breakdown of control among prevailing political and economic institutions, opening up space and possibility for change. For elites and leaders of the racial capitalist development regime, this breakdown of control, dramatized and exacerbated by the upsurge of grassroots insubordination, defined the era's crisis. The task of developing new strategies for effective social management provided a driving force for the redefinition of liberalism and the making of the New Deal order.

As one of the most politically polarized regions of the country throughout the 1930s, California lent urgency to broader, national efforts to resolve the crisis and to re-stabilize the capitalist economy. In summer of 1934, veteran journalist and chief investigator for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) Lorena Hickok traveled to California as part of her assignment to document the progress of relief efforts across the western states in the early stages of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. What she

found was a political situation she described as “a pretty hopeless mess.”<sup>630</sup> In her view, however, the main problem at hand was not the conditions of poverty and inequality she witnessed but the unruliness of Californians in the face of federal programs that aimed to restore order. Beyond “heat, depression, bitterness, more heat, terrible poverty, [and] confusion,” Hickok chronicled a widespread loss of faith in national leadership among Californians from across the political spectrum. She decried that large numbers of moderate progressives, labor unions, and rank and file workers had virtually “lost faith in their leaders.” At the same time, she expressed frustration with the “violently anti-administration” attitudes of merchants, businessmen, middle-class conservatives and major metropolitan newspapers, all of whom failed to control the insurgency at the grassroots while actively resisting federal efforts to alleviate the crisis.<sup>631</sup> The problem, in other words, was the disobedience of Californians to national imperatives and the degree of autonomy they claimed for themselves. The general impression Hickok gathered with respect to the impact of federal programs was “so far, very bad. . . . It’s a mess. . . . It’s California politics. . . . God damn it,” she declared in a letter to FERA supervisor Harry Hopkins, “I think we ought to let Japan have this state. Maybe they could straighten it out.”<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, July 1, 1934, 1, Lorena Hickok Papers, Accession No. MS 59-2, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Archives. Hyde Park, N.Y., Box 11, folder: Lorena Hickok reports to Harry Hopkins, May through August 1934.

<sup>631</sup> Lorena Hickok to Aubrey Williams, August 15, 1934, 2, 5, Lorena Hickok Papers, Box 11, folder: Lorena Hickok reports to Harry Hopkins, May through August 1934.

<sup>632</sup> Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, July 1, 1934, 9, Lorena Hickok Papers, Box 11, folder: Lorena Hickok reports to Harry Hopkins, May through August 1934. Also regarding California’s resistance to New Deal order, see Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

Hickok's sarcastic commentary about renouncing California to Japan aside, her assessment about the intractable character of California society and the unsustainability of its political antagonisms were of widespread concern among liberal politicians and intellectuals who sought to save capitalism from itself. A growing number of observers and analysts saw the necessity of redefining the very terms of liberalism in order to secure the future of capitalist development. Not coincidentally, some of the key insights that would help shape the trajectory of New Deal policy during this period came from California-based economists and social scientists who drew on observations of conditions in their home state. At a conference of the Social Science Research Council in June 1932, University of California-Berkeley Agricultural Economist Murray Reed Benedict acknowledged that the rapid modernization of industry had subjected working people "to very adverse conditions." According to his analysis, the combined factors of "sunken capital," "restrictive action by labor groups in the cities," and "the general friction which grows out of inadequate information, fear of the unfamiliar, etc." were key components in the making of the current crisis. To restore "fluidity of capital and labor," Benedict concluded that it was necessary to institute measures to protect farmers' investments, reduce barriers to international trade, and restore the "controllability of production."<sup>633</sup> At this same conference, one of Benedict's colleagues, Mr. Haley, affirmed a sense that

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<sup>633</sup> Murray Reed Benedict, "The Problem of Balance between Agriculture and Industry," presentation given at Social Science Research Conference, San Francisco, California, June 15-17, 1932, transcription in "Notes Social Science Research Conference," Murray Reed Benedict Papers, Carton 7, folder 11.



“the tendency away from laissez faire is almost inevitable because free competition tends to become self-destructive.”<sup>634</sup>

The New Deal had complex implications for Californians. On the one hand, it offered unprecedented concessions to working people, from the legalization of collective bargaining rights, to the redistributive imperatives of a graduated income tax, to a social security system and broader social safety net that encouraged the growth of a sizable middle class leading into the mid-twentieth century.<sup>635</sup> On the other hand, its benefits and protections for working people were deeply circumscribed along lines of race and gender. New Deal programs directed the benefits of unemployment insurance, federal home-loan assistance, and other workforce protections enshrined in the Wagner Act primarily to White men. Due in no small part to the deliberate efforts of Southern Democratic legislators to safeguard Jim Crow segregation, they explicitly excluded agricultural and domestic workers from minimum wage standards and work hour regulations, unionization rights, and the benefits of the Social Security Act.<sup>636</sup> Consequently, New Deal policies played an important role in resurrecting many of the social divisions that had been destabilized by grassroots movements in the early and mid-1930s. They reinforced barriers dividing rural from urban, private from public, masculine from feminine, low-wage and overwhelmingly non-White from higher-wage and overwhelmingly White sectors of the labor market. Ultimately, the New Deal

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<sup>634</sup> Mr. Haley, notes from Social Science Research Conference, Committee II: Social Planning on a Regional, National, and International Basis,” San Francisco, California, June 15, 1932, 4, Murray Reed Benedict Papers, Carton 7, folder 11.

<sup>635</sup> Carole Shammas, “A New Look at Long-Term Trends in Wealth Inequality in the United States,” *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (April 1993): 412-431.

<sup>636</sup> Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005), 22.

worked to secure capitalism through the consolidation of racial and gender subordination.<sup>637</sup>

While New Deal policies drove a wedge into multiracial coalitions that had crystallized amid the crisis, the entry of the United States into the Second World War accelerated the transformation of California's oppositional culture into a patriotic mobilization to defend the interests of the American state. Especially in the wake of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the upwelling of nativist sentiments and racist suspicions about the supposed presence of enemy aliens fueled the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans and reinforced the boundaries of American national culture. Meanwhile, the pressures of defense mobilization, deployment of troops, demands for national unity, and widespread repression of political dissent constricted or closed altogether many of the channels through which Californians had mobilized throughout the 1930s. As the Depression-era victory of the right to strike gave way to a wave of no-strike pledges by labor leaders, the workplace shifted from a site of confrontation between workers and employers to a site for the production of discourses of common purpose and home front unity. It became increasingly clear throughout the 1940s that the new corporatist relationship between unions, employers, and government would do less to support the political participation of rank and file working people than to solidify the power of ruling blocs through the military industrialization of California's economy. In the words of longshore worker and labor organizer Stan Weir, "The coming of war did not strike dumb the people who built the new unionism of the 30s, but it did remove them from the workplaces and the social combinations inside the shops that were the basis of

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<sup>637</sup> Ibid., Chap. 2; Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*, 49.

the organizing drives. . . . Also, it geometrically accelerated the bureaucratization of their unions.” In short, “Social unionism was a war casualty.”<sup>638</sup>

Despite these closures, the shifting contours of the wartime economy should not undercut our sense of the significance of the oppositional culture that Californians built during the 1930s, or of its lasting impact. As George Lipsitz reminds us, within struggles for social change “victory and defeat are not mutually exclusive categories,” and any assessment of the successes and failures of movements must consider not merely the outcomes of the “short-term institutional struggle for power” and “specific concessions” wrested from ruling classes, but the “long-term ideological work of constructing counterhegemonic ideas and institutions.”<sup>639</sup> As sociologist Larry Isaac has similarly urged, social movements can never fully be understood in terms of their role in changing immediate structural realities. Instead, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing that “[a]t root, movements are cultural production agents. Regardless of whatever else they accomplish, they produce new cultural forms in the course of the struggle; they often change and augment mainstream cultural stock in the process, and sometimes live on for generations in collective memory.” No less important than their immediate impacts on power relations, movements “change our awareness, perceptions and sensibilities. . . . [T]hey *move* our culture.”<sup>640</sup>

Despite the reassertions of racial capitalist power that marked the 1940s, the modes of self-activity engaged by California’s grassroots surrealists during the

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<sup>638</sup> Weir, *Singlejack Solidarity*, 285-286. Also see Lichtenstein, *Labor’s War at Home*.

<sup>639</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Struggle for Hegemony,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (June 1988): 148-149.

<sup>640</sup> Italics in original. Larry Isaac, “Movement of Movements: Culture Moves in the Long Civil Rights Struggle,” *Social Forces* 87, no. 1 (September 2008): 36, 47.

Depression era changed the way people understood themselves and the world around them. The thoughts and actions of people struggling for dignity both manifested and affirmed the emancipatory desires of California's social majorities against the universalizing principles of racial capitalist modernization and U.S. imperialism. Moreover, the social ties, cultural affinities, and differentiated notions of working-class dignity that they advanced provided vital sustenance for the protracted struggles of grassroots communities throughout the World War II and postwar eras. In the face of demands for home front unity and McCarthyite political purges that swept progressive organizations in the war's aftermath, the networks of friendship and political affiliation that activists forged in the 1930s served as crucial resources for those who continued to challenge racism, imperialism, patriarchy, and class inequality into the Cold War era. Against the bureaucratic, centralized structure of corporatist political organizations, the creative communities that took shape in 1930s California provided models of participatory democracy and community-based organization that continued to shape ongoing grassroots struggles for liberation. Against emergent discourses of racial liberalism, which bolstered structures of White supremacy beneath a veil of fairness and equal opportunity, the languages of struggle that proliferated in Depression-era California—from swing tunes to Pentecostal rituals—served as repositories for collective historical counter-memories and sources of cultural affirmation.<sup>641</sup>

The multiracialist expressions of working class-dignity and autonomy that

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<sup>641</sup> Luis Alvarez, "From Zoot Suits to Hip Hop: Towards a Relational Chicana/o Studies," *Latino Studies* 5 (2007): 53-75; Alvarez, *The Power of the Zoot*; Widener, "Another City is Possible"; Widener, *Black Arts West*; Widener, "Perhaps the Japanese are to be Thanked"; Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict Sounds of Solidarity*; Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads*; Young, *Soul Power*; Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left*.

California's grassroots surrealists advanced in the midst of the Great Depression laid the foundations for new modes of transnational, interethnic, and multiracial dialogue and solidarity that shaped social justice struggles over the course of the long civil rights era. While the movements of Depression-era Californians did not remake the world according to their desires, they offered a counternarrative of capitalist development that subsequent generations could reference and draw on as they confronted evolving structures of power and oppression. As Paul Gilroy has written, "brotherhood and sisterhood should not be assumed to exist but are waiting to be re-created."<sup>642</sup> Depression-era Californians recreated notions of brotherhood and sisterhood and offer valuable lessons that can help us do so in our current moment.

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<sup>642</sup> Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 12.

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