



REBEL IMAGINARIES

ELIZABETH E. SINE

Labor, Culture,
and Politics in
Depression-Era
California

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For Nicholas, Raymond, and Leah

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PROLOGUE. Capitalism and Crisis in Global California

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, farmworkers, 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 roads, embarking from Ventura and from Eureka in the northern reaches of the state. By January 7, three more groups left from San Francisco, Oakland, and Redding. The ranks of the marchers swelled as they passed through cities, towns, and the countryside, as hundreds and sometimes thousands of people joined in for part or all of the remaining distance.¹

The routes they traveled were well trodden. They trekked along major arteries that every day carried goods from farms, factories, and ships to markets near and far; the same roads were used by itinerant workers and their families to follow shifting and seasonal labor demands. Yet the aims of the marchers who headed to Sacramento in early 1933 were markedly different from those of the others who routinely passed down these same roads.² The marchers were a motley bunch—multiethnic, interracial women, men, and children—who survived on wages from a range of different jobs. They included ethnic Mexican, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinx, African American, and European American textile workers, lumber workers, teamsters, small farmers, agricultural workers, longshore workers, and domestic workers, as well as many who were jobless. Despite their differences, their march was an act of common struggle forged from the political and economic challenges they

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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 struggles 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!"³ 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 on them. At the same time that they called attention to prevailing injustices and pressed for concessions from the region's political establishment, the marchers also gestured toward a broader reimagining of life 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 during the first week of January, on the heels of a nationwide hunger march to Washington, DC, in December 1932. In Alabama, Black and White sharecroppers battled for the right to organize. In Barcelona, Spanish workers clashed with police and called 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.⁴

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 sought to restore "a desirable balance" in industrial and social relations. According to their assessment, such a step was critical to addressing the broader problem of "world unrest."⁵ 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” that exacerbated the “existing breakdown of economic machinery in the present world-wide depression.”⁶ In the months after 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.”⁷

Throughout the country and across the world, the Great Depression generated innumerable attempts to secure a sense of order and shape the future of the global economy. In California such efforts carried particular urgency, precisely because so much was at stake. By the time of the Great Crash in 1929, California stood as a critical node for a world being stitched together by industrial capitalism. Not only was the state a leading global producer of gold, silver, mercury, and several other minerals, but it was also the number-one producer of oil in the world. It brought more agricultural goods to market than any other region of the United States. It was the nation’s leading commercial fishery and one of its largest producers of timber and lumber.⁸ It had 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.⁹ It was a major center of national and global finance, with San Francisco serving as home to the “Wall Street of the West.” Booms in California real estate, tourism, advertising, and motion picture production further made the state a key shaper of mass culture and consumer desire. As a center of global artistic production, California increasingly helped to define the very notions of capitalist modernity and progress that it came to emblemize.¹⁰ 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 World War I. It would subsequently accelerate the country’s emergence as a global superpower by the end of World War II.¹¹

While the concerns of authorities revolved around safeguarding regional development for the future, they also recognized the vital role that California had historically played in shaping the national and global economy. The roots of California’s economic power can be traced backward over a half century before the crash, to developments that simultaneously accelerated California’s incorporation into the United States and its integration into the globalizing capitalist economy. Following the gold discoveries of 1848, the world rushed

in, seeking the wealth California had to offer. At the same time, Californians looked increasingly outward, pursuing 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, Hawai'i, 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."¹²

What political geographer Edward W. Soja has described as the "Californianization of capitalism"—that is, a tilting of the global spatial economy of capitalism toward California—was not strictly a consequence of the region's abundant natural resources, though these did provide the latent potential for such a transformation.¹³ At least as important were the social arrangements that took shape within the state, along with its patterns of resource and social management, which enabled the extraction and development of its resources at a pace and scale that stretched the imaginations of the world's most ambitious entrepreneurs.¹⁴ In sync with the broader history of U.S. western expansion, the advancement of industry, infrastructure, and prosperity in California relied on conquest and unequal arrangements of race and labor. These arrangements in turn subjected the region's diverse Indigenous and immigrant populations to sharp asymmetries of wealth and power and the self-justifying logic of White supremacy.¹⁵ 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 of violence in the very regions of California that generated the most wealth in gold during the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ The completion of huge infrastructure 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 multi-ethnic workforce, which included workers with ethnic ties to China, Japan, India, the Philippines, Mexico, Armenia, Italy, Alaska, Hawai'i, and African American populations in the Deep South.¹⁷

The state's economy continued to expand and diversify during the first three decades of the twentieth century, especially through the growth of manufacturers based in Los Angeles and Southern California. The rise of California's manufacturing sector further concentrated wealth in the hands of industrial elites and tightened the interdependency between the state's economic and political leadership. By the 1920s, industrialists had secured extraordinary sway over local- and state-level policy making, occupying public offices and wielding their organizational power through employers' associations. Virtually without interference from government, and often with the government's outright support, business leaders fixed labor policies within the state and compelled smaller businesses to conform to policies that served the interests of larger ones.¹⁸ The level of political control that California's industrial leaders enjoyed so struck investigators with the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee that they concluded in 1942, after a five-year study of labor-employer relations across the country, that "to a greater degree than this Committee has found elsewhere, associations of employers in California . . . have been able to impose their influence upon the social and economic structure of the state."¹⁹ Concentrated wealth and political power, in other words, had become some of the California economy's most distinguishing characteristics.

As industry grew and diversified, so did the state's labor base. The economy drew large numbers of workers from across the continent and overseas with the promise of comparatively higher wages and better working conditions. At the same time, industrial leaders refined their tactics for cultivating a workforce that was not only large and cheap, especially when compared to the profits it produced, but also fluid, flexible, and docile—characteristics they deemed critical for meeting the needs of a quickly growing and changing economic terrain. Racially targeted hiring, wage differentials, and other discriminatory practices gave rise to a complex, locally varied system of racialized labor segmentation as well as a massive and racially heterogeneous working-class population.²⁰ By 1930 California was among the most diverse states in the nation. Its African American population remained relatively small, especially compared to most southern states, though it did have more African American residents than any other state in the U.S. West. It also contained more non-White people of "other races" than any other state in the union. Although the state as a whole accounted for less than 5 percent of the total U.S. population, it contained roughly 26 percent of the nation's ethnic Mexican inhabitants, 67 percent of its Filipinx, half of its Chinese, and over 70 percent of its Japanese inhabitants.²¹ The

state's White population was also ethnically heterogeneous. Roughly half of its White population comprised first- and second-generation immigrants during the first two decades of the twentieth century, though by the 1920s these populations were becoming outpaced by an influx of U.S.-born whites, especially from the Midwest.²²

Those who came to California during the early twentieth century included large numbers of women, who were drawn to the state by the prospect of jobs and wages, and also the need to perform nonwaged domestic labor to support their husbands and families. From the days of the gold rush and for much of the late nineteenth century, migration to California was overwhelmingly male dominated. Correspondingly, the state's political and cultural institutions were most directly and thoroughly defined by men. Combined, these features led journalist Carey McWilliams to describe California at the turn of the century as "essentially a man's state."²³ By the 1910s and 1920s, the expansion of industry created a new demand for female labor, especially in low-wage and low-skilled positions, and growing numbers of primarily women of color came to fill them. White women increasingly took on this work as well, though the bulk of their labor remained based within their own households.²⁴ As the ratio of male to female California residents approached equilibrium leading into the 1930s, racialized inequality among women and the political dominance of White men continued to permeate gender politics within the state.

What emerged in the region as a result was a patriarchal and multiracist pattern of capitalist modernization that reinforced the boundaries of the national body politic at the same time that it fueled global economic advancement both within and well beyond California's borders. As historians David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch have shown, California was at the "leading edge" in pioneering a distinctly multiracial brand of White supremacy, in which racial differences and divisions among working people served as crucial instruments of population management.²⁵ The "common sense" of race that took hold in California promoted intergroup competition and conflict, which, by inhibiting unity among workers, contributed to the ascendance and durability of regional hierarchies. Racial and gender divisions among working people were a driving force behind Indian removal, Asian exclusion, the quota system inaugurated by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, policies prohibiting miscegenation and interracial marriage, and those authorizing Mexican and Filipinx repatriation. All of these projects, in turn, were foundational to California's annexation, incorporation, and maintenance as part of the American nation-state.²⁶

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 a bounty of natural resources and among the world's most rapidly developing sectors for 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 liked to admit. Underlying its image as a model of modern capitalism's promise were 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 and power on the one hand and the people and land who proved insubordinate to those imperatives on the other.²⁷ In the words of 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 “each wave of migration . . . with fear and trembling.”²⁸ These antagonisms and imbalances, which accompanied and threatened California's development throughout the early twentieth century, were put in stark relief amid the crisis of 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 World War II, 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.²⁹

California experienced some of the earliest signs and some of the most intense symptoms of the crisis that struck the world in the 1930s. The state's agricultural sector was in recession through most of the 1920s. Its construction and real estate markets, which drove regional development during the first decades of the twentieth century, began to decline by 1926. Financial markets

began contracting around the same time, and stock prices in California's major banks fell sharply during the summer of 1928. Employers sought to minimize the impact of the stagnating economy on profits by passing costs on to workers, which meant wage cuts, reductions in consumer spending, and unemployment were all on the rise well before the 1929 stock market crash.³⁰

After the 1929 crash, as a spiral of financial panic and protectionist policies expanded the crisis to global proportions, the fallout in California was especially severe. Just as California's reliance on speculative industries made the state a source of crisis for the national and global economy, it also made it one of the sites where the Depression's devastating consequences were most acutely felt. Unemployment within the state climbed as high as 28 percent, exceeding the historic peak of nationwide unemployment, which reached 25 percent in 1933.³¹ Its social and economic problems were only exacerbated by the dislocations of populations that occurred in this period, especially as California became the prime recipient of interstate migrants from the southern Great Plains following the drought and dust storms that began there in 1933. In all, an estimated 300,000–400,000 Dust Bowl refugees came to California during this period, more than to any other single state.³² In part because of the severity of its internal economic and social tensions, California's political scene was also more polarized than in other parts of the country. The same years that saw California's Democratic Party nominate a lifelong socialist for governor also experienced fierce resistance to reform by reactionaries within the state's right wing. In fact, as historians of the era have noted, conservative opposition to New Deal policies in California appears to have been stronger than in almost any other state.³³

By 1933–34, according to historian Richard Lowitt, California decidedly stood out as “the most chaotic and tumultuous state in the Union.”³⁴ Established authorities were eager to defend their positions and investments, but their legitimacy and their idealized notions of California as a place of inimitable and inevitable prosperity were becoming unglued. For those who had long suffered from inequality and exploitation in California, the Depression signaled the continuation of preexisting struggles, along with the extension of hardships that were already quite familiar. For those who had previously enjoyed moderate levels of financial security and social mobility, the Depression brought new troubles, new suffering, disappointed hopes, and escalated levels of uncertainty. Long-standing social divisions among working people persisted. The outcomes were entirely unforeseeable.

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Introduction

The Politics and Poetics of Rebellion

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, *Crack Capitalism*

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, “Walter Rodney and the Question of Power”

This book investigates the crisis of capitalism in California during the Great Depression and corresponding efforts by people from the grassroots to imagine and pursue their liberation on their own terms. From the upsurge of rural agricultural strike activity in 1928 to the acceleration of urban defense mobilization upon U.S. entry into World War II in 1941, the book’s narrative charts the deepening instability of California’s relationship to the global economy through the everyday self-activity of the region’s social majorities. Its protagonists are less the union leaders and politicians who 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. Despite playing a fundamental role in the making of California, many of them remain unknown. Amid the turmoil and unpredictability of the 1930s, these multiethnic working populations advanced visions of themselves and their world that challenged the dominant political discourses and modes of social organization. They constructed 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 the dignity, autonomy, and freedom that prevailing institutions denied them and expressed alternative imaginings of what life in and beyond the Great Depression might have been. In an era marked by deep uncertainty and radical possibility, *Rebel Imaginaries* traces how these populations made sense of the conditions they confronted, pursued self-defined needs and aspirations, and changed their surroundings and themselves in the process.

During the Depression era, California's social majorities became the subjects of wide-ranging efforts to determine the contours of a modern political order. As people from all parts of society sought to interpret the unfolding conditions and to find a way out of the economic disaster, numerous business and political leaders, professional intellectuals, middle-class reformers, and leaders of nationwide labor and left organizations sought to fashion the lives of California's populations to suit their own political visions. As widely as their agendas varied and as deeply as their objectives sometimes conflicted, these constituencies agreed that social management was necessary to the future of regional development. Together, they nourished a dominant tendency toward a politics of rationalized governance that sought order through disciplined social organization from the top down.

Dominant though it was, this political impetus was far from totalizing. Many people in California pushed back against the forms of subjection they faced and sought dignity in ways that challenged prevailing governance and development patterns. These Californians were as ideologically diverse as those whose authority they contested. They were linked, however, by shared vulnerabilities and shared desires to determine the directions of their own lives. In their daily struggles, they gave rise to a contrasting, sometimes directly oppositional politics of grassroots autonomy that prioritized community-based social organization, creative and collaborative self-definition, and the integral relationship between imagination and transformation.

As this book examines the contestations between these opposing political currents, it reveals how grassroots movements challenged the racialism, nationalism, and rationalism on which California's modernization relied and posited alternative imaginations of modernity. Against the racial divisions that defined regional capitalist development, the grassroots insurgencies that swept California during the 1930s expressed a multiracialism that embraced the differentiated nature of grassroots struggles. Against the national boundaries of social belonging and political participation, they embodied a spirit of internationalism that underscored the interconnectivity of global emancipatory movements. Against the rationalist notions of progress guiding modern Western thought, they advanced a politics of surrealism that regarded the liberation of desire and imagination as an indispensable political priority. These movements criticized sharply not only the alienating forces of the market and the homogenizing pressures of national culture but also the pressures for uniformity that underpinned some calls for political unity. They 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—the movements under investigation here asserted the necessity of imagination to the pursuit of liberation and posited social transformation as an objective without a predetermined end.

Poetry in Times of Crisis

In January 1937, in the midst of an agricultural strike that was holding up the pea harvest across California's Central Coast, Philippine-born writer and labor organizer Carlos Bulosan recalled sitting on the lawn of the San Luis Obispo County jail with his friend José, who had just been released after doing time for his labor organizing activities. Bulosan recounted the words of his comrade that day in his autobiographical account, *America Is in the Heart*. "This is a war between labor and capital," José remarked, acknowledging a perspective on working-class unrest that was held by many. Yet he added, "To our people, however, it is something else. It is an assertion of our right to be humans again."¹ The struggle that José described was not easily encapsulated by protest demands, organizational manifestos, or political platforms. Resisting dehumanization often presumed the necessity of better wages and working conditions. It frequently entailed efforts for fairer access

to wage work and equal citizenship rights. Yet it was never reducible to any of these things. The “right to be humans again”—to make life livable and to claim a sense of dignity that was denied by the established order—might be considered an inherently ambiguous objective. The concept undoubtedly held different meanings for different people and sometimes fueled conflicts among those who sought it. Varied as its contents may have been, it constituted a key animating force behind some of the era’s most tremendous disturbances to the social order.

Although waged and experienced at the local level, the battle that Bulosan described—a battle for a dignified existence, against dehumanization—had much further-reaching social and political implications. Black newspaper editor and activist Charlotta Bass put it another way. In 1939, as the conflicts of the Depression era accelerated the drive toward war across Europe, Bass addressed Los Angeles radio audiences, noting, “We are living in one of the most significant epochs in all history, an age of stupendous conflict, whether military or intellectual.” She explained, “We in America have the sanity to fight our internal battle without recourse to arms. However, in essence, it is the same struggle taking place with bloody horror throughout Europe. It is the same tremendous clash of thought and theory, the same bitter battle of progress and prejudice, hatred of the new and disgust for the old.”² As Bass emphasized, contemporary battles of arms and of ideas were integrally linked in a worldwide conflict over the future of society. The conflict at hand did not revolve strictly around the direction of policies, the selection of political leaders, or the relationship of workers to their employers, although it encompassed all of these. More fundamentally, this was a contest over the horizons of politics. It brought to the fore questions of what could be created and what should be preserved, what was imaginable and what was possible. It entailed clashes over prospects for addressing the contemporary crisis, for rebuilding society and determining the place of people within it. The conflict linked local and national events to international and global ones. From Bulosan’s San Luis Obispo to Bass’s Los Angeles, the efforts of marginalized populations to alter their circumstances and better their lives were not disconnected from the unfolding global conflict but can be seen as constitutive fronts within it. Like their contemporaries in eastern China, the Tigray region of Ethiopia, Spain’s Catalonia, and Anastasio Somoza García-controlled Nicaragua, they asserted claims to dignity and fought the destructive effects of prevailing modernization patterns. Although observers in their time and since have more commonly treated them as the objects of politics than as the subjects, during the Depression

working-class Californians contributed to a broader reshaping of the political terrain within and beyond California.

The perspectives of both Bulosan and Bass urge us to consider how, as much as the Great Depression was marked by soaring inflation, poverty, unemployment, and catastrophic human suffering, it was also an era of intensified conflict between contrasting visions and aspirations for the future. In hindsight, of course, we know a great deal about the era's conflicts and their impacts. Many scholars have chronicled how national efforts to resolve the crisis gave rise to a New Deal order, marked by corporatist expressions of political liberalism and a reconstructed military-industrial economy. They highlight how the New Deal offered unprecedented concessions to working people, from the legalization of collective bargaining rights, to the redistributive effects 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. Increasingly in recent decades, researchers have also revealed how these same measures played an important role in resurrecting many of the social divisions that had been destabilized by grassroots movements in the early and mid-1930s. By directing unemployment insurance, federal home-loan assistance, and other workforce protections primarily to White men, and by explicitly excluding agricultural and domestic workers from their benefits, the New Deal reinforced barriers dividing rural from urban, private from public, masculine from feminine, and low-wage and overwhelmingly non-White from higher-wage and largely White sectors of the labor market. In these respects, the New Deal worked to secure capitalism by consolidating racial and gender-based subordination. We know well, then, that the era's movements did not shape the world according to their visions. We know that, for many, the emergent political order, and the war, did more to shore up social boundaries and intensify exclusion and suffering than to alleviate them.

Yet, before the dust settled and dreams were deferred, the uncertainties of the 1930s presented a widened terrain of political possibility. The crisis wrought by the Depression loosened the hold of established norms and hierarchies, making the future perhaps more unpredictable than ever. The moment intensified fears and anxieties for many, to be sure. For some, it bred hopelessness. But it also nourished dreams of a different world. It opened up space for communities with long histories of political struggle to advance their visions and to reinvent their movements and themselves. In the spirit and pace of "revolutionary time," the movements that emerged and converged in this era generated a momentum that helped some to view their

circumstances in a different light and to work toward reshaping their future with new vigor.³ Despite the political closures that we now know came later, in the earlier moments of the crisis those developments were neither foreseeable nor fixed. And the dreams that grew amid the rupture of the age—visions of what might have been—merit a fuller investigation.

California is far from the only site where such dreams can be traced. However, it is an especially valuable site for investigating them. California contained many of the features that came to define modern capitalism during the twentieth century, including agribusiness, manufacturing, commerce, finance, real estate, advertising, tourism, motion pictures, and military development, all supported by the labor of a globalized, multiracial workforce. The state thus offers a cross section of the modernizing U.S. economy that can shed light on broader patterns of capitalist development and crisis. Moreover, as a major center of global economic advancement and growth, California was also a place where political stakes were especially high, political attitudes were especially polarized, and political antagonisms grew especially intense, making the contours of political struggles within the state distinctly visible and ripe for investigation. In other words, in addition to serving as a central node of the developing global economy in the early twentieth century, California also puts into relief the ways people have experienced, made sense of, and responded to these same phenomena. Despite the particularities that defined them, the struggles of Californians during the Great Depression had profound resonance with and relevance to popular struggles well beyond their local and regional context.

Amid the chaos of the crisis, many competing forces sought to graft their political visions onto California and the people who inhabited it. Significantly, the different visions of California that crystallized at this time were shaped by divergent interpretations of the crisis itself. For urban and rural industrial elites who controlled the state's resources, markets, and political institutions, the problem of the Depression was in part how to maintain authority and profits in a stagnating economy. As some of the nation's wealthiest and most powerful interests, the state's political and economic leadership had a great deal at stake in the effort to salvage their investments and secure their social positions. Yet inextricable from this imperative was the necessity of responding to the assertion of a new form of social power by the grassroots.⁴ In a general sense, of course, the problem of grassroots insubordination was far from novel. California's elites had proven adept at innovating strategies of social control to contain labor and political disturbances. Yet the grassroots solidarity that elites confronted during the 1930s threatened

the stability of the social order in a new and profound way. The popular movements in this period were of a scope and scale that the region had not previously seen; they traversed divisions that had long ordered capitalist society and undermined the narrative logic that had equated California's ascendance with social progress. In the resulting crisis of power, 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 interemployer organization, urban-rural industrial alliance, and campaigns of co-optation.⁵ Ultimately, 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.⁶

Of course, California's elites were not wholly responsible for suppressing 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 failing 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.⁷ In these and other ways, people across the social spectrum—many of them self-designated agents of the “public good” and seekers of a well-ordered society—disparaged grassroots struggles and fortified dominant power relations. Along with the region's elites, they struggled to contain the grassroots unrest and rebellion.

Meanwhile, across California's multiracial and multiethnic working populations, diverse and seemingly disparate ethnic Mexican, Filipinx, Asian, African American, Native American, and European American communities offered an alternative account of the 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. Just as Bass described the contemporary global conflict, they waged battles for dignity as much through direct-action confrontations as through production of new ideas *about* dignity. 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 foot-dragging 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 expressed social visions that elevated the dignity of ordinary people over the imperatives of building the nation and the market.⁸ They exacted important concessions from elites in the age of the New Deal but also had a lasting impact on the political imaginations 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. Historical 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 fertile ground for advocates of a leftward shift in the Democratic Party and the New Deal, independent progressives who supported Upton Sinclair's End Poverty in California campaign, and those who spurned the nation's electoral system altogether. Californians were Trotskyists, Wobblies, Italian anarchists, and Magonistas.⁹ They promoted an array of ethnic-oriented agendas against discrimination and segregation. They included advocates of racial internationalisms and diasporic anti-imperialisms.¹⁰ The multifaceted terrain of left politics in California calls into question the tendency of scholarship on interwar social movements to treat the Communist Party as the central pivot of popular efforts for social change.¹¹ 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 the party-affiliated movements that took hold in the region were fundamentally shaped by local conditions and locally driven concerns.¹² 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 constituted California’s popular front political milieu.¹³

Proceeding from this broadened framework, this book departs from narrower understandings of the popular front as a highly specific political formation that emerged from the Communist Party in 1934, in which the Comintern abandoned the sectarian tactics of the Third Period for the construction of alliances with liberal and socialist groups in the interest of defeating fascism in Europe.¹⁴ Significantly, even if we were to pursue this more orthodox framework, California’s history complicates the traditional, Moscow-centered narrative we inherit. In fact, as historian Robert W. Cherny has revealed, popular front organizing strategies took shape on the ground in California well before they became the official policy of the party, and, moreover, events in California played an important role in informing the party’s ultimate transition toward building a People’s Front.¹⁵ Building on the insights of Cherny and many others, I use the phrase “popular front” here to reference the broader movement culture that crystallized in California during the Depression era and that gave expression to new political solidarities across racial, ethnic, national, gender, and ideological divisions. Correspondingly, this book seeks a history of the popular front 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 people.

The oppositional culture that crystallized in the 1930s was not monolithic. It was an expression neither of political unity nor of a common identity. Rather, it grew out 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 reflected grassroots efforts to navigate and stand up to the varying forms of dehumanization they faced. It 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. Three of those threads constitute the focus of this book.

First, California's oppositional culture was animated by a *multiracialist* politics that challenged the racial divisions structuring global capitalist development within the state and the U.S. West more broadly. When a lettuce strike in the Imperial Valley in January 1930 drew together Mexican, Filipino, African American, and White workers, ushering in a wave of inter-ethnic mobilizations across the state, agribusiness leaders decried what they viewed as a "young Red revolution" that appeared to be unfolding across the industry.¹⁶ When the surge of multiracial strike activity peaked during the summer of 1934, and San Francisco became the epicenter of a three-month coastwise strike that linked workers of all races and trades and overrode employers' strikebreaking efforts, authorities sought to break up grassroots solidarities with tear gas, clubs, and guns. Even beyond the front lines of industrial conflict, in the seemingly more benign contexts of everyday life, interracial socialization and affiliations provoked the shuttering of dance halls, raids on organizational meetings, and the destruction of works of art. As authorities well recognized, such multiracial practices of working-class association complicated the operations of California's economy and broader imperatives for social and political order. Moreover, they underscored how Californians were reimagining political solidarities to embrace and value difference.¹⁷

Second, this book also illuminates the *internationalism* that informed the era's popular movements, as they contested the border-policing nationalism that drove the search for order and ultimately framed the New Deal. In 1935 W. E. B. Du Bois's ground-shifting *Black Reconstruction in America* emphasized the inadequacy of a national frame for confronting social injustice within the United States. He urged that the struggles of African Americans and other oppressed people in the United States had to reckon with the global realities of empire, to account for the fact that "in Africa, a black back runs red with the blood of the lash; in India, a brown girl is raped; in China, a coolie starves; in Alabama, seven darkies are more than lynched; while in London, the white limbs of a prostitute are hung with jewels and silk. Flames of jealous murder sweep the earth, while brains of little children smear the hills."¹⁸ The connections were not lost on California's working people; many were immigrants whose lives and familial ties reached across national borders and who were acutely aware of the miseries confronting people beyond the United States. Californians—in writing, speech, and art—conveyed that their own struggles were "but a local phase

of a world problem.”¹⁹ They engaged these ideas in practice as they built international boycotts and solidarity strikes, promoted the rights of transnational migrants, rallied to support Ethiopia in the face of Italy’s invasion, and even took up arms with revolutionary forces in Spain. The international character of California’s oppositional struggles generated alternative practices of citizenship and belonging. At the same time, it also contributed to a broader reshaping of established White-dominated and Western-centric traditions of left internationalism, reinterpreting the possibilities of socialism, communism, and anarchism. Californians regarded popular struggles in disparate localities and nations as interconnected, collectively shaped by incursions of empire, race, and capitalism on a global scale. They saw the solutions to local and domestic problems as lying in the remaking of the wider world.²⁰

Third, Californians embraced a politics of *surrealism* that challenged the rationalist strictures governing American liberal thought. Although it is often cited as part of a litany of artistic and literary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century—alongside postimpressionism, futurism, cubism, fauvism, and Dadaism, among others—surrealism was a movement not strictly of aesthetics but of culture and politics in a much fuller sense. Regarded by its participants as a fundamentally revolutionary movement, surrealism embodied a quest for emancipation from the world’s misery, to create an elevated and more expansive sense of reality.²¹ Californians who engaged and embodied this strain of politics recognized how patterns of oppression relied on a restrained imagination. They saw that material redistribution and, ultimately, liberation required cultural transformation. To this end, they combined conventional strategies of boycotts, strikes, and picket lines with a cultural politics driven toward reenvisioning everyday life. In the artwork that accompanied their protests, in the murals they painted with Works Progress Administration commissions, and in the jazz music that filled their homes, neighborhoods, and dance halls, working-class Californians generated new ideas about democracy and freedom. Applying their cultural politics to more traditional channels of political action, they turned labor unions and electoral politics into sites for redefining solidarity, representation, and participation. They challenged narrow conceptions of art as a mere vehicle for propaganda or as something separate from politics altogether. They countered prevailing tendencies to treat freedom as an abstract ideal or a distant goal. Instead, they treated art and freedom as urgent and integral features of the practice and process of emancipatory political struggle.

In a significant way, *Rebel Imaginaries* is an exploration of the relationship between poetry and rebellion. On one level, the book tells of the cultural expressions and political imaginations—the poetry, so to speak—that emerged from the rebellions of the 1930s. “Poetry” here refers not strictly to the literary form but, in the surrealist sense, to the creative and experimental practice of breaking from inherited strictures, of reimagining and reinventing what exists in ways that might lead to alternative ways of knowing and being. For surrealists, poetry was not just a mode of writing but the source from which a new world might emerge. As Mauritian writer and artist Malcolm de Chazal put it, “Poetry has an aim; absolute human freedom.”²² In this spirit, this study 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 contributed to making a broader oppositional culture.

Yet, even as it examines the poetry that Depression-era Californians generated, on another level this book can also be read as a meditation on rebellion itself *as* a kind of poetry. Struggles for dignity entailed breaking with the structures, rhythms, and patterns that guided and disciplined social life. These battles against subordination also necessarily involved acts of creation, a “moving against the barriers of that which exists,” a “subversion and transcendence of definitions,” as political theorist John Holloway has described it.²³ They reflected a “negation of humiliation” that was simultaneously a reclamation of dignity. They were acts of innovation that required both imagination and improvisation. Borrowing from Martinican theorist Suzanne Césaire, theirs was a struggle “to finally transcend the sordid antinomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages—at last discovering the magic of the mahoulis, drawn directly from living sources.”²⁴ In the end, it was a continuously evolving effort to make freedom reality and to make poetry life.²⁵

The story this book tells about poetry and rebellion in 1930s California is necessarily one of contradiction and contestation. 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 process was 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 of 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, was worth struggling for.

The Art of Labor, the Labor of Art: Culture and Politics in the 1930s

Working-class culture is widely regarded as a critical axis of the conflicts and crises 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 reflecting 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.²⁶ 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."²⁷ Denning's work has been seminal in shifting our gaze beyond the activities of formal political organizations and bringing culture into focus as a category of historical analysis. Rejecting a narrow focus either on official channels of the Communist Party or on battles waged strictly at the point of production, Denning argues powerfully that the social movements of the 1930s and 1940s reshaped American culture through a more diffuse and multifaceted range of contestations over meaning and identity. Particularly productively, Denning underscores the significance of ethnicity in the making of the working-class culture he explores. The historical bloc that defines what he calls "the Age of the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations]" was largely the product of an immigrant working class. Moreover, he emphasizes, it was first- and second-generation immigrant workers' experiences of ethnic subordination that fueled their engagement with some of the era's most distinctive cultural forms and, ultimately, their contributions to a "pan-ethnic" redefinition of both Americanism and internationalism.²⁸

As generative as Denning's work has been for studies of working-class identity, movements, and culture in the 1930s and 1940s, in casting workers' struggles and politics within the frame of American culture's "laboring," his work also confines our understanding of the popular front in significant ways. More specifically, even as he seeks to capture the wide-ranging and multidimensional character of the era's movements, his approach nonetheless eclipses some of those movements' heterogeneity and short-circuits the insurgent character of the imagination that animated them. Most gravely of all, in binding the fate of multiethnic communities to a trajectory of laboring, such an analysis risks reimposing the very structures of oppression from which many in these communities sought liberation. As historian David R. Roediger has urged, while "labor radicalisms are *part*" of what fueled working-class struggles in the 1930s, "they do not exhaust dreams for a new world."²⁹

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.³⁰ 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 Breton, 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. Unlike other early twentieth-century avant-gardes such as postimpressionism, futurism, cubism, and fauvism, surrealism drew momentum from liberatory struggles occurring outside Europe and from a vantage point that was distinctly anti-Eurocentric.³¹ 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 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 important, 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.³²

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 constituted 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 we heed Kelley's assertion that "politics is not separate from lived experience or the imagined world of what is possible; to the contrary, politics is about these things."³³

The point here is not to suggest that all forms of grassroots struggle and resistance can simply be subsumed under the classification of "surrealist." Nor is it to imply that surrealist expressions of politics are somehow better or more important than others.³⁴ Rather than deploying surrealism either as a unifying, umbrella-like construct or as a marker of political superiority, I draw on it as a resource that bursts open the containers through which we often view different forms of political activity. The insights that surrealism offers might assist us in looking beyond the terms of order we have inherited, to explore the fuller range of inventiveness, creativity, and political possibility generated by people at the grassroots.³⁵ From this vantage point, surrealism lends us a route to expand and multiply, rather than consolidate or enclose, the kinds of politics that can be imagined, interpreted, and enacted—in the past as well as, perhaps, the present.

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—engaged a politics born out of the embattled circumstances of everyday life and driven toward the manifold goal of making life livable. At the heart of their endeavors was a refusal of the conditions and classifications that capitalist modernization imposed on their lives and an impulse to move beyond them. They 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, variability, and intersectionality of a wider array of popular struggles against subordination. Theirs was a multiracialist and internationalist 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.³⁶

Considering the politics of Depression-era social movements through the frame of surrealism reshuffles the ways we understand the key political dilemmas confronting working people in the 1930s. For most, the problem of politics 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 the priorities of creative autonomy and democratic participation.³⁷ 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 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 work sites, 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.

Policy, too, proved an important fulcrum for Depression-era oppositional movements. Efforts to impact policy at local, state, and national levels were critical to grassroots efforts to survive and respond to prevailing injustices and to the incursions of the militarized racial state. In political education

drives, ballot-box measures, and electoral campaigns, Californians made claims on legal rights and public goods and redrew the boundaries of the nation itself. Their initiatives reflected more than an attempt to gain inclusion within existing institutions; they advanced a social warrant that mandated a redistribution of resources and transformed the meanings of citizenship, representation, and political participation, with substantive structural consequences for people in and beyond California.³⁸

Yet neither workplace- nor policy-centered movements ever encompassed the totality of grassroots political activities or emancipatory hopes. For many aggrieved and working-class communities in the 1930s, life conditions demanded more than access and inclusion within existing institutions or the fulfillment of modernity's promises; they made necessary 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*."³⁹ Resisting dehumanization implied cultivating new ideas about labor and leisure, new ways of living and belonging, and new modes of social relations.⁴⁰ For innovations of this sort, established discourses, aesthetic conventions, and avenues of political participation were important and strategic but never sufficient modes of expression. For this reason, much of the work of liberatory struggle occurred, as anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott has put it, "like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum," on that wider terrain of politics we call culture.⁴¹ 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."⁴² 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."⁴³

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 struggle for transformation and hegemony.⁴⁴ The point here is not to posit work and art, politics 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.

Cultural expressions in themselves cannot transform the world. They do not “topple regimes, break chains, or stop bullets.”⁴⁵ In fact, they often reinforce prevailing structures of power and provide means of accommodating to existing conditions. However, as cultural 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.”⁴⁶ 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.”⁴⁷

In examining California’s Depression-era “revolution in culture” on the terms of the people who created it, 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 transnational patterns that Earl Lewis has called “overlapping diasporas.”⁴⁸ 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 to a fully industrialized and multicultural Golden State by the mid-twentieth century, this book 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 different localities and valences—across what Latinx 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).⁴⁹ 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].”⁵⁰

Organization

What follows is an examination of the making of California’s grassroots oppositional culture as an interethnic, multiracial, and transregional phenomenon. It moves across rural and urban divisions in California’s landscape, to illuminate the expressions of grassroots radicalism that emerged through contestations over labor, policy, and art. It reveals the multiracialist, internationalist, and surrealist politics that animated California’s oppositional culture, ultimately showing how everyday Californians challenged racial capitalist development and American imperialism. While each of these political currents receives varying levels of attention within different parts of the chapters that follow, all three elements are present and integrally shape the narrative throughout all parts of the text.

Part I examines radical currents of grassroots politics in sites of industrial labor. It begins in the rural, industrialized agricultural region of the Imperial Valley, where a lettuce strike by Mexican, Filipinx, African American, and White workers in January 1930 marked one of the earliest upsurges of multiracial, industry-wide collective direct action during the Great Depression. Chapter 1 takes the 1930 lettuce strike and subsequent formation of the multiracial Agricultural Workers’ Industrial League as a point of departure for examining the crystallization of an oppositional grassroots politics of multiracialism. As multiracial, cross-trade strike activity in agriculture peaked in 1933–34, political tensions in California’s commercial capital also reached a boiling point. In the spring of 1934, the major port city of San Francisco became the epicenter of a coastwise waterfront strike and the site of the largest and longest general strike in U.S. history since the general strike of the slaves during the Civil War. Chapter 2 examines how mobilizations for workplace democracy on San Francisco’s waterfront in the summer of 1934 became a site on which Black, Asian, Latinx, and White workers linked wide-ranging struggles against racial capitalist development in the city.

Part II examines how established channels of policy making became vehicles for grassroots radicalisms that redefined the role of the state and reimagined the nature of citizenship. Chapter 3 examines grassroots responses to repatriation policies and to the wave of deportations that swept California

during the 1930s. From targeted populations' informal social and cultural practices to the immigrants' rights activism of groups like El Congreso de Pueblos de Habla Española (Spanish-Speaking People's Congress) and the Committee for the Protection of Filipino Rights, the chapter investigates how grassroots actions reconceptualized national belonging, political participation, and rights. Chapter 4 explores the shifting coalitional solidarities and tensions that shaped efforts toward a leftward shift in the Democratic Party in California. Taking Upton Sinclair's gubernatorial campaign in 1934 as a point of departure, it examines how efforts to take over California's Democratic Party and to harness it to grassroots needs and interests presented new possibilities and limitations for grassroots movements.

Part III shifts the lens away from sites and moments of direct political confrontation to examine the production and circulation of oppositional culture in wider ambits of grassroots struggle. Chapter 5 examines how art served as a critical battleground for working-class residents of Los Angeles—the culture industry's capital and a nationwide pacesetter for open-shop unionism. The chapter focuses especially on the ways Angelenos utilized public visual art, community theater, and jazz to advance oppositional forms of cultural representation and expressions of belonging and identity. Chapter 6 deepens the investigation of jazz culture's radical potential, to reveal how jazz expanded the range of frequencies through which Native people in and around Northern California's Round Valley Reservation imagined their liberation, challenged the assumed separation of the physical from the spiritual, and redefined relationships across tribal affiliations and ethnic populations.

Examining how Depression-era Californians sought to make their lives livable across each of these 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 sites as a small sampling of the many movements that made up the region's Depression-era political landscape illuminates how grassroots expressions of multiracialism, internationalism, and 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 radicalisms manifested themselves in the liberatory 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 and community, and even in expressions of identity that reinforced social exclusions and divisions. These radical currents were not confined to a specific location or to a group of

people with a specific racial, ethnic, or gender affiliation. They cannot properly be understood as a specific strategy of organizing or protest. They were not ideologies. As the movements that unfolded across California reveal, the political imaginations that crystallized at the grassroots during the 1930s embodied the pervasive contradiction of the age between aspirations for dignity and those for social transformation. In the struggles they animated lie crucial lessons concerning the relationships among struggle, freedom dreams, solidarity, and social change.

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1. *Western Worker*, January 2, 1933, 1–2; *Western Worker*, January 9, 1933, 1; and Sam Darcy, radio address for station KTAB San Francisco, January 5, 1933, box 2, folder 25, Sam Darcy Papers, TAM 124, Tamiment Library and Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

2. *Western Worker*, January 2, 1933, 2.

3. Clinton Clark, *Remember My Sacrifice: The Autobiography of Clinton Clark, Tenant Farm Organizer and Early Civil Rights Activist* (Baton Rouge: 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; and *Western Worker*, January 23, 1933, 4.

4. “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; and “Insurrection in Nicaragua,” *Western Worker*, January 9, 1933, 2.

5. Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, Report to Plenary Session by the Committee on Social Planning, July 16–17, 1932, 11, carton 7, folder 11, Murray Reed Benedict Papers, BANC MSS 2009/109, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and meeting minutes, Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, June 15, 1932, morning session, Clift Hotel, San Francisco, 1, carton 7, folder 11, Murray Reed Benedict Papers.

6. 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?” carton 12, folder 16, Murray Reed Benedict Papers; and meeting minutes, Social Science Research Conference of the Pacific Coast, June 15, 1932, morning session, 2.

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7. Bernard Baruch, quoted in John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (New York: Pluto, 2010), 196.
8. 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): 172–73.
9. 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: University of California Press, 2001), 103–4.
10. Major works on California art include Stephanie Barron, Ilene Fort, and Sheri Bernstein, *Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Paul Karlstrom, ed., *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Peter Plagens, *Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Richard Cándida Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham, NC: 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: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Kevin Starr, *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
11. Walker, "California's Golden Road to Riches"; and Paul A. David and Gavin Wright, "Increasing Returns and the Genesis of American Resource Abundance," *Industrial and Corporate Change* 6, no. 2 (1997): 203–45. Regarding the 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: University of California Press, 2014); Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989), chap. 8; Allen John Scott and Edward W. Soja, *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); and Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946; Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 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); and Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910–1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
12. Karl Marx to Friedrich Sorge, November 5, 1880, trans. and ed. Leonard E. Mins, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Letters to Americans, 1848–1895* (New York: International

Publishers, 1953), 126. Mins's translation was previously published in *Science and Society* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1938).

13. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, 190.

14. Walker, "California's Golden Road to Riches."

15. See especially Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 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, 1769–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and James N. Gregory, "The West and Workers, 1870–1930," in *A Companion to the American West*, ed. William Deverell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 240–55. For early seminal works on this subject, see Mario Barrera, *Race and Class in the Southwest: A Theory of Racial Inequality* (Notre Dame, IN: 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 in the region were not isolated experiments 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).

16. Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 120–30.

17. Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 120–30; and Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), esp. 269–91.

18. Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (1949; Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1971), 129–30, 138–39.

19. U.S. Senate Committee on Education and Labor, *Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor, Report No. 1150, Part 1* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1942), 64–65; and McWilliams, *California*, 129–30.

20. Roediger and Esch, *Production of Difference*, 155–62; and Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*, 13–14.

21. These calculations are based on the 1930 census, which counted "Mexicans" as non-White. This was revised in the 1940 census, which included people of Mexican heritage/ethnicity as part of the White race. Data come from U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population* (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration, 1931–33), vol. 2, *General Report*, table 17, 12, and vol. 3, *Reports by States*, pt. 1, table 2, 233.

22. McWilliams, *California*, 774–75; data come from U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census: Population*, vol. 3, *Reports by States*, pt. 1, table 2, 233.

23. McWilliams, *California*, 81. During the 1850s male California residents outnumbered female California residents by a ratio of twelve to one. By 1850 women constituted just 30 percent of the state's total population, and by 1870 that figure had risen just slightly, to 37 percent.

24. McWilliams, *California*, 81; and U.S. Census Bureau, *Fifteenth Census: Population*, vol. 3, *Reports by States*, pt. 1, table 2, 233.

25. Roediger and Esch, *Production of Difference*, 193–204.
26. See especially Saxton, *Indispensable Enemy*; Nayan Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Peggy Pascoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (London: Oxford University Press, 2010).
27. Regarding this central antagonism between forces of subordination and insubordination, see Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political Origins of Our Time* (1944; Boston: Beacon, 2001); and Holloway, *Change the World*.
28. McWilliams, *California*, 17, 20.
29. Polanyi, *Great Transformation*, 210–11.
30. Robert W. Cherny, Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, and Richard Griswold del Castillo, *Competing Visions: A History of California* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 248–49.
31. Loren B. Chan, “California during the Early 1930s: The Administration of James Rolph, Jr., 1931–1934,” *Southern California Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (1981): 268.
32. James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 6–7.
33. Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. chaps. 6 and 7; Richard Lowitt, *The New Deal and the West* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 172; and Robert E. Burke, *Olson's New Deal in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953), 230.
34. Lowitt, *New Deal and the West*, 175.

INTRODUCTION

1. Quoted in Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 186.
2. Charlotta Bass, November 1939 radio broadcast, “Next week we celebrate the ‘Roosevelt Thanksgiving . . .,’” 2, Additions—box 1, folder: “Articles, 1930s,” Charlotta Bass Collection, MSS 002, Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Los Angeles.
3. Regarding “revolutionary time,” see David R. Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York: Verso, 2014), 14.
4. 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* (1935; Berkeley: University of California Press, 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: University of California Press, 2001), 96–122; Devra Anne Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); and William Issel and Robert W. Cherny, *San Francisco, 1865–1932: Politics, Power, and Urban Development* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

5. See, for example, Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 6; and Laura Renata Martin, "'California's Unemployed Feed Themselves': Conservative Intervention in the Los Angeles Cooperative Movement, 1931–1934," *Pacific Historical Review* 81, no. 1 (February 2013): 33–62.

6. George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), esp. 59–60, 157–81, 341–43; Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930–1980* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

7. Becky M. 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. Gutiérrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); and Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

8. My use of the term "racial capitalism" draws on Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

9. Magonistas were part of a current of anarchosyndicalism that grew out of early twentieth-century Mexico and that was based on the ideas of Ricardo, Enrique, and Jesús Magón.

10. Shelley Streeby, *Radical Sensations: World Movements, Violence, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: 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 20th 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; and Fay M. Blake and H. Morton Newman, "Upton Sinclair's Epic Campaign," *California History* 63, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 305–12.

11. 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); Maurice Isserman, "Notes from Underground," *Nation* 260, no. 23 (June 12, 1995): 846–56; and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996).

12. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: 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, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988); Vicki L. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Bruce Nelson, "Unions and the Popular Front: The West Coast Waterfront in the 1930s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 30 (Fall 1986): 59–78; and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983).

13. 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 antiglobalization movements. See, for example, Tom Mertes, ed., *A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* (New York: Verso, 2004).

14. Seminal works on the political culture of popular front movements include Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1969); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Denning, *Cultural Front*; Fraser and Gerstle, *New Deal Order*; and Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*.

15. Cherny, "Prelude to the Popular Front."

16. Grower, quoted in Benny J. Andrés Jr., *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900–1940* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 147. See also Elizabeth E. Sine, "Grassroots Multiracialism: Imperial Valley Farm Labor and the Making of Popular Front California from Below," *Pacific Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (May 2016): 227–54.

17. For additional examinations of multiracialism in 1930s social movements, see Christina Heatherton, "Relief and Revolution: Southern California Struggles against Unemployment in the 1930s," in *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements across the Pacific*, ed. Moon Ho Jung (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 159–87; and Robert Zecker, "A Road to Peace and Freedom": *The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930–1954* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018).

18. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Free Press, 1992), 728.

19. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Color Line Belts the World," in *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 42.

20. Regarding the international and transnational dimensions of 1930s social movements and the politics of racial, ethnic, and working-class internationalisms more generally, see Zecker, "Road to Peace and Freedom"; Rachel Ida Buff, *Against the Deportation Terror: Organizing for Immigrant Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018); Benjamin Balthasar, *Anti-imperialist Modernism: Race and Transnational Radical Culture from the Great Depression to the*

Cold War (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016); Kenyon Zimmer, *Immigrants against the State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Revolution in New York City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919–1933* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), esp. chap. 2; and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

21. In the words of David Gascoyne, cofounder of the Surrealist Group in England in 1936, “It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally to dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the ‘unreal’ and the ‘real,’ the unconscious and the conscious, and thus to make what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets, the acknowledged common property of all.” Gascoyne, *A Short Survey of Surrealism* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1982), viii, quoted in Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 3.

22. Malcolm de Chazal, quoted in F. Rosemont and Kelley, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, 2.

23. John Holloway, “Dignity’s Revolt,” in *Zapatista! Reinventing Revolution in Mexico*, ed. John Holloway and Eloína Peláez (London: Pluto, 1998), 169, 183.

24. Suzanne Césaire, “1943: Surrealism and Us,” in Penelope Rosemont, ed., *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 136–37.

25. Here I paraphrase Czech surrealist Karel Teige, who proclaimed, “When freedom becomes reality, poetry becomes life.” Quoted in Franklin Rosemont, “Notes on Surrealism as a Revolution against Whiteness,” in “Surrealism: Revolution against Whiteness,” spec. issue, *Race Traitor*, no. 9 (Summer 1998): 19.

26. 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, *New Deal Order*; Cohen, *Making a New Deal*; and Denning, *Cultural Front*. While more recent departures in historiography of the New Deal era have tended to shift the focus from social and cultural histories of the working class to higher levels of New Deal policy making, established analyses of working-class culture that revolve around working-class unity and Americanism continue to shape the narrative. For example, see Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016); and Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, “The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008): 3–32. For a sample critique of Cowie and Salvatore’s analysis, see Nancy MacLean, “Getting New Deal History Wrong,” *International Labor and*

Working-Class History 74 (Fall 2008): 49–55 (MacLean’s article is part of the round-table “Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History”).

27. Denning, *Cultural Front*, xvi–xvii.

28. Denning, *Cultural Front*, 129–32, 238–39. Paul Buhle makes a parallel argument about the role of ethnicity and ethnic subordination in the making of working-class solidarities in Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* (New York: Verso, 2013).

29. David R. Roediger, *History against Misery* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2006), 27 (italics mine). Roediger’s fuller critique of Denning’s work can be found in pages 12–27 of this same text. See also George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis: 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), 137–38.

30. Roediger, *History against Misery*, 19–20; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 4–6; and Gavin Grindon, “Surrealism, Dada, and the Refusal of Work: Autonomy, Activism, and Social Participation in the Radical Avant-Garde,” *Oxford Art Journal* 34, no. 1 (2011): 79–96.

31. F. Rosemont and Kelley, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, 3.

32. 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 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 Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) 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, 1998), 1–18.

33. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 9. In addition to Kelley’s work, 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, eds., *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, CT: Yale University Press, 1985); Elizabeth Faue, *Community of 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): 107–46; and Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

34. For example, Kelley, one of the leading contemporary scholars of surrealism, has produced a rich and expansive body of work chronicling and interpreting modes of grassroots struggle and resistance that reach well beyond a strict understanding of surrealism per se. See, for example, Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe; Race Rebels*; and *Yo Mama’s Dysfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 2008).

35. Cedric J. Robinson, *Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

36. Regarding the rethinking of revolution, freedom, and democracy articulated here, see John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power* (New York: Pluto, 2010), 218–19, 224–25.

37. The dilemma of organizational discipline and working-class self-activity sat at the heart of such foundational texts of the political left as Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, “What Is to Be Done?,” in *Essential Works of Lenin: “What Is to Be Done?” and Other Writings*, ed. Henry Christman (New York: Dover, 1987), 53–176; 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 Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Paul Gilroy’s work on Black cultural politics in Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 15.

38. Regarding the social warrant advanced by 1930s social movements, see George Lipsitz’s afterword to Stan Weir’s memoir: Lipsitz, “Stan Weir: Working Class Visionary,” in *Singlejack Solidarity*, by Stan Weir (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 351–52. Also see George Lipsitz, “Abolition Democracy and Global Justice,” *Comparative American Studies* 2, no. 3 (2004): 273.

39. Ralph Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 1964, 54.

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

41. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.

42. Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 134.

43. Gilroy, *Small Acts*, 134, 137–38.

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

45. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 17.

46. Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" in *Cultural Resistance Reader*, ed. Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso, 2002), 192.
47. 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." Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), x.
48. Earl Lewis, "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," *American Historical Review* 100 (June 1995): 765–87. Brent Hayes Edwards, "Shadow of Shadows," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11, no. 1 (2003): 13. For seminal studies that underscore the West's importance as an illuminator of the role of racial difference in U.S. history, see Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987); and Richard White, "Race Relations in the American West," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1986): 396–416.
49. Juan Flores, "Reclaiming Left Baggage: Some Early Sources for Minority Studies," *Cultural Critique* 59 (Winter 2005): 187–206.
50. Eley, *Forging Democracy*, viii–ix.

1. MULTIRACIAL REBELLION IN CALIFORNIA'S FIELDS

An early form of Chapter 1 appeared in Elizabeth E. Sine, "Grassroots Multiracialism: Imperial Valley Farm Labor and the Making of Popular Front California from Below," *Pacific Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (May 2016): 227–54.

1. The story of the 1930 Imperial Valley lettuce strike has been told many times. For the most thorough and seminal accounts, see Benny J. Andrés Jr., *Power and Control in the Imperial Valley: Nature, Agribusiness, and Workers on the California Borderland, 1900–1940* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2015), 139–42; Gilberto G. González, "Company Unions, the Mexican Consulate, and the Imperial Valley Agri-cultural Strikes, 1928–1934," *Western Historical Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 56–60; Cletus E. Daniel, *Bitter Harvest: A History of California Farmworkers, 1870–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 111–17; Devra Anne Weber, "The Organizing of Mexicano Agricultural Workers: Imperial Valley and Los Angeles, 1928–1934, an Oral History Approach," *Aztlán* 3, no. 2 (1973): 319–21; Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933–1941* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 1969), 147–50; Stuart Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), 81–84; and Frank Spector, *Story of the Imperial Valley* (New York: International Labor Defense, n.d.), 15–19. Regarding the 1928 cantaloupe strike, other earlier work stoppages, and patterns of political repression, see Charles Wollenberg, "Huelga, 1928 Style: The Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Workers' Strike," *Pacific Historical Review* 38, no. 1 (February 1969): 45–58; Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1935; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 212–13; Jamieson, *Labor Unionism in California Agriculture*, 75–78; Louis Bloch, "Report on the Strike of the Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Pickers," in *Mexicans in California: Report of Governor C. C. Young's Mexican Fact-Finding Commit-*