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The Water's Edge:

Empire, Race, and the Global History of Oakland, California, 1848-1980

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

by

Andrew Nelson Carver Klein

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Water's Edge: Empire, Race, and the Global History of Oakland, California, 1848-1980

by

Andrew Nelson Carver Klein

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Robin D.G. Kelley, Chair

This dissertation explores historical intersections between capitalism, race-making, environmental change, and U.S. foreign relations from the vantage of Oakland's waterfront. It tracks the evolution of this geostrategic coastline since it emerged as a coal-powered nexus of railroads, steamships, and military installations during American colonization. Revising the story of Oakland's development from a global perspective, my project documents how local boosters, businessmen, and bureaucrats forged intimate ties with far-flung territories administered by U.S. troops and landowners. Combining social and environmental history with methods from Black studies, I map the transformation of Oakland's fertile estuary into an infilled hub of postindustrial commerce, a vital node of military logistics, and a focal point for racialized labor migration. Simultaneously, this dissertation reveals how, over the long twentieth century, Black, Indigenous, Chinese, and other working-class Oaklanders found footholds on the harbor, often repurposing its imperial routes for dramatically different ends. Drawing on archives and oral histories in Cuba, Hawai'i, and across the continental United States, I trace Oakland's tradition of radical internationalism, most visible in the antiwar and Black Power movements of the sixties, to multi-generational struggles over the governance of coastal land. I argue that

Oakland's waterfront both bridged the continental and overseas expansion of an ascendant world power and came to serve as a proving ground for alternative forms of globalization. "The Water's Edge" therefore offers a critical reappraisal of the generally place-bound history of North American urbanism and far-reaching lessons for building just cities in a present defined by global environmental crises.

The dissertation of Andrew Nelson Carver Klein is approved.

Ananya Roy

Frank Tobias Higbie

Peter James Hudson

Robin D.G. Kelley, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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I am so grateful to have found that community among my fellow graduate student workers at UCLA. I still remember the first of many meals I would share with Bernard Remollino, Masa Yamada, and Michael Dean at Simpang in LA's Palms neighborhood. Ever since, the three of you have brought an abundance of joy, solidarity, and critical inquiry into my

life. That our gatherings, check-ins, and writing workshops have continued despite our physical distance is a testament to your thoughtfulness and care. I am very fortunate, though, to live in the same region as Bernard and his wonderful partner Francesca. Kat and I have cherished the many meals we've shared with the two of you and always look forward to the next one. Since my first day on campus, Marissa Jenrich has been the most wonderful friend I could have hoped for and I am so grateful we landed in the same cohort. From answering my endless questions as we studied for exams to inviting me to family events, you have always made me feel so welcome. Rachel Smith is another friend I was lucky to meet in my cohort. I always look forward to weekly writing sessions with you and Marissa. They are sources of stability and much-needed laughter. My time at UCLA has also been enriched by Marques Vestal. Marques has helped shape my thinking on so many things, from land struggles to what it means to be a comrade and friend. Javier Muñoz, Madina Thiam, Amanda Martínez, Jennifer Cárcamo, Jeanette Charles, Desmond Fonseca, and Chris Abdul Hakim Martínez have all played a vital role in making me feel socially and politically at home in graduate school.

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Graziano and Julia Ryan have held me down for more than half my life. Attending your respective weddings last year was one of the most joyful experiences in my recent memory and getting to know your partners, Clare and André, has been such a treat. Max Mishler and I are not technically related, but we're "cousins" because that seems like the best way to describe our life-long connection. Growing up, Max was an infinite source of life advice and classic hip hop knowledge. More recently, he has been an indispensable mentor, who has steered me through the critical junctures of the doctoral program. I eagerly look forward to the time when I'm only a day's drive from you, Shauna, and Maceo. My New York family—Maya, Vinz, Parker, and Anaïs—have been such a blessing in my life. Time together always gives me the boost I need to keep going. My parents, Ilene and Jeff, raised me with tremendous love and showed me how to live a life devoted to justice. They have each taught me so much about the quiet, persistent labor required to build a better world. They have also made patently clear in their everyday actions that people are not just a means to an end, but worlds in themselves. My stepmom Jinny left us far too soon, but the mark she made on my life and on all of us will never fade. My sister Ray gets me on such a deep level and I'm beyond grateful to have her in my life. She is my teacher, friend, and constant source of emotional support, someone who continues to challenge my thinking and always makes me feel seen. Kat came into my life over a decade ago and completely transformed it. Her love makes me feel fully secure in who I am while also pushing me to live my values to the fullest. Those values and the historical weight I've accorded them owe so much to her wisdom. Kat, you have lighted the way through the darkest times. I can't wait to see where we go next.

Biographical Sketch

Andrew Nelson Carver Klein is a historian of race, cities, and the global United States. Before pursuing his doctoral studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, Klein earned his Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Studies at Harvard University. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Nation*, and *Public Books*.

Introduction

In the spring of 1958, the S.S. William C. Ralston embarked on a final voyage from the eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay. Named for the Gilded Age financier who died by drowning after his San Francisco bank collapsed amid a rapacious frenzy of real-estate deals, the vessel passed under the burnt-orange glow of the Golden Gate Bridge and continued west for over a hundred miles before plunging into the icy depths of the Pacific Ocean.¹ As an obsolete model idling in the National Defense Reserve Fleet, the Ralston was selected to ferry 8,000 tons of expired poison gas from the Oakland-East Bay waterfront to an offshore location where the ship and its cargo would be sunk.² In the weeks prior, shipments of chemical warfare gases had arrived by train from the Navajo Ordnance Depot. The northern Arizona military installation took its name from the Indigenous land on which it stood and from the Native people who, separated from their subsistence ecologies, resorted to employment at the depot for survival.³ In the place now known as the East Bay Area, a similar pattern of colonial land use had turned the ancestral shores of the Ohlone people into a preeminent node of military power, an enclosed strip of Pacific coastline where weapons of war continuously circulated.

Here, civil service dockworkers employed directly by the military loaded 100-pound bombs of mustard gas and steel containers of lewisite onto a condemned ship that sported the

¹ On the rise and fall of William C. Ralston, see Gray Brechin, "Pecuniary Emulation: The Role of Tycoons in Imperial City-Building, in *Reclaiming San Francisco: History, Politics, Culture*, eds. James Brook, Chris Carlsson, and Nancy J. Peters (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1998), 101-114.

² "Quarterly Historical Report: U.S. Army Transportation Terminal Command, Pacific," January-March 1958; Instl Hist Files 206-09, box 1; Western Area – "Quarterly Historical Reports, 1956-1974" (HMS: UD-WW-14); Records of the Military Traffic Management Command (Army), Record Group 552; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [NACP].

³ John S. Westerlund, *Arizona's War Town: Flagstaff, Navajo Ordnance Depot, and World War II* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003).

name of a land-hungry settler who met his demise in these very waters. The crew of longshoremen was chosen for the job not for its experience in hauling poisonous payloads but for the convenience afforded by its employment status. The same civil service workers had been mobilized as strikebreakers ten years prior when a 95-day walkout by the staunchly leftist International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) brought ports to a standstill all along the West Coast. Ever since, U.S. military officials—fearful that radical stevedores threatened logistics operations at the critically important Oakland Army Base, the most active military transport hub in the entire Pacific Rim—had sought to permanently replace unionized dockworkers with lower-cost direct-hire employees.⁴ The military’s union-busting strategy dovetailed with the efforts of a consortium of shipping companies who saw the ILWU as an obstacle to Oakland’s postwar ascent to the busiest seaport on the Pacific coast.⁵ If repressive labor practices surrounded the loading of the *Ralston*, they also governed its construction. The World War II-era Liberty ship had been manufactured locally at a Kaiser shipyard several miles north of the Oakland waterfront. Kaiser, whose parent company remains one of the largest corporations in the region today, produced more warships than any of its competitors in no small part because its managers incorporated thousands of Black migrants from the Jim Crow South into a tightly managed racial and gendered division of labor.⁶ In its birth as in its death, the

⁴ Headquarters San Francisco Port of Embarkation, Fort Mason, California, “Use of Direct-Hire Civil Service vs Contract Stevedoring and Terminal Personnel,” 1954; 201-45, box 1; Western Area – “Management Surveys and Cost Analysis Files, 1954-1965” (HMS: UD-WW-24) – Oakland Army Terminal; RG 552; NACP.

⁵ On the Port of Oakland’s development into the busiest container port on the West Coast by the late 1960s, see Woodruff Minor, *Pacific Gateway: An Illustrated History of the Port of Oakland* (Oakland: Port of Oakland, 2000), 47-61.

⁶ On segregation at the Kaiser shipyards and the Black-led the struggle to integrate them, see Shirley Ann Wilson Moore, *To Place Our Deeds: The African American Community in Richmond, California, 1910-1963* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), Chapter 3.

Ralston bore the weight of a multi-layered history of racialized violence. When the ship departed from the East Bay waterfront for the last time, discharging lead paint, asbestos, and traces of poison gas as it chugged through local waters, it embodied the toxic, anti-labor legacy of more than a century of top-down development on the colonized homelands of Indigenous peoples across the American West.⁷

That mode of development met considerable opposition on the water's edge of Oakland. Among its antagonists were the rank and file of the ILWU. Though their livelihoods were fused to the circuits of war, the dockworkers practiced a form of solidarity that envisioned transnational connections rooted not in military expansion but in global cooperation.⁸ The same vision animated a wide range of local activists, including the children of Kaiser shipyard workers who comprised a significant share of the Oakland-born Black Panther Party (BPP). In the 1970s, the BPP partnered with members of the ILWU in dispatching material aid, via the Port of Oakland, to anticolonial movements in southern Africa. Such experiments in radical internationalism germinated in working-class spaces—from union halls to nightclubs—that transgressed the borders of race and nation. They were part of a broader struggle over Oakland's globalization that stretched back to the U.S. conquest of California.⁹

The struggle continues today. To grasp its future requires reckoning with its past, a past indelibly shaped by the violent work of empire. The entrenchment of military and commercial

⁷ On the environmental impact of National Defense Reserve Fleet ships, see Andrew Chamings, "Once a sign of military strength, the eerie Suisun ghost fleet has disappeared," *SFGate*, September 26, 2022.

⁸ Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

⁹ This dissertation frames the global integration of regional and national economies, labor markets, and infrastructure as a long, contested, and uneven process, rather than a phenomenon confined to the turn of the twenty-first century, as it often appears in popular discourse. On the *longue durée* of globalization, see Adam McKeown, "Periodizing Globalization," *History Workshop Journal* 67, no. 1 (Spring, 2007): 218-230.

power on the Oakland-East Bay waterfront depended on an unbroken chain of imperial rule over territories and ecosystems. It also depended on the organized subordination of racialized working-class people, both wage earners *and* those outside of the waged economy.¹⁰ But those same people possessed their own ideas about the ties binding Oakland to the world. In their daily lives, working-class Oaklanders helped make their city's global history, often in ways that challenged entrenched power. Their experiences complicate the Cold War dictum that "politics stops at the water's edge," the notion that U.S. foreign relations reside outside the domain of partisan conflict.¹¹ In Oakland, the water's edge is not just a metaphor; it is the vigorously contested landscape where maritime infrastructure physically bound the United States and the world.

This dissertation tracks the evolution of Oakland's geostrategic coastline since it emerged as a coal-powered nexus of railroads, steamships, and military installations during American colonization. It documents how local boosters, businessmen, and bureaucrats forged intimate ties with far-flung territories administered by U.S. troops and landowners. It then maps the

¹⁰ The non-linear nature of proletarianization and the importance of unwaged social reproduction to the capitalist mode of production are major themes of this dissertation. The expropriation of landed subsistence communities, the process of "primitive accumulation" in Marxist theory, has historically forced many into the waged economy. But many others have occupied a liminal space between waged and unwaged work. In recent years, labor historians have increasingly engaged with the realm of social reproduction as well as the licit and illicit economies (from scavenging to stealing to street vending) that enable poor people to survive. Given that the majority of humans today neither have access to meaningful reserves of capital nor consistently labor for wages, it is vital to examine illicit or semi-legal economic activities and the ambiguous and contradictory class locations they represent. In doing so, we might follow James Boggs, the Black working-class theorist of class formation and transformation, in recognizing the potential of unemployed "outsiders" to conjure a social vision in which the "question of the right to a full life...[is] divorced completely from the question of work." James Boggs, *American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009 [1963]), 47. On the Marxist-Feminist lineage of social reproduction theory, see Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017). On contradictory class locations, see Erik Olin Wright, *Classes* (London: Verso, 1985), 19-63.

¹¹ U.S. Senator Arthur Vandenberg coined the phrase in 1948, but it remains a truism in U.S. politics. Andrei Cherny, "Water's Edge: It's time to acknowledge that foreign policy is fair game in presidential politics," *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 10 (fall 2008). <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/10/waters-edge/>.

transformation of Oakland's fertile estuary into an infilled hub of postindustrial commerce, a vital node of military logistics, and a focal point for racialized labor migration. Simultaneously, this dissertation reveals how, over the long twentieth century, Black, Indigenous, Chinese, and other working-class Oaklanders found footholds on the harbor, often repurposing its imperial routes for dramatically different ends. Oakland's tradition of radical internationalism, most visible in the antiwar and Black Power movements of the sixties, took shape in the course of multi-generational struggles over the governance of coastal land. I argue that Oakland's waterfront both bridged the continental and overseas expansion of an ascendant world power and came to serve as a proving ground for alternative forms of globalization. "The Water's Edge" therefore offers a critical reappraisal of the generally place-bound history of North American urbanism and far-reaching lessons for building just cities in a present defined by global environmental crises.

The Lay of the Land

Understanding the global history of Oakland, California demands a deeper engagement with the land at the water's edge. The city's waterfront carves a 19-mile V-shaped swath on the eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay. In the regional landscape, its presence is at once conspicuous and easy to miss. Seen from the East Bay hills, the waterfront juts into the bay like the tip of a spear. Thrust beyond a warren of modest towers and gridded flatlands, its westernmost point is adorned with a legion of giant white container cranes. Off shore, idling cargo ships queue for these portside berths. In the distance, the region's titular city unfurls out of a New Deal-era ribbon of steel and concrete called the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. Before long, the viewer's gaze drifts from Oakland's port and its more prosaic contributions to

the built environment to the shimmering skyline of high-rise real estate preening across the bay.

San Francisco looms large on the horizon as it does in popular conceptions and historical accounts of Northern California's urban core. The city's "imperial" status is vaunted in the titles of two different monographs, its history garnering outsized attention from chroniclers of the region.¹² Oakland, by contrast, usually figures as a case study of urban decline, a city ground down by the postwar maladies of deindustrialization and white flight.¹³ If San Francisco is a historical agent projecting its financial, technological, and cultural power far and wide, Oakland is a local backwater acted on by outside forces it is powerless to stop. Consequently, histories of Oakland are generally confined to local or regional scales, their narratives emphasizing how national and global phenomena have shaped the city over time. Lost in these depictions is the East Bay city's waterfront, a landscape intimately connected to the military and commercial empire forged by the United States.

¹² Judd Kahn, *Imperial San Francisco: Politics and Planning in an American City, 1897-1906* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979); Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

¹³ The historiography of Oakland and the broader East Bay region has focused on the military-industrial boom of World War II and the political consequences of economic retrenchment in the postwar era. The few studies of Oakland before World War II have little to say about the city's global history. For World War II-era and postwar Oakland, see Marilyn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Donna J. Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017). For Oakland's earlier history, see Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004); Mitchell Schwarzer, *Hella Town: Oakland's History of Development and Disruption* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); Marta Gutman, *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscapes of Oakland, 1850-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

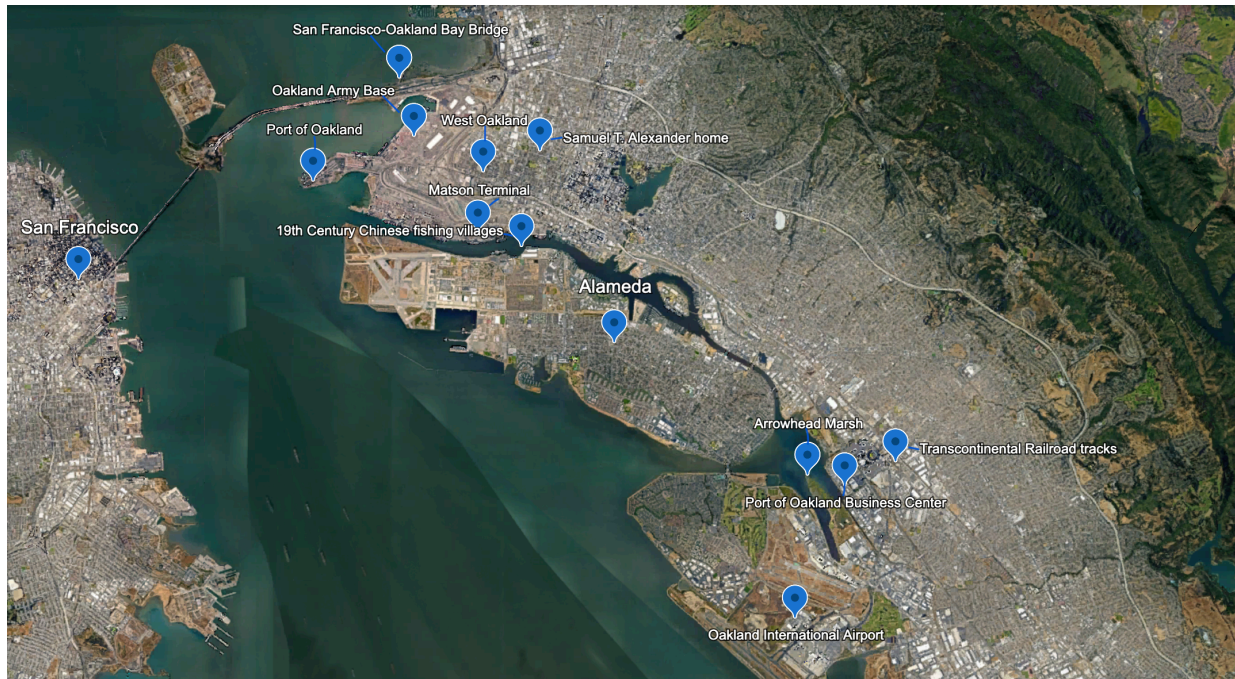


Figure 1. Annotated map of the Oakland-East Bay waterfront. Map Data: Google, ©1997-2024.

Seen from the East Bay flatlands, Oakland’s waterfront comes into clearer focus. But the imperial processes that made this place are buried beneath the sediment of more than a century of urban development. This dissertation aims to excavate those layers. A more densely textured survey of the waterfront will guide the dig beneath the surface. The tour might begin at the Port of Oakland Business Center near the city’s eastern border. Here, a nondescript collection of squat buildings, housing the light industrial and warehousing facilities of transnational corporations, hugs the inner banks of Oakland’s harbor. Across the waterway is the Oakland International Airport, which sits atop a marshy peninsula that was hastily filled and turned into runways at the behest of the U.S. military.¹⁴ In the summer of 1927, Army pilots took off from Oakland’s newly built airport and landed 26 hours later at an Army airfield on the U.S. territory of Hawai‘i. The journey marked the first ever transpacific flight, a signal event in the history of a burgeoning

¹⁴ “Fill and Development of the Oakland Airport, 1927-1989,” 1989, Port of Oakland Archive.

empire of the air.¹⁵ Tucked between the airport and the Business Center is Arrowhead Marsh, the only undeveloped marshland left on Oakland's shoreline. Before they were largely paved over, the East Bay's marshy tidelands had sustained the lifeways of the indigenous Ohlone people for millennia. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, the marshland became a refuge for Chinese migrants in search of a commons that could nourish their communities beyond the racialized exploitation of the waged economy. Local marshes began to disappear in the 1870s, as the Army Engineers filled in the East Bay coast in a quest to build a global shipping hub on artificial land. Before the U.S. government seized it, Oakland's estuary had been claimed by Spanish settlers and their Mexican descendants. But it was not until the U.S. conquest of northern Mexico in the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) that the waterfront's ecology began to dramatically change.

A quarter-mile inland from the green-brown bristles of protected marsh, a thicket of railroad tracks offers a portal into the seismic transformations wrought by American colonization. The tracks follow a path laid by the transcontinental railroad. Crucially, Oakland's waterfront became the railroad's last stop after its completion in 1869. Constructed by Chinese migrants bound by debt-based labor contracts, the western portion of the railroad connected continental lands dispossessed in Indian Wars to new frontiers of American power across the Pacific world.¹⁶ Oakland was the place "where rail and water meet," as its Anglo boosters proclaimed at the turn of the twentieth century, a logistical node critical to the commercial and military expansion of the United States. Much of Oakland's modern history has flowed from this

¹⁵ Jenifer Van Vleck, *Empire of the Air: Aviation and American Ascendancy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

little appreciated fact.

Traveling seven miles west along the railroad tracks leads to the Port of Oakland's ship-to-shore cranes and a multicolored assortment of shipping containers strewn across the water's edge. The mechanized cranes were installed in the 1960s. Their economic impact and worldmaking potential garnered the attention of the Black Panther Party's Oakland chapter. Oakland's high-technology waterfront featured prominently in the Party's political vision as the material grounds for combining local social welfare and transnational solidarity. Central to that vision was the seaport's distinction in the late 1960s and early 1970s as the most productive containerized port on the entire West Coast, as well as the economic anchor of the city.

No entity contributed more to the Port of Oakland's rise than the Matson shipping company, whose four containerized berths still line the southern flank of the waterfront. Headquartered in Oakland in the early twenty-first century, Matson traces its origins to late-nineteenth-century Hawai'i. In its early years, the company served as the primary vehicle for transporting the islands' sugar cane to California refineries. Soon after its founding, Matson came under the control of Hawai'i's colonial sugar planters. One such outfit, the Maui-based Alexander & Baldwin corporation, emerged as its principal shareholder. Around the time of Matson's birth, Alexander & Baldwin founder Samuel Thomas Alexander decided to invest his substantial plantation profits in Oakland real estate. Alexander lived out the last two decades of his life in a spacious Victorian house several blocks from Oakland's harbor. From the East Bay city, he continued to manage plantation operations. Among his managerial innovations was the recruitment of workers from China, a move that reflected broader trends in the history of plantation capitalism. The novel labor arrangement depended on the Bay Area in another, less-recognized way. While coercive contracts nominally bound Chinese workers to remote

plantations for periods of strenuous labor, without the steady supply of seafood demanded by these workers—seafood furnished by fellow nationals occupying the marshlands of Oakland and neighboring cities—there was little chance of fixing them in place. Transpacific migrations, and the diasporic networks that sustained them, allowed Hawaiian sugar to fill the void left by the collapse of plantation slavery during the American Civil War.¹⁷ As a result, Alexander could watch from his Oakland perch as Matson shipments of Chinese-harvested cane transited through the whirring mills of an industrializing region. Half a century later, Matson’s East Bay hub would play an important role in another epochal development in the world of transpacific supply chains: the advent of the standardized shipping container, an object now ubiquitous on Oakland’s waterfront.

But the shipping container—a foundational component of capitalism’s turn to just-in-time production—owed its widespread adoption to an Oakland-based innovator in the public sector, whose dormant workshop can be found on the western edge of the waterfront. The former site of the Oakland Army Base is located across a knot of railroad tracks due north of the Matson Terminal. From World War II through the end of the Cold War, the base served as the U.S. military’s primary point of embarkation for cargo and troops destined for the Pacific Rim. Here, on hundreds of acres of infilled wetlands, the U.S. military experimented with containerized shipping, demonstrating its efficiencies to commercial shippers like Matson and generating massive demand for the new technology amid the American war on Vietnam.¹⁸ The base made

¹⁷ On the relationship between the politics of slavery and the American conquest of Hawai‘i, see Merze Tate, “Slavery and Racism as Deterrents to the Annexation of Hawaii, 1854-1855,” *Journal of Negro History* 47, no. 1 (1962): 1-18.

¹⁸ Scholars have acknowledged the contributions of the Port of Oakland and the American war on Vietnam to the rise of containerized shipping, but the specific contributions of the U.S. military to the research and development behind the technological shift has been understated. The Sea-Land and Matson shipping companies usually garner most of the credit. However, military documents make clear that the military’s innovation of the Conex box, shipped from Oakland starting with the Korean War, was a key turning point in the rise of the standard container. For the

Oakland a major choke point in the U.S. military's global supply chain, a status rooted in an older history of imperial expansion. This fact was not lost on the Black Panthers, nor on its allies in the antiwar movement and the militantly internationalist International Longshore and Warehouse Union. Oakland leftists sought to capitalize on the waterfront's geostrategic location by both disrupting the circuits of American empire and forging bonds of solidarity with revolutionary struggles across the Third World.

Further along the western flank of the waterfront is the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, an imposing New Deal structure delineating the Port of Oakland's northern border. The Oakland side of the bridge, along with much of the modern port, was constructed by the Kaiser company. The Oakland conglomerate, which has since metamorphosed into a healthcare provider, is the largest private employer in the city today. But Kaiser's reputation as a major employer did not originate in Oakland. It was in the Caribbean nation of Cuba that the company first tried its hand at large-scale public works. In 1927, Kaiser landed a contract to build 200 miles of the Cuban Central Highway, a project commissioned by the U.S.-backed dictator Gerardo Machado. Shipping earth-moving equipment and California asphalt from Oakland to Cuba via the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal, Kaiser completed the construction over three years and netted a profit exponentially greater than any of its previous contracts. The income and experience—notably the chance to experiment with racial and gendered divisions of labor in a capital-friendly colonial context—paved the way for Kaiser's subsequent success and left a mark

history of containerization, see Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). On Oakland's contribution, see Mark Rosenstein, "The Rise of Maritime Containerization in the Port of Oakland, 1950-1970," (M.A. thesis, New York University, 2000). For an internal military history of containerization emphasizing the Conex box, see Joint Logistics Review Board, *Logistic Support in the Vietnam Era: Monograph 7—Containerization* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1970).

on the colossal infrastructure projects straddling the Oakland-East Bay waterfront.

Southeast of the Bay Bridge is a residential area circumscribed by freeways. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the waterfront-adjacent neighborhood became home to a multiracial community of working-class migrants drawn to the region by the promise of employment in shipbuilding, longshoring, infrastructure building, and rail and maritime transportation. West Oakland, as the neighborhood came to be called, also developed into a hotbed of radical internationalism, a place where working people cultivated other global futures for the East Bay city. From the diasporic worlds of Chinese migrants to the emancipatory politics of the Black Panther Party, the local pursuit of self-determination and the global connections that made it possible flowered on the low-lying stretch of coastal land between West Oakland and the eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay.

Global Questions, Local Methods

This dissertation explores the water's edge of Oakland from the top down and the bottom up. It ranges from the grassroots of Oakland's tidelands to the towering heights of its container ships, charting intimacies, solidarities, and conflicts between a variety of global actors vying for power on these coastal plains. Though focused on Oakland, the narrative occasionally strays into Alameda, a manmade island edging the southern banks of Oakland's harbor, as well as the city's northern neighbors, especially Berkeley and Richmond. In embracing the broader East Bay region that Oakland anchors, I have opted for a regional frame that can better account for the mobile lives of Oaklanders, the sprawling nature of military infrastructure, and the estuarial ecology encompassing the city. At the same time, my research follows the paths in and out of town, the routes of exchange, migration, conquest, and counterhegemonic worldmaking that

made Oakland a global city.¹⁹ Several core questions have guided my project. How did the coastal land now called Oakland become integrated into the circuits of U.S. empire and the capitalist world-system? Relatedly, how did working-class Oaklanders who helped forge those connections imagine the global possibilities of their city? More broadly, how did the military and commercial expansion of the United States—both across the North American continent and into overseas territories in the Pacific and the Caribbean—shape the social, political, and environmental development of American cities? And finally, how does mapping the global circuits of overlooked places, as well as Indigenous peoples, working-class communities, and people of color, open up new ways of thinking about America and the world?

In answering these questions, I have breached disciplinary and archival boundaries as well as city limits. Drawing on archives and oral histories in Cuba, Hawai‘i, and across the continental United States, my project revises the story of Oakland’s development from a global perspective. I take inspiration from the bricolage of sources assembled in Andrew Friedman’s history of imperial placemaking in postwar Northern Virginia. I share Friedman’s commitment to forming “an archive that arises from a landscape rather than a discipline.”²⁰ I am similarly inspired by Lisa Lowe’s determination to “read *across* the separate repositories” of imperial archives, which, when confined to their discrete containers, disavow material connections between settler colonialism in the Americas, the transatlantic slave trade, and the mobilization of Asian contract workers in the age of abolition.²¹ Tracing such connections helps illuminate the

¹⁹ On this approach to regional history, see William Cronon, “Kennecott Journey: The Paths Out of Town,” in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 28–51.

²⁰ Andrew Friedman, *Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of U.S. Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 16.

²¹ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 5.

mutable racial regimes underpinning global capitalism, as well as the susceptibility of those regimes to critique, rupture, and transformation at the hands of dispossessed and working-class peoples.²² Like Lowe, I am concerned with both the racialized accumulations of capitalist empires and the unauthorized and sometimes radical encounters enabled by imperial mobilities.

It is a challenge to recover the transnational experiences and global visions of dispossessed and working-class peoples because their lives so often appear as localized and disfigured or simply do not appear in historical archives.²³ Nevertheless, by creatively combining a range of evidence—from newspaper articles to personal papers to oral history interviews—it is possible to glimpse the worldmaking practices of non-elite actors.²⁴ Take for example the Black Panther Party’s vision of the People’s Republic of China. The Panthers, as with other Black radicals in the 1960s and ‘70s, found inspiration in China’s agrarian road to socialist development. Chinese socialism offered an alternative to the stultifying tendency of Western Marxists to frame the white male-dominated industrial working class as the universal revolutionary subject.²⁵ Though replete with misrecognitions, the Party’s conception of China

²² Here, I follow Cedric Robinson’s analysis of racial regimes as “constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power” (xii). Cedric J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

²³ On knowledge production, violence, and erasure in historical archives, see Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14; Anna Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

²⁴ On the possibility and political urgency of recovering subaltern lives rendered opaque in official archives, see Laura Helton, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney, “The Question of Recovery: An Introduction,” *Social Text* 33, no. 5 (2015): 1-18.

²⁵ Robin D.G. Kelley and Betsy Esch, “Black like Mao: Red China and black revolution,” *Souls* 1, no.4 (1999): 6-41.

stemmed from concrete efforts to build solidarity with Chinese people.²⁶ Those efforts took the form of political delegations abroad as well as alliances at home with Chinese American organizations like the San Francisco-based Red Guard Party.²⁷ But the Panthers' appreciation of Chinese culture went deeper. The diary of Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver includes a telling passage in which he hints at the ways his admiration for China's political system blended with his love for Chinese cooking, describing the latter as "the national, systematic way that the Chinese move on food."²⁸ The passage is revealing in its ordinariness, calling into question the analytic divide between politics and everyday culture. Taking it seriously suggests that the Panthers' vision of the global city they hoped to build in Oakland was inseparable from their quotidian connections to Chinese people and their traditions.

Cultural intimacies between Black and Chinese-descended Oaklanders have roots that stretch back much further than the 1960s and '70s. In January 1915, an editor of the *Western Outlook*, a Black newspaper based in Oakland, complained that African American youth spent too much time socializing at "Chinese noodle joints."²⁹ These types of casual interactions between African Americans and Chinese Americans rejected social norms prescribing the segregation of their communities. Those norms help explain the newspaper editor's disapproval. Transgressive social ties made possible other forms of solidarity. In the 1920s, followers of

²⁶ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Robeson Taj Frazier, *The East Is Black: Cold War China in the Black Radical Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002).

²⁷ "Red Guard," *Black Panther*, March 23, 1969.

²⁸ Diary entry, October 29, 1972, carton 5, folder 17, Eldridge Cleaver Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁹ "New Years Hopes," *Western Outlook*, January 9, 1915.

Marcus Garvey's Black nationalist movement, populating the local chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, hosted talks by Asian anti-imperialists at their West Oakland hall.³⁰ Afro-Asian solidarity also manifested in less formal practices of mutual aid. During the Great Depression, seafood harvested by Chinese fishers provided sustenance to Black families in the East Bay Area. Marguerite Williams, an African American woman who grew up along the East Bay waterfront in the 1930s, remembered visiting the local "Fong Wan shrimp camp...[where] they would lay these shrimps to dry just like you do to process prunes or apricots...right next to the sidewalk there."³¹ Williams would fill up a bag with dried shrimp and bring it to her mother who would prepare it with rice. Fong Wan's son Calvin Fong recalled in an interview that his father did not mind that Williams and other working-class locals helped themselves to portions of his catch. In fact, he was often "giving shrimp away for free." "He would give like a 100 pounds of shrimp away for free during Christmas," continued Fong. "So he had plenty of shrimp and didn't worry about it."³² Fong Wan and Marguerite Williams crossed paths at a moment when the East Bay waterfront was transforming into a military-industrial hub. Just a few years after their encounter, Fong's shrimp camp was forced to disband when its fishing grounds became a restricted military zone in the leadup to World War II. In this context, the everyday bonds that African Americans and Chinese Americans cultivated at the water's edge constituted an alternative mode of land use and a worldmaking project grounded

³⁰ Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch, III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community 1852-1977* (Oakland: Norther California Center for Afro-American History and Life, 1989), 32.

³¹ Harry and Marguerite Williams, "Reflections of a Longtime Black Family in Richmond," an oral history conducted in 1985 by Judith K. Dunning, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1990.

³² Calvin Fong, interview with author (phone), July 10, 2023.

not in militarization but in ethics of care and mutuality. Such bonds formed the affective soil in which radical internationalism took root.

This dissertation highlights connections across borders, both locally and globally, that are missed if the “global” only connotes elite realms of trade, technology, diplomacy, and war. Since the “global turn” of the 1990s—the historiographical accompaniment to the vogue for globalization that permeated mainstream discourse at the turn of the twenty-first century—the transnational history of the United States has tended toward a top-down perspective. But an older African American intellectual tradition offers another model of diasporic and internationalist scholarship.³³ Emblematic of that tradition is the work of W.E.B. Du Bois. Writing in *Black Reconstruction* in the mid-1930s, Du Bois placed the reorganization of capitalism and democracy after the American Civil War in a global context. “That dark and vast sea of human labor,” he observed, “in China and India, the South Seas and Africa; in the West Indies and Central America and in the United States—that great majority of mankind, on whose bent and broken backs rest today the founding stones of modern industry—shares a common destiny.”³⁴ Following Du Bois, my research explores the “common destiny” of the racialized laboring class that slavery and empire birthed. To speak of a shared “destiny” is not to imply that interracial or transnational solidarity is inevitable, but to identify its conditions of possibility.³⁵

This dissertation both maps the global circuits of race and empire and attends to the subjective and intimate spheres of the imperial production of difference. On both fronts, Du

³³ Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘But a Local Phase of a World Problem’: Black History’s Global Vision, 1883-1950,” *Journal of American History* 85, no. 3 (1999): 1045-1077.

³⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]), 15.

³⁵ Christina Heatherton, *Arise! Global Radicalism in the Era of the Mexican Revolution* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 20.

Bois's work provides a vital model. In *The World and Africa*, Du Bois considers the imperial networks tying a "blameless, cultured, beautiful young woman in a [mid-twentieth-century] London suburb" to "the crimes of colonialism."³⁶ From the "ivory keys of a grand piano" to the hoarded wealth of "a lovely British home, with green lawns, appropriate furnishings and a retinue of well-trained servants," traces of conquest permeate the social worlds of the metropole.³⁷ Yet, as Du Bois shows, these worlds are structured through racist common sense to disguise their violent genealogies. My dissertation likewise traces the social and financial routes connecting domestic spaces—in all senses of the term—to outposts of empire. Doing so suggests that the dichotomy of "home" and "abroad" is a political construction that conceals more than it reveals.

As a method, Black studies enables the simultaneous analysis of global political economy and the cultural and epistemic dimensions of imperialism. The work of Black Feminist scholars has been particularly generative in this regard. Sylvia Wynter's conception of the "inner eyes" of Western humanism—a cultural common sense, inherited from centuries of white supremacy, that universalizes the white male middle-class subject—provides a useful framework for historicizing the material effects of racial knowledge.³⁸ Similarly, the works of Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and Claudia Jones show how questions about capitalism and empire change when posed from the perspective of the most intensely exploited, namely Black working-class women.³⁹

³⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The World and Africa* (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1976 [1947]), 42.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁸ See Sylvia Wynter, "No Humans Involved: An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Knowledge on Trial* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 42-71; and Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.

³⁹ Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [1981]); Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminism and Political Economy," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 568 (March 2000): 41-53; Claudia Jones, *Beyond Containment: Autobiographical Reflections, Essays, and Poems*, ed.

Taken together, their scholarship offers a model for analyzing how systems of inequality produce individuals and how individuals reproduce, renovate, and disrupt such systems.

Combining social and environmental history with methods from Black studies, this dissertation explores historical intersections between capitalism, race-making, environmental change, and U.S. empire from the vantage of Oakland's waterfront.⁴⁰ Its narrative takes as a model Clyde Woods's examinations of regional development in New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta, particularly their attention to long-term connections between placemaking, cultures of opposition, and racial and gendered divisions of labor.⁴¹ Woods's conjunctural analysis and ecologically grounded, place-based approach to global systems of inequality have informed the temporal and spatial contours of my dissertation. They have also influenced its political stakes. Taking seriously the worldmaking practices, developmental ideas, and cultural imaginations of working people unsettles the air of inevitability surrounding American empire.

The Urban History of U.S. Empire

The founding of the United States in the late eighteenth century gradually transformed a

Carole Boyce Davies (Banbury, UK: Ayebia Clarke Publishing Ltd., 2011); Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁴⁰ My understanding of the interplay of race, capitalism, empire, and ecology has been influenced by Jason W. Moore, "Ecology, Capital, and the Nature of Our Times: Accumulation & Crisis in the Capitalist World-Ecology," *Journal of World-System Research* 17, no. 1 (2011): 107-146; Aaron Jakes, "Boom, Bugs, Bust: Egypt's Ecology of Interest, 1882-1913," *Antipode* 49, no. 4 (2017): 1035-1059; Bikrum Singh Gill, "A world in reverse: The political ecology of racial capitalism," *Politics* 43, no. 2 (2023): 153-168.

⁴¹ Woods's work traces the dialectical relationship between a white southern power structure and the Black working-class communities it has sought to control. It shows how place-based struggles over race and class pivoted on rival visions of regional development. An ethical and aesthetic framework of radical egalitarianism—what Woods calls the "blues epistemology"—countered the racist political culture of the "plantation bloc." Across centuries of history, everyday contestation erupted into open war in times of political-economic crisis. Channeling Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Woods shows how historical conjunctures of crisis and conflict paved the way for new ruling coalitions formed at the nexus of coercion and consent. Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998); Clyde Woods, *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2017).

settler colony into a settler empire. What began as a British imperial outpost ultimately became an imperial center, a nation that accrued the geopolitical power to pull external territories, markets, and more-than-human worlds into its orbit.⁴² The substance of that empire has varied over time, but the promotion of national capitalists and the global system of capitalism itself has always been at its heart.⁴³ As such, I refer to the United States as a nation-based “capitalist empire,” while recognizing that the state’s relative autonomy from capitalist relations means that imperialism is not merely a stage of capitalism.⁴⁴ U.S. imperialism encompasses economic, military, and cultural forms of domination, all of which depend on the construction of particular landscapes and the production and reproduction of human difference. Put differently, the process of administering and expanding the relational power of the United States makes space as well as race. As racialized geographies and dense nodes of economic, military, and cultural power, U.S. cities have played a critical role in the ascendancy of American empire. This dissertation charts that ascendancy from the shores of Oakland, revealing the long-term imperial relations that shaped and were shaped by a midsize U.S. city often reduced to the site of a domestic “urban

⁴² In conceptualizing the United States as an imperial nation rooted in an imperial past, this dissertation echoes Gerald Horne’s assertion that “1776 was an attempt to continue the process of moving west through North America, seizing the land of indigenes and stocking same with enslaved Africans.” It also channels Jack Greene’s analysis of the historical continuities attending the emergence of the U.S. republic: national state formation proceeded haltingly after independence and the republican period did not dramatically alter the decentralized settler colonial model of imperial expansion that prevailed during the British era. Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018), 17. Jack P. Greene, “Colonial History and National History: Reflections on a Continuing Problem,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (2007): 235-250.

⁴³ On U.S. empire as the “superintendent” of global capitalism, see Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012).

⁴⁴ On “nation-based empires,” see Paul Kramer, “Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1369. On the analytic distinction between imperialism and capitalism, see Salar Mohandesi, “The Specificity of Imperialism,” *Viewpoint Magazine*, February 1, 2018, <https://viewpointmag.com/2018/02/01/the-specificity-of-imperialism/>. On the integral role of imperialism in all stages of capitalism’s expansion, see Samir Amin, “Imperialism and Globalization,” *Monthly Review* 53, no. 2 (2001): 6-24; Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (New York: Verso 2018 [1972]).

crisis.”

Though the global and imperial dimensions of Oakland’s development have not attracted the attention of historians, the broader urban history of U.S. empire has begun to cohere into a subfield. Since Paul Kramer highlighted the conspicuous absence of imperial histories of American cities in 2011, scholars have documented various aspects of the complex relationship between the projection of U.S. power and the making of urban space.⁴⁵ The settler-colonial foundations of urbanization, social inequalities, and carceral control comprise an important facet of recent scholarship.⁴⁶ Relatedly, scholars have documented linkages between overseas conquest and municipal policing in the United States.⁴⁷ An associated line of inquiry considers the often-hidden webs of military power stretching across metropolitan regions.⁴⁸ The circuits of

⁴⁵ Kramer, “Power and Connection,” 1355-1356.

⁴⁶ Coll Thrush, *Native Seattle: Histories from the Crossing-Over Place* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008); Myla Vicenti Carpio, *Indigenous Albuquerque* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011); Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of Straits* (New York: New Press, 2017); Andrew K. Frank, *Before the Pioneers: Indians, Settlers, Slaves, and the Founding of Miami* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2017); Heather Dorries, Robert Henry, David Hugill, Tyler McCreary, and Julie Tomiak, eds., *Settler City Limits: Indigenous Resurgence and Colonial Violence in the Urban Prairie West* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2019); Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent Histories of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); David Hugill, *Settler Colonial City: Racism and Inequality in Postwar Minneapolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Kyle T. Mays, *City of Disposessions: Indigenous Peoples, African Americans, and the Creation of Modern Detroit* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); Kent Blansett, Cathleen D. Cahill, and Andrew Needham, eds., *Indian Cities: Histories of Indigenous Urbanization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2022); Sean Fraga, “Steam power, native labor, and contested terraqueous mobilities during American settlement of Puget Sound, 1846–1873,” *Mobilities*, 17, no. 2 (2022): 196-212.

⁴⁷ Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Matthew Guariglia, *Police and the Empire City: Race and the Origins of Modern Policing in New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023); Julian Go, *Policing Empires: Militarization, Race, and the Imperial Boomerang in Britain and the US* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁴⁸ Friedman, *Covert Capital*; Catherine Lutz, *Homefront: A Military City and the American Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Pierre Bélanger and Alexander Arroyo, *Ecologies of Power: Countermapping the Logistical Landscapes and Military Geographies of the U.S. Department of Defense* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2016).

capital connecting investors, corporations, and consumers in U.S. cities to expansive realms of extraction and pollution make up another generative topic within the subfield.⁴⁹ A complementary theme is the colonial networks of migration and labor that built the American city.⁵⁰ Published in 2021, Kristin Hoganson’s synthetic account of the “inposts of empire,” and her corresponding call for “local histories that open out” onto the broader imperial geography of the United States, suggests that more work along these lines will soon emerge.⁵¹

This dissertation contributes to the urban history of U.S. empire by centering contests over land use and globalizing infrastructure. To that end, it draws on an older literature on the “imperial” supply chains linking the urbanization of the American West to extractive industries in rural hinterlands.⁵² That literature is largely confined to the regional scale, seldom ventures beyond the nineteenth century, tends to naturalize U.S. sovereignty on the North American continent, and has little to say about the production of human difference. It does, however,

⁴⁹ N.D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2014); Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line: Managing Race in the Ford Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Jessica Kim, *Imperial Metropolis: Los Angeles, Mexico, and the Borderlands of American Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Henry W. Berger, *St. Louis and Empire: 250 Years of Imperial Quest and Urban Crisis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015); Paige Glotzer, *How the Suburbs Were Segregated: Developers and the Business of Exclusionary Housing, 1890-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); Christina Dunbar-Hester, *Oil Beach: How Toxic Infrastructure Threatens Life in the Ports of Los Angeles and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Malcolm Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World* (New York: Little Brown, 2023); Andrew Hedden, “Empire of Tomorrow: Seattle and the Making of Global Capitalism in the 1970s” (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, Seattle, 2023).

⁵⁰ Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919-1941* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York after 1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Kristin Hoganson, “Inposts of Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 45, no. 1 (2021): 1–22.

⁵² Kahn, *Imperial San Francisco*; Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*; William Cronon, *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: WW Norton & Co., 1991); Eugene P. Moehring, *Urbanism and Empire in the Far West, 1840-1890* (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2004); William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1994).

provide a framework for understanding the shared transformation of noncontiguous landscapes. This dissertation stretches that framework.⁵³ In doing so, it shows how global struggles over race, land, and infrastructure transformed the social and ecological terrain of Oakland's waterfront. Local changes in the land happened in conjunction with plantation expansion in nineteenth-century Hawai'i, U.S.-managed roadbuilding in interwar Cuba, the American bombing of Vietnamese villages, and other such developments in the orbit of American empire.⁵⁴

Zeroing in on connected landscapes has necessitated a broad periodization and an elastic temporality. The transformation of Oakland's waterfront, and the ripples it sent around the world, are best discerned over the *longue durée*. At the same time, it is possible to observe moments of abrupt transition, important conjunctures that transformed the city and the places to which it was linked. I have chosen to begin the dissertation in 1848 amid the U.S. conquest of California and to conclude in 1980 at the dawn of neoliberal globalization.⁵⁵ That 132-year span makes visible underappreciated ruptures and continuities in the development of Oakland's waterfront and in the imperial history of the United States. 1848 marks such a rupture not only

⁵³ My understanding of the interplay of race, space, and place across multiple landscapes and scales has been shaped by the field of critical geography. The following works have been especially useful in providing a model for analyzing globalization as a contingent, nonlinear process rooted in local histories of uneven development: Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007); Doreen Massey, *Spatial Divisions of Labour: Social Structures and the Geography of Production* (London: Macmillan Press, 1984); Marion Werner, *Global Displacements: The Making of Uneven Development in the Caribbean* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016); Jenna Loyd and Alison Mountz, *Boats, Borders, and Bases: Race, the Cold War, and the Rise of Migration Detention in the United States* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

⁵⁴ The formulation, "changes in the land," is derived from William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

⁵⁵ Taking the long view suggests that neoliberalism as a political project involving the mobilization of state power to insulate capital from the pressures of democracy did not emerge *ex nihilo* in the late twentieth century, but rather took shape in a series of earlier governmental experiments largely based in the Global South. On the long, global history of neoliberalism, see Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Amy C. Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

because it is the year that the United States began to formally colonize the territory now called Oakland, but also because it marked the beginning of a new global hegemony.⁵⁶ As Christine Heatherton argues in her global history of the Mexican Revolution, though historians typically locate the birth of U.S. hegemony in the post-World War II era, it was in the mid-nineteenth century that the leadership of the United States began to gradually supplant British dominion over the world economy. This shift coincided with “a vast expansion and integration of the global capitalist economy,” notes Heatherton, a moment when “territorial acquisition was becoming a driver of accumulation rather than an objective of state power.”⁵⁷ Securing an overland route to Pacific markets was a central motivation in the United States’s expropriation of northern Mexico in 1848. More broadly, as Paul Kramer contends, U.S. empire has been driven by a quest for “the physical infrastructure required for U.S. capitalist expansion.”⁵⁸ From that perspective, 1848 can be seen as the beginning of Oakland’s transformation into a logistical hub for the projection and protection of U.S. commercial power.

Oakland’s global history casts new light on other key conjunctures in the rise of the United States as a world power. Historians have documented the ways that the U.S. Civil War accelerated the westward push of American capitalism through the conquest of Indigenous lands.⁵⁹ Situating these changes on the Oakland-East Bay waterfront shows how the spread of

⁵⁶ The ascent of U.S. economic power in the mid-nineteenth century was intimately linked to the rise of the large-scale vertically integrated corporation. U.S. corporate capitalism stood in stark contrast, Giovanni Arrighi writes, to the “highly extroverted, decentralized, and differentiated structure of British business,” which, as a result, “began to lose out in the world markets” to its American competitors. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010 [1994]), 291, 293.

⁵⁷ Heatherton, *Arise!*, 12-13, 25-26.

⁵⁸ Paul A. Kramer, “Embedding Capital: Political-Economic History, the United States, and the World,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era* 15, no. 3 (2016): 338.

⁵⁹ See for example Emma Teitelman, “The Properties of Capitalism: Industrial Enclosures in the South and the West after the American Civil War,” *Journal of American* 106, no. 4 (2020): 879-900.

sugar and cotton cultivation across the Pacific Rim spurred the industrialization of coastal California in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps the most widely recognized turning point in the historiography of American empire is 1898, when the United States parlayed a war with Spain into the acquisition of “formal” colonies in the Caribbean and the Pacific. From the vantage of Oakland’s shoreline, this moment of imperial expansion looks less like an abrupt departure for a formerly continental power and more like the culmination of military and commercial ventures stretching back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Mindful of continuities in the imperial history of the United States, historians have corrected the common misconception that the period after World War I was a time of isolationism. The so-called interwar era saw numerous U.S. invasions of Caribbean basin countries and the widespread encroachment of U.S. finance on Latin American economies.⁶⁰ The completion of a canal across the isthmus of Panama in 1914, enabled by the U.S. seizure of the Panama Canal Zone in 1903, made Caribbean markets accessible to West Coast capitalists in cities like Oakland.⁶¹ New Deal infrastructure on Oakland’s waterfront offers mute testimony to these imperial connections and the turbulent interplay of capital accumulation and gendered racial hierarchies at a global scale. The militarization of the Oakland-East Bay shoreline during World War II and the Cold War era is a better-known example of the built environment of U.S. expansion. But the broader relationship

⁶⁰ Emily S. Rosenberg, *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy, 1900–1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Mary A. Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Ellen D. Tillman, *Dollar Diplomacy by Force: National-Building and Resistance in the Dominican Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

⁶¹ The legacy of the Panama Canal project touched Oakland directly. George Washington Goethals, a key engineer of the canal, served on the first board of directors of Oakland’s regional water system. Sarah S. Elkind, “Industry and Water Distribution in California: The East Bay Municipal Utility District, 1920–1930,” *Environmental History Review* 18, no. 4 (1994): 77.

between the domestic landscapes of American imperialism and the restructuring of the global economy in the second half of the twentieth century has not been fully documented. Viewing the advent of neoliberal globalization in the 1970s, and the correlative emergence of the postindustrial city, from the water's edge of Oakland suggests that the neoliberal turn was a state-led project predicated on the political defeat of alternative visions of the global city.⁶²

As this brief outline suggests, treating Oakland as a case study for the decline of the American city has obscured its pivotal role in the consolidation of U.S. global power between the mid-nineteenth and late twentieth century. If a San Francisco-centric history of globalization emphasizes finance, technology, and high politics, an Oakland version might instead shed light on land, labor, migration, and the individuals who both contributed to the development of global racial hierarchies and also helped undo them. The water's edge of Oakland is an ideal setting for considering the ways that capitalism, empire, and freedom-seeking have brought African, Asian, and Indigenous peoples into contact. Oakland's global history can also illuminate the relationship between urban development and American expansion. Bridging urban history and the imperial history of the United States on the Oakland-East Bay waterfront reveals how U.S. foreign relations are deeply connected to the construction of race and the production of space within the domestic United States. Finally, mapping the global circuits of an overlooked city unsettles the persistent binary of global or cosmopolitan elites and local or nationalist working-class people.⁶³ The view from the shores of Oakland suggests that the "global" is always up for

⁶² On political contestation in the 1970s and the ascent of neoliberalism as a counterrevolutionary process, see Michael Hardt, *The Subversive Seventies* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023).

⁶³ On the historical construction of this dichotomy, see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Heartland: An American History* (New York: Penguin, 2019).

grabs, and the struggle over its meaning is fundamentally a struggle over the future of the planet.

Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation begins by charting the people and processes that remade Oakland's shallow estuary into a bustling port and logistical node for the U.S. military. Chapter one chronicles the waterfront's growth following its selection as the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 and the making of property on land dotted with indigenous Ohlone shellmounds. These developments were inextricably linked to histories of settler colonialism, resource extraction, and military expansion across the Pacific world. Digging into the underexamined history of Oakland in the nineteenth century shows that the city entered the geopolitical orbit of the United States through the enclosure, policing, and reengineering of its waterfront.

Chinese contract workers largely built the rail and maritime infrastructure that converted Oakland's waterfront into a launchpad for military and commercial ventures. These workers had their own ideas about life at the water's edge. My second chapter explores their transnational communities and efforts to escape plantation environments, dangerous construction jobs, and an economic order rooted in racial and ecological domination. In the face of anti-Chinese ordinances, immigration restrictions, grassroots violence, and environmental destruction, fishing villages founded by Chinese migrants managed to multiply on the peripheries of the region. Their presence offers a concrete illustration of the contradictions of U.S. imperialism between the post-emancipation era and the turn of the twentieth century.

Oakland's waterfront remained contested ground amid the labor upheavals and infrastructure improvements of the 1920s and 1930s. My third chapter connects these local developments to the reconstruction of U.S.-dominated territories in the Caribbean and Pacific.

Specifically, I follow money, personnel, and earth-moving practices from foreign-controlled public works in interwar Cuba to New Deal infrastructure on Oakland's harbor. These connections were embodied by the Oakland-based Kaiser company, a transnational corporation responsible for much of the built environment on Oakland's shores. Kaiser's trajectory between the First and Second World War—from smalltime roadbuilding in the North American West to large-scale development in neocolonial Cuba to federal projects on the Oakland-East Bay waterfront—sheds light on the imperial dimensions of U.S. social democracy.

My fourth and final chapter examines two historical phenomena typically treated discretely—the Second Great Migration of African Americans and the rise of containerized logistics—as they converged on Oakland's deindustrializing waterfront in the wake of World War II. The Port of Oakland helped drive the postwar revolution in container shipping that facilitated both the global dispersion of industry and the U.S. War in Vietnam. Black migrants from the Jim Crow South experienced these changes firsthand as waterfront workers and as residents of the port-adjacent West Oakland neighborhood. As such, they bore the brunt of the harmful land uses associated with the militarized expansion of Oakland's waterfront. Such developmental processes, together with the long, local tradition of working-class internationalism, set the stage for the Black Panther Party's bid for political power. As deindustrialization began to batter Oakland's flatlands, the Panthers reimagined the port as a logistical hinge between community control and Third World revolution.

The legacy of the Panthers and their allies continues to inspire alternative visions of the global city. My conclusion considers Oakland's present and future from the standpoint of social movements struggling to build a sustainable engine of global justice on these contested shores. The global history of the Oakland-East Bay waterfront lays bare the material linkages between

nested scales of empire and ecology, as well as the possibilities and challenges of a radical internationalism made to the measure of the world today.

Chapter 1

Where Rail and Water Meet: The Urbanization of Empire in Nineteenth-Century California

The freshly built barracks of the Eighth Regiment of California Volunteers were nestled in a semi-rural landscape of small farms and modest homes edging the marshy slough of the East Bay estuary. The pastoral setting on the outskirts of Oakland seemed far removed from the traumas of war. But just before sunrise on July 19, 1898, a massive explosion punctured the air of safety and calm, rocking the barracks with the percussive force of a high-magnitude earthquake. Battered and dazed, the soldiers crawled up from the ground and began to survey the damage around them. A storm of bricks and corrugated metal had left their camp in shambles. By a stroke of luck, none of them were seriously injured in the blast. But they were not out of harm's way yet. A fire raged nearby threatening to detonate a boxcar of explosives idling on a Southern Pacific Railroad side track. Thanks to a rapid mobilization and fortuitous winds, further carnage was avoided. But just beyond the confines of the camp at the epicenter of the explosion, the bloody toll was unmistakable. The evening edition of the *Oakland Tribune* grimly reported, "Six Blown to Eternity," while the *San Francisco Call* announced that the "effect of the explosion was more general and far-reaching than any other explosion that has taken place in Alameda County."¹

At the time of the blast the troops were awaiting deployment to the Philippines where their counterparts in California's First Regiment were preparing to join the local insurgency

¹ "Six Blown to Eternity," *Oakland Tribune*, 19 July 1898; "The Destructive Area," *San Francisco Call* 20 July 1898.

against Spain's dwindling Manila stronghold.² In their makeshift base erected ominously close to the Western Fuse and Explosives Factory near Oakland's fledgling tidal canal, the soldiers got a foretaste of the war the United States was waging in the rebellious colonies of a waning empire. The explosion brought the war home in subtler ways too. From the leveled fuse and powder works to the munitions-bearing train to the debris-littered tidal canal boring through the marshlands on a route surveyed by Army Engineers, the incident illuminated a sprawling infrastructure that made the East Bay waterfront a critical node of U.S. empire decades before it rose to prominence as a military-industrial powerhouse during the Second World War.³ Generally ignored when properly functioning, the vulnerability of that infrastructure became painfully clear on this grisly July morning. Its smooth operation, as the day's events showed, could be shattered in an instant. Mercurial nature and technology lurked behind this shoreline belt of production and transportation, threatening to blow it all up. As soon became clear, another source of volatility was threatening this emergent landscape: the migrant workers who built and maintained it.

Gung Ung Chang was one of those workers, and he was suspected of causing the blast. Gung worked in explosives manufacturing, which, given its inherent dangers, was one of the only industrial jobs in the region not monopolized by Euro-Americans. Critical to the production of bullets and bombs as well as railroads, canals, and various other earth-moving ventures

² Ernest C. James, *The First, Sixth, Seventh and Eighth California Volunteer Regiments and the California Heavy Artillery in the Spanish American War and Philippine Insurrection, 1898-1899* (Sacramento: California State Library, 1996).

³ The rapid conversion of the East Bay Area into an "arsenal of democracy" during World War II and its political reverberations in the postwar era have garnered considerable attention from historians. Oakland's emergence as a node of U.S. empire in the nineteenth century has yet to be documented. For the transformative impact of World War II, see especially Marilyn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

propelling U.S. expansion, the sector was synonymous with the East Bay's Chinese migrants in the final decades of the nineteenth century.⁴ Tellingly, the factory-owned dormitories where Gung and his coworkers resided appeared on local maps as "Chine Quarters," with "Chine" short for "Chinese."⁵ Gung lived and worked in a one-and-a-half-acre company compound encircled by a six-foot-high wood-board fence topped with barbed wire.⁶ The factory's prison-like architecture embodied the simultaneous drive to exploit and contain Chinese migrants in a settler society that valued them primarily as cheap labor. The 1898 explosion laid bare the contradictions inherent in that settler project. But a reckoning with those contradictions, and the insecurities they caused, did not follow.

Instead came moral panic. Condemned without trial, Gung entered the pages of local newspapers as a racialized villain, a "fiendish Mongolian" and "Chinese demon."⁷ In sensational accounts of a murder-suicide plot involving the detonation of his employer's gunpowder magazine where he fled after allegedly shooting a Chinese food peddler in a dispute over a lottery ticket, Gung appears as an irrational monster with a nihilistic thirst for death and destruction.⁸ Such racist coverage makes it difficult to reconstruct the incident from extant

⁴ Seth Lunine, "Iron, Oil, and Emeryville: Resource Industrialization and Metropolitan Expansion in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1900" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2013), 86-108.

⁵ *Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Alameda, Alameda County, California*. Sanborn Map Company, 1897. Map. https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00374_001/.

⁶ *Kleebauer v. Western Fuse & Explosives Co.* (San Francisco: State Supreme Court of California: 1903).

⁷ "Blown into Atoms by a Fiendish Mongolian," *San Francisco Call* 20 July, 1898.

⁸ It is impossible to know how this incident actually played out, but gambling-related interpersonal violence was not unprecedented at the time nor were tensions between Chinese merchants and laborers unheard of. Gambling was a major part of Chinese diasporic culture. The games of chance were imports from southern China, where they were fixtures of social life, but probably played less frequently than in California. In late-nineteenth-century California, Chinese lotteries (*pak kop piu*) and the like were categorized as "vice" and heavily criminalized. The looming possibility of incarceration certainly raised the stakes of a given bet, as did the ubiquity of anti-Chinese harassment and the dismal work and living conditions of the Chinese migrants who made them. All of this set the stage for violence. And yet the allure of gambling remained for a community yearning to escape subordination. On Chinese

sources.⁹ There is certainly reason to doubt the version printed in the local press.¹⁰ But beyond the proximate cause and lurid headlines is another story, a story about struggles over coastal development and the infrastructure of U.S. empire. Since the onset of American colonization in 1848, local elites had labored to make Oakland a world-renown logistics hub, a dynamic crossroads of multiple transportation systems bridging discrete sites of war and trade all while raising property values. By the late nineteenth century, they had largely succeeded. But the imperial landscape they helped engineer was an explosive place due in no small part to the racialized migrants whose labor enabled its development. These migrants had their own ideas about life at the water's edge, ideas that could, in a matter of seconds, explode the rigid social order that empire promised to bring.

gambling in Oakland, see L. Eve Armentrout-Ma, *Hometown Chinatown: The History of Oakland's Chinese Community* (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 48-53. On allusions to gambling in the folksongs of the diaspora, see Marlon Kau Hom, "Some Cantonese Folksongs on the American Experience," *Western Folklore* 42 (Apr. 1983): 131, 138. Lashawn Harris's analysis of Black women's work in New York's early twentieth-century informal economy and their desires for joy, pleasure, financial stability, labor autonomy, occupational mobility, and self-determination beyond conventional respectability offers a model for exploring the illicit desires bound up in the East Bay's gambling parlors. See Lashawn Harris, *Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners: Black Women in New York City's Underground Economy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

⁹ Beyond the press accounts cited above there is a listing in Alameda County's Record of Deaths for the Chinese peddler, Quong Tan, also known as Ham Sing, which gives the cause of death as "gunshot wound." A newspaper article also includes Quong's "dying statement," as recounted by a deputy district attorney. The statement accuses Gung of slashing Quong with a "hatchet" before shooting him, but does not explain the source of their altercation. As for the cause of the explosion, there are conflicting accounts. No. 3064, "Record of Deaths of those Dying in Alameda County," 1898. ancestrylibrary.com; "Six Blown to Eternity," *Oakland Tribune*, 19 July 1898.

¹⁰ For one, an eye-witness, whose affiliation with the virulently anti-Chinese Native Sons of the Golden West suggests he had little reason to embellish his account to vindicate Gung, told a reporter that the explosion was an accident. See Mary Walker et al, *Nearly Neighbors: Archeological Investigations for the High Street Retrofit Project in Oakland California* (Oakland: Office of Cultural Resource Studies of the California Department of Transportation, 2012), 19-21, 53-54.

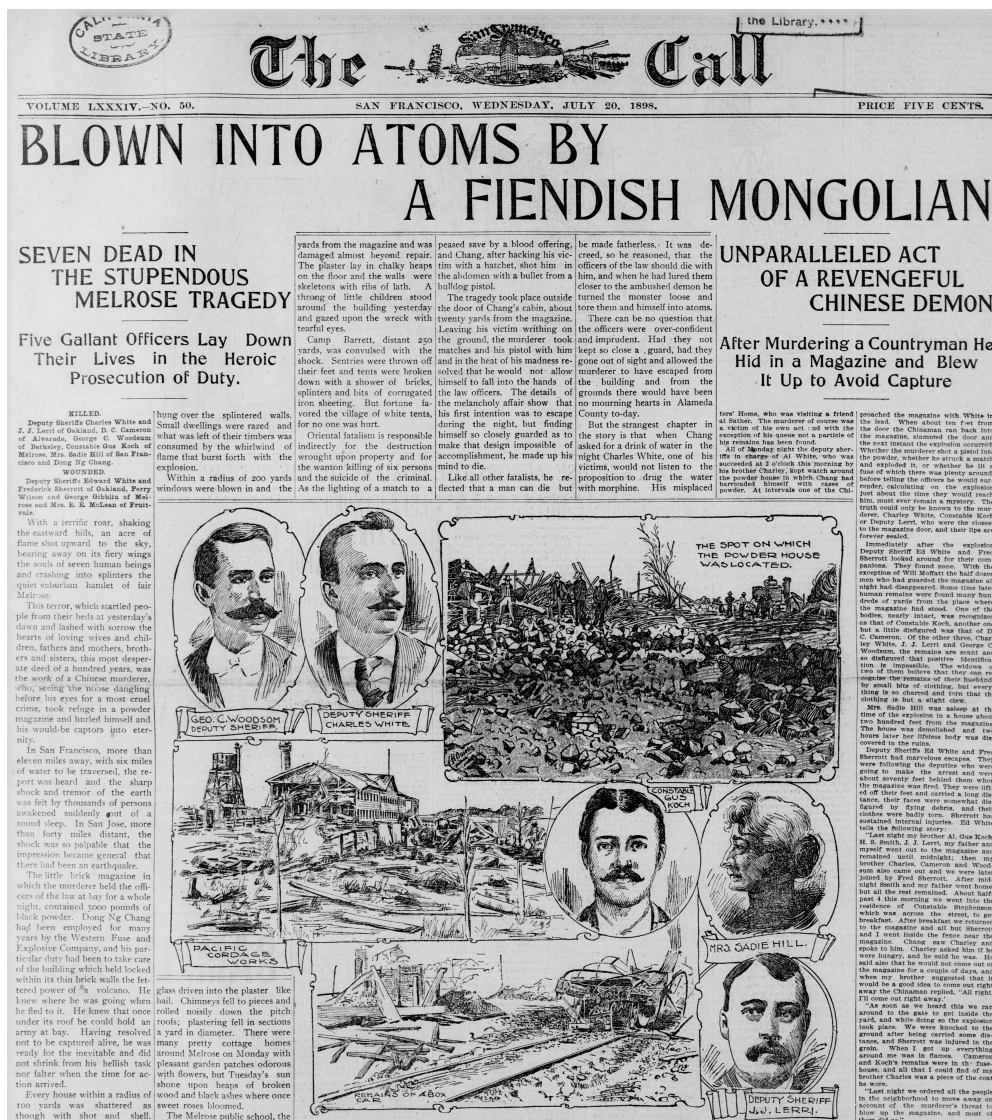


Figure 2. Front page of local newspaper after explosion, 1898. “Blown into Atoms by a Fiendish Mongolian,” *San Francisco Call*, July 20, 1898.

This chapter examines the workings of U.S. empire in a place made “domestic” by colonial violence. Ranging across urban, labor, military, and environmental history, it tracks the United States’s continental and overseas expansion from the vantage of Oakland’s waterfront. The chapter builds on a growing body of literature examining the contested rise of colonial capitalism in the nineteenth-century American West.¹¹ Tracing the routes of money and

¹¹ On the contested rise of colonial capitalism in the American West, see Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999 [1935]); Charlotte K. Sunseri, “Capitalism as Nineteenth-Century Colonialism and Its Impacts on Native

migration underpinning urban development and the rise of a metropolitan-imperial complex, I aim to show how the domination of nature and racialized populations by local elites and their War Department allies laid the groundwork for the East Bay's emergence in the twentieth century as a military depot and a key link in the global supply chain.¹² While city boosters narrated the region's rise as the inevitable result of its geographical advantages in an era when the Pacific Ocean was becoming an "American Lake," the building of this logistics empire was a precarious process.¹³ Unpredictable nature, shaky financing, and intransigent people who envisioned other futures for this bay shore land unsettled claims of inevitability. Ultimately, it was state-sanctioned violence—against racialized populations and their ecosystems, locally and

Californians," *Ethnohistory* 64, no. 4 (October 2017): 471-495; Bernadette Pérez, "Before the Sun Rises: Contesting Power and Cultivating Nations in the Colorado Beet Fields" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2017); Kornel Chang, *Pacific Connections: The Making of the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012); Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (New York: Verso, 2019); Manu Karuka, *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006). Jessica Kim, *Imperial Metropolis: Los Angeles, Mexico, and the Borderlands of American Empire, 1865-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

¹² My conception of a "metropolitan-imperial complex" follows Laleh Khalili's insights on the inextricability of infrastructures of war and trade in the history of capitalism. To convey how such infrastructure made and remade urban space, I have fused Roger Lotchin's notion of a California "metropolitan-military complex" with Lauren Hirshberger's identification of a "U.S. military imperial industrial complex" in Cold War Micronesia. Laleh Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade: Shipping and Capitalism in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Verso, 2020); Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California, 1910-1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Lauren Hirshberger, "Home Land (In)security: The Labor of U.S. Cold War Military Empire in the Marshall Islands," in *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, eds. Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 335-356.

¹³ On logistics empire, see Anna Tsing, "Supply Chains and the Human Condition," *Rethinking Marxism* 21, no. 2 (2009): 148-176; Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Lives of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Charmaine Chua, Martin Danyluk, Deborah Cowen, and Laleh Khalili, "Turbulent Circulation: Building a Critical Engagement with Logistics," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (2018): 617-629; Shiri Pasternak and Tia Dafnos, "How Does a Settler State Secure the Circuitry of Capital?" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 4 (2018): 739-757; On "natural advantages," "boosters dreams," and the metaphors of empire, see William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 23-54.

in a broader constellation of U.S.-occupied territories—which ensured other roads would not be taken in this pivotal moment of regional development and imperial consolidation.

Crossroads of Empire

In the wake of the Civil War, promoters of Manifest Destiny fixed their gaze on the Pacific. The imminent completion of the transcontinental railroad and the westward extension of empire filled them with optimism. Genocidal campaigns in the North American West, euphemized as Indian Wars, followed the transcontinental's path. In 1869, its tracks finally reached the continent's edge at the Central Pacific's ferry wharf in the city of Oakland. Trainloads of coal from the U.S. interior—where wars of extermination continued unabated, bolstered by troops reassigned from their erstwhile posts in the Reconstruction-era South—could now meet commercial and naval steamships plying the Pacific Rim. Formally inaugurated by the Guano Islands Act of 1856, U.S. colonization in the Pacific pried open territories and secured new markets, as well as coaling stations, natural resources, and supplies of cheap labor. As the physical nexus between the oceanic and continental dominions of American empire, the East Bay Area was primed to attract speculators, industrialists, and military officials. The investors and planners drawn to Oakland in the second half of the nineteenth century did not always agree about how the city should exploit its geographical fortune. But what was shared by this largely white male cohort was a belief that logistical infrastructure and the colonial relations it cemented would pave the way for long-term prosperity.

The region's urbanization offers a window into American empire under construction amid the fall of Reconstruction and the repression of Black-led forays into interracial social

democracy.¹⁴ It illustrates how, through the engineering of coastal ecosystems into conveyer belts of war and trade, military and industrial supply chains became deeply entangled. Oakland and its municipal neighbors developed infrastructure critical to the rise of what W.E.B. Du Bois called, “the capitalist dictatorship of the United States, which became the most powerful in the world, and which backed the new industrial imperialism and degraded colored labor the world over” in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ U.S. expansion in this period transformed landscapes far and wide, often through the deployment of super-exploited Chinese workers. Situated at the crossroads of this global process, Oakland’s fertile estuary of mudflats, saltwater marshes, and oak woodlands began to give way to gridded streets, infilled piers, and railroad depots.

Following its absorption by the United States in the Mexican-American War, Oakland emerged as a distribution hub for redwood lumber and other raw commodities extracted from the Northern California hinterland. By the end of the century, the city boasted a world-facing port, subsidized and designed by the U.S. War Department, that would come to rival San Francisco’s. But such a future was hardly visible at the time of its founding. A 1934 history of the Port of Oakland commissioned by the Oakland Board of Port Commissioners described the city’s waterfront in 1850 as “an evil-smelling strip of muddy tide lands with an occasional strip of sandy beach.”¹⁶ Contrary to this depiction of malodorous blight, the Oakland waterfront of the mid-nineteenth century hosted an intertidal zone teeming with biodiversity. Giant shellmounds, some reaching a thousand feet in length and 30 feet in depth, dotted the shoreline for decades

¹⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]); Julie Greene, “The Wages of Empire: Capitalism, Expansionism, and Working-Class Formation,” in *Making the Empire Work*, eds. Bender and Lipman.

¹⁵ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 630.

¹⁶ Dewitt Jones, ed., *Port of Oakland* (Oakland: State Emergency Relief Administration, 1934), 1.

after the American conquest. These burial grounds and rich depositories of Indigenous life testified to the bounties of local fisheries and their millennia-long stewardship by the Ohlone people.¹⁷

For Oakland's first generation of Anglo property-holders, such markers of a complex maritime world registered as little more than obstacles to the city's commercial ascent. Illustrating the fundamental link between the ecological and cultural dimensions of genocide, pieces of shell pilfered from the hundreds of mounds lining the bay would eventually supplement cement mixtures used to pave roads radiating out from an infilled shoreline running roughshod over Indigenous fisheries.¹⁸ In the early twentieth century, archaeologists at the University of California-Berkeley published reports describing the shell mounds as mere trash heaps—"accumulated refuse"—lending their academic authority to the desecration of these sacred sites. Berkeley archaeologist Max Uhle found evidence in the mounds of a "low grade of civilization," while his colleague Nels C. Nelson drily noted, "It so happens that the majority of the larger [shellmounds] lie precisely in the places since found suitable for habitation by the modern invaders, and therefore have to give way to the requirements of civilization."¹⁹

If the shellmounds prompted derision or indifference among the "invaders," the people who made them elicited a combination of paternalism, hostility, and murderous contempt. Joseph Eugene Baker tended toward the latter reaction. His résumé included a stint as a Confederate

¹⁷ Malcolm Marglin, *The Ohlone Way: Indian Life in the San Francisco-Monterey Bay Area* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1978) 36.

¹⁸ Matthew Morse Booker, *Down by the Bay: San Francisco's History Between the Tides* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 117.

¹⁹ Max Uhle, "The Emeryville Shell Mound," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 7, no. 1 (1907): 21; N.C. Nelson, "Shellmounds of the San Francisco Bay Region," *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 7, no. 4 (1909): 326.

soldier, a brief career in the 1890s as general overseer of California's Folsom state prison, and a 16-year tenure as an editorial writer for the *Oakland Tribune*.²⁰ In his history of Alameda County, he used a common slur to describe, approvingly, the precarious state of Ohlone women in the wake of U.S. colonization. "The squaws were the lowest type of human femininity," he wrote. "Their only virtues were that they bore few children to perpetuate the miserable race and died young."²¹ For Baker and his fellow settlers, civilization denoted the inexorable extension of white supremacy over the territories of people fated for subjugation or extinction.²² For those who resisted their assigned fate, unbridled disdain and violence awaited. Contrary to settler myth, the Bay's original human inhabitants did not go extinct. Uprooted from their shoreline ecologies, their numbers drastically fell but the Ohlone people continued to survive through resistance to displacement and creative adaptations to the new environment.²³

The claims of Mexican rancheros to East Bay land garnered little more respect from American settlers.²⁴ In 1850, an enterprising group of squatters, led by Horace Carpentier, a

²⁰ Joseph E. Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County, California, Vol. 2* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1914), 97-102.

²¹ Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County, California, Vol. 1*, 25.

²² Settler colonialism in practice does not maintain a neat binary between exploitation and elimination. As Robin D.G. Kelley writes in a sympathetic critique of Patrick Wolfe's conception of settler colonialism as a "logic of elimination," bringing South Africa and African indigeneity into the discussion reveals a mode of white settlement that "wanted the land *and* the labor, but not the *people*—that is to say, they sought to eliminate stable communities and their cultures of resistance" (269). Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London: Verso, 2016). Robin D.G. Kelley, "The Rest of Us: Rethinking Settler and Native," *American Quarterly* 69 (June 2017): 267-276.

²³ Margaret Marietta Ramírez, "Take the houses back/take the land back: Black and Indigenous urban futures in Oakland," *Urban Geography* 41 (2020): 682-693.

²⁴ The Spanish government approved Luis Peralta's East Bay grant in 1820 and it was renewed under Mexican rule. While the claims of Peralta's descendants were ultimately validated by the federal Board of Land Commissioners and by a series of judicial rulings, the cost of litigation forced them to dispose of the land. This reflected a pattern of legal dispossession playing out in the American West following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). See Maria E. Montoya, *Translating Property: The Maxwell Land Grant and the Conflict over Land in the American West, 1840-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002). For details of the Peralta claim, see Oakland Title Insurance and Guaranty Company, "Abstract of Title," vol. 1, p. 3-40, 1916, Box 1, Folder 3, Papers

twenty-six-year-old white New Yorker with a law degree from Columbia University, first leased and then expropriated, through legal chicanery, the Peralta family's Spanish land grant.²⁵ Two years later, Oakland incorporated on a small square of waterfront land encompassing its present-day downtown.

At the time, there was nothing particularly urban about its geography. Its southern edge was a marshy band bordered by a shallow estuary. The southern bank of the estuary, known then as San Antonio Creek, hosted a bristling bulb of partially submerged cordgrass. Further south, this low-lying marsh gave way to a spit of land studded with coast live oaks. The town of Alameda would soon rise amid the ruins of this forest. Alameda formed a peninsula appending Oakland at the eastern end of the estuary. Later in the century, Army Engineers would construct a tidal canal forcing the waterway east into San Leandro Bay and turning Alameda into an island. Topography aside, Oakland and its southern neighbor remained inextricably linked by a series of bridges, tunnels, railroad lines, and a shared stake in regional development.

relating to properties known as the Alameda Marsh in the Oakland Estuary, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²⁵ Beth Bagwell, *Oakland: The Story of a City* (Oakland: Oakland Heritage Alliance, 2012), 25-26.

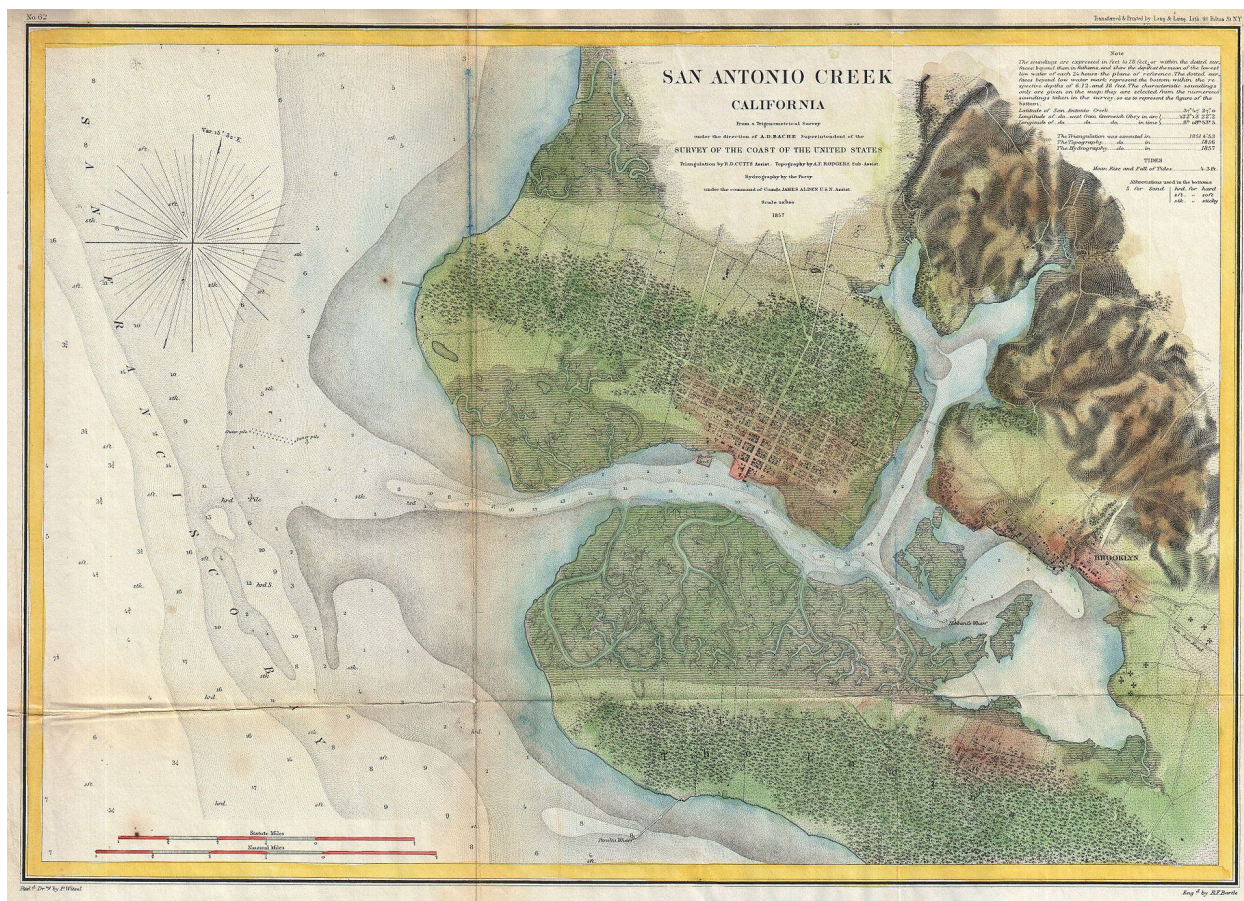


Figure 3. Map of San Antonio Creek between Oakland and Alameda, 1857. Superintendent of the U.S. Coast Survey.

From the western borders of both cities, one could peer out at the bay's Golden Gate, a mile-wide strait between Marin and San Francisco where oceangoing vessels entered the calmer harbors of the vast inlet. From this vantage, the world of the Pacific appeared tantalizingly close. But the vista was misleading. At the western mouth of the estuary was a sandbar, which, at low tide, blocked access to the bay's shipping lanes. Given that a deep-water harbor already existed in San Francisco, there was little initial interest outside of Oakland's landowning class in funding improvements to the city's waterfront. Consequently, Oakland's inaugural ferry service had to align its schedule with the drift of the tides. In 1859, the sandbar was finally removed by a private contractor under the guidance of the U.S. Navy, which also supplied a government

dredger. The project cost \$14,000, which was raised through a combination of private capital and Alameda County bonds.²⁶

But much work still remained. A short item from January 1874 in the *San Francisco Chronicle* succinctly evoked the pitiful state of the harbor and the hope that additional improvements would soon come: “A scow sloop got stuck last Wednesday on the place where Oakland Harbor is to be.”²⁷ The first infusion of federal funding arrived a few months later in the summer of 1874, greatly expanding dredging operations in the estuary. But Congressional appropriations under the Rivers and Harbors Act proved capricious. Progress was halting.²⁸ A young Jack London experienced the slow pace of harbor development firsthand. Having come of age on Oakland’s waterfront during the early 1890s, London recounted, in his autobiographical novel *John Barleycorn*, a drunken voyage down the estuary, in which a “full hundred yards of soft mud intervened between the boat-wharf and the water,” sending a 14-year-old London flying off his skiff “head-foremost into the ooze.”²⁹ Less inebriated captains could navigate the estuary’s uneven depths. But natural impediments continued to hobble the growth of Oakland’s maritime industries through the end of the century.

Ecological obstacles notwithstanding, local speculators remained convinced that an imperial entrepot would soon spawn on Oakland’s shores. By the mid-1860s, they could point to concrete developments that seemed to foreshadow their city’s rise. Oakland’s strategic position

²⁶ Jones, ed., *Port of Oakland*, 30; Lunine, “Iron, Oil, and Emeryville,” 145.

²⁷ “Pacific Slope Brevities,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 January 1874.

²⁸ For annual appropriations for the Oakland harbor between 1874 and 1899, see *Annual Reports of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 4, for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 3164.

²⁹ Jack London, *John Barleycorn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009 [1913]), 33.

as the interface between the United States's railroad-driven continental imperialism and its naval and commercial expansion in the Pacific bolstered the city's claim to empire: its future rested on its ability to bridge mineral frontiers of the American West with Pacific Rim worksapes of guano and sugar.³⁰ Mirroring its impact on cotton production, the Civil War's disruption of Louisiana sugar plantations spurred a global search for new arenas of cultivation.³¹ Transpacific capitalists moved quickly to exploit the opening. Because American and European imperialism had destabilized a southeast Chinese peasantry already reeling from a land shortage, a vast reserve of Chinese labor could be mobilized in California, the broader Pacific world, and the Caribbean.³² Employing Chinese contract laborers, Hawai'i's American-owned sugar plantations boomed between 1860 and 1865. By the Civil War's close, their acreage and exports had multiplied many times over as they rushed to fill the supply vacuum.³³ Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy inaugurated its first Hawaiian coaling station, signaling the growing importance of Pacific territories to U.S. commercial and military power. Back in California, a mainly Chinese workforce began to blast railroad tunnels through the High Sierras, using explosives largely manufactured by Chinese laborers in the East Bay Area. The transcontinentals promised, in the

³⁰ On "worksapes" as places "shaped by the interplay of human labor and natural processes," see Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 125. On "continental imperialism," see Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 168-184. See also, Alyosha Goldstein, ed., *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³¹ Moon-Ho Jung, "Outlawing 'Coolies'": Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (September 2005): 677-701; Zach Sell, "Asian Indentured Labor in the Age of African American Emancipation," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 91 (Spring 2017): 8-27.

³² Edna Bonacich, *Asian Labor in the Development of California and Hawaii in Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 160; Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 46-47, 65; Sucheng Chan, *This Bitter Sweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 16.

³³ Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1778-1854: Foundation and Transformation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1965), 141.

words of Manu Karuka, to transform “California from an overseas to a continental possession of the United States.”³⁴ The coming railroad and the frenzy of activity in the Pacific basin seemed to herald the westward shift of commerce and industry.³⁵ For local boosters, Oakland was ideally positioned to prosper from such a development.

The city’s growth into a major transshipment hub seemed plausible in the late 1860s when the Central Pacific selected Oakland’s waterfront as its western terminus. The selection came at the urging of War Department officials, who viewed Oakland as the railroad’s logical endpoint.³⁶ While Army Engineers explored harbor improvements in the estuary, two railroad wharves, one reaching out from Oakland’s western flank and the other running parallel to the south out of Alameda, provided train-to-ferry service to San Francisco, as they had done since 1863. Extending thousands of feet into deep water, these wooden piers became the property of the Central Pacific in 1868. So too did Oakland’s estuary with the exception of a lone wharf set aside for city use.

The real estate transaction took the form of a back-room deal with Horace Carpentier, the New York squatter who gained control of the waterfront in the early 1850s. Carpentier’s possession of this prime local real estate had been contested from the beginning. What was arguably the first social movement in modern Oakland’s history erupted in 1853 when a crowd of furious residents descended on the waterfront, causing thousands of dollars in property

³⁴ Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks*, 82.

³⁵ The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, the same year as the completion of the transcontinental railroad, would undermine this prospect. Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 37.

³⁶ Jones, ed., *Port of Oakland*, 34.

damage, after the denial of their petition seeking the invalidation of Carpentier's title.³⁷ The protest did not prevail, nor did its memory come to the fore when the Central Pacific began its inquiries. The anticipated benefits to local land values and economic growth trumped all other considerations when the Oakland City Council officially recognized Carpentier's title in the spring of 1868. The city's seal of approval ensured the smooth transfer of the waterfront to the railroad, an absentee landlord with offices in San Francisco.³⁸ In the stroke of a pen, one monopolistic owner replaced another. The decision would have enormous implications for the development of Oakland's harbor and its broader economy, not all of them salutary from the perspective of boosters. But if there were skeptics at the time, their voices could not be heard over the cheers of local speculators, whose dreams of a railroad-fueled real estate boom were now becoming reality.³⁹

Plantation Circuits

When the first transcontinental rumbled into town on November 8, 1869, it remained to be seen whether Oakland would retain its suburban character and reputation as a city of schools and churches or graduate into an industrial metropolis.⁴⁰ Many early landowners saw the promise in both potential futures and hoped for a harmonious marriage of the two. One thing was certain:

³⁷ Jones, ed., *Port of Oakland*, 13; John Gulick, "Landside Risks: The Ecological Contradictions of Port of Oakland Globalism" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2001), 303.

³⁸ The railroad ruled over the Oakland harbor until the early twentieth century by way of the Oakland Water Front Company, a real estate entity, whose board included Carpentier, his brother Edward, as well as Leland Stanford, Lloyd Tevis, John Falton, and Samuel Merritt. The Oakland Water Front Company had its office at 1592 Geary Street in San Francisco. Leckie-Abraham Title Co, "Abstract of Title," p. 89-92, ca. 1926, Box 1, Folder 1, Alameda Marsh Papers.

³⁹ Mel Scott, *The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985 [1959]), 48.

⁴⁰ Alameda County Development Commission, *Alameda County: Where Every Prospect Pleases: Where Rail and Water Meet* (Oakland: Curtis-Baum Advertising Service, 1922); Bagwell, *Oakland*, 96-117

land values would benefit tremendously from the city's good fortune as the Pacific coast railhead of the transcontinental system.

For James McKinney Alexander, born to a Protestant missionary family in Hawai'i with burgeoning ties to the archipelago's sugar industry, rumors of the coming railroad coupled with Oakland's sterling reputation as a city of good moral character made it an attractive place to put down roots of the spiritual and financial sort. He made the move in 1864, with the intention of becoming a pastor and investing in land. The region's salubrious conditions delighted him, as did its more temperate climate, a climate still hospitable to the flora of the tropics.⁴¹ In a letter to his brother William from January 1866, Alexander requested a shipment of "a box or two of young koa and ohia lehua trees to be planted in our church lot," in the East Bay town of San Leandro.⁴² In another Hawai'i-bound letter, this one sent to his father in November 1867, Alexander reported on the expansion of his church and on the professional activities of his social circle, but above all his message focused on real estate. Oakland, he predicted, as the "terminus of the Pacific [Railroad] and as country resort of [San] Francisco, will in a few years increase immensely."⁴³ The surrounding area held great promise, as well. Due north, he noted, was "the site of the Oakland College and of the Agriculture College and of the future University of the State...around all which quite a town will cluster which is to be called Berkley [sic]." The

⁴¹ Musings on climate suffuse the Alexander family letters, evoking nineteenth-century Western assumptions about the intersection of race and geography. Popularized by the German geographer Alexander von Humboldt, who constructed racial hierarchies along isothermal lines, climactic theories of civilization conceived the tropics as intrinsically subordinate to the temperate zones. Nevertheless, tropical botany, as historian Gary Okihiro observes in his discussion of the pineapple, came to symbolize "an escape from the alienations of modernity," a representation that obscured its "materiality as an object of plunder, possession, and prestige." Gary Y. Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 3.

⁴² James McKinney Alexander to William Dewitt Alexander, January 17, 1866, Microfilm Reel 6, Alexander Family Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴³ James McKinney Alexander to William Patterson Alexander, November 27, 1867, Microfilm Reel 6, Alexander Family Papers.

town's name paid homage to the eighteenth-century Anglican theologian, philosopher, poet, and slave owner George Berkeley. The name first surfaced in 1866 when college trustee Frederick H. Billings, a financier and land-claims attorney who would later serve as president of the Northern Pacific Railway, recalled a Berkeley verse that struck his colleagues as remarkably prescient: "westward the course of empire takes its way." The poem fired the trustees' imaginations, as did the stunning hillside views of the bay that formed the backdrop of their gathering. It was an ideal perch for contemplating the future of higher education and the continental and overseas frontiers of U.S. expansion.⁴⁴

In this bastion of empire, Alexander felt confident that property values would steadily climb. In fact, they were already soaring. He pointed to the gains of his friend George Beckwith who bought land on Oakland's northern border for \$250 an acre only to see it inflate to \$600 an acre less than a year later. Moreover, with horse car service to the Oakland Ferry slated to reach Beckwith's home in the near future, the upward trend would surely continue. For these reasons, Alexander recommended that his younger brother Sam buy local land, possibly in the lot adjoining Beckwith's, as soon as possible: "Sam would do well to trust G. Beckwith to invest his or a part of his money in a building spot at Oakland." With Hawai'i mired in a postwar slump due to an oversupplied sugar market, East Bay real estate presented a compelling opportunity to

⁴⁴ U.S. imperialists regularly trotted out the Berkeley verse. New York Congressman Fernando Wood, who led the Congressional opposition to the 13th Amendment, uttered the verse in an 1876 speech to the House of Representatives defending the passage of the Hawaii Reciprocity Treaty: "I look to the Pacific Ocean as that vast sea which in the not distant future will be more essential and indispensable to the prosperity and material interest of this great nation than the Atlantic Ocean twice over; and that this treaty if consummated will be a giant step toward the permanent security of these interests, laying the foundation of a permanent prosperity, and the obtainment of rights and exclusive privileges which will be as advantageous in war as they will be valuable in peace. Westward the course of empire takes its way." Charles Wollenberg, *Berkeley: A City in History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 25-26; *Congressional Record: Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Forty-Fourth Congress, First Session; Also Special Session of the Senate, Vol. IV* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 1423.

financially diversify. “Oakland is to grow so fast,” Alexander declared, “that any investment of money that Sam could make there would pay more profit than the 6 per cent of the Honolulu Bank.”⁴⁵ Sam Alexander would eventually take his brother’s advice, but only after investing in Hawaiian sugar and amassing a fortune.

Alexander’s comparison of the rate of return on Oakland real estate to the sugar-saturated interest rates of the Honolulu Bank gives concrete form to a nascent circuit of transpacific capital. His letter—likely delivered by the California, Oregon, & Mexico Steamship Company, which in 1867 became the first steamer service to obtain a U.S. mail contract to Hawai‘i—points to a basic truth.⁴⁶ The money that the Alexanders and Beckwiths ploughed into East Bay real estate originated in plantations.

Before departing for Oakland in 1867 to invest in land and convalesce from a “complete breakdown” of health, George Beckwith worked as the founding manager of the Haiku Sugar Company on Maui.⁴⁷ He began his tenure in 1858 with a tour of Louisiana’s sugar plantations. It was a familiar itinerary for Hawai‘i’s planters.⁴⁸ Four years earlier, Louisiana native John Clough delivered a detailed report on the ecological and financial workings of Louisiana cane

⁴⁵ Alexander was hardly exaggerating in his estimation of the value of Oakland real estate. In the 1866-1867 fiscal year, the assessed value of city property totaled \$1,434,800. Two years later, it surged to \$3,363,478, an increase of over 200 percent. *Directory of the Township and City of Oakland, Together with the Townships of Brooklyn and Alameda, for the Year 1869* (Oakland: R.F. Stillwell, 1869), 97.

⁴⁶ William L. Worden, *Cargoes: Matson’s First Century in the Pacific* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1981), 4.

⁴⁷ *The Seventy-First Annual Report of the Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society* (Honolulu: Paradise of the Pacific, 1923), 73.

⁴⁸ Lawrence Helfgott Kessler, “Planter’s Paradise: Nature, Culture, and Hawai‘i’s Sugarcane Plantations” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 2016), 128.

fields to the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society's Committee on Sugar.⁴⁹ The report inspired confidence about Hawai'i's prospects in no small part because the cost of importing and compensating Chinese "coolies" in Hawai'i compared favorably with "the cost of feed and clothing for negroes" in Louisiana. The Committee concluded that the "comparative cheapness, therefore, of cooly [sic] labor, must forever preclude the possibility of competition, in these Islands, of negro slavery." The anti-slavery posture of Hawai'i's sugar capitalists reflected the predominance of missionary families with New England roots in their broader milieu.⁵⁰ But, as their comparative calculations make clear, the appeal of Asian contract labor stemmed as much from its cost-effectiveness as from its supposed morality.⁵¹ In this age of emancipation, Caribbean planters, and, for a brief period after the Civil War, their Louisiana counterparts, would come to similar conclusions.⁵² Beckwith, for his part, did not focus on questions of labor in his Louisiana survey. Sugar mill technology commanded his attention. Nevertheless, during his time at Haiku, labor problems were among his most vexing concerns.

In 1865, Beckwith oversaw the introduction of a Chinese workforce on the 10,000-acre plantation. He hoped to use this migrant population to replace Indigenous Hawaiian workers, whom planters deemed, in the racist common sense of the time, biologically unfit for plantation

⁴⁹ *Transactions of the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society: At Its Fourth Annual Meeting, in June, 1854* 2, no. 1 (Honolulu: Government Press, 1854), 24.

⁵⁰ Lawrence H. Kessler, "A Plantation upon a Hill; Or, Sugar without Rum: Hawai'i's Missionaries and the Founding of the Sugarcane Plantation System," *Pacific Historical Review* 84, no. 2 (2015): 129-162.

⁵¹ This point resonates with Eric Williams's discussion of the economics of abolition and his attendant critique of the self-serving moral explanations circulating within the British Empire: "Sugar meant labor—at times that labor has been slave, at other times nominally free; at times black, at other times white or brown or yellow." Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 29.

⁵² Walton Look Lai, *Indentured Labor, Caribbean Sugar: Chinese and Indian Migrants to the British West Indies, 1838-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

labor.⁵³ The transition did not go smoothly. The steep cost of furnishing rice, a staple demanded by Chinese workers, caused Beckwith endless grief. He agonized over the arithmetic of labor replacement and wondered whether it truly added up.⁵⁴ But when he tried to source the relatively cheaper taro crop to feed Native Hawaiians he ran into a different problem: taro was in short supply because the people who traditionally grew it had been dispossessed of their land and turned into wage workers as sugar plantations proliferated.⁵⁵ Planters were gobbling up Indigenous land to make room for a lucrative monocrop. But in doing so they undermined their own ability to feed their workers efficiently. The tension between these two objectives was a source of great anxiety: failure to provide workers with their desired calories could trigger a mass exodus and without workers no profits could be reaped from the ever-expanding cane fields.

Such economic and ecological contradictions weighed heavily on Beckwith and may have contributed to his “breakdown.” In any case, he left the plantation in 1867, with enough money saved to purchase a parcel in Oakland where he lived with his wife and their two newborn children. Upon arrival, he found work as a Latin professor, resuming a career he had put on hold during his eight years as plantation manager.⁵⁶ By the summer of 1870, less than a year after the

⁵³ Gregory Rosenthal, *Beyond Hawai‘i: Native Labor in the Pacific World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 170.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁶ *Williston Seminary, Easthampton, Mass. Alumni Records from 1842 to 1874* (Springfield, MA: Clark W. Bryan and Company, 1875), 86.

first transcontinental chugged through the city, his Oakland home had an assessed value of \$2000.⁵⁷

This amounted to nearly five years of wages for the Central Pacific's Chinese tracklayers, whose labor underpinned local land values. Moreover, unlike their white counterparts who enjoyed company-provided room and board as a supplement to their pay, Chinese railroad workers had to purchase their own provisions without higher incomes to offset the cost. This meant good business for Chinese merchants who satisfied workers' cravings for the tastes of their home villages with a supply chain that linked Chinese-run fishing villages and truck farms to rural and urban enclaves of industrial labor.⁵⁸ When Chinese workers staged a massive strike in June 1867, Central Pacific executives tried to break it by choking off this distribution system.⁵⁹ Some accounts of the strike suggest Chinese merchants abetted the corporation's efforts in cutting off supplies to the workers' camps.⁶⁰ In nineteenth-century California, conflicts between Chinese merchants and workers were not unheard of as suggested by the fatal dispute between the explosives worker and food peddler that began this chapter. But there are also indications that Central Pacific executives suspended food deliveries on their own.⁶¹ Regardless, the strikers ended up halting construction for eight crucial days. And while their demands for higher pay and shorter hours were not immediately met, Chinese workers did secure gradual

⁵⁷ 1870 United States Federal Census, Oakland, Alameda, California, page no. 101. Ancestry.com.

⁵⁸ Gordon Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 110.

⁵⁹ They also contemplated sending in freedmen as strikebreakers. Mark Hopkins wrote to Collis P. Huntington in June of 1867: "A Negro labor force will tend to keep the chinese steady, as the chinese have kept the Irishmen quiet." Quoted in *Ibid.*, 154.

⁶⁰ Karuka, *Empire's Tracks*, 94.

⁶¹ Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, 155.

wage increases in the months after the stoppage.⁶² The strikers' ability to hold out for over a week testified to their willpower, but it also reflected, as historian Gordon Chang has observed, their success in "living on gathered supplies" and, at least initially, their maintenance of unity across "contractors, headmen, and workers."⁶³ Indigenous trading partners and hunting and foraging by camp cooks may have also played a part in keeping the workers supplied.⁶⁴ As for the date of the strike, Chang notes that "Chinese cosmology is likely to have played an important role." These various strands intersected in the material culture of railroad workers: in their everyday lives, food, spirituality, and militancy were intimately linked.⁶⁵ The social reproduction of contract laborers, responsible for the rise of sugar plantations in Hawai'i and transportation infrastructure in the North American West, was a site of contestation. The provisioning of workers presented a chance to cut costs and discipline labor, but it also sustained cultures of opposition and infrastructures of solidarity. Such contradictions had been all too familiar to Beckwith during his tenure at Haiku. They probably felt a lot less pressing from the vantage of Oakland, where trains continued to multiply and land values continued to swell. And yet, his current prosperity as an Oakland landowner, touted by James Alexander just five months after the railroad strike, still depended on contract laborers and vexing equations involving calories, output, and profit.

For 31-year-old Sam Alexander, the intricacies of labor productivity and social control remained urgent matters when his brother advised him to follow Beckwith's lead and invest in

⁶² Ibid., 157

⁶³ Ibid., 153.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 111. Charlotte K. Suneri, "Alliance Strategies in the Racialized Railroad Economies of the American West," *Historical Archaeology* 49 (2015): 85-99.

⁶⁵ Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain*, 152, 116-119.

East Bay land. Alexander's decision to remain in Hawai'i proved highly profitable. In 1867, he earned a living as the manager of the Waihee sugar plantation. Like Beckwith, he was recruited to the position while working as an educator. He had entered the latter profession after an abortive attempt to strike it rich in Gold Rush California. During his sojourn, he found time to explore the city of Oakland, a place that "mightily pleased" him both for its unsurpassably "healthy" climate and its exotic oddities, including its "Chinese temples which were well worth seeing."⁶⁶ After returning to Hawai'i in the early 1860s, Alexander became a Protestant missionary teacher and began to dabble in sugar cultivation. With Indigenous Hawaiian students providing unpaid labor, he began to grow cane on a hillside plot in the vicinity of his school. He got the job at Waihee in 1863 on the success of that endeavor. In a letter to his brother William from September of that year, Alexander described a commute from the school to the cane fields and suggested how his experience as a teacher in a colonial classroom might serve him as a manager of Native labor: "I am hard at work now getting new words in Kanaka, also idiomatic phrases, such as natives are constantly using," wrote Alexander. "I should like to be able in my sermons and speeches to quote from their old bards—the effect would be tremendous."⁶⁷ In 1871, Alexander moved 15 miles east to take Beckwith's old job at Haiku. By then, he was a seasoned planter, but his attraction to the Haiku owners stemmed in part from his marriage to one of their daughters.

Alexander did not last long in the position. Always on the lookout for sound investments, he purchased some arid agricultural land near Haiku with his childhood friend Henry Baldwin

⁶⁶ Samuel Thomas Alexander to William Dewitt Alexander, August 10, 1860, Folder 409: Alexander, Samuel T., Alexander & Baldwin Papers, Hawaiian Mission Children's Society Library, Honolulu, Hawai'i [HMCS].

⁶⁷ Samuel Thomas Alexander to William Dewitt Alexander, September 12, 1863, Microfilm Reel 6, Alexander Family Papers.

and began to explore irrigation schemes.⁶⁸ These were the seeds of the Alexander and Baldwin corporation, an entity that would soon grow into one of the largest sugar exporters in Hawai‘i as well as a dominant player in the nascent world of transpacific shipping. The following year, James Alexander returned to Hawai‘i after selling his San Leandro home for a profit. Settling in Haiku, he joined his brother’s business venture. Before long, the brothers were surveying land for an aqueduct and drawing on the engineering knowledge of California’s irrigation experts.⁶⁹

James Alexander’s return to Hawai‘i, a decision the Beckwiths also made around this time, illustrates the kinds of intimacies being forged between the islands’ planters and the East Bay Area.⁷⁰ Oakland was a genial place to build a home and a sensible place to invest; its land values appeared to have more room to grow while its conditions seemed more wholesome than those in the rough-and-tumble city of San Francisco.⁷¹ These Protestant planters and their descendants helped build the East Bay’s churches, schools, and philanthropies.⁷² Their efforts

⁶⁸ Barbara R. Stein, *On Her Own Terms: Annie Montague Alexander and the Rise of Science in the American West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 7.

⁶⁹ Samuel T. Alexander to S.N. Castle, April 16, 1877, Folder: Correspondence A-B, Castle & Cooke Papers, HMCS.

⁷⁰ Intimacies between the two regions can be traced to the late eighteenth century, which marked the beginning of transpacific circuits of Indigenous Hawaiians and British and American traders. David Chang, “Borderlands in a World at Sea: Concow Indians, Native Hawaiians, and South Chinese in Indigenous, Global, and National Spaces,” *Journal of American History* 98, no. 2 (September 2011): 384-403; Rosenthal, *Beyond Hawai‘i*; Minyong Lee, “Circuits of Empire: The California Gold Rush and the Making of America’s Pacific” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2018), 34-36; Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); David Igler, *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷¹ On popular perceptions of nineteenth-century San Francisco as a rough, unstable city, see Lauren E. Ferguson, “A Gateway without a Port: Making and Contesting San Francisco’s Early Waterfront,” *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 4 (2018): 603-624.

⁷² The impact of the Alexanders and Beckwiths is substantial in itself. The First Presbyterian Church of San Leandro, which James Alexander helped found, still exists. George Beckwith taught Latin at the Oakland College School, the forerunner to the University of California-Berkeley, where his brother, Edward, was one of the first principals. Samuel Alexander’s daughter, Anne Montague Alexander, founded two natural history museums at the University of California-Berkeley and pioneered zoology on the West Coast. Wallace Alexander, another of Samuel’s children, played an outsized role in local philanthropy, Chambers of Commerce, and the Republican Party. Their legacy continues in the Berkeley-based Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, founded in 1971. Stein, *On*

contributed to Oakland's Gilded Age reputation as the "Athens of the Pacific."⁷³ Many others followed the path they blazed, as indicated by the dozens of East Bay addresses populating the late-nineteenth-century reports of the Hawaiian Mission Children Society, a veritable who's who of Hawai'i's transnational Protestant elite.⁷⁴ But homes could be transplanted and investments could be liquidated. When more profitable enterprises beckoned on the other side of the Pacific, local ties were readily unbound.

Within a few years of Alexander's return, construction began on the water system of the Alexander and Baldwin plantation. The project coincided with the implementation of the first reciprocity treaty between Hawai'i and the United States. Waiving tariffs on imports, the treaty was a godsend to Hawai'i's planters. But its passage had as much to do with bolstering the U.S. military presence in Honolulu as it did with streamlining trade. In a letter read into the Congressional Record in March 1876, General J.M. Schofield of the San Francisco-headquartered Military Division of the Pacific stated frankly that the "financial interest to the United States involved in this treaty is very small, and if it were much greater it would still be insignificant when compared to the importance of such a military and naval station to the national security and welfare."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, the treaty was of great financial interest to Alexander and Baldwin. Having secured the ultimate prize of duty-free access to the U.S.

Her Own Terms; Directory of the Township and City of Oakland for the Year 1869, 101; Allen L. Chickering, "Wallace M. Alexander, 1869-1939," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (December 1939): 379-381.

⁷³ Many booster pamphlets sported the slogan. See for example, Merchants' Exchange and Board of Trade of the City of Oakland, *Oakland: "Athens of the Pacific"* (Oakland: G.W. Calderwood and G.T. Loofbourow, 1897). The slogan persisted into the twentieth century. See Untitled speech, 1923, George C. Pardee Papers, Carton 12, Folder 18, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁷⁴ For an illustrative case, see the 1895 report, in which 47 individuals on the membership rolls listed Oakland or Berkeley as their place of residence. *Forty-Third Annual Report of the Hawaiian Mission Children's Society* (Honolulu: Press Publishing Company, 1895).

⁷⁵ *Congressional Record: Forty-Fourth Congress, First Session, Vol. IV* (1876), 1489.

market, revenues came gushing in after the company completed its aqueduct in 1878. Its duly irrigated sugar crop offered considerable returns, as did hawking Hawaiian water rights to rival plantations. Meanwhile, the migration of Chinese contract workers began to accelerate. By the end of the decade, Chinese laborers overtook their Indigenous counterparts as the largest population in the cane fields.⁷⁶

With several years of business success under his belt and with plans underway to incorporate his partnership with Baldwin, Sam Alexander finally decided to relocate from Maui to Oakland. As with George Beckwith, health issues and a desire for a new environment were among his motivations.⁷⁷ In a letter to his brother William, he cited then popular climatological theories of race in explaining his growing distaste for Hawai‘i. “I am more than ever convinced that the climate of the Islands is debilitating,” he wrote. “The tendency is to sloth and vice.”⁷⁸ The chance to invest in real estate was likely on his mind as well. His brother James, who years before had tried to sell him on the virtues of local land, joined him in the move. In 1883, Sam purchased property and built a house on 16th Street, west of Oakland center. He lived there with his wife, Martha, and their children, along with a live-in maid and cook, both of them women who had emigrated from Sweden.⁷⁹ James Alexander settled on the other side of town in East Oakland, not far from his old home in San Leandro.

From his base in Oakland, Sam Alexander tracked incoming shiploads of sugar bound for San Francisco’s refineries and thereafter West Coast consumers. He also stayed abreast of

⁷⁶ Rosenthal, *Beyond Hawai‘i*, 198.

⁷⁷ Stein, *On Her Own Terms*, 9-10.

⁷⁸ Mary Charlotte Alexander, *William Patterson in Kentucky, the Marquesas, Hawaii* (Honolulu: Private Print, 1934), 442.

⁷⁹ 1900 United States Federal Census, Oakland, Alameda, California, sheet no. 6. Ancestry.com.

federal tariff policies. Within a few months of his move, he joined the successful push for the extension of the reciprocity treaty. On the receiving end of the lobbying blitz was California Senator John F. Miller, chair of the Committee on Foreign Relations, and, several years prior, architect of the Chinese Exclusion Act.⁸⁰ Immersed in the minutiae of foreign policy, Alexander's ambitions became grander and more global in scope. He kept an eye on French construction efforts on the Panama Canal, and even explored the creation of a Panama outpost to be helmed by his brother James, as a future springboard to East Coast refineries and markets.⁸¹ While James declined the offer since he did "not think it best to take my family there, especially as I am uncertain about the summer climate," the Panama scheme augured the corporation's geographical expansion and inroads into the transportation sector.

For the past couple years, Alexander had relied on the newly formed Matson shipping company for moving his company's sugar crop to North American refineries. But his interest in vertical integration made him eager to control all facets of the transportation, refining, and distribution process. Within a couple of decades, Alexander and Baldwin would obtain a sizable stake in Matson, a corporation that, in the second half of the twentieth century, helped revolutionize global shipping from its Port of Oakland terminal. The plantation company would also cooperate with its American rivals in taking control of the California and Hawaiian Sugar Company. Located twenty miles north of Oakland, the East Bay refinery continues to serve as the principal processor of cane sugar consumed by Americans west of the Mississippi River.

⁸⁰ James Alexander to William Dewitt Alexander, February 13, 1884, Microfilm Reel 6, Alexander Family Papers.

⁸¹ Ibid. On the application of the imperial fantasies of white businessmen in Panama and the broader Caribbean basin, see Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

While Alexander's relocation to Oakland attuned him to the possibilities of corporate expansion, physical distance did not decrease his interest in the intricacies of plantation management. In 1883, he was appointed chairman of the labor committee of the Planters' Labor and Supply Company, a consortium of American plantation interests on the Hawaiian archipelago. In October of that year, a report he drafted in Oakland was read on his behalf at the consortium's annual meeting in Honolulu.⁸² The report opened by noting improvements in Hawai'i's labor supply, a development attributed to an influx of Chinese workers. Though Alexander did not mention it, the uptick in Chinese labor migration correlated with the United States's ratification of Chinese Exclusion the previous year. While the Hawaiian government followed the U.S.'s example by establishing an immigration quota of its own, it still allowed entry to thousands of Chinese migrants annually.⁸³ Weighing the costs and benefits of planters' reliance on Chinese workers, Alexander characterized their presence as an overall boon. But he warned of the dangers of overdependence. "By employing different nationalities," he stated, "there is less danger of collusion among laborers, and the employer, on the whole, secures better discipline." Nevertheless, after referencing failed experiments in labor sourcing from Pacific Island nations and the uncertainty of future migrations from India and Japan, Alexander rhetorically asked, "To what country then but China shall we look for the bulk of our labor?" His reasoning in the subsequent passage mixed scientific racism, classical liberalism, and missionary zeal:

Have we not large resources here capable of development, and shall we let them remain forever unproductive, because Providence did not intend that the white man should do field work in the tropics. No country is expected to prosecute industries which are not

⁸² "Report of Committee on Labor," *Planters' Monthly, Published by the Planters' Labor and Supply Company, of the Hawaiian Islands* 2, no. 8 (November 1883): 245-247.

⁸³ Ronald Takaki, *Pau Hana* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1983), 24-25.

profitable, and the experience of sugar growing, the world over, goes to prove that cheap labor, which means in plain words, *servile* labor, must be employed in order to render this enterprize [sic] successful. Men shudder at the word servile labor, as though it was akin to slave labor, but the term has no such signification. In arguing for servile [Chinese] labor, we only mean to say that we must fall back on the *lower strata* of society, because it is cheap labor and because it is adapted to the tropics.

While not disputing the argument that “the Chinese are shrewd and clanish [sic], and will unite through secret organizations, in maintaining the standard of wages,” Alexander offered a simple remedy: “let emigrants come here in large numbers and the *market will break*, so to speak. John Chinaman will have to work or starve.” That an increase in Chinese migration would alone solve the problem of Chinese militancy by slackening the labor market is contradicted in a subsequent section, in which Alexander evoked the specter of a “vagrant class of Chinese” overrunning Hawai‘i. Echoing the contemporaneous moral panic surrounding Euro-descendant hobos in the North American West, he wagered that the introduction of Chinese women in Hawai‘i and complementary policies designed to foster heteronormative nuclear families would mitigate the problem of vagrancy.⁸⁴ But such policies would only work if paired with the state-sanctioned containment of Chinese mobility: Chinese workers should only arrive “under contract” and the Hawaiian government should demand that its Chinese counterpart cover the cost of deporting those who refuse to sign new ones when the originals expire.

Alexander’s proposal for the instrumentalization of Chinese labor and the containment of Chinese people reflected a racial discourse spanning the settler colonies of the White Pacific.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 45-63.

⁸⁵ Gerald Horne, *The White Pacific: U.S. Imperialism and Black Slavery in the South Seas after the Civil War* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2007); Andrew T. Urban, “The Advantages of Empire: Chinese Servants and Conflicts over Settler Domesticity in the White Pacific,” in *Making the Empire Work*, eds. Bender and Lipman.

But the impact of that discourse was uneven, owing to regional differences of political economy and varying levels of anti-Chinese violence. That the same California senator who had legislated Chinese Exclusion supported efforts to retain tariff exemption for Hawai‘i’s Chinese-harvested sugar crop speaks to the contradictions at the heart of this racial geography.

Geographies of Exclusion and Circulation

Oakland’s Congressman Horace Francis Page was among the fiercest advocates of Miller’s Chinese Exclusion bill. His dogged support helped shepherd it through the House of Representatives.⁸⁶ The Republican representative offered a lengthy speech championing the law’s passage in March 1882. Anti-Blackness, a frame of reference buttressing Chinese subjugation in nineteenth-century California, formed a pillar of Page’s argument: “I believe, Mr. Speaker, that there is not a member upon this floor, of either party, who believes that the coming of the African race to this country originally was a blessing to us or to the African himself.”⁸⁷ Page uttered these words five years after the withdrawal of federal troops from the South. No Black Congressmen held office at the time. In the decade prior, 14 Black men served in the House and two in the Senate. Page’s elision of these facts, let alone the fact that capitalism in the United States arose on the backs of enslaved Africans, signaled the rise of a popular amnesia consigning Reconstruction to the dustbin of history. If remembered at all, the period registered as

⁸⁶ The bill was ratified in May 1882 in a slightly modified form—restricting Chinese immigration for ten rather than twenty years—in response to President Chester Arthur’s initial veto. Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 177.

⁸⁷ *Congressional Record: Containing the Proceedings and Debates of the Forty-Seventh Congress, First Session, Vol. XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1882), 1932. Scholars have located the origins of American Sinophobia in anti-Blackness. A number of pieces of anti-Chinese legislation in nineteenth-century California were modeled on Black Codes ratified in Midwestern states, while racist stereotypes of Black and Chinese cultures mingled in minstrel shows and wild west melodramas. See Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy*, 19-20; Tomás Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines: The Historical Origins of White Supremacy in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 158-159.

a cautionary tale, a failed experiment in the relaxation of white rule.⁸⁸ According to this emerging common sense, Black and Chinese people were comparably unassimilable and both ill-suited to the responsibilities of citizenship. Page took pains to clarify that he was not opposed to all immigration, declaring that “the German, the Irishman, and the Scandinavian come here to make their homes with us and become a part of us.”⁸⁹ By way of contrast, he conjured up images intended to convey the immutability of Chinese difference, including a stereotypical snapshot of the Chinese diet. “His food is brought from [China],” Page asserted, “for it consists principally of rice and tea. He eats no beef-steak or mutton-chops or potatoes. He is trained to live on the smallest amount of food.”⁹⁰ Page claimed to know of what he spoke. He pointed to his record in Congress as proof of his authority on the matter: “During my nearly ten years as a member of this house I have had frequently, in obedience to a sentiment in my State that was almost practically unanimous, introduced bills and resolutions for the purpose of preventing the further immigration of Chinese into the State of California.”⁹¹ The most notorious piece of legislation authored by Page fortified the 1862 prohibition on the “coolie trade” and effectively banned the admission of Chinese women to the United States.⁹² It is best known as the Page Act of 1875.

If Sam Alexander sought to encourage the migration of Chinese women, strengthen the labor contract system, and increase the ranks of Chinese workers in Hawai‘i, Horace Page sought the opposite for California. These were not incompatible stances. In Hawai‘i, there was no

⁸⁸ See Du Bois’s analysis of the “propaganda of history” in *Black Reconstruction*, 711-729.

⁸⁹ *Congressional Record: Forty-Seventh Congress, First Session, Vol. XIII* (1876), 1932.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1936.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1933.

⁹² On the prohibition of the so-called “coolie trade,” see Jung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies.’”

constituency of white laborers railing against Chinese competition in the labor market. As such, labor in-sourcing in the archipelago did not provoke the level of backlash that it did in the North American West. This helps explain why Page backed the 1876 Hawai‘i reciprocity treaty, lending his support to the duty-free importation of raw sugar cultivated in large part by contract workers from China.⁹³ A decade later, he moved to bring the Hawaiian and U.S. markets even closer together, by calling for U.S. annexation of Hawai‘i.⁹⁴ For Page, free trade and Chinese Exclusion were two planks of an imperial project that sought to galvanize and harness white antipathy to competition from workers of color, while reproducing a global value chain that funneled wealth into the pockets of white capitalists.⁹⁵

Page’s greatest achievement in the House, aside from laying the groundwork for Chinese Exclusion, was securing federal funding for the development of Oakland’s port.⁹⁶ Improving the East Bay’s waterfront infrastructure formed an adjunct to free trade. Enhancing the logistical means by which Hawaiian sugar and other Pacific Rim resources entered the U.S. market facilitated economic integration as much as tariff treaties did.⁹⁷ And this, too, involved Chinese labor, both in the construction of the railroad lines fanning out from the East Bay’s docks and in

⁹³ *Congressional Record: Forty-Fourth Congress, First Session, Vol. IV* (1876), 3037. His support for the measure is all the more striking in light of the fact that California’s beet sugar industry was taking off in the 1870s. Moreover, many of Page’s Republican colleagues opposed the measure. After noting the abysmal contracts under which sugar workers in Hawai‘i labored, Republican William D. Kelley of Pennsylvania remarked, “Of Course no American laborer, no Caucasian, will go there for any such wages.” *Ibid.*, 1462.

⁹⁴ “Late Foreign News,” *Saturday Press* (Honolulu), 25 July 1885.

⁹⁵ Page was, like Missouri’s Thomas Hart Benton, “a populist fixer beloved by plutocrats.” Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America*, 46.

⁹⁶ “The Second District Congressional Convention,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 July 1875.

⁹⁷ Donald Marquand Dozer, “The Opposition to Hawaiian Reciprocity, 1876-1888,” *Pacific Historical Review* 14, no. 2 (1945): 161.

the building of the harbor itself. Chinese labor played an indispensable role in the making of a logistics empire in nineteenth-century Oakland.

In October 1875, a year after the commencement of federally funded harbor improvements and seven months after the ratification of his pivotal anti-Chinese legislation, Horace Page embarked on a tour of Oakland's harbor.⁹⁸ Oakland's mayor and an assortment of local notables accompanied him on the voyage. The group traversed the estuary on a steamer, surveying the progress of work crews contracted and managed by the Army Engineers. Their tour began at the harbor's entrance, continuing eastward to the site where a planned tidal canal would eventually connect Oakland's waterway to San Leandro Bay. At the western edge of the waterfront, Page and his companions found the clearest sign of the harbor's incipient transformation: a pair of jetties formed a 750-foot-wide path stretching over a mile into the deep waters of the bay.

What Page saw on that October day represented a stunning achievement. In the past 11 months, 65,000 tons of stone had been deposited along the lines of the north and south training walls at the mouth of the harbor.⁹⁹ The local press did not report on whether the tour passed by the laborers responsible for this feat. But if Page and his companions happened to observe the construction work in action, they would have seen a team of 50 Chinese men on a fleet of barges lowering rock after rock into the bay.¹⁰⁰ The rocks came from a quarry a couple miles west on Yerba Buena Island, known colloquially as Goat Island. Here, dozens of largely Chinese workers chipped away at the island's northeast corner aided by dynamite locally manufactured by a

⁹⁸ "Improvements in Oakland Harbor," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 October 1875.

⁹⁹ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1875* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1875), 690; *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1876* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1876), 612.

¹⁰⁰ David Weber, *Oakland: Hub of the West* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1981), 92.

predominantly Chinese workforce.¹⁰¹ The construction crew worked around the clock, sleeping near their worksite on a barge converted to a house boat.¹⁰²

The genealogy of this labor process can be traced to the birth of California's prison system, a system that was private before it was public and mobile before it was fixed in place. In 1851, local capitalists John Hays and John Caperton secured a sublease to employ convict laborers recruited from six county jails across the state. The prisoners were confined in overcrowded quarters on a boat named the *Waban*, the state of California's inaugural institution of incarceration. Hays and Caperton shuttled the captives between various infrastructure projects around the San Francisco Bay, including the quarry on Angel Island, which by the turn of the twentieth century hosted a different kind of prison—a detention facility for immigrants hailing mainly from China. The *Waban* prisoners were also tasked with constructing California's first fixed-site penitentiary—San Quentin State Prison, located on the shores of Marin County due north of San Francisco.¹⁰³ In 1861, campaigns against child labor, Chinese contract work, and convict leasing coalesced in a union-led coalition that forced an end to prisoner employment beyond the confines of San Quentin.¹⁰⁴ But the employment repertoire of maritime confinement and labor deployment lived on. On the surface, the experiences of Chinese workers building jetties in Oakland's harbor in the mid-1870s resembled those of convict workers mobilized from the *Waban*. Though the former nominally consented to their work, the context in which they made their choice ensured that dangerous, geographically isolated, low-wage jobs were among

¹⁰¹ "A 'Wumpus' and a 'Wow,'" *Oakland Tribune*, 8 March 1875; "Oakland Harbor," *Oakland Tribune*, 7 October 1875.

¹⁰² Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County, California, Vol. 1*, 121.

¹⁰³ Lunine, "Iron, Oil, and Emeryville," 209-210.

¹⁰⁴ Following this reform, the convict leasing system continued in California until 1882. *Ibid.*, 211.

their best opportunities for survival. Page and the broader anti-Chinese movement in California helped shape this context. Choking off Chinese immigration and coercing Chinese laborers already residing in the United States into self-deporting were their ostensible goals. But compelling Chinese migrants to accept work generally undesired by white men was an agreeable compromise. As one San Francisco shoemaker candidly stated in explaining why he needed to contract out manufacturing work to San Quentin in order to compete with firms using Chinese labor: “You can crowd Chinamen into basements and other places where white men won’t work.”¹⁰⁵

Newspaper accounts and the War Department’s engineering reports suggest that the laborers responsible for quarrying and ferrying rocks plunged into saltwater off the coast of Oakland toiled in deplorable conditions for little pay. The rate of exploitation inversely correlated with the staggeringly low bid approved by the Army Engineers for the contract. Of the 14 respondents to the Army’s 1874 advertisement “for delivery of stone along the lines of the projected training-walls,” Daniel Sweeney made the lowest bid by far. At \$0.985 per ton, his offer was nearly one-fifth less than his nearest competitor’s.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, it was over 50 cents short of the estimated cost per ton listed in the Army Engineers’ own report, an estimate criticized in the local press for being too small.¹⁰⁷ But Sweeney’s paltry figure seemed to prompt

¹⁰⁵ “Convict Labor,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 15 January 1874. Chinese men were also vastly overrepresented in San Quentin, comprising nearly 20% of prisoners in 1875 (Chinese comprised 9% of California in 1870), indicating that many of the convict laborers competing with “free” Chinese laborers were also Chinese. See “Pacific Slope Brevities,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 March 26 1875.

¹⁰⁶ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1875*, 691.

¹⁰⁷ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1874* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1874), 383. A *Chronicle* article complained that the Army Engineer’s estimate of \$3/cubic yard or \$1.50/ton “would not pay for the stone at the quarry,” let alone the costs of labor, cement, and transportation needed to build jetties. “Oakland Harbor,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 March 1874.

enthusiasm, not skepticism, in War Department officials. A mere two days after receiving the proposal, they awarded him the contract. Congressman Page commemorated the announcement with a cruise around the bay, taking in maritime scenery that struck local boosters as a blank slate on which harbor improvements would soon be etched.¹⁰⁸ By the time Page repeated this itinerary one year later, Sweeney had been replaced by a higher bidder for failing to meet the terms of his contract.

There were immediate signs that Sweeney was not up to the task. After spending the first month constructing several barges and a small wharf on Goat Island, he assembled a crew of quarriers and haulers.¹⁰⁹ The operation was understaffed from the beginning, likely a consequence of a piece rate too low to accommodate the requisite labor costs.¹¹⁰ Work on the jetties commenced in December 1874. The initial pace was extremely disappointing. Sweeney's contract called for the delivery of 10,000 tons of stone per month, but after the first two months he had only mustered a total of 4,000 tons. By March, the rate of delivery had picked up slightly, but it still fell far short of the quota. And then, disaster struck. In the early morning of March 2, 1875, an embankment collapsed on a group of quarriers. Many were injured and one of them died several hours after the accident.¹¹¹ When work resumed soon thereafter, the mood on Goat Island was surely tense. Less than a week later, tensions boiled over into a massive brawl between several dozen Chinese laborers and a handful of white laborers, likely Irish

¹⁰⁸ *Oakland Tribune*, 16 October 1874. On the dialectic of the pastoral and the industrial in nineteenth century American culture, see Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

¹⁰⁹ "Goat Island Attacked," *Oakland Tribune*, 5 November 1874.

¹¹⁰ "Oakland Harbor Improvements," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 April 1875.

¹¹¹ "Accident at Goat Island," *Oakland Tribune*, 3 March 1875; "Across the Bay," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 March 1875.

immigrants.¹¹² What we know about the incident comes from a salacious newspaper account.¹¹³ But given the Bay Area press's penchant for racist caricatures of Chinese criminality, it is noteworthy that the article does not equivocate in attributing the cause of the fight to harassment by a white worker. An initial "insult" escalated into a tussle that drew in the island's white and Chinese workers on opposite sides. Defying pervasive Western stereotypes of Chinese docility, the latter's show of collective defense brought the fight to a close. The white workers soon fled the scene, "leaving one of their number upon the field of battle in an insensible state, and groaning with numerous wounds inflicted by the enemy." Thus, in the first week of March, violent events reduced Sweeney's already stretched workforce by two, and possibly more owing to uncounted injuries. The strain of grueling work apportioned to an insufficient number of laborers undoubtedly pressurized the environment in which this violence occurred. That Sweeney desperately needed additional labor was confirmed a day after the fight, when the *Oakland Tribune* reported matter-of-factly that, "Twenty more men went to work on Goat Island this morning, excavating rock to be used in the improvement of our harbor."¹¹⁴

Sweeney's belated expansion of his workforce proved too little too late. In April 1875, a supervising officer of the Army Engineers informed a *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter that "During the past season the [harbor improvement] work has made very slow progress, owing to want of proper outfit by the contractor for building the north training wall."¹¹⁵ Less than a month

¹¹² "An Hour in Bottle Jake's," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 March 1875.

¹¹³ "A 'Wumpus' and a 'Wow,'" *Oakland Tribune*, 8 March 1875.

¹¹⁴ "Increasing the Force," *Oakland Tribune*, 8 March 1875.

¹¹⁵ "Oakland Harbor Improvements," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 14 April 1875.

later, Sweeney's slow progress cost him the contract.¹¹⁶ His successor, a San Francisco lawyer and real estate agent named Henry F. Williams, agreed to furnish stones at \$1.19 per ton. Upon taking over the job, Williams concluded that Sweeney's Goat Island infrastructure was inadequate and promptly assembled a team to construct a new pier.¹¹⁷ He also upgraded the delivery boats and built a narrow-gauge railroad system on the island's eastern flank atop artificial land composed of refuse stone and dirt excavated from the quarry.¹¹⁸ The tracks culminated at the end of the wharf, where railcars of rocks poured their contents onto barges docked below. It took over a month to develop this new infrastructure at a cost nearly equal to the total value of the contract.¹¹⁹ Moreover, unforeseen difficulties in locating and extracting stones capable of passing inspection by government officials demanded more labor than initially expected.¹²⁰ Despite these setbacks, Williams succeeded in accelerating the pace of construction, delivering well over 10,000 tons of stone per month to Oakland's jetties over the course of his contract. But given the unanticipated expenditures on labor and equipment it is doubtful that he made a profit on the venture.

Why did Williams take on a contract unlikely to remunerate his investment? His leadership in San Francisco's Mechanics' Institute, an organization founded in 1854 with the aim of catalyzing technical education in California in order to channel the energies of unemployed gold miners into industrial jobs and thereby wean the state off foreign imports, suggests a loftier

¹¹⁶ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1875*, 689.

¹¹⁷ "New Dock on Goat Island," *Oakland Tribune*, 20 May 1875.

¹¹⁸ "Oakland Harbor," *Oakland Tribune*, 7 October 1875.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1875*, 690.

¹²⁰ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1876*, 612.

purpose than short-term financial gain.¹²¹ As the Institute's Corresponding Secretary, Williams delivered the opening address at its inaugural exhibition in 1857. In his speech, he extolled the contributions of the mechanical arts to the "physical sciences," to "the dominion of mind over matter," and to the reduction of "the various products of nature to forms and conditions best suited to the wants and wishes of man," which together make up "the great measure of difference between civilized and savage life."¹²² Among the recent industrial advancements celebrated by Williams was the establishment of the San Francisco Sugar Refinery in 1856 by local entrepreneur George Gordon, an event heralding the end of sugar imports from East Coast refineries. "I am pleased to be able to state upon authority," Williams proclaimed, "that [the refinery's] facilities for obtaining the raw materials from the Islands of the Pacific, enables them to undersell importers and make handsome profits upon their investments."¹²³ As a prominent booster of California industry, perhaps Williams delighted at the opportunity to build up infrastructure that would facilitate the import of raw materials and the export of goods whose added value originated in the state's enterprising class of producers. But a closer look at his biography indicates another motive was at play.

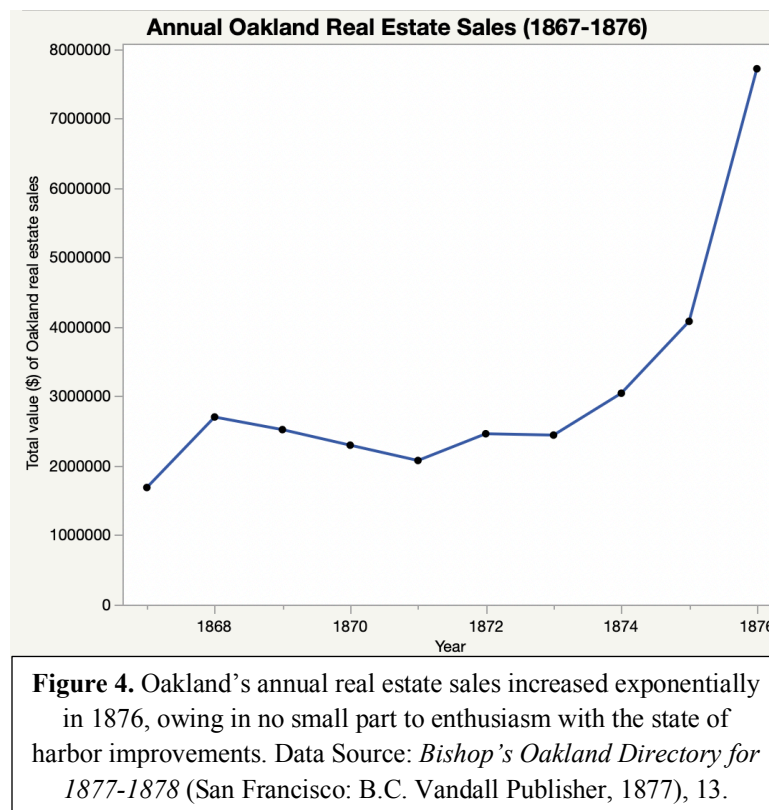
As a buyer and seller of real estate, Williams hoped to profit off the inflation of value stemming from the improvement of waterfront land. In 1876, a year after dutifully carrying out his contract with the Army Engineers for the construction of the jetties, Williams placed an ad in Oakland's city directory with a choice listing: grounds available for a multiyear lease

¹²¹ The Mechanics' Institute played a part in the founding of University of California, Berkeley and retained a position on the college's Board of Trustees until 1974. See Taryn Edwards, "Mechanics' Institute History," *Mechanics' Institute*, <https://www.milibrary.org/about/history>.

¹²² *Report of the First Industrial Exhibition of the Mechanics' Institute of the City of San Francisco Held at the Pavilion of the Institute, from the 7th to the 26th September, A.D. 1857* (San Francisco: Franklin Office, 1858), xxii.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, xxix-xxx.

“conveniently situated” to both railroad depots and wharves.¹²⁴ It was a propitious time to be a Bay Area landlord. After declining slightly in 1873, the value of sales of Oakland real estate grew by a quarter in 1874, the first year of federally funded harbor improvements. Then in 1875, the annual growth rate increased again, this time by more than a third. But even with this upward trend, few could have imagined that in 1876, a year characterized by a general slump in Pacific coast property markets, the sum total of Oakland real estate sales would rise by 90 percent to a value greater than the previous two years combined.¹²⁵ If anyone could have anticipated such staggering growth, it was someone intimately connected to the development of infrastructure responsible for this speculative frenzy.



¹²⁴ *Bishop’s Oakland Directory for 1876-1877* (San Francisco: B.C. Vandall Publisher, 1876), 499.

¹²⁵ *Bishop’s Oakland Directory for 1877-1878* (San Francisco: B.C. Vandall Publisher, 1877), 13.

Imperial City Making

These were heady times for local boosters. In their eyes, Oakland's newfound status as the rail-water nexus of the North American West ensured that it would soon cast off the yoke of the imperial metropolis across the bay.¹²⁶ While Army and Navy officers surveying the region in the 1840s had concluded that a continental base on the eastern shores of the bay held more strategic promise than the deep waters of San Francisco's hilly, wind-swept peninsula, the importance of ocean travel in the mid-nineteenth century along with San Francisco's Mexican-era legal status as a property-granting pueblo ensured San Francisco, not Oakland, would emerge as Northern California's premier city.¹²⁷ Oakland's lower position in the metropolitan hierarchy clearly stung the pride of its promoters, who hammered home their grandiose conception of their city as the future commercial and industrial empire of the Pacific. "No aggregation of capital," wrote Oakland's C.B. McDonald, Esq. in 1876, "can retain the seat of commercial empire away from the established highway of commerce; and Oakland being the actual terminus of the overland railway, and having more than the required wharfage, must in time acquire a considerable proportion if not a preponderance of trade."¹²⁸ Many would repeat the assertion that economic activity ought to favor the city where trains and ships converged. During the mid-1870s, local real estate investors Edwin Woodward and Grant Taggart found no shortage of "gratification in improvements now being made to our local harbor, which soon is to convert the entire waterfront into one vast workshop for the Pacific Ocean." According to these men,

¹²⁶ On the rise of an imperial metropolis in San Francisco, see Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco*.

¹²⁷ Bagwell, *Oakland*, 4; Booker, *Down by the Bay*, 41.

¹²⁸ Quoted in *Bishop's Oakland Directory 1876-1877*, 9.

Oakland's ascent was guaranteed, since the "natural and only profitable location for manufacturers is where ship and [rail] cars come together."¹²⁹

The bridging of rail and maritime transport laid the groundwork for the East Bay's industrialization and its emergence as a logistical crossroads for coal and troops powering the Pacific empire of the United States.¹³⁰ Military and commercial expansion created a feedback loop of dispossession and incorporation: U.S. incursions into Asia hastened the displacement of people from their ancestral lands, augmenting, in turn, reserves of "cheap" labor available to toil on plantations and infrastructure projects that swelled the nation's coffers and enabled further expansion. This dynamic fueled the urbanization of Oakland during the 1870s. Low-wage Chinese labor made the city's logistical infrastructure, which facilitated U.S. imperialism and laid the groundwork for exponential increases in local real estate activity.

But if California's racialized terrain of employment undergirded Oakland's property values, its social fault lines engendered fundamental instabilities.¹³¹ By the close of the decade, Oakland's real estate market was contracting, as reflected in the declining rate of housing starts. Here was a clear sign that the global depression of the 1870s had begun to pierce the city's aura of endless growth. In his eponymous city directory from 1880, D.M. Bishop stated that the "causes of this comparative quiet in [Oakland's] building operations are plainly apparent." The first cause he listed was the violence and disorder sparked by the local anti-Chinese movement, a

¹²⁹ Woodward and Taggart's *Real Estate Catalogue and Price List of Oakland Property for 1877* quoted in Bagwell, 56.

¹³⁰ By the turn of the twentieth century, Oakland had the largest coal bunkers on the west coast and served as the Pacific coast terminus of the Army's "troop train," which will be discussed in the next chapter. Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County, Vol. 1*, 69; Stephen D. Coats, *Gathering at the Golden Gate: Mobilizing for War in the Philippines, 1898* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2006), 43-45.

¹³¹ Almaguer, *Racial Fault Lines*.

phenomenon he euphemized as “social agitations in the metropolis, [which] tended to render capital wary.”¹³² The riots that swept through Oakland and San Francisco amid the downturn of the late 1870s—described in greater detail in the subsequent chapter—made for a turbulent business climate, and threatened to expel the workforce whose super-exploitation had unlocked local prosperity. The banner under which the rioters marched declared: “The Chinese Must Go!”¹³³

A concurrent development further stoked the anxieties of investors. In 1877, at the height of Oakland’s racist upheaval, federal appropriations dried up. Horace Page had failed to convince the Congressional Committee on River and Harbor Improvements, as he had successfully done in the previous three years, to earmark funds for Oakland. The reason for this turn of events was renewed attention to the ambiguity of land titles along the East Bay waterfront.¹³⁴ Disputes over property rights pervade the history of U.S. colonization in the North American West, periodically posing a roadblock to capitalist development.¹³⁵ In Oakland’s case, the conflict pitted an ascendant nation-state against a corporation that acted like a sovereign power.¹³⁶ After gaining possession of Oakland’s waterfront in 1868 in the infamous deal with ex-mayor and land speculator Horace Carpentier, the Central Pacific Railroad (acquired by the

¹³² *Bishop’s Oakland Directory for 1880-1881* (San Francisco: Directory Publishing Co., 1880), 19.

¹³³ Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).

¹³⁴ “Oakland’s Harbor,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 April 1877.

¹³⁵ Emma Teitelman, “The Properties of Capitalism: Industrial Enclosures in the South and the West after the American Civil War,” *Journal of American* 106, no. 4 (March 2020): 879-900; Noam Maggor, “To Coddle and Caress These Great Capitalists: Eastern Money, Frontier Populism, and the Politics of Market-Making in the American West,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 1 (February 2017): 55-84; Donald Pisani, “Land Monopoly in Nineteenth-Century California,” *Agricultural History* 65, no. 4 (Fall 1991): 15-37.

¹³⁶ Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); White, *Railroaded*.

Southern Pacific in 1885) fought to keep this coastal land relatively underdeveloped. It did so in lawsuits and in waterfront scuffles involving employees deputized as sentries, blocking the inroads of corporate rivals.¹³⁷ The railroad aimed to hinder the competition of other rail and ferry companies vying for a stake on the East Bay shoreline.¹³⁸ An attendant goal was shoring up its bet on San Francisco as the region's uncontested metropolis. Leland Stanford and his Central Pacific partners assumed Oakland would find its niche as a sparsely populated transit junction, furnishing the peninsula across the bay and hosting its more noxious industries.¹³⁹

Their vision ran counter to the one proffered by the Army Engineers. The Army official most responsible for transforming Oakland into a future hub of war and trade was George Mendell. A West Point graduate with decades of experience in the field, Mendell's career spanned the supervision of military road construction in the 1850s Pacific Northwest, where he also fought in Indian Wars, and the development of Fort Alcatraz in the 1870s. The latter project entailed the deployment of federal prisoners, including Indigenous captives, to level the island's peaks and extend its boundaries into the bay using surplus rock and dirt.¹⁴⁰ Mendell's prolific examinations of irrigation systems, urban water supplies, and deep-water ports helped set in motion the industrialization of the Pacific coast in the late nineteenth century. That his

¹³⁷ *Southern Pacific Company vs. The City of Oakland, et al.* (San Francisco: Circuit Court of the United States, Ninth Circuit, Northern District of California, 1893); John Davie, *His Honor, the Buckaroo: The Autobiography of John L. Davie, Mayor Emeritus of Oakland, California* (Reno, NV: Publisher Jack Herzberger, 1988), 137-187.

¹³⁸ The CPRR guarded its holdings so jealously that it refused to sell any of the waterfront until 1882. That year a nail factory obtained a small parcel with "the condition that it not engage in any rail or ferry operations." "Historical Research of Land Use & Industry in Federal Ship Channel, USACE," 1990, Port of Oakland Archive.

¹³⁹ Richard Walker, "Industry Builds Out the City: The Suburbanization of Manufacturing in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1940," in *The Manufactured Metropolis*, ed. Robert Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁰ "Historic Property Survey Report, 50-Ft Channel Project," 1997, Port of Oakland Archive; Gregory L. Wellman, *A History of Alcatraz Island: 1853-2008* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 17.

intellectual output exceeded technical surveys only added to his luster. In 1862, he published an English edition of Baron Henri de Jomini's canonical text, *The Art of War*, which he co-translated from the original French with Captain W.P. Craighill of the Army Engineers.¹⁴¹ Jomini's chapter on "Logistics, or the Practical Art of Moving Armies" contributed to the elevation of supply chains and transportation networks to a prominent place in modern warfare.¹⁴² Mendell left his own mark on the future of logistics—a legacy discernible in the engineered coastline of the San Francisco Bay.

Mendell and his War Department underlings lent technocratic credence to the aspirations of Oakland boosters who did not want their city to remain a glorified rail depot with a smattering of ferry wharves. Federal intervention, as Mendell and his colleagues proposed in 1874, would "enable the largest ships to enter the new harbor, so as to 'bring ship and [rail] car together.'"¹⁴³ By 1878, the success of that project was seriously in doubt. Coming on the heels of the retrenchment of harbor funding, the Central Pacific refused to release the title to submerged lands it claimed to own, thus impeding scheduled improvements in the estuary's bed.¹⁴⁴ The work of the Army Engineers ground to a halt for three years.¹⁴⁵ The matter was finally resolved in June 1880, when Rutherford B. Hayes's Department of Justice decreed that the United States

¹⁴¹ Baron Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War*, translated from the French by Capt. G.H. Mendell and Capt. W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1862).

¹⁴² Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 28-29.

¹⁴³ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1874*, 383.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph J. Hagwood, *Engineers at the Golden Gate: A History of the San Francisco District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1866-1980* (San Francisco: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1980), 56.

¹⁴⁵ This was an ironic turn of events since a few years prior, San Francisco boosters had accused Army Engineers of colluding with the Central Pacific in their Oakland harbor improvement scheme. Fearing a modern harbor in Oakland would challenge San Francisco's maritime hegemony, they smeared it as a giveaway to the widely reviled railroad monopoly, which allegedly sought public investment to "utilize and make valuable their otherwise valueless tide land possessions." "Oakland Harbor," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 March 1874.

had full rights to the estuary, regardless of private claims, in accordance with its constitutional authority over navigable waterways.¹⁴⁶ A few months later, the War Department awarded a new contract for the delivery of stone along the harbor's long-awaited training walls.¹⁴⁷

In February 1881, Mendell, who had recently risen through the ranks to Lieutenant-Colonel of the Corps of Engineers, submitted a report to his superior that underscored the national importance of Oakland's harbor. He reviewed the conditions that brought the War Department to its waterway, noting that the city was a far more accessible transit node than San Francisco, which is "topographically ill-located for a railroad center" and "can only be reached by a considerable detour."¹⁴⁸ In light of these geographical facts, "commercial facilities for the transfer of persons and freight on [Oakland's] shore are indispensable for the commercial interests of the whole country." Federal intervention was further justified by the inadequacy of the Central Pacific's Oakland Long Wharf, a two-mile wooden railroad pier, whose vulnerability to "the attacks of marine insects...has long been a subject of anxiety to the ferry company and the part of the traveling public that appreciated the danger of a train carrying 600 or 800 people being precipitated into the bay." Oakland's boosters could not have asked for a more resounding endorsement of their cause. And there were few who could match Mendell's authority on the subject.

Under Mendell's guidance, the Army Engineers reshaped Oakland's waterfront, through jetty construction, canal building, land reclamation, and constant dredging. They deepened shipping channels, cleared sandy shoals, and dispatched endless runoff from inland mines and

¹⁴⁶ "The Oakland Water Front," *Sacramento Bee*, 2 July 1880.

¹⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 3, for the Year 1881* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881), 2462.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2519.

other extractive industries. But the successful conversion of this unnatural harbor into a bustling maritime hub by the turn of the twentieth century obscured numerous failures along the way. Oakland's jetties, for example, were originally conceived as a component of a "natural" scouring system intended to harness the power of the ebb-tide current to sweep away river-bed layers and thereby reduce the need for dredging.¹⁴⁹ But the scouring scheme never came to fruition. The Army Engineers eventually conceded the error.¹⁵⁰ But the misstep elicited little criticism from Oakland's boosters since by the time of its acknowledgement the jetties had come to play an unintended role in wresting the waterfront from the clutches of the railroad. This was a profitable failure indeed.

The north and south training walls would ultimately provide a scaffold for the construction of new land atop the marshes of the estuary. While talk of infilling the coast using material dredged from the harbor first surfaced in 1874, initial dredging operations in 1877 and 1878 involved the dumping of refuse sediment in deep water.¹⁵¹ This changed in the early 1880s, when dredged material was first repurposed for land reclamation between the northern jetty and the banks of Oakland.¹⁵² By the early twentieth century, over 100 filled acres stretched across the former East Bay tidelands.¹⁵³ In 1897, the resultant extension of the coastline convinced a

¹⁴⁹ *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 2, for the Year 1874*, 379-380.

¹⁵⁰ *Annual Reports of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 4, for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1901* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1901), 3436.

¹⁵¹ "The News Says," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 11 August 1874; "Historic Property Survey Report, 50-Ft Channel Project," 1997, Port of Oakland Archive.

¹⁵² In 1878, a dredge-and-fill experiment on the southern training wall was carried out by the South Pacific Coast Railroad at the behest of the Army Engineers. Its success prompted the Army Engineers' pivot to infilling in Oakland's harbor. "Historic Property Survey Report, 50-Ft Channel Project," 1997, Port of Oakland Archive.

¹⁵³ "'No Man's Land' at Harbor Door Waits Oakland's Claim," *Oakland Herald*, 18 April 1903.

California judge that the original deed to the Central Pacific required revision.¹⁵⁴ It took another decade to resolve the dispute for good, but the 1897 precedent proved decisive in convincing the railroad to relinquish the waterfront to the city. The ruling foretold the loosening of the “octopus’s” grip on Oakland’s harbor, allowing the city to finally exploit the locational advantages afforded by the railroad’s maritime terminus.¹⁵⁵

The news came at a fortuitous time. At the turn of the twentieth century, the United States broadened its oceanic empire through the annexation or political domination of Hawai‘i, Guam, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Samoa, the Philippines, and the Panama Canal Zone. Environmental transformations ushered in by unelected military engineers empowered Oakland’s capitalists to build the industrial coastline they had long imagined in an era when U.S. imperialism was knitting together Pacific and Caribbean littorals.

But the eradication of the East Bay tidelands came at a great cost to local biodiversity and to the people who depended on it. Chinese fishing villages had dotted the shores of Oakland and Alameda since the mid-nineteenth century. Their aquatic harvest fed Chinese laborers working on California infrastructure projects as well as mines and plantations far beyond. In nourishing Chinese migrants, Bay Area fishing villages played a vital role in the projection of U.S. empire across the Pacific, while also offering a reprieve from the racialized containment and exploitation that propped up the settler society. Nevertheless, the emergence of the East Bay’s rail-water port,

¹⁵⁴ *City of Oakland v. Oakland Water Front Co.* (San Francisco: Supreme Court of California, 1897); Bagwell, *Oakland*, 186-189; Woodruff Minor, *Pacific Gateway: An Illustrated History of the Port of Oakland* (Oakland: Port of Oakland, 2000) 19-20.

¹⁵⁵ The representation of the monopolistic Southern Pacific Railroad as an “octopus” was popularized by Frank Norris’s 1901 novel, *The Octopus: A Story of California*. On the railroad in the political economy and political culture of turn-of-the-twentieth-century California, see William Deverell, *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad, 1850-1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

a fulcrum of continental and overseas expansion, undermined the villages' ecological base. This was one of the explosive contradictions, embedded in Oakland's developing waterfront, that continued to threaten the stability of the city.

Chapter 2

Coastal Conflict: Migration, Ecology, and the Imperial Circuits of the United States

During the 1870s, the banks of Oakland's harbor still brimmed with flora and fauna, nourished by salty tides and a dense web of fresh-water creeks spilling down the coastal range. At the beginning of the decade, Chinese migrants built a fishing village here. On their leased tract of marsh, they constructed a dozen houses on wooden stilts, a sampan-style rowboat, and a garden plot for personal use. Similar communities dotted the Northern California coast. The sun-dried seafood harvested by their cosmopolitan residents filled the bowls of local Chinese migrants, as well as migrants scattered across the mines and plantations of the Pacific basin. The resources extracted in these overseas outposts arrived, in turn, at places like Oakland, where a rapidly developing seaport served as the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad. It was Chinese migrants who constructed Oakland's rail and maritime infrastructure, and they too enjoyed the bounties of Chinese-stewarded fisheries.¹

The fishing village became part of the fabric of the East Bay waterfront. In 1875, it appeared as "China Point" on a map drawn by the U.S. War Department's Corps of Engineers, the agency overseeing local harbor improvements. But the same map showed the route of a forthcoming harbor jetty passing directly through the tidelands bordering the village. A dashed line portended the community's severance from the ecosystem on which it depended. This meant that Oakland's conversion into a Pacific launchpad for military and commercial ventures threatened the carefully managed ecologies that sustained the workers who made that conversion

¹ *San Francisco Weekly Bulletin*, January 27, 1871; David S. Jordan, "The Chinese Fishermen of the Pacific Coast," *The Fisheries and Fishing Industries of the United States, Section III*, ed. George Brown Goode (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 40-41; "Historic Property Survey Report, 50-Ft Channel Project," 1997, Port of Oakland Archive.

possible. It also degraded an environmental commons that allowed Chinese migrants to avoid the abuses of a racially stratified labor market. By the end of the decade, coastal infilling under the direction of the Army Engineers had displaced the fishing village from Oakland's estuary.² But new villages cropped up elsewhere on the bay. Their persistence hinged in part on escaping the unwanted attention of the state, which helps explain their relative absence from histories of the region.³

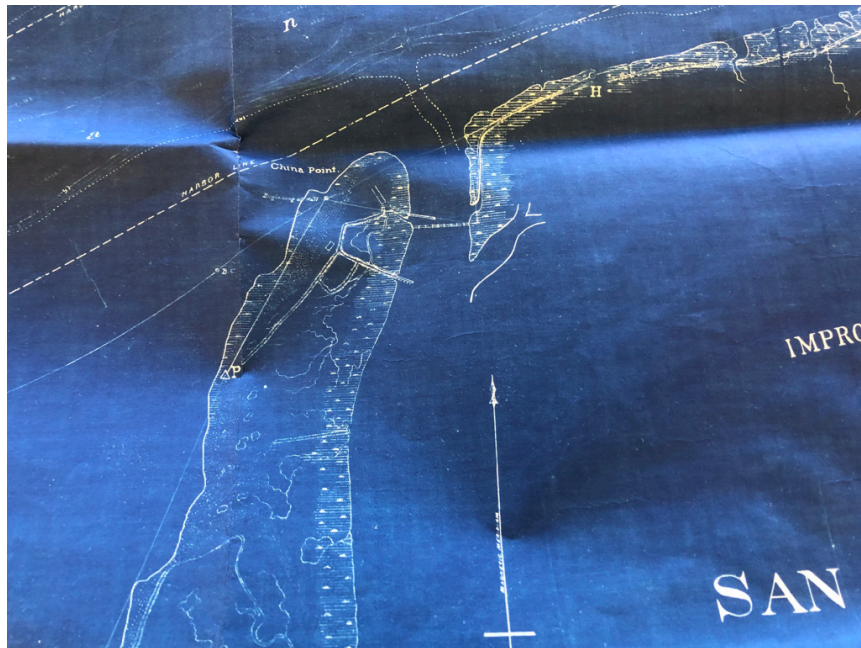


Figure 5. “China Point” on Army Engineers map, 1875. “China Point” is located near the center, at the northern edge of a finger-like strip of Alameda marsh. Directly above is a dashed line labeled “Harbor Line,” marking the future path of the southern training wall midway between the high and low-tide lines. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Hugging the shores of Oakland, San Francisco, and beyond, Chinese fishing villages

² “Map of San Antonio Estuary: Improvement of Oakland Harbor, drawn by J.R. Mauran under the direction of Major G.H. Mendell U.S. Engineers,” 1875, Box 1, Folder 7, Papers relating to properties known as the Alameda Marsh in the Oakland Estuary, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³ With the exception of a few articles and book chapters, the fishing villages have received little attention from historians. L. Eve Armentrout-Ma attributes this neglect to the deliberate remoteness of the villages, which meant they were often “not an obvious part of the landscape.” L. Eve Armentrout-Ma, “Chinese in California’s Fishing Industry, 1850-1941,” *California History* 60, no. 2 (1981): 142. See also L. Eve Armentrout-Ma, *Hometown*

contested the terms of racial and ecological domination governing capitalist economies across the post-emancipation world.⁴ While many of these communities came to reflect class hierarchies structuring the merchant networks of the Chinese diaspora, they emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as low-capital, cooperative enterprises with every fisher an equal partner.⁵ In their early years especially, collective visions of land use, leisure, and kinship underpinned their work. Populated by former contract laborers, the villages staked out alternatives to an economic system rooted in racial hierarchies, brutal labor, and environmental ruin.

Still, their maritime worlds were hardly isolated from global capitalism. Bay Area seafood traveled across the Pacific to China and to other destinations where the Chinese diaspora had a foothold. Oakland's industrialization expanded the local markets of the fishing villages by drawing new Chinese workers into the region. But it also imperiled the habitats they harvested. Docks and railways traversed the city's infilled coastline, obliterating productive fisheries. The same pattern of colonial land use had driven the indigenous Ohlone people from these coastal plains and leveled the shellmounds, which had taken them generations to construct. Indeed, some of the same War Department officials who had devalued and suppressed Native ways of life

Chinatown: The History of Oakland's Chinese Community (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 26-29. Published fifty years ago, the late geographer Robert Nash's dissertation remains the most comprehensive source on Chinese fishing villages in nineteenth-century California. Robert A. Nash, "The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1973).

⁴ On the cultural and economic significance of Chinese laborers in post-emancipation societies, see Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). On the changing political economy of the nineteenth-century and the evolution of unfree labor regimes during and after chattel slavery, see W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998 [1935]), 580-636; Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 135-153; Robert J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁵ Fishing villages, in many ways, resembled the mining cooperatives founded by Chinese migrants around the same time. Mae Ngai discusses the latter and their "strong ethos of egalitarianism" in *The Chinese Question: The Gold Rushes and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021), 42-45. On the global migrant networks of the Chinese diaspora, see Adam McKeon, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

helped undermine the land uses of Chinese fishing villages. Racialized policing, extrajudicial violence, and discriminatory laws compounded the effects of ecological enclosure, eroding the possibility of wageless survival for most Chinese migrants. Tellingly, while the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 granted exemptions to Chinese merchants, who, it was reasoned, would help the United States build a commercial empire in Asia, Congress took steps in the wake of its passage to ensure that peddlers, fishmongers, and fishers would not be among the exempted.⁶ Immigration restrictions hastened the decline of the Bay Area's Chinese population in the final decades of the nineteenth century. But the community did not vanish. Its endurance depended in no small part on the shifting geographies of fishing villages, whose numbers increased as the century drew to a close.

This chapter places these villages in a local, national, and global context. It shows how Chinese migrants made use of nature *and* capitalist markets to escape stifling conditions in the waged economy. Situated at the underexplored intersection of migration and environmental change, the chapter builds on a growing body of scholarship documenting the reconstruction of labor, property, and racial relations during the rise of industrial capitalism in the North American West.⁷ I begin by locating the fishing village on Oakland's harbor in the United States's

⁶ Paul A. Kramer, "Imperial Openings: Civilization, Exemption, and the Geopolitics of Mobility in the History of Chinese Exclusion, 1868-1910," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14, no. 3 (2015): 323.

⁷ This chapter takes up the call of Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker for explorations of the environment-migration nexus in the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See Marco Armiero and Richard Tucker eds., *Environmental History of Modern Migration* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1-10. For a recent effort along these lines, see James Beattie, Ryan Tucker Jones, and Edward Dallam Melillo, eds., *Migrant Ecologies: Environmental Histories of the Pacific World* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023). On the reconstruction of labor, property, and racial relations in the American West after the Civil War, see Edlie L. Wong, *Racial Reconstruction: Black Inclusion, Chinese Exclusion, and the Fictions of Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 2013); D. Michael Bottoms, *An Aristocracy of Color: Race and Reconstruction in California and the West, 1850-1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013); Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Elliott West, "Reconstructing Race," *Western Historical Quarterly* 34 (Spring 2003): 7-26; Tamara Venit Shelton, *A Squatter's Republic: Land and the Politics of Monopoly in California*,

burgeoning Pacific empire, charting tensions between race, capitalism, and ecology in the final third of the nineteenth century. I then turn to the social worlds of the semi-autonomous communities that Chinese migrants built on the edges of California cities. Comparing these settlements to similar places erected on the outskirts of Louisiana plantations can help illuminate their connection to an expanding imperial economy. Both California and Louisiana saw waves of Chinese labor migration amid the post-Civil War resurgence of U.S. imperialism. Jana Lipman and Daniel Bender aptly link this period to “fierce debates over free and unfree labor, the value and restriction of migratory labor, and the territorial acquisition of non-continental territories.”⁸ These debates were influenced by the thousands of Chinese migrants in the West and the South who abandoned the industries to which they were recruited, desertions that in many ways resembled the *marronage* of African-descended slave populations across the Americas.⁹ Next, I examine the efforts of public authorities and private citizens to restrict the mobility of Chinese migrants, and the contributions of Chinese fishing villages to sustaining the diaspora in the face

1850-1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Emma Teitelman, “The Properties of Capitalism: Industrial Enclosures in the South and the West after the American Civil War,” *Journal of American* 106, no. 4 (2020): 879-900; Matthew Guterl and Christine Skwiot, “Atlantic and Pacific Crossings: Race, Empire, and ‘the Labor Problem’ in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Radical History Review*, no. 91 (Winter 2005): 40-61; Bernadette Pérez, “Before the Sun Rises: Contesting Power and Cultivating Nations in the Colorado Beet Fields” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2017); Manu Karuka, *Empire’s Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); Jessica Kim, *Imperial Metropolis: Los Angeles, Mexico, and the Borderlands of American Empire, 1865-1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

⁸ Daniel E. Bender and Jana K. Lipman, eds., *Making the Empire Work: Labor and United States Imperialism*, (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 9.

⁹ Historians have framed the defection of Chinese contract laborers in nineteenth-century Cuba as analogous to *marronage*. See Kathleen López, *Chinese Cubans: A Transnational History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 44; Benjamín Narváez, “Subaltern Unity? Chinese and Afro-Cubans in Nineteenth-Century Cuba,” *Journal of Social History* 51, no. 4 (2018), 886. For an analysis of *marronage* as an expansive repertoire of freedom-making, see Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). For a comparable theorization of the dual nature of “insurgent economies” as vehicles of autonomy that also relied on markets sustained by unfree labor, see Shauna Sweeney, “Market Marronage: Fugitive Women and the Internal Marketing System in Jamaica 1781-1834,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2019): 197-222.

of legal and extralegal attacks. The movement and containment of Chinese migrants in and around the city of Oakland both produced and unsettled racial categories that justified U.S. imperialism and defined the boundaries of U.S. citizenship. Finally, I demonstrate how, amid ecological changes and efforts to supplant Chinese migrants in the post-Exclusion era, working-class Oaklanders continued their pursuit of self-determination albeit on new terrain. Their experiences suggest that environmental conflicts in this rapidly industrializing Pacific Coast entrepôt reflected contradictions at the heart of the commercial and territorial expansion of the imperial United States.

Settler Logics and Transpacific Routes

The Chinese fishing village stretched across the southern banks at the mouth of Oakland's harbor. Fishing nets and their abundant catches typically carpeted its shores. Its residents fished for smelt and herring in the tidelands edging the harbor. They also harvested shrimp, the most popular catch of local Chinese migrants. The village's techniques resembled those of a North Bay outfit described by Captain E. Wakeman in an 1871 report for California's newly established Fish Commission. Wakeman observed an elaborate tideland system in which cone-shaped nets spanning "an area of several miles in extent" were "kept constantly set" until the "slackwater of the flood and ebb tide," when they were retrieved, usually full of shrimp. The shrimp were boiled in large vats of salt water. They were then "spread out on cleanly swept ground and dried in the sun, being raked over frequently during the day." The raking separated the meaty part of the shrimp from its external shell. Wakeman called the latter, "refuse," but the shells were preserved, along with the meat, for use as fertilizer, primarily in rice and tea

plantations.¹⁰ After the dried shrimp and “sawdust”-like shells were “sewn up in the best quality of bags,” they were “placed on board the Chinese junk of about thirty tons.” The design of this sleek wooden boat, propelled by one or more sails, originated in the Pearl River Delta, where most local shrimpers traced their roots. After a short journey across the bay, the junk arrived at the San Francisco waterfront. From there, the shrimp embarked on a final journey, either to a local vendor or to markets across the Pacific. From the outside, the communal world of Chinese fishing may have seemed insular and aloof, but closer observers perceived its place in a network of global exchange.¹¹

In the eyes of U.S. War Department officials, the East Bay fishing village had no place on a waterfront slated to become a global port. As the previous chapter detailed, the Army Engineers endorsed the developmentalist vision of local boosters, deeming Oakland’s harbor “the real center of the railroad system of the Pacific coast,” and a future maritime hub “indispensable for the commercial interests of the whole country.”¹² Realizing that vision required a considerable amount of earth moving. The construction of harbor jetties by a crew of fifty Chinese laborers, deploying from a converted barge and working around the clock, enabled land reclamation along the shore.¹³ The infilling process involved dredging the shipping lanes of Oakland’s port and dumping the sediment—which was filled with lead, mercury, and other toxic

¹⁰ Linda Bentz and Todd J. Braje, “Bounty from the Sea: Chinese Foundations of the Commercial Shrimp, Squid, and Abalone Fisheries in California,” in *Chinese Diaspora Archaeology in North America*, eds. Chelsea Rose and J. Ryan Kennedy (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2020), 282.

¹¹ *Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries of the State of California for the Years 1870 and 1871* (Sacramento: T.A. Springer, State Printer, 1872), 15.

¹² *Annual Report of the War Department: Report of the Chief of Engineers, Part 3, for the Year 1881* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1881), 2519.

¹³ Joseph E. Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County, California, Vol. 1* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1914), 121.

metals used in upstream mines—atop the jetties and adjacent tidelands. The destruction of this coastal ecosystem sealed the fishing village’s fate.

In 1878, a local journalist reporting on Oakland’s harbor celebrated the recent construction of a shoreline railroad embankment. Its dredged mud foundation, he wrote, “transformed China Point from a dreary and bleak sandy knoll, with a solitary wooden shanty, occupied by a few Chinese fishermen, into a center of commercial enterprise.”¹⁴ Such language naturalized the eviction of this maritime community, interpreting its demise as the inevitable consequence of developmental progress. That China Point was already embedded in a web of global commerce did not factor into the journalist’s account.

The rationale for displacing the fishing village drew on older logics of settler-colonial ownership justifying Indigenous dispossession.¹⁵ Contrary to settler myth, Native communities did not vanish from the region, though successive waves of colonial conquest and environmental violence did separate them from the intertidal zones on which they relied. Regardless, colonial logic framed their disappearance as inevitable. The same logic informed the War Department’s approach to infilling Oakland’s tidelands. In a letter to his superior from 1884, Lieutenant-Colonel George Mendell evoked Anglo-European notions of wetlands as disease-ridden “wastes,” sacrifice zones for the material and ideological production of white dominion.¹⁶ “Fortunately,” wrote Mendell, “there is a large area of marsh and low land moderately convenient to the shores of the bay and near the city [of Oakland] that can be the receptacle of

¹⁴ “The Harbor,” *Oakland Tribune*, September 24, 1878.

¹⁵ On settler-colonial land use, see Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁶ On the mobilization of this discourse in the U.S. colonization of the California coast, see Lindsey Dillon, “Civilizing Swamps in California: Formations of Race, Nature, and Property in the Nineteenth Century U.S. West,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40, no. 2 (2022): 258-275.

mud for many years to come.”¹⁷ According to Mendell, the local tidelands that had long nourished Indigenous communities and, more recently, Chinese migrants were best used as “receptacles” for the muddy refuse of coastal engineering. Mendell’s decades-long career in the U.S. military—his combat in Indian Wars and his use of Indigenous captives in the construction of Fort Alcatraz—had prepared him for this project. Experienced in the construction of colonial infrastructure, he was well equipped to manage the conversion of Oakland’s marshlands into a springboard of imperial expansion.

The boosters, industrialists, and land investors who dominated Oakland’s government in the final third of the nineteenth century sought to capitalize on this development. In their eyes, Oakland’s strategic location in the cartography of U.S. empire foretold its success.¹⁸ As a burgeoning Pacific seaport and, since 1869, the western terminus of the transcontinental railroad, the city bridged distant geographies of war and trade, from Nevada mines to Hawai‘i plantations to a constellation of naval coaling stations. Crucially, Oakland’s waterfront boasted some of the largest coal bunkers in California.¹⁹ Such assets proved essential to the Bay Area’s critical military sites, including the San Francisco Presidio, the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, and the Benicia Arsenal. In Oakland, as in the continental and overseas outposts linked by the city’s infrastructure, Chinese contract workers performed much of the dangerous, poorly compensated

¹⁷ George Mendell to The Chief of Engineers, August 8, 1884; entry 37, box 122; Pacific Division – “Letters sent by Colonel G.H. Mendell, April 1884-December 1889”; Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77; National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region (San Francisco).

¹⁸ Alameda County Development Commission, *Alameda County: Where Every Prospect Pleases: Where Rail and Water Meet* (Oakland: Curtis-Baum Advertising Service, 1922); Dewitt Jones, ed., *Port of Oakland* (Oakland: State Emergency Relief Administration, 1934).

¹⁹ Baker, *Past and Present of Alameda County*, 69.

labor.²⁰ They laid railroad tracks, hauled rocks for harbor jetties, and manufactured explosives used in the bullets, bombs, and construction projects that enabled U.S. conquest. Chinese food peddlers, truck gardeners, and fishers, for their part, did the indispensable work of sustaining the bodies and cultures of the diaspora. But as their labor knitted Oakland into far-flung imperial supply chains, the lives of Chinese migrants grew increasingly precarious. Hemmed in by the legal, economic, and ecological borders of the settler city that they helped to construct, their daily existence became an act of transgression.

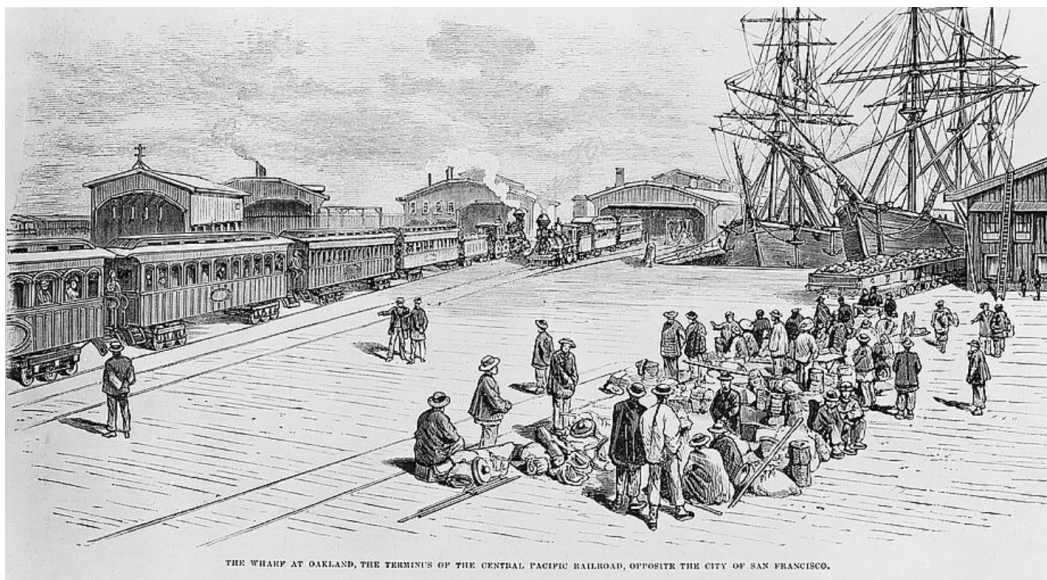


Figure 6. Chinese migrants on the Oakland waterfront, 1869. Historic American Buildings Survey Collection, Library of Congress.

When William Blote reminisced about the East Bay fishing village in his *Oakland Tribune* column, nearly five miles of marshland in Oakland's Alameda County had been paved

²⁰ Gordon Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019); Ruth C. Woodman, *The Story of the Pacific Coast Borax Co.* (Los Angeles: Borax Consolidated Ltd., 1951); Gregory Rosenthal, *Beyond Hawai'i: Native Labor in the Pacific World* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 170-195.

over by the War Department.²¹ Blote wrote the column in 1921 as a spokesperson for the Oakland Pioneers, a club devoted to the nostalgia of first-generation Anglo settlers.²² He recalled rowing with his childhood friends across the estuary to the village at China Point to enjoy bottomless bowls of dried shrimp and rice for 15 cents. His wistful depiction of the defunct Chinese community cast it as an exotic relic of a bygone era.²³

Like the shrimp he once devoured, Blote's business career with the Contra Costa Water Company depended on the labor of Chinese migrants.²⁴ Oakland's original water system owed its existence to hundreds of Chinese workers, many of whom had decamped to the region after toiling on the transcontinental railroad. Beginning around 1870 and continuing for nearly two decades, Chinese workers put in grueling shifts building reservoirs, dams, and water pipes in the hills of San Leandro, with "white men doing the skilled work and 'bossing,'" as the *Oakland Tribune* reported at the time.²⁵ Earning less than \$1 a day, they faced many occupational hazards. Death and injury were not infrequent.²⁶ But the remote location of the work had its benefits. Like shrimp fishing, infrastructure building on the urban periphery offered migrants a place to work and reside where they could develop cultural institutions and mutual aid, while maintaining

²¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Economic Aspects of Comprehensive Survey of San Francisco Bay and Tributaries: Future Development of the San Francisco Bay Area, 1960-2020* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), 80.

²² William Blote, "Chinatown in Early Days," *Oakland Tribune*, 23 October 1921.

²³ Blote's assumption was mistaken. Chinese shrimping in the Bay Area persisted well into the twentieth century, as detailed below.

²⁴ D.M. Bishop & Co., *Bishop's Oakland Directory for 1876-7* (Oakland: B.C. Vandall, 1876), 107; "California Pioneer, Aged 71, Succumbs," *Oakland Tribune*, March 24, 1926.

²⁵ "Oakland Water Supply," *Oakland Tribune*, September 13, 1875.

²⁶ "Chinese Workers and the East Bay's Water System," n.d., Folder: Chinese in Oakland, Oakland Public Library History Center. "San Leandro Items," *Oakland Tribune*, July 20, 1875.

social and economic linkages to local Chinatowns. The waterworks builders were known to cook traditional Chinese food. It is no stretch to imagine Chinese peddlers visiting their camp with baskets of shrimp harvested from the nearby estuary.²⁷

The reach of Chinese fishing villages extended much further: their distribution networks linked the plantations of Hawai‘i to the tidelands of the San Francisco Bay. Chinese employees of the Paia Plantation—founded in 1870 by Sam Alexander, whose investments in sugar, shipping, and Oakland real estate are discussed in the previous chapter—were among the consumers of Bay Area seafood. This made the Maui sugar company reliant on a network of Chinese fishers and merchants, and the market coordination of *huiguan* or Chinese home district associations.²⁸ Chinese importers in Honolulu received bales of dried, salted fish from San Francisco, which they then shipped to plantation stores and Chinese grocers on various Hawaiian islands. Violet Hew Zane remembered her father Hew Fat, who moved from a Guangdong village to Pā‘ia, Maui in the late nineteenth century, furnishing local plantation workers with copious amounts of California seafood.²⁹ The demand for the imported fish was so insatiable that Hew had to visit the Pā‘ia depot twice a week to retrieve new shipments for his store.

U.S. government officials appreciated the significance of this trade. “Immense quantities of canned, salted, smoked, and dried fishery products...are imported and consumed by the

²⁷ On “imaginative reconstructions of the past, tightly wedded to historical knowledge” as gateways to subaltern experiences shrouded in archival silence, see Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 60.

²⁸ American planters and other employers of low-wage Chinese workers also relied on district associations for the enforcement of the credit-ticket system which underpinned the debt-based migrations of Chinese laborers. Him Mark Lai, “Historical Development of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association/*Huiguan* System” in *Chinese America: History and Perspectives*, ed. Chinese Historical Society of America (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1987), 13-51.

²⁹ Violet Hew Zane interview, *Stores and Storekeepers of Paia and Puunene, Maui, Volume I*, 1980, Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, Hamilton Library, University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa.

people, particularly on the sugar plantations,” reported two American investigators of Hawaiian fisheries at the turn of the twentieth century. “As these are in many instances located in rather inaccessible regions where fresh fishery products can not be obtained at any price, they are perforce compelled to depend on the prepared goods for their supply.”³⁰ The investigators made clear that Hawai‘i’s plantations could only nourish their workers with the aid of imported seafood. And much of that seafood, their data showed, came from the Bay Area’s Chinese fisheries. Nevertheless, supplies of imported fish were not guaranteed and American planters frequently worried over shortages.³¹ Coastal engineering projects—aimed at facilitating exports of manufactured goods and imports of raw materials, Hawai‘i sugar chief among them—eroded miles of tidelands in Northern California, jeopardizing the productivity of these vital ecosystems. Thus, when Sam Alexander chose to recycle plantation profits into Oakland’s lucrative real estate market just a few years after the Army Engineers had displaced the fishing village on Oakland’s harbor, his decision embodied the environmental conflicts roiling an emergent Pacific empire.

Harbor development did not, however, spell the end of the region’s Chinese fisheries. Chinese migrants continued to ship vast quantities of seafood from San Francisco to Honolulu and in the final decades of the nineteenth century their overall production expanded. Demand from China, which became the primary destination for seafood harvested by local Chinese

³⁰ David Starr Jordan and Barton Warren Evermann, “Preliminary Report on an Investigation of the Fishes and Fisheries of the Hawaiian Islands,” in *U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries Report of the Commissioner for the Year Ending June 30, 1901, Part XXVII*, ed. George M. Bowers (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 379.

³¹ See, for example, a report from another Maui plantation—where Sam Alexander would serve as manager and secure an ownership stake—warning, “We only have 12 bbls [barrels] of [fish] left, enough for 1 to 2 months, say 6 weeks.” G.E. Beckwith to S. Savidge, July 26, 1866, Folder: “Haiku, Maui 1866 Managers letters Beckwith (a few Goodale),” Castle & Cooke Papers, Hawaiian Mission Children’s Society Library, Honolulu, Hawai‘i.

fishers, fueled the industry's growth. In an era when imperial trade policies were weakening China's sovereignty and exacerbating an economic crisis contributing to Chinese emigration, Bay Area fisheries provided a relatively cheap source of protein.³² Bountiful catches of cod, oysters, and more moved between ramshackle storehouses, Chinese junks, and steamships bound for Hong Kong. Citing San Francisco Custom House records for 1877, California fish commissioners placed the annual value of the dried fish and shellfish shipped to China at \$293,971. This amounted to more than 7 percent of the city's booming marine export market.³³

Shrimp camps—as the shrimp-harvesting fishing villages came to be known—played an especially vital role in connecting the Chinese diaspora in an era of capitalism characterized by the globalization of “coolie” labor.³⁴ It is difficult to measure the precise volume of the trade, but some sense of its scope can be gleaned from data printed in the Bulletin of the U.S. Fish Commission. Based on an annual market review of San Francisco exports, commissioner William H. Dall counted 9,611 packages of dried shrimp and fertilizing shrimp shells shipped to

³² On the role of Western imperialism in the destabilization of Southeast China, a factor driving labor migration, see Edna Bonacich, “Asian Labor in the Development of California and Hawaii” in *Labor Immigration Under Capitalism: Asian Workers in the United States Before World War II*, eds. Lucie Cheng and Edna Bonacich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 160. Yong Chen has pushed back on “the prevailing interpretation... [of] Chinese emigration as a panic-stricken, hunger-driven flight from poverty and other socioeconomic difficulties.” Nevertheless, he acknowledges that regional variations in Guangdong meant that migrants from “less-developed counties,” like Xinning (present-day Taishan), were typically contract laborers while those from “more developed market economies,” namely the sanyi counties, were more likely to be merchants. Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 13, 21.

³³ *Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries of the State of California for the Years 1876 and 1877* (Sacramento: T.A. Springer, State Printer, 1878), 21. *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, Vol IV, for 1884* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), 128.

³⁴ My usage of “coolie” follows Moon-Ho Jung's: “Coolies were never a people or a legal category. Rather, coolies were a conglomeration of racial imaginings that emerged worldwide in the era of slave emancipation, a product of the imaginers rather than the imagined.” Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, 5. While Chinese laborers in the United States were not indentured, as were their counterparts who arrived in places like Cuba and Peru via the “coolie trade,” they nevertheless “occupied a liminal, ambiguous intermediary position” between slavery and freedom in U.S. society, as Lisa Lowe asserts. This status, inscribed in part by debt-based labor agreements, helps explain their attraction to employers after the Civil War. Of course, Chinese migrants had their own ideas about the terms of their migration to the United States. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015), 27.

China in 1882.³⁵ Smaller shipments went to South America and Hawai‘i, the latter benefiting from the recent free-trade treaty with the United States. In 1883, Dall put the value of San Francisco’s dried shrimp exports at \$82,891 and its shrimp shell exports at \$28,288, which together constituted around 3 percent of the fish products shipped abroad from the city. In the bulletin covering that year, he noted the shrimp market’s expansion to British Columbia, Australia, Peru, and other Pacific Rim territories, “wherever large numbers of Chinese are found.” He then opined on the trade’s significance. “The value of this apparently almost worthless fishery,” he wrote, “carried on by a few miserable but industrious barbarians is certainly surprising.”³⁶ Dall’s remark epitomized the strain of anti-Chinese racism pervading California in the 1880s. Chinese immigrants were “barbarians,” in no small part because they enjoyed a crustacean not yet popular with Euro-Americans. But they were also excessively “industrious,” and accordingly threatened the livelihoods of the white working class.

Migrant Moral Ecologies

Racist fictions aside, Dall’s insult did capture a truth about Chinese shrimp camps and similar enterprises: they found value in what others deemed “worthless.”³⁷ These Bay Area communities represented distinct moral ecologies, or ideas about “nature ‘from the bottom up,’” a term I borrow from Karl Jacoby, who draws on E.P. Thompson’s work on English peasants’ customary rights, or “moral economy.”³⁸ Though their business models varied, shrimp camps

³⁵ *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, Vol III, for 1883* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1883), 425.

³⁶ *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, Vol IV, for*, 125-126.

³⁷ On Chinese migrants using organisms deemed useless by Euro-Americans, see Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckoning in the New West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 196.

³⁸ In “The Moral Economy of the Crowd,” E.P. Thompson described food riots in eighteenth-century England as protests against state-sanctioned denials of subsistence and refusals of proletarianization. He subsequently acknowledged the applicability of the term to other contexts, including “the migration of whole villages.” E.P.

tended to embrace cooperative work, communal autonomy, and creative adaptation to changing environments.

A similar ethos characterized the Chinese truck gardens flecking the region in the final third of the nineteenth century. In the mid-1870s, Polish journalist Henryk Sienkiewicz marveled at the “small vegetable gardens encircling [San Francisco] with one belt of greenness” and the “labor of the Chinese [which] has transformed the sterile sand into the most fertile black earth.”³⁹ Chinese gardeners cultivated compact plots using intensive methods of crop rotation, combinations of compatible plants, animal manure, and creek-water irrigation. They also turned their own sewage into “night soil,” marking a small-scale reversal of the metabolic rift in the earth’s ecosystem that attended the rise of industrial capitalism.⁴⁰

These agricultural communities stood in stark contrast to California’s monocrop-style “factories in the fields.”⁴¹ The takeoff of the latter hinged on Chinese farm labor along with imports of guano and nitrate fertilizers typically mined by indentured Chinese workers in South America.⁴² Like truck gardens, Bay Area fishing villages attenuated pressures driving Chinese migrants into the highly exploitative, racialized work that powered global capitalism after the

Thompson, “The Moral Economy Reviewed,” *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993), 263; Karl Jacoby, *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

³⁹ Sienkiewicz quoted in Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 104.

⁴⁰ On night soil and the metabolic rift see, Nicholas C. Kawa et al., “Night Soil: Origins, Discontinuities, and Opportunities for Bridging the Metabolic Rift,” *Ethnobiology Letters* 10, no. 1 (2019): 40-49. On the broader disturbance of “the metabolic interaction between man and the earth” associated with the transition to industrial agriculture, see Karl Marx, *Capital: Vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977 [1867]), 637.

⁴¹ On California’s agricultural empires, see Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999 [1935]).

⁴² Edward D. Melillo, “The First Green Revolution: Debt Peonage and the Making of the Nitrogen Fertilizer Trade, 1840-1930,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 1028-1060.

abolition of slavery. But they also served this system of production by provisioning Chinese workers—from the sugar plantations of Hawai‘i to the guano mines of Peru—with the foods they craved.

A comparable dynamic arose amid the collapse of plantation slavery in Louisiana. During the 1860s and 1870s, Louisiana planters tried to recruit Chinese workers to the cane fields as substitutes for newly emancipated Blacks.⁴³ The experiment in labor replacement lasted a few years, but ultimately failed. Most Chinese migrants to the United States opted for work in California and the few who arrived in Louisiana tended to take jobs in railroad construction. But even those who did sign plantation contracts routinely broke them. A number of deserters decided to stay in Louisiana, abandoning the cane fields for truck gardens and shrimp camps. Building on the example of a former rice farmer named Lee Yuen, the state’s Chinese shrimpers constructed giant pine-board drying platforms on stilts, complete with warehouses, living quarters, and wharves, in the remote marshlands of Bayou Barataria. They worked with fishing crews of Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Spanish, and French Creole descent. Once dried and bagged, the shrimp made its way to the New Orleans export market. From there, most of the haul traveled to San Francisco. It did so on railways built by Chinese workers, who by the 1870s, were swelling the ranks of California fishing villages. In San Francisco, dried Louisiana shrimp blended with the Bay Area catch for local consumption or transshipment across the Pacific.⁴⁴

In both Louisiana and California, thousands of Chinese migrants absconded from the

⁴³ Jung, *Coolies and the Cane*; Gunther Barth, *Bitter Strength: A History of the Chinese in the United States, 1850-1870* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 187-196.

⁴⁴ Chin D. Choy (Quong Sun Company Inc.) to Chinese Historical Society of America, May 4, 1971, Box 7, Folder 67, Robert A. Nash Collection (FK001-FK006), Chinese Historical Society of Southern California [hereafter: Nash Collection]; Charles H. Stevenson, “The Preservation of Fishery Products for Food,” *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission, Vol. XVIII for 1898* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1899), 414-415. Armentrout-Ma, “Chinese in California’s Fishing Industry,” 143.

army of labor sustaining the United States's capitalist empire after the fall of chattel slavery, mirroring the geographical and occupational trajectories of many formerly enslaved people.⁴⁵ Shrimp camps offered the chance to earn income beyond the purview of domineering bosses. Shrimpers enjoyed off seasons and more flexible schedules, work rhythms resembling those left behind in rural China. A longing for the peasant way of life cropped up in the folksongs of the Cantonese diaspora. One song decried the cruelties of the working-class experience in North America and waxed nostalgic about conditions in China's countryside:

No way is life better than farming at home:
Toiling for half a year, relaxing the rest;
You greet your parents in the mornings,
You are with your wife at nights.
Everyone is happy, smiles all over their faces.⁴⁶

While shrimp camps could not replicate rural family networks, they often did bring together members of the same clan and district.⁴⁷ And while the camps were generally male-dominated spaces, reflecting the gender balance of the diaspora, some of them hosted women and children. Above all, shrimp camps buffered the hardships of racialized employment, depressed economies, and everyday harassment. Economic fluctuations and drops in aggregate demand did affect shrimpers' incomes, but even when their product did not sell or sold for piddling prices, they

⁴⁵ A federal fishery investigator reported in 1887 that formerly enslaved people comprised the overwhelming majority of fishers in Charleston, South Carolina, noting: "The emancipation proclamation threw a large class of people upon their own resources, and the first impulse of freedom led many to forsake their old masters and plantation life, and to seek employment in the city. With their natural love for boating and fishing many of them drifted into fisheries as a desirable way of obtaining a livelihood." *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section II*, ed. George Brown Goode (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 507.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Marlon Kau Hom, "Some Cantonese Folksongs on the American Experience," *Western Folklore* 42 (Apr. 1983): 129.

⁴⁷ Armentrout-Ma, "Chinese in California's Fishing Industry," 150; Armentrout-Ma, *Hometown Chinatown*, 28.

could always eat the fruits of their labor.

The Chinese migrants who populated Bay Area shrimp camps had unique histories of migration, family, and work, but some common threads connected them. The first camps were founded by fishers who learned their craft in China, which was true of California fishing villages more broadly. The earliest villages appeared in the 1850s in San Francisco's Rincon Point and near the city of Monterey.⁴⁸ Their founders, as with subsequent generations of shrimpers, would have emigrated from counties in the Pearl River Delta where fishing played an important role in cultural and economic life. Chinese shrimping techniques used in California originated in this region. Crucially, its estuarine ecology shared many similarities with that of the Bay Area.⁴⁹



Figure 7. Chinese fishing village in Monterey, CA, 1875. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

While shrimp camps drew on the expertise of seasoned Chinese fishers, many of their

⁴⁸ For the former, see “Chinese Fisheries in California,” *Chambers's Journal*, January 21, 1854. The latter may have been founded by Tanka or Dan people, a community of boat dwellers—with many generations of fishing experience—who were indigenous to the coast of Southeast China. Sandy Lydon, *Chinese Gold: The Chinese in the Monterey Bay Region* (Capitola, CA: Capitola Book Company, 1985), 30-31.

⁴⁹ Marvin Brien, *China Camp and the San Francisco Bay Shrimp Fishery* (Sacramento: California Department of Parks and Recreation, 1983), 60, 35.

members would have started shrimping after stints as contract laborers. These communities left scant historical records, but information collected by census takers and other outside observers offers insight into their demographics. Due north of San Francisco in Marin county, the Point San Pedro shrimping village—today the site of China Camp State Park—was the largest and most surveilled Chinese fishing settlement in the Bay Area. Chinese migrants were first recorded at Point San Pedro in 1870, less than a year after the completion of the transcontinental railroad. The census for that year identified seventy-six male “fishermen” in the village, representing a quarter of all Chinese fishers in the state. The men resided in fifteen dwellings and each had an average of about \$50 of personal wealth, which encompassed collective investments in boats, nets, and gear. Based on the reported locations of the dwellings and the distribution of wealth across the households, it appears that the seventy-six fishers were divided into a handful of partnerships. This low-capital, cooperative structure made shrimping accessible to Chinese migrants who entered California under the auspices of low-wage labor agreements.⁵⁰

While the next decennial census did not document household wealth, it did collect other data supporting the claim that many shrimpers arrived in the United States as indebted laborers. Over the 1870s, the fishing village grew significantly larger and more diverse. During a decade in which California’s anti-Chinese movement crescendoed into an unbridled campaign of racial violence, Point San Pedro’s Chinese population increased more than six-fold, far outpacing the rate of growth of the Chinese community in the county and broader region.⁵¹ Sixteen of its residents identified as women, fifteen of them living with their husbands. The village also hosted

⁵⁰*Population Schedules of the Ninth Census of the United States, 1870: California, Vol. 4—San Rafael Township, Marin County*, pages no. 21-23. [archive.org](https://www.archive.org).

⁵¹ *U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880: San Rafael Township, Marin, California*, pages no. 50-59.

twenty-nine children residing with their parents. Fishers comprised around three-quarters of the community, but there were also fishery clerks (one of them a woman), as well as fishery cooks, gardeners, storekeepers, a physician, a school teacher, and a barber. While a small number of residents had occupations requiring commutes, including twenty-six laborers and five hotel cooks, the vast majority lived and worked in Point San Pedro. The village's amenities and division of labor made it close to self-sufficient, with one observer identifying firewood as the only major commodity sourced beyond its shores.⁵² Crucially, the census reveals that nearly 70 percent of its residents had ties to the Ning Yeung district association, which indicates a birthplace in the Chinese county of Xinning (present-day Taishan). A relatively poor area whose economy revolved around small-scale farming, Xinning sent more migrants to the United States during the nineteenth century than any other Chinese county. The vast majority of its emigrants could not afford the cost of the steamship ticket and typically indebted themselves to labor agents to secure their passage.⁵³ It is therefore probable that most residents of Point San Pedro had previously worked in railroads, industrial mines, and other industries with high concentrations of Chinese contract laborers.

⁵² *San Francisco Weekly Bulletin*, November 7, 1873 cited in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States*, Section II, 620.

⁵³ Madeline Y. Hsu, *Dreaming of Gold, Dreaming of Home: Transnationalism and Migration Between the United States and South China, 1882-1943* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 3, 21, 32.

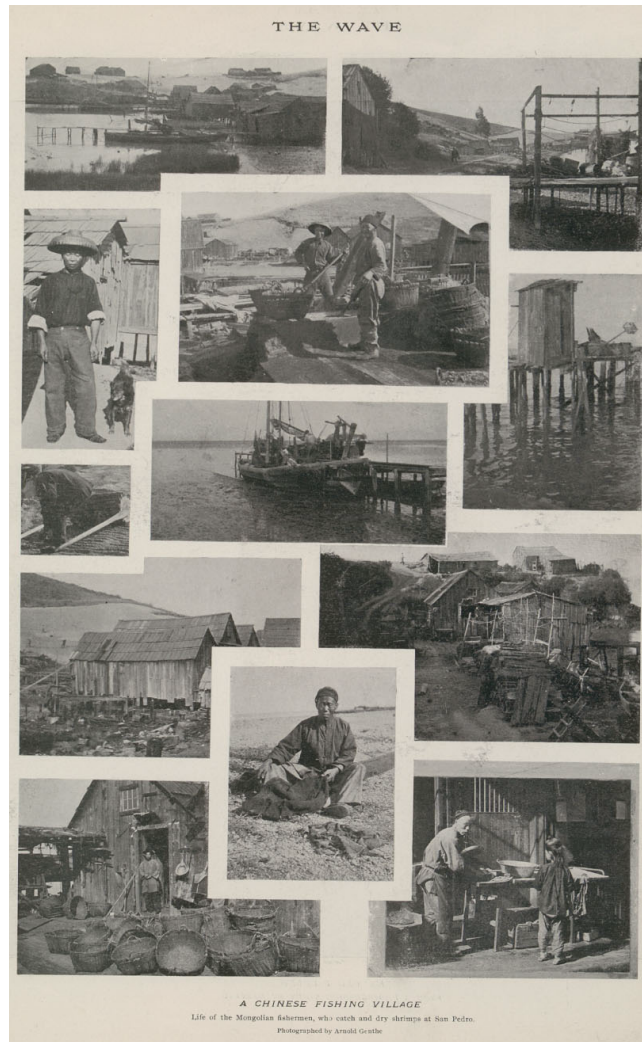


Figure 8. Point San Pedro shrimp camp, c.a. 1890s.
Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Shrimp camps continued to expand over subsequent years. By the 1880s, roughly twenty camps lined the bay, housing hundreds of people and harvesting millions of pounds of shrimp each year. During the decade, Chinese migrants working other fisheries in Northern California numbered in the thousands. Shrimp camps could be found as far south as Redwood City and as far north as San Rafael, hopscotching across the undeveloped county marshes of San Mateo, San Francisco, Contra Costa, and Marin.⁵⁴ Point San Pedro remained the most popular shrimping

⁵⁴ "Chinese Shrimp Fishery: Shrimp Camps" n.d., box 4, folder 15, Nash Collection. Robert A. Nash, "The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California," 130, 148, 152. Armentrout-Ma, "Chinese in California's Fishing Industry," 143.

site, but the outskirts of San Francisco and Richmond both hosted multiple camps with scores of members. Chinese fishers favored less visible spots on the shore to avoid the unwanted attention of government agents, commercial rivals, and potential racist assailants. China Point on the Oakland harbor was difficult to reach except by boat and, as the *Daily Alta California* reported, it was an “almost daily occurrence” for vessels to run aground on its shoals.⁵⁵ Across the bay, Point San Pedro was equally inaccessible, with low tides creating a muddy barrier at the water’s edge.⁵⁶ One visitor in 1880 described a half-hour journey to the camps from the closest town, culminating in a quarter-mile hike after “you hitch your team [of horses] to the fence.”⁵⁷ According to one resident, Point San Pedro was just as isolated thirty-five years later.⁵⁸ The geographical isolation of shrimp camps earned them reputations as places of “refuge” for Chinese migrants fleeing outbreaks of racial terror.⁵⁹ Remote locations also meant cheaper land rents, an attraction for owner-operator entities with minimal start-up capital.⁶⁰

Oral histories with descendants of shrimpers, some of whom continued in the trade, shed additional light on the social worlds of shrimp camps. Born in 1909, Jennie Limm followed in her parents’ footsteps, participating in the shrimp industry as a bookkeeper, marketer, and sorter of the catch. While men made up the boat crews, women increasingly contributed to shoreside

⁵⁵ “Oakland Items,” *Daily Alta California*, August 14, 1874.

⁵⁶ Marvin Brienens, *China Camp and the San Francisco Bay Shrimp Fishery*, 81.

⁵⁷ J.P. Munro-Fraser, *History of Marin County, California* (San Francisco: Alley, Bowen & Co., 1880), 346

⁵⁸ “Interview with Frank Quan” (interviewed by L. Eve Armentrout Ma), January 27, 1979, carton 23, folder 30, Him Mark Lai Papers (AAS ARC 2000/80), Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵⁹ Greg Cahill, “The village that was China Camp,” *Pacific Sun*, November 9, 1990.

⁶⁰ Housing market segregation, which artificially limited supply, led to price gouging. While peripheral sites offered cheaper rents, Chinese renters still faced inflated costs. In 1873, Chinese residents of Point San Pedro reportedly subleased the property for \$3,000 per year from a white man who rented it for \$1,000. *San Francisco Weekly Bulletin*, November 7, 1873 cited in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section II*, 620.

work at the turn of the twentieth century. Limm was a third-generation shrimper; her mother was born in Point San Pedro in the 1870s. She recalled in an interview that her family's foray into shrimp fishing followed a stint in railroad construction, which was likely a common trajectory. Her father, Sup Quok, entered the trade after emigrating from Xiangshan county in the Pearl River Delta. The precarious conditions he faced in California made shrimping a relatively attractive proposition. "At the time the labor market wasn't too generous with the Oriental people," Limm explained.⁶¹

In the nineteenth century, before ecological and political-economic shifts encouraged greater capitalization, Chinese shrimpers tended to form cooperatives by pooling meager savings from past waged work.⁶² "In my business everyone had one equal share," said Limm, noting her company's continuation of the original owner-operator model.⁶³ Nevertheless, as Bay Area fisheries became increasingly enmeshed in overseas markets in the final decades of the nineteenth century, hierarchical models began to spread. By 1880, half of the 22 fishing partnerships operating at Point San Pedro hired fellow migrants to supplement their labor.⁶⁴ While marking a change from ten years prior, these employment relationships clearly differed from the debt-based labor agreements that underwrote the bulk of Chinese migration to the United States prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act. In Point San Pedro, shrimping partners and

⁶¹ "Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm," August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection. Edd Johnson, "Our Own Crago Franciscorum: The Lady is the Boss," *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 16, 1952. Nash, "The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California," 165-166.

⁶² The banning of the "Chinese bag net" by the California Fish Commission in 1910 precipitated a turn to beam trawls on motorized boats, a method better suited to the bay's diminishing tidelands and increasingly enclosed coastline. On this transition, see Robert Nash, "The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California," 234-235.

⁶³ "Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm," August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

⁶⁴ *U.S. Federal Population Census, 1880: San Rafael Township, Marin, California*, pages no. 50-59. ancestry.com.

their employees often lived together under the same roof. Moreover, such groupings were transitory by design. Shrimpers marked the occasion of the autumn harvest moon, a Chinese holiday that lined up with the end of the peak shrimping season, by hosting a feast, settling accounts, distributing profits, bidding farewell to departing fishers, and constituting new partnerships.⁶⁵ The annual reset of shrimping operations reflected the mobility of Chinese migrants, as well as the porous boundary between waged and unwaged work. At the end of the year, some chose to continue shrimping at the same camp or a different one, while others opted to work for wages elsewhere in the United States, seek employment in another colonial economy, or return to China.

Like truck gardeners and vegetable peddlers, who also favored cooperative ownership, shrimpers exhibited flexibility in the face of changing environments. Following the passage of discriminatory laws aimed at driving Chinese fishers out of business, Limm remembered her father repurposing his shrimping vessel for deliveries. He would voyage “up the Sacramento River to haul [Chinese winter melons],” she recalled. He would bring “Chinese groceries to all the farmers on the river bank and then he’d bring the melons back.”⁶⁶ Shrimpers embodied the creative ways that Chinese migrants navigated an environment short on cash. David Chan, who followed his father—Chan Hoy—into the shrimp trade, told an interviewer that in the early twentieth century, “you could start with twenty-five dollars,” and to set up a camp, “all you needed was a few 2 x 4’s.”⁶⁷ Shrimp camps, like laundry services, allowed Chinese migrants to

⁶⁵ “Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm,” August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ “Transcript of an Interview with Mr. David Chan,” January 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

make a living outside the waged economy with a low barrier to entry.⁶⁸

But the camps were more than financial lifelines. They were also sites of cultural preservation, hosting religious institutions, garden plots, gambling venues, and even schoolhouses.⁶⁹ Fishing methods drew on practices honed in the Pearl River Delta. Southeast Chinese folk traditions mixed with the work and the Chinese lunar calendar informed its schedule.⁷⁰ Regular consumption of shrimp, a staple of Chinese diets on the mainland and across the diaspora, formed another feature of camp life. This was no small thing. Chinese migrants took pains to ensure their access to the seafood. For example, when Chinese laborers contracted to work for the Houston and Texas Central Railroad in 1870, they secured a contractual provision for a “Chinese store” that would supply “2,000 pounds [of] salt shrimps.” No food had a larger inventory at the store.⁷¹ Commonly paired with rice, shrimp provided tasty, protein-rich meals to people who labored strenuously. Steady access to a nourishing ingredient and a cornerstone of Chinese foodways was therefore among the appeals of shrimping.

An additional hallmark of shrimp camps was their unique customs of property.⁷²

⁶⁸ Paul Ong, “An Ethnic Trade: The Chinese Laundries in Early California,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 8, no. 4 (1981): 95-113.

⁶⁹ Asst. Surg. Donald H. Currie, “Inspection of Chinese Shrimp Camps at San Pablo Bay, California,” May 5, 1903, *Annual Report of the Surgeon-General of the Public Health and Marine-Hospital Service of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1903* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1904): 258.

⁷⁰ It is important to add that the business culture of Chinese shrimpers did not inoculate them against the competitive pressures of global capitalism. On manifestations of capitalist logic in non-Western ventures, see Andrew B. Liu, *Tea War: A History of Capitalism in China and India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

⁷¹ Contract quoted in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Chinese Railroad Builders after Promontory,” in *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, eds. Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 285.

⁷² Currie, “Inspection of Chinese Shrimp Camps at San Pablo Bay, California”; Armentrout-Ma, “Chinese in California’s Fishing Industry,” 150-152. “Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm,” August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection. “Draft of Don Limm Interview,” n.d., box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

Customary rights to shrimp beds reflected the considerable investments of time, labor, and money needed to identify and prepare tidelands frequented by the three species of crangonid shrimp in the San Francisco Bay.⁷³ Although unsanctioned in California law, historic tideland use garnered recognition from Chinese fishers. In several instances, conflicts flared up over disputed claims to fishing areas, and on a couple of occasions contested payments for tideland access led to violence.⁷⁴ For a population pushed to the margins of society, much was at stake in the cultivation of these fisheries. But for the most part, shrimpers' proprietary rights seemed to provoke little controversy in their communities.

Defying Enclosures

Shrimp camps confounded attempts to concentrate Chinese residents in bounded enclaves. In the East Bay, local ordinances aimed to segregate the population in well-defined districts, initially at the water's edge of present-day West Oakland.⁷⁵ The shifting local real estate market and pressures exerted by anti-Chinese mobs periodically forced the relocation of Chinese residents. A short item in the *Oakland Daily Transcript* from May 1872 flatly recounts a "Mongolian progression," in which a "number of Chinamen marched through Broadway ... 'consigned' to their new homes on Second street."⁷⁶ Forced relocation was one plank of an official program of marginalization and removal in late-nineteenth-century Oakland.

Crackdowns on Chinese laundries, food vending, opium use, and lotteries constituted

⁷³ Bay shrimp require particular mixes of salinity, temperature, fresh water flow, and estuarial substrate conditions. Staking out unproductive tidelands could spell financial disaster. Clifford A. Siegfried, "Species Profiles: Life Histories and Environmental Requirements of Coastal Fishes and Invertebrates (Pacific Southwest)—Crangonid Shrimp," *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Biological Report* 82 (1989), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, TR EL-82-4.

⁷⁴ "Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm," August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

⁷⁵ Beth Bagwell, *Oakland: The Story of a City* (Oakland: Oakland Heritage Alliance, 2012), 87.

⁷⁶ "Local Intelligence," May 19, 1872.

another form of repression. One ordinance banned the selling of meats, fruits, and produce in the streets of Oakland, a policy inspired by San Francisco's earlier crackdown on Chinese vendors.⁷⁷ Chinese migrants persistently fought these discriminatory laws. At times, they formed alliances with other ethnic groups. In 1864, San Francisco's Italian fishers went on strike and blockaded the city's port to protest an exorbitant license fee levied on the Chinese fishmongers who distributed their catch.⁷⁸ The endurance of Chinese peddlers, gardeners, and fishers in the face of such repression helped sustain Chinese foodways in Northern California.⁷⁹

The elimination of Chinese cultural practices was a common theme of anti-Chinese legislation. A mid-1870s law, known as the Pigtail Ordinance, forced Chinese men incarcerated in local jails to cut off their traditional braids or queues. Though it was later found unconstitutional, the law reflected the visceral hostility local whites directed at Chinese people and their cultural markers during this era. Everyday acts of humiliation and violence complemented a program of criminalization. Chinese people were vastly overrepresented among arrestees in Alameda County during the late nineteenth century. In 1880, they were arrested three times the rate of native-born whites, and the overwhelming majority of the charges cited regulatory and morals ordinances.⁸⁰

The anti-Chinese movement took off on the state level as well, with Chinese fisheries

⁷⁷ Fred L. Button, *General Municipal Ordinances of the City of Oakland, Cal.* (Oakland: Enquirer Publishing Company, 1895), 78-79; Wilfred Tim Chow, "The Reemergence of the Inner City: The Pivot of the Chinese Settlement in the East Bay Region of the San Francisco Bay Area" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1974), 114.

⁷⁸ "The Fishermen's Strike," *Daily Alta California*, October 7, 1864.

⁷⁹ Demand from Chinese laborers for traditional food was also critical. Robert F.G. Spier, "Food Habits of Nineteenth-Century California Chinese," *California Historical Society Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1958): 79-84.

⁸⁰ Lawrence M. Friedman and Robert V. Percival, *The Roots of Justice: Crime and Punishment in Alameda County, California, 1870-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), 106, 292-293.

serving as a lightning rod. Discriminatory state laws had afflicted the industry since the passage of a tax on Chinese fishers in 1860. Like the Foreign Miners' Tax of the previous decade, the Chinese fishers' tax responded to the pressures of European-descended settlers who aimed to wield state power to stamp out Chinese competition. Italians hailing from coastal towns near Genoa constituted the largest group of rival fishers.⁸¹ Collaboration between Italian and Chinese migrants in the California fishing industry was not unheard of, as suggested by the aforementioned case of Italian fishers striking on behalf of Chinese fishmongers. But enmity and scapegoating often prevailed. In 1862, an organization calling itself the Fishermen of the Bay of San Francisco unanimously adopted a resolution condemning San Francisco State Senator R.F. Perkins for his newfound opposition to the tax on Chinese fishers. Signed by the organization's executives, all of whom had Italian surnames, the resolution declared that the tax "was absolutely necessary for the protection of the white Fishermen, against the encroachments of the Mongolians."⁸² Such political agitation helped reproduce the social and economic marginalization of Chinese migrants, while advancing claims to whiteness by a group whose racial status was tenuous in its own right.⁸³ Though ultimately ruled unconstitutional, the tax on Chinese fishers dissuaded many from entering the trade during its four years on the books. The legislative precedent, as well as the consolidation of Italian fishers into an organized political

⁸¹ Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982), 218.

⁸² Fishermen of the Bay of San Francisco, "At a meeting of the Fisherman of the Bay of San Francisco, held January 13th, 1862, the following resolutions were unanimously adopted," 1862, x F870.C5F5, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁸³ Southern European fishing communities were routinely racialized as backward. David Starr Jordan, an ichthyologist and ardent eugenicist who would serve as the founding president of Stanford University, designated Italian, Greek, and Spanish fishers as "improvident" by nature in a federal report on California fisheries. Jordan, "The Fisheries of the Pacific Coast," *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section II*, 610.

force, paved the way for the passage of laws banning fishing technology favored by Chinese migrants in the 1870s.

Grassroots lobbying did not always yield results, but when formal politics failed, extrajudicial violence could fill the void. In 1872, a federal investigator of California fisheries observed that in the Sacramento River, “salmon-fishing is conducted entirely by white men,” principally Italians, and to a lesser extent Germans and Greeks. He went on to note that the fishery’s racial composition was not a matter of law, but of “public opinion”: “there is such a prejudice against the Chinamen, that any attempt on their part to engage in salmon fishing would meet with a summary and probably fatal retaliation.”⁸⁴ Practitioners of extralegal violence against Chinese migrants, in nineteenth-century California, did so with nearly total impunity.

In 1878, the Workingmen’s Party capitalized on this mounting hostility by capturing a third of the delegates to California’s Constitutional Convention. Established in San Francisco in 1877 and active for roughly five years, the Party enjoyed its greatest support in the Bay Area. Its exponents sought to channel popular discontent during a long economic slump toward Chinese migrants, whom they disparaged as tools of monopoly capitalists. Riots and pogroms touched off by the Party’s affiliates reverberated across the bay and throughout the American West.⁸⁵ Oakland had its own branch of the party, an outgrowth of the local Anti-Coolie Club. Its history has been overshadowed by its San Francisco counterpart, but its impact on local affairs was no less profound. In May 1877, anti-Chinese groups organized a mass demonstration in downtown Oakland. Participants vowed to burn the city’s Chinatown to the ground and murder all its

⁸⁴ Livingston Stone quoted in David Starr Jordan and Charles H. Gilbert, “The Salmon Fishing and Canning Interests of the Pacific Coast,” in *The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section V.*, ed. George Brown Goode (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1887), 735-736.

⁸⁵ Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Jean Pfaelzer, *Driven Out: The Forgotten War against Chinese Americans* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, Press, 2007).

residents. Police intervened to forestall a plan that would have seen a rash of arson in a dense area adjacent to the central business district. But the mob was largely unchecked when it proceeded to assail local businesses with Chinese employees. The transcontinental railroad offered the most symbolic target. According to historian Eve Armentrout-Ma, “a mob of 12,000 marched to Central Pacific’s harbor operations and demanded on pain of immediate reprisals that the railroad fire its Chinese employees.”⁸⁶ Politically ambitious Oaklanders rode this racist wave to electoral victory. By the following year, the Workingmen’s Party dominated Oakland’s government, controlling the offices of mayor and state senator, as well as several city council and school board seats. Grassroots violence and municipal power went hand in hand, shaping local labor markets, the distribution of land, and the composition of public space.

The electoral success of the Workingmen’s Party in 1878 enabled the passage of Article 19, a forerunner to the federal Chinese Exclusion Act.⁸⁷ The amendment called on the state legislature to empower cities and towns to drive Chinese residents into ghettos or remove them entirely. It also called for a ban on Chinese immigration to the state. In the following year, a state law inspired by Article 19 declared that non-citizen residents barred from naturalization, namely Chinese immigrants, were “prohibited from fishing, or taking any fish, lobsters, shrimps, or shell-fish of any kind, for the purpose of selling or giving to another person to sell.” Less than two months after its ratification, a test case appeared before a California Circuit Court. Following a pattern of Chinese resistance to discriminatory statutes, Ah Chong, whose name graces the case, joined with several petitioners in filing writs of habeas corpus challenging the

⁸⁶ Armentrout-Ma, *Hometown Chinatown*, 40.

⁸⁷ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 129.

constitutional grounds of their arrest for fishing while Chinese in Bay Area waters. Their challenge proved successful and the law was swiftly annulled.⁸⁸

But the legal victory did not blunt the antagonism of the California Fish Commission. When the Commission established a police division in 1883, it justified the decision on the grounds that “the diminution [of certain species of fish] was largely owing to violation of the fish laws of the State, by Chinese and others.”⁸⁹ Charged with collecting fines and fees, enforcing regulations, and arresting violators, the agency singled out the putative criminality of Chinese migrants. Data compiled by the fish patrol, as it was colloquially known, show that Chinese fishers became the primary target of its investigations and arrests, even as its own reports document the diversity of maritime lawbreakers.⁹⁰ Blaming Chinese migrants for the depletion of Bay Area fisheries proved easier than recognizing the far greater threat posed by industrial pollution and the destruction of tideland ecosystems. In this way, the Fish Commission attempted to square the contradictions of U.S. expansion on the backs of a racially subordinated group. That the state both criminalized Chinese fishers and aided American employers who relied on Chinese fisheries captures the unstable nature of capitalist empire in the post-emancipation era.

Undoubtedly, the most famous patrolman employed by the Commission was a young Jack London. The future Oakland novelist defected to the fish patrol after a short-lived career as a raider of private oyster beds. London was a self-avowed socialist and a prior member of the

⁸⁸ Judge C.J. Sawyer, “In Re *Ah Chong*,” *Circuit Court, D. California* 2, no. 9-47 (June 9, 1880): 733-740.

⁸⁹ *Biennial Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries of the State of California for 1885-1886* (Sacramento: James J. Ayers, Supt. State Printing, 1886), 13

⁹⁰ See, for example, the preponderance of complaints and arrests associated with the use of “Chinese sturgeon lines” and other practices identified with Chinese fishers in “Summary of Arrests Made for Two Years ending September 1, 1898,” in *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners of the State of California for the Years 1897 and 1898* (Sacramento: A.J. Johnston, Superintendent State Printing, 1900), 16.

“piratical and robber race” of the late-nineteenth-century Bay Area, whose “peculiar ideas of ownership and property rights” are celebrated in his autobiographical novel, *The Cruise of the Dazzler*.⁹¹ But London also trafficked in white supremacy and, in his writing and police work, he demonized Chinese fishers, casting them outside the circle of righteous rebels romanticized in his novels. In *Tales of the Fish Patrol*, London’s lightly fictionalized account of his stint as a patrolman, “the Chinese shrimp-catchers” appear as the “wildest among the fisher-folk,” responsible for the “wasteful destruction” of bay fisheries.⁹² London echoed the specious claim of the Fish Commission that Chinese shrimping was uniquely harmful to newly hatched fish.⁹³

The racist grievance and simmering resentment undergirding this assumption rose to the surface in the Commission’s 1897-1898 report: “Fully eighty per cent of the catch of the shrimp-fishermen is dried and sent to China. Why should our bay be depleted of small fish that the Chinese may carry on this export?”⁹⁴ For the Fish Commission, the transnational shrimp trade entailed irredeemably foreign people trespassing on California’s sovereign resources. In an earlier report, an unnamed commissioner lent credence to the notion that policing Chinese fishers had little to do with their alleged lawbreaking. Not only were patrolmen making “almost weekly trips to the Chinese shrimp-fishing stations” and doing “all that we can do with the means at our hands...to see that they do not destroy the young fish,” but given that the “drying beds at all these camps are mostly free of small fish” it is doubtful that the “law is violated to the extent that

⁹¹ Jack London, *The Cruise of the Dazzler* (New York: The Century Co., 1902), 25.

⁹² Jack London, *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1906), 2, 3.

⁹³ The claim first surfaced in 1874. See *Report of the Commissioners of Fisheries of the State of California for the Years 1874 and 1875* (Sacramento: G.H. Springer, State Printer, 1876), 13-14. Nash, “The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California,” 131. Armentrout-Ma, “Chinese in California’s Fishing Industry, 1850-1941,” 154.

⁹⁴ *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners*, 20. In 1905, California passed a law at the Commission’s behest prohibiting shrimp exports to China.

is complained of.”⁹⁵ It is telling that an agent of the virulently anti-Chinese Fish Commission admitted that the aggressive policing of Chinese shrimp camps rested on a flimsy pretext.

Regardless, the criminalization of Chinese fishers did not abate.

Despite the negative attention trained on them, Chinese migrants often succeeded in eluding state authorities. This was conceded in the Commission’s 1897-1898 report: “We have caused the arrest of many of these shrimp-fishermen, and have maintained as close an inspection over their work as our force would permit...but their camps are so scattered around the bay that the patrol has not been as effective as could be wished.”⁹⁶ Investigating the camps in 1892, a reporter for the *San Francisco Call* revealed one of their counter-surveillance tactics: the use of “lookouts stationed on the hilltops to sound the alarm at the approach of any strange craft.” The reporter went on to compare the “queer-looking Chinese junks” and “their strange and oddly dressed crew” to the “pictures of the bloody pirates painted in the old dime novels and serials.”⁹⁷ The spatial strategies of Chinese shrimpers frustrated attempts to police them. The local press’s description of these strategies coalesced around tropes of Chinese deviance, conjuring images of unruly renegades prowling an underworld of “queer” piracy.⁹⁸

Shrimpers were part of a broader waterfront milieu, a multiracial counterculture of

⁹⁵ *Biennial Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners of the State of California for the Years 1891-1892* (Sacramento: A.J. Johnston, Superintendent State Printing, 1892), 21.

⁹⁶ *Fifteenth Biennial Report of the State Board of Fish Commissioners*, 20.

⁹⁷ “Do You Like Fish?” *San Francisco Morning Call*, June 27, 1892.

⁹⁸ In the late nineteenth century, the California press regularly characterized shrimping, and a variety of other Chinese practices and beliefs as “queer.” See, for example, “Queer Chinese Fishing,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1892; “A Queer Chinese Tale,” *Oakland Daily Evening Tribune*, January 22, 1881; “Queer Chinese Customs,” *San Jose Daily Herald*, August 24, 1892. At the time, the word “queer” connoted strangeness, often associated with racially subordinated people. Such earlier usages laid the groundwork for its later connotation as a pejorative against putatively effeminate and homosexual men. For a theorization of “queer domesticity” that illuminates “the variety of erotic ties and social affiliations that counters normative expectations” in San Francisco’s Chinatown, see Nayan

gambling, scavenging, food peddling, rowdy drinking, clam digging, oyster-bed raiding, and working-class intimacy. Local elites roundly despised this motley crew, casting it as a public menace and an obstacle to harbor development and real estate speculation.⁹⁹ At the turn of the twentieth century, this threat was embodied in the figure of the “riff-raff of the water front,” which stalked the pages of the local press. Its specter prompted one newspaper to endorse an expansion of the Oakland chain gang, which had been recently ordered to “shovel dirt into the [Oakland] marsh” to “reclaim the land” along the shore.¹⁰⁰ The chain gang accomplished multiple objectives at once: not only did it remove unwanted people, including many Chinese migrants, from the waterfront, but its labor helped build out the harbor while burying the tidelands on which some of its members had depended prior to incarceration.

In urbanizing Oakland and the broader Bay Area, the interlocking effects of ecological destruction, settler hostility, aggressive enforcement of anti-Chinese laws, and shifting geographies of work contributed to the decline of the local Chinese population. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Geary Act of 1892, which supplemented the ban on Chinese immigration with a policy of mandatory registration for Chinese laborers, hastened the decline. This marked a reversal of two decades of rapid growth. Oakland’s Alameda County reflected the broader demographic trend. Between 1860 and 1870, the county’s Chinese community surged

Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 13.

⁹⁹ For a comparable conception of “counterculture” in the nineteenth-century Mississippi Delta, see Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 7 and Macon Fry, *They Called Us River Rats: The last Batture Settlement of New Orleans* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2021), 53-75. On the “motley” maritime communities brought into being by European empires, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

¹⁰⁰ “Oakland Jottings,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 29, 1870; “Oakland Works Its Dissolute,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 24, 1906.

from around 200 to nearly 2000. Former builders of the transcontinental railroad comprised much of the increase. Over the next decade, the local Chinese population more than doubled to just over 4,400 out of a county population of roughly 63,000. But it plummeted by a quarter during the 1880s, a period when the county as a whole grew by 50 percent. Over the subsequent decade, it fell again, this time by a third, while the county's population rose by more than 36,000. Some Chinese migrants resettled in other states, but most sought a return to China or admission to a different country. Those who resisted the myriad pressures to self-deport found themselves pressed into company towns on the fringes of cities or urban ghettos like San Francisco's Chinatown.¹⁰¹

With Oakland's infilled and vigorously policed coastline affording fewer opportunities for wageless life, some Chinese migrants searched for less prohibitive corners of the region. In the 1890s, Chinese settlement expanded in relatively rural Contra Costa. Situated due north of Oakland, Contra Costa was the only Bay Area county whose Chinese population grew during the decade, and one of only a handful of California counties to see an increase.¹⁰² In the late nineteenth century, a string of shrimp camps sprung up on the shores of present-day Richmond, along with a cluster of explosives factories staffed by a largely Chinese workforce. The area's relatively undeveloped waterfront appealed to shrimpers, who set up villages in the coves of Point Molate and Point Pinole, and on a small island off the coast known as Red Rocks. Most of their catch was bound for San Francisco's export market, but the fishers were known to bring a portion of it to town. The presence of Chinese explosives workers ensured a steady demand for

¹⁰¹ On the social and legal pressures driving Chinese self-deportation, see Adam Goodman, *The Deportation Machine: America's Long History of Expelling Migrants* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 9-36.

¹⁰² *1910 United States Federal Census: Supplement for California* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office), 596.

locally harvested shrimp. Another factor critical to the endurance of this informal market was the absence of municipal ordinances criminalizing Chinese peddling, setting the area apart from Oakland.¹⁰³ The growth of the Chinese community in Contra Costa reflected a broader pattern. When racist campaigns and environmental changes conspired to eliminate certain spaces, new ones emerged. Intra-regional mobility proved key to the survival of Chinese migrants. To that end, fishing villages were crucial vehicles. They helped an embattled community maintain a foothold on the bay in a time of relentless hostility.



Figure 9. Shrimp camp, Richmond, CA, c.a. 1900. Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

The Chinese migrants who populated shrimp camps, truck farms, clam beds, and vending

¹⁰³ On Richmond's lack of anti-vending laws, see "Interview with Mrs. Ethyl Ferns" (interviewed by L. Eve Armentrout Ma), November 1, 1977, carton 23, folder 30, Him Mark Lai Papers (AAS ARC 2000/80), Ethnic Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. Thanks to Linda Bentz for drawing my attention to this source.

sites throughout the region persisted in the face of social and ecological enclosures. Cultivating the natural bounties of Northern California, they made a living satisfying the cravings of people whose super-exploited labor built the economies of the Pacific world. Still, there is no denying that at the turn of the twentieth century the Bay Area was becoming increasingly inhospitable to the wageless survival of Chinese migrants. During the 1890s Chinese-leased farm acreage in Alameda County plummeted from 319 to zero. Food peddling had been criminalized in Oakland at the start of the decade and fishing villages had long since decamped from the city.¹⁰⁴

For most local capitalists, the subordination and containment of Chinese migrants flowed naturally from the westward course of settler colonialism and overseas conquest. By the time the United States consolidated its Pacific empire in the late nineteenth century, the East Bay waterfront had morphed into a logistical hub of war and trade powering U.S. expansion across this vast ocean basin. The federal government summoned massive expenditures of finance and labor to transform Oakland's estuary into a global entrepôt. Chinese migrants made such development possible, even as the resultant infrastructure hastened their displacement.

And yet, as the Bay Area's Chinese population declined over the final decades of the nineteenth century, the number of shrimp camps ticked upward. They reached their peak around the year 1900.¹⁰⁵ Fishing villages afforded some distance from capitalist exploitation and hotbeds of racial terror within the United States's ascendant Pacific empire. Their geographical strategies allowed them to survive various threats of elimination. The places they made and the ecologies they managed existed on the margins of the region, but the communities they sustained proved

¹⁰⁴ On the convergence of urbanization and social pressures on white landowners to stop leasing to Chinese migrants, see L. Eve Armentrout-Ma, "Chinese and GGNRA, 1849-1949: Guests of Choice, Guests of Necessity" (San Francisco: National Park Service, 1975), 60; Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil*, 376-379, 382.

¹⁰⁵ Nash, "The Chinese Shrimp Fishery in California," 152.

central to the political economy of the post-emancipation age.

While shrimp camps persisted in the region longer than other semi-autonomous Chinese communities, they too began to decline in the early twentieth century. A series of new state laws decimated the industry. First came the implementation of a closed season that coincided with the fishery's most bountiful months, then a prohibition on exports, and finally a ban on the traditional bag net. In the wake of these measures, Chinese shrimpers saw their incomes shrivel up and their numbers crater. But the shrimp trade continued, in part because non-Chinese residents began to acquire a taste for the crustacean. The reversal of the export ban in the early 1920s gave the industry an additional boost. Chinese shrimping lingered on in the San Francisco Bay. Racist laws curtailed it, but could not destroy it entirely.

It was the rapid militarization of the coastline in the lead up to World War II, and subsequent infilling and industrial pollution, that sent the shrimp camps on a downward spiral to obsolescence. The proliferation of shoreline military bases, trans-bay bridges, ship manufacturers, chemical plants, and the like accelerated the erosion of the bay shrimp's habitat, drastically shrinking the available catch. But the U.S. military also played a more direct role in hastening the displacement of Chinese shrimping.¹⁰⁶ As Jennie Limm remembered, "Gradually, during the war, the Navy took all the places away."¹⁰⁷ The first war-related eviction arrived in 1939. To make room for the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard, local officials reduced six

¹⁰⁶ The displacement of shrimpers from their shoreside lands to make way for military contractors and installations was a key factor in the industry's demise. Calvin Fong, whose father Fong Wan was a partner in a Richmond, CA fishing village in the 1930s, recalled in an interview that the military also restricted access to offshore shrimping grounds, accelerating the industry's decline. Calvin Fong, interview with author (phone), July 10, 2023. Thomas W. Chinn, *Bridging the Pacific: San Francisco Chinatown and its People* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1989), 36; Thomas W. Chinn, *A History of the Chinese in California: A Syllabus* (San Francisco: Chinese Historical Society of America, 1969), 40.

¹⁰⁷ "Transcript of an Interview with Mrs. Jennie Limm," August 23, 1970, box 4, folder 13, Nash Collection.

longstanding shrimp camps to ashes.¹⁰⁸ Construction of the infrastructures of war and trade had brought an influx of working people to the region. Among their ranks were thousands of Chinese migrants. But the same developmental process would displace many of these people.

The racialized process of recruitment and containment that governed the lives of Chinese migrants structured the experiences of other mobile populations in and around the city of Oakland. Among them were Black Pullman porters and their families, a community similarly linked to the completion of the transcontinental railroad and to the ebbs and flows of U.S. empire. Like many members of the Chinese diaspora lured to the industrializing East Bay Area, a large portion of these Black newcomers lived in what was essentially a company town. Pullman corporate policy required porters to reside in a sliver of West Oakland adjacent to the city's railyards, so that they could be ready to report for last-minute shifts.¹⁰⁹ Racially restrictive covenants and other state-sanctioned practices of segregation reinforced this initial pattern of settlement. Consequently, the East Bay's Black population remained clustered around the smog-filled West Oakland flatlands for generations, even as its numbers swelled during and after World War I and World War II. Over the twentieth century, the flatlands would birth a vibrant array of Black institutions, from restaurants and music venues to churches, unions, and political organizations. In the face of racist hostility, Black Oaklanders, like their Chinese counterparts, turned spaces of confinement into sites of congregation.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ "Shrimp Camps: 70 Years of Tradition Gone Up in Smoke, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 21, 1939.

¹⁰⁹ Marta Gutman, *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscapes of Oakland, 1850-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 15.

¹¹⁰ For incisive analyses of the interplay of segregation and congregation, see Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 91-92; Gaye Theresa Johnson, *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2013), xii.

The hostility directed toward African Americans was sometimes tempered by the hope that these newcomers would replace Chinese migrants as California's racially subordinated laboring class.¹¹¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, a number of well-heeled Californians endorsed the decision of Leland Stanford—the railroad mogul turned university founder and Republican Senator—to back a migration scheme aimed at “bringing Negroes to California...to supplant the Chinese.” The plan rested on the fact that the “Celestials are not citizens or voters, and the colored people are both.”¹¹² There was no better illustration of the vagaries of white supremacy than this ad hoc renovation to California's late-nineteenth-century regime of anti-Chinese racism. Similar experiments in labor replacement involving workers of Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, and Puerto Rican descent were simultaneously attempted in American outposts across the Pacific.¹¹³ Men like Stanford envisioned the incorporation of African Americans into California's political economy not as full-fledged members of society but as compliant and geographically segregated laborers who dutifully lined up behind Republicans in elections. African Americans, it was reasoned, were better suited to the post-Exclusion era. But efforts to pit Black newcomers against their Chinese predecessors did not succeed. Black Oaklanders routinely transgressed racial and spatial boundaries, while Chinese residents refused the terms of removal. From socializing in “Chinese noodle joints” to hosting talks by Asian anti-

¹¹¹ Nevertheless, hostility abounded in a state that nearly added a constitutional clause barring Black residency. While the clause failed to become law, California did enact in its first decade as a state a bevy of anti-Black laws, including bans on court testimony, homesteading, jury service, marriage to whites, and voting. These laws also applied to Indians and Chinese residents. Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998), 82. Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 66.

¹¹² “Negroes for California,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1891.

¹¹³ Joanna Poblete, *Islanders in the Empire: Filipino and Puerto Rican Laborers in Hawai'i* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

imperialists at Liberty Hall, a West Oakland event space run by Black nationalists affiliated with the Universal Negro Improvement Association, African Americans visibly shirked their assigned role as pliable instruments of labor replacement.¹¹⁴

But in the first decades of the twentieth century, the working-class Oaklanders drawn to such spaces of subversive sociality had less and less room to maneuver. The region's economic and ecological transformation, tethered from its earliest days to the rhythms of U.S. empire, left fewer possibilities for life unmoored from hyper-exploitative waged work. To be sure, working-class people still looked to the informal economy as a survival strategy. Urban gardens and fishing would continue to supplement diets, and scavenging on the water's edge would help sustain a cashless economy.¹¹⁵ But subsisting on the land in a semi-autonomous cooperative became less viable amid the contraction of tideland fisheries and cheap, tillable soil.

The history of land use on the East Bay coastline suggests other futures might have emanated from its shores. Local elites summoned vast expenditures of finance and labor to transform Oakland's estuary into a global shipping hub even though a major port already existed across the bay in San Francisco. Their actions typified a pattern of overdevelopment and wasteful duplication that the historian Richard White has located at the heart of the infrastructural history of the North American West.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ "New Years Hopes," *Western Outlook*, January 9, 1915; Lawrence P. Crouchett, Lonnie G. Bunch, III, and Martha Kendall Winnacker, *Visions Toward Tomorrow: The History of the East Bay Afro-American Community 1852-1977* (Oakland: Norther California Center for Afro-American History and Life, 1989), 32.

¹¹⁵ On the persistence of land practices and imaginaries constitutive of a "Black commons" in the face of enclosure and ecological toxification, see J.T. Roane, "Plotting the Black Commons," *Souls* 20, no. 3 (2018): 239-266.

¹¹⁶ Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

The drive to maximize local real estate values together with the promise of a strategically positioned rail-water hub in an era of Pacific empire pushed Oakland to modernize its seaport. Many obstacles stood in the way of this objective, from environmental snags to financial shortfalls to everyday acts of refusal. Achieving it required the full-scale reconstruction of waterfront land, a process underwritten by the War Department. The region's transformation into a logistical hub of U.S. empire depended on state-sanctioned violence and ecological destruction to mobilize and fix in place reserves of low-wage labor, while suppressing other visions of global integration. But the changes were always provisional, domination never total. In the coming years, rebellions continued to sprout in the cracks of this imperial terrain. They would grow into a movement that, in the depths of a global depression, forged bonds of solidarity between the water's edge of Oakland and the outer reaches of American empire.

Chapter 3

From the Pacific to the Atlantic and Back: Neocolonial Cuba and the Transnational Routes of New Deal Capitalism

In late August of 1933, a letter with a Cuban postmark arrived at Kaiser Company headquarters in Oakland, California.¹ Writing from Havana, the U.S. businessman and Kaiser associate William C. Rich relayed a warning to company executives: “The situation at the present moment is most serious, as we are having the beginnings of Race Riots.”² The news mattered greatly to the corporation. The construction industry upstart had recently completed a 200-mile stretch of the Cuban Central Highway, and, in the process, dispatched massive quantities of asphalt and equipment to the Caribbean island via the newly incorporated Port of Oakland. The company earned its biggest payday yet from the multi-year public works venture. Along with the handsome earnings, Kaiser walked away from the project with a sizable stake in Cuba’s sovereign debt and a promising piece of real estate. Rich had worked with the firm on the highway and had similar interests in the island’s economy. He was writing to brief Kaiser officials on the nationwide uprising that had just toppled Cuba’s president-turned-dictator Gerardo Machado. The popular rebellion erupted in response to a combustible combination of state violence, economic turmoil, and U.S. meddling in Cuban affairs. But Rich did not focus on underlying causes. High-profile lynchings of government henchmen formed the backdrop to his

¹ This chapter refers to the conglomerate that originated with the Kaiser Paving Company in 1914 and which has encompassed a number of well-known entities over its century-long history, including Kaiser Steel, Kaiser Aluminum, and the healthcare giant Kaiser Permanente, as the Kaiser Company, the Kaiser corporation, and Kaiser. Like the Ford Motor Company, the Kaiser corporate empire was intimately linked to the personality of its founder, Henry J. Kaiser, a linkage reflected in the narration of the chapter.

² William C. Rich to G.G. Sherwood, August 27, 1933, Carton 297, Folder 26, Henry J. Kaiser Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley [HJKP].

letter, animating his fear that “race riots” loomed.³ Still, for a U.S. businessman ensconced in Havana’s high-end districts, anxieties of this sort had much deeper roots. In neocolonial Cuba, profit and power flowed outward to foreign investors from a starkly racialized plantation economy.⁴ The iron fist of a U.S.-backed dictatorship secured these flows, and, if needed, U.S. Marines were ready to deploy from the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base on Cuba’s eastern flank. The fall of Machado, and the momentary rupture of Cuba’s neocolonial order, threw this arrangement into chaos. For men like Rich, the resulting disorder inspired a panic that was at once financial and existential.

Kaiser treasurer George G. Sherwood quickly replied to his Cuba-based colleague with a sober assessment of the road ahead: “It looks like it is going to be necessary for you to make friends with some of the personnel of each party that can possibly get control of the country.”⁵ Sherwood suggested how Kaiser planned to safeguard its investments in an economy convulsed by revolt. By currying favor with powerful figures across a range of political camps, it would hedge its bets on Cuba’s future. Time abroad in a semi-colonial protectorate of the United States imparted valuable lessons to a corporation pursuing government contracts that might span

³ “Fué linchado por el pueblo el sargento que asesinó a nuestro compañero Sr. Carlos Cuchet,” *Diario de la Marina* 24 August 1933. For a broader discussion of the uprising’s racial dimensions, see Frank Andre Guridy, “‘War on the Negro’: Race and the Revolution of 1933,” *Cuban Studies* 40 (2010): 49-73.

⁴ That the United States replaced formal Spanish colonialism with neocolonial or informal imperial rule during Cuba’s republican period (1902-1958) has been established by numerous historians based in Cuba and the United States. Roig de Leuchsenring, *Historia de la enmienda Platt* (Havana: habana imprenta el siglo XX, 1972); Julio E. LeRiverend, *La República: dependencia y revolución* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1971); Grupos de Estudios Cubanos, *La República neocolonial* (Ciencias Sociales: 1975-1979); Teresita Yglesias Martínez, *Cuba: primera república, segunda ocupación* (Havana Imprenta Editorial, 1977); Yunaisy Rodríguez Osorio, *Dinámica del pensamiento plattista en la República Neocolonial: Una problemática desde la “larga duración”* (Havana: Editorial Académica, 2012); Leland Hamilton Jencks, *Our Cuban Colony: A Study in Sugar* (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2021 [1928]), Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press); Ada Ferrer, *Cuba: An American History* (New York: Scribner, 2021).

⁵ G.G. Sherwood to William C. Rich, September 5, 1933, Carton 297, Folder 23, HJKP.

business cycles, election years, and periods of societal crisis. This formative experience traveled with Kaiser back to Oakland in the early 1930s. A vast profit made the return trip home as well. Together, they formed a Cuban inheritance that would underwrite the firm's substantial investment in the emerging New Deal order.⁶

If Kaiser exhibited flexibility in response to political upheavals in Cuba, the corporation similarly adapted to domestic shifts associated with the rise of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The disturbing news from Cuba crossed the desks of Kaiser executives at a time when working-class rebellions with international implications were emanating from Oakland's waterfront. A global crisis of capital threatened to become an intractable crisis of governance along the vulnerable byways of U.S. empire. Kaiser responded to the contingencies of the moment, allying with Roosevelt and choosing reform in the face of revolt. This was a major departure for a company that had supported the anti-union open-shop movement of the 1920s and publicly denounced prevailing-wage legislation as late as 1932.⁷ The severity of the depression demanded drastic changes and Roosevelt's presidency heralded new ways to make a profit. During the 1930s, public works stewarded by Kaiser, with their thousands of jobs for the unemployed, symbolized the march of New Deal liberalism.⁸ By the 1940s, the company's founder, Henry J. Kaiser, had a solidified a reputation as an "enlightened New Deal Capitalist."⁹ He became—in the words of

⁶ On the New Deal order, see Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Gary Gerstle, Nelson Lichtenstein, and Alice O'Connor, eds., *Beyond the New Deal Order: U.S. Politics from the Great Depression to the Great Recession* (Philadelphia: University Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁷ "Wage Legislation Held Detrimental," *Oakland Tribune*, 23 December 1932.

⁸ Jason Scott Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁹ Michal Kohout, "Sustainable Empire?" *Adventures in Sustainable Urbanism*, eds. Robert Krueger, Tim Freytag, and Samuel Mössner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 196.

labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein—“the most famous” of the “progressive industrialists with whom the [Congress of Industrial Organizations] sought an alliance.”¹⁰ As Lichtenstein notes, Kaiser “built his empire on New Deal construction and wartime contracts.”

The building blocks of that empire had imperial origins. Profits accrued in neocolonial Cuba formed the foundation on which Kaiser amassed his lengthy record of New Deal public works. And before his company became synonymous with federal infrastructure building, the Cuban Central Highway gave his personnel their first crash course in large-scale government projects. It also gave them a loosely regulated laboratory for testing management practices that would become central to the company’s identity. According to prominent Kaiser officials, the firm’s roadbuilding on the island between 1927 and 1930 and the capital accumulated therein marked a “turning point in our history” and “thrust Mr. Kaiser into the big time.”¹¹ The Cuba years shaped the company’s response to the turbulence of the Great Depression and the massive spike in government spending that followed. But while Kaiser’s domestic operations and their contributions to the midcentury welfare state have been well documented, their relationship to Cuba has yet to be explored.¹² Examining this connection offers a fuller account of the company, its hometown, and the political economy of the 1930s.¹³ Kaiser’s transnational routes allow us to

¹⁰ Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era,” *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, 129.

¹¹ Albert P. Heiner, *Henry J. Kaiser: Western Colossus: An Insider’s View* (San Francisco: Halo, 1991), 43, 48.

¹² For Kaiser’s contributions to the midcentury welfare state, see Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America’s Public-Private Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 190-197; Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 253; Sanford Jacoby, *Modern Manors: Welfare Capitalism since the New Deal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 242.

¹³ In academic histories of the Kaiser corporation, Kaiser’s nearly four years in Cuba have elicited only a few paragraphs. For Kaiser histories, see Stephen B. Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington: The Rise of a Government Entrepreneur* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Mark S. Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser: Builder in the Modern American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

see the New Deal order as a public-private partnership concerned not only with settling down out-of-work laborers in places like Oakland but also with shoring up the fragile bonds of empire, not least the colonial ties between Cuba and the United States.¹⁴

This chapter situates domestic applications of Keynesian reform in a global context. In doing so, it takes inspiration from Kwame Nkrumah's *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. There are conceptual and historical reasons for extending the analysis of *Neo-Colonialism* to Kaiser's iteration of New Deal capitalism. Not only did Nkrumah meticulously document Kaiser's extractive ventures in Africa and the Caribbean, but, several years before he wrote the text, he encountered the predations of Kaiser infrastructure building directly. As Ghana's head of state, Nkrumah partnered with Kaiser on the Volta River Dam project.¹⁵ In the introduction to *Neo-Colonialism*, Nkrumah argued that from the turn of the twentieth century, "imperialist powers found themselves engaged upon a conflict on two fronts, at home with their own workers and abroad against the growing forces of colonial liberation."¹⁶ As conflict continued to mount, Western states began to treat reform as a matter of necessity. Redistributive policies in Europe and North America routed colonial profits into higher standards of living for

¹⁴ Empire, as a method or subject, does not feature prominently in the historiography of the New Deal and U.S. welfare capitalism. Important exceptions include Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Color Line and the Assembly Line: Managing Race in the Ford Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Amy C. Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy: The Rise and Fall of Welfare and Developmental States in the Americas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Kiran Klaus Patel, *The New Deal: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), 63, 67, 102, 172-173, 189. While president of Ghana, Nkrumah commissioned Kaiser to design and oversee the construction of the Volta River Dam, a project primarily financed by the World Bank and the U.S. government's Development Loan Fund and Export-Import Bank. It later became clear that the project benefited Kaiser's local aluminum smelting operation far more than Ghana's development. On Kaiser's ambitions in Ghana, see Kaiser Industries Corporation, "Ghana in Brief," August 1958, carton 290, folder 15, Edgar F. Kaiser Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Marc Linder *Projecting Capitalism: A History of the Internationalization of the Construction Industry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 212.

¹⁶ Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism*, xiii.

their domestic working classes with the aim of splitting them off from their Global South counterparts.¹⁷ “A deliberate attempt was made,” wrote Nkrumah, “to divert colonial earnings from the wealthy class and use them instead generally to finance the ‘Welfare State.’” Rejecting the methodological nationalism of Western social science, Nkrumah recast the welfare state as a pacification strategy rolled out in a period of global rebellion. Its public investments aimed to stabilize capitalism’s industrial core at the expense of its colonial periphery.

Kaiser’s transnational geography sheds light on the inner workings of this process. During the 1930s, the company routed hefty earnings from neocolonial Cuba into higher-wage ventures at home, including New Deal public works on the Oakland waterfront. These developmental projects doubled as jobs programs for the United States’s restive working class. Like other pillars of the welfare state, they disproportionately benefited white male laborers, reproducing, in this case, legacies of racism and patriarchy in construction industry hiring.¹⁸ The long, winding career of the Kaiser Company reflects the turbulent interplay of capital accumulation and gendered racial hierarchies at a global scale. Following its path from the Cuban Central Highway to New Deal infrastructure reveals how a corporate empire based in Oakland helped channel colonial surplus into a tiered system of social democracy.¹⁹

The Roots of Kaiser Management

¹⁷ Here, Nkrumah drew on Vladimir Lenin’s argument that imperialism produced an “aristocracy of labor,” and more broadly a “split” between “exploiting” and “proletarian” nations. See V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (New York: International Publishers, 1969 [1917]).

¹⁸ Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 15.

¹⁹ On twentieth-century “corporate imperialism,” as an economic arrangement in which corporations did not function “expressly as colonizing forces but gained their entitlements and generated uneven economic and political power in relationship to multiple imperial entities,” see Nan Enstad, *Cigarettes, Inc.: An Intimate History of Corporate Imperialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 14.

To understand how Kaiser landed in Cuba in the late 1920s to carry out its first national infrastructure project requires an overview of the company's early years. The firm's founder, Henry Kaiser, exercised tight control over its financial and operational decisions from the beginning. Kaiser cut his teeth in the 1910s as a smalltime contractor paving city streets in Washington state and British Columbia. After successfully managing two local companies, he subsequently founded his own. Evidently proficient in the art of self-promotion, he obtained the capital to jumpstart the Kaiser Paving Company in 1914 by convincing a Canadian banker to take a gamble on a U.S. citizen without a business record to speak of.²⁰ Kaiser put this investment to efficient use. A tendency to underbid the competition proved crucial to his initial success. He had a knack for keeping equipment costs low owing to his background as a hardware salesman. But labor made up the biggest item on most construction budgets and Kaiser was especially adept at whittling it down. His methods ranged from the strategic deployment of labor-saving technology to the brazen disregard of official work holidays.²¹

Kaiser's first hire, a construction supervisor named Alonzo B. Ordway, was tasked with realizing these organizational efficiencies in the field. Ordway joined Kaiser's outfit in 1912, and their bond would span the entirety of his six-decade business career.²² At the time, he was fresh out of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. One of his college extracurriculars signaled his managerial ambition, as well as his passion for engineering and the popular culture of white supremacy. Ordway had served as the business manager of the Engineers' Minstrels, an ensemble of white male engineering majors who donned blackface for performances at the

²⁰ Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 29.

²¹ A.B. Ordway Recollections, undated, Carton 282, Folder 49, HJKP.

²² Alonzo B. Ordway biography, c.a. 1941, carton 282, folder 49, HJKP.

university's annual homecoming and across the Midwest.²³ Years later when Kaiser tapped him to serve as general manager on the Cuban Central Highway project, these racist performances echoed in his supervision of Cuban laborers, whom he likened to clumsy children.²⁴



Figure 10. Alonzo B. Ordway in Engineer's Minstrels yearbook photo, 1910. *The Badger, 1910* (University of Wisconsin-Madison yearbook).

In North America, the laborers Ordway managed were largely white and male. White men dominated the building trades and their labor market monopoly often received official support. The municipal street paving contracts that Kaiser obtained in Canada typically included

²³ *The Badger, 1910* (University of Wisconsin-Madison yearbook), p. 81. ancestry.com.

²⁴ "Ord Remembers Cuba," *Oakland Tribune*, 28 February 1971. On the U.S. history of "whiteness-as-management," 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).

clauses prohibiting the employment of “Chinese, Japanese or Hindoos or any other Asiatic.”²⁵ Kaiser’s early roadbuilding jobs reinforced the industry’s color line. But one of the company’s first hires notably transgressed it. He was an exception that proved the rule.

Born in eastern Illinois in 1879, James Andrew Shaw was the first Black employee hired by Kaiser. Shaw traveled to Spokane, Washington in the early twentieth century, when westward migration formed a survival strategy of African Americans navigating the perils of the Jim Crow era.²⁶ He arrived in a decade that saw the doubling of the city’s Black population even as the community continued to hover around one percent of the total.²⁷ The story of his employment attests to the creative ways African Americans resisted conditions of economic exclusion and racial containment at the turn of the twentieth century. It also attests to the precarity of a Black man seeking waged work in a hostile labor market and the readiness of an employer to take advantage of that fact. Shaw reportedly approached Ordway, then the foreman of a local Kaiser paving crew, to inquire about work.²⁸ At first, Ordway rebuffed him. But after Shaw agreed to labor for a week without wages, he was assigned to the crew on a trial basis. Impressed by his unwaged output, which apparently left his coworkers in the dust, Ordway offered him a paying gig at the end of his first day.

²⁵ City of Victoria: General Conditions for Contract Work: Asphalt Pavements, 1911, carton 296, folder 8, HJKP.

²⁶ On the politics of Black migration in the post-Reconstruction era, see Rayford Whittingham Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954); Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1976); Kendra T. Field, “‘No Such Thing as Stand Still’: Migration and Geopolitics in African American History,” *Journal of American History* 102, no. 3 (Dec. 2015): 693-718; Steve Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2003), 317-363, 412-464.

²⁷ Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1900* (New York: Norton, 1998), 193.

²⁸ Gordon Barteau, “Kaiser’s Early Days Recalled by ‘Old Tote,’” *Oregonian* 28 November 1943.



Figure 11. James Andrew Shaw, 1963. *San Bernardino Sun*, August 10, 1963.

Like his supervisor, Shaw's work ethic made him indispensable to the Kaiser Company. He followed the corporation from the Pacific Northwest to the Bay Area in the early 1920s and later to Cuba as a roadbuilder.²⁹ But unlike Ordway, he had no chance of career advancement during the decades he spent with the firm. When Kaiser led a consortium of contractors in the construction of the Hoover Dam in the early 1930s, Shaw was sidelined entirely; there was apparently no place for him in the project's Jim Crow work site, notwithstanding the modest diversity efforts of Roosevelt's Public Works Administration.³⁰ When his labor was in demand, Shaw routinely worked a second shift of domestic service for Henry Kaiser and his family. "I did

²⁹ James Shaw interview, 1943, carton 283, folder 4, HJKP.

³⁰ Laton McCartney, *Friends in High Places: The Bechtel Story: The Most Secret Corporation and How It Engineered the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 41; Marc W. Kruman, "Quotas for Blacks: The Public Works Administration and the Black Construction Worker," *Labor History* 16, no. 1 (1975): 37-51.

all kinds of work,” he later recalled. “I cleaned [Kaiser’s] house, took care of his kids, any kind of work.”³¹ This was hardly the typical job description of a self-described asphalt paver.³² Indeed, there is no indication that Kaiser’s white employees were ever asked to perform this kind of gendered care work on the side. But the tenuous position of Black men in the North American construction industry enabled this kind of exploitation. Shaw’s experience illustrates that Kaiser’s reputation for high productivity at the lowest possible cost rested on an ever-evolving division of labor, an organizational structure that made and remade race all while making a profit.

This reputation left the company well positioned to win bigger paving contracts following the passage of the first U.S. highway bill. Enacted during World War I, the Federal Aid Road Act sought to better integrate cities and agricultural hinterlands and to improve roads slated for “military purposes.”³³ Setting a pattern that guided Kaiser’s progress over the rest of the century, wartime stimulus opened new frontiers for the firm. When federal roadbuilding revenue spurred rural highway construction in Northern California in the early 1920s, Kaiser detected an opportunity for growth. The state’s projects exceeded the scale of his prior contracts in the Pacific Northwest. Consequently, the company’s center of gravity began to shift south.

In 1921, Kaiser moved his headquarters from Seattle to Oakland. The city’s rapidly industrializing economy, major railroad terminus, proximity to both the state capital and San Francisco creditors, and location in one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country

³¹ “After 85 Years: Kaiser’s First Employe [sic] Gets Birthday Cake,” *San Bernardino Sun* 10 August 1963.

³² *Fourteenth Census of the United States: 1920—Population, Mount Vernon City, Skagit, Washington*, sheet no. 4. ancestry.com.

³³ Richard F. Weingroff, “Federal Aid Road Act of 1916: Building the Foundation,” *Public Roads* 60, no. 1 (Summer 1996).

made it an ideal base for a budding roadbuilder.³⁴ A personal connection offered an additional attraction. Warren Bechtel was already a prominent figure in California construction when Henry Kaiser obtained his first highway contract in the state.³⁵ Founder of the Contractors Association of Northern California, Bechtel visited Kaiser at his job site soon after his arrival and invited the newcomer to join his industry lobbying group.³⁶ The encounter spawned a lifelong friendship as well as a long chain of profitable business partnerships.³⁷ An Oakland resident since 1904, Bechtel lived with his family in an apartment tower he had purchased in an upscale enclave on the edge of Lake Merritt.³⁸ Kaiser chose to settle with his wife and children in the same area. Prizing an easy commute, he decided to open his new office in downtown Oakland.³⁹

1920s Oakland had an additional draw for a capitalist concerned with efficiency: the prevalence of the open shop. When Kaiser arrived, the city was emerging as the regional base of a corporate offensive against organized labor. The construction industry took the lead in the anti-union campaign. In July 1920, Bechtel's Contractors Association joined forces with local businesses to wage a "war" on strikes.⁴⁰ In Oakland, strongarm tactics to "protect the open shop

³⁴ San Francisco Bay Area Chambers of Commerce, *San Francisco-Oakland Area: An Industrial Study* (San Francisco: McCann-Erickson, 1931).

³⁵ McCartney, *Friends in High Places*, 21.

³⁶ Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 38; and Heiner, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 32.

³⁷ Their relationship flourished in spite of the fact that Bechtel's company ultimately became an engine of the New Right movement that swept Ronald Reagan into power while Kaiser's would become a fixture of the New Deal coalition that the movement sought to undo.

³⁸ McCartney, *Friends in High Places*, 28.

³⁹ "Talk with A.B. Ordway on why Mr. Kaiser chose Oakland as his headquarters," 1968, carton 282, folder 49, HJKP.

⁴⁰ Albert Vetere Lannon, *Fight or Be Slaves: The History of the Oakland-East Bay Labor Movement* (Boston: University Press of America, 2000), 44.

principle” included labor lockouts, the promotion of injunctions and police violence against picketers, and agreements to ban the sale of construction materials to unionized firms.⁴¹ Through his ties to Bechtel, Kaiser became an active participant in the open-shop crusade. By 1923, he headed the Oakland section of the Contractors Association. The following year, he embarked on a two-year stint as president of the Northern California chapter.

Kaiser’s milieu encompassed business organizations like the Contractors Association and the Chamber of Commerce as well as social institutions like the Oakland Yacht Club, the Claremont Country Club, and the Athens Athletic Club.⁴² These venues provided spaces of fraternity and coordination for the local ruling class. They were ideological hotbeds, germinating ideas about the virtues of elite dominance in the workplace and civic life. The open-shop movement was more than a struggle at the point of production; it was a battle over the governance of particular places and the preservation of hierarchies within them. These broader aims were communicated plainly by one of the movement’s allies. Born in Los Angeles in the early 1920s, the Better America Federation (BAF) espoused a “100 percent Americanism” ideology that cast immigrants as bearers of dangerous radicalism and genetic inferiority.⁴³ The BAF laid bare the Social Darwinist principles behind employer hostility to labor empowerment.⁴⁴ Organizational literature published by the Bay Area chapter of the BAF decried

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Oakland Yacht Club to Hold ‘Night in Venice,’” *Oakland Tribune* 14 September 1933. Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 112-113.

⁴³ Michael Joseph Roberto rightly associates this ideology with “a distinct US form of fascism” in *The Coming of the American Behemoth: The Origin of Fascism in the United States, 1920-1940* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018), 2.

⁴⁴ Allen M. Wakstein, “The Origins of the Open-Shop Movement, 1919-1920,” *Journal of American History* 51, no. 3 (Dec., 1964): 464.

the possibility of popular self-government, since “throughout the length and breadth of Christendom in all lands and ages, the people, when turned loose, have raised every inch of hell to the square inch they were able to raise.”⁴⁵ Such depictions of the working class as a mindless horde incapable of managing its own affairs inflected the Red Scare panic that justified the policing of labor radicals. In 1924, the Oakland Police Department disseminated a pamphlet that pathologized the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), countering the union’s revolutionary vision with the assertion that, “Every civilization has always had and will always have its drudge class, and no advance in machinery or soviet form of government will relieve them of their fate.”⁴⁶ By all accounts, Kaiser shared this view of the inevitability of capitalist inequality. He certainly shared the Oakland Police Department’s contempt for the IWW, many of whose members passed through his construction camps.⁴⁷ For the IWW, the feeling was mutual. In a 1931 article in the *Industrial Worker*, an anonymous IWW author denounced “Keyser [sic]” and his fellow Hoover Dam contractors as “notorious for their low wages, rotten camp conditions and belly-robbing cookhouses; not to mention unsafe equipment and an unequaled collection of petty slave drivers.”⁴⁸

Kaiser’s authoritarian labor practices may have reflected a belief in societies structured in dominance, but they grew out of structural conditions. In the 1920s, California roadbuilders operated in a hyper-competitive environment with razor-thin profit margins. This resulted in a

⁴⁵ “Union Labor in Fight to Beat California’s B.A.F.,” *San Francisco Call* 3 April 1922.

⁴⁶ Frederick R. Wedge, “Inside the I.W.W.: A Study of the Behavior of the I.W.W., with Reference to Primary Causes,” c.a. 1924, carton 46, folder 27, Paul Schuster Taylor Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 34.

⁴⁸ *Industrial Worker*, 14 March 1931, quoted in Michael Hiltzik, *Colossus: The Turbulent, Thrilling Saga of the Building of Hoover Dam* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 227-228.

race to the bottom in quality and cost.⁴⁹ Securing a steady supply of cheap labor was among Kaiser's chief missions as president of the Contractors Association of Northern California. His advocacy of the use of incarcerated workers on California highway jobs epitomized the effort.⁵⁰ The practice was anathema to organized labor but welcomed by contractors hoping to reduce the cost of construction.⁵¹ In a regional market teeming with competitors, the drive to suppress the price of labor by any means necessary emanated from relentless pressure to lower bids.

The drive to forcibly control the cost of labor seemed especially urgent in the climate of revolt that took hold after World War I. Kaiser arrived in Oakland at a time when labor-capital relations were spiraling into open warfare. Working-class rebellions sprung up across the country in the postwar period and the Bay Area was no exception. Among the most critical work stoppages of the era was a massive metal trades strike in 1919 that upended the region's shipbuilding industry, an industry Kaiser would come to dominate. Black shipyard and railroad workers supported the strike, with the Dining Car Employees Union promising to organize against the recruitment of strikebreakers in Black neighborhoods. Their solidarity had the broader aim of opening up waterfront industries monopolized by white unions. But the shipbuilders found ways to circumvent acts of working-class unity. The temporary importation of workers from Jamaica allowed the employers to replace the labor of strikers. By shuttling

⁴⁹ *Monthly Letter* (Contractors Association of Northern California), VI, no. 12, December 1925, carton 296, folder 2, HJKP.

⁵⁰ "Prison Road Camps Upheld," *San Francisco Examiner* 19 December 1925.

⁵¹ On the history of prison labor in California highway construction, see Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 68-75.

these workers to job sites from houseboats on the bay, they successfully evaded shoreside picket lines.⁵²

The tactic had a residual impact on the Bay Area labor movement that went beyond its immediate lessons in the geography of class war. Although local Black unions had supported the strike, white-dominated unions still tended to view them as complicit with the strikebreakers. According to Bay Area labor journalist Sidney Roger, the “black Jamaicans imported to work on the waterfront...created very strong feelings about blacks” in general, an antipathy that lingered among white waterfront workers well into the 1930s.⁵³ Such divisions reinforced the association of the Bay Area’s Black community, then concentrated in West Oakland, with open-shop employers. The trade unions hardened their boundaries in response. Black Oakland columnist Delilah L. Beasley observed this dynamic in 1919. “With but few exceptions,” she wrote, “all the avenues of trade are closed to the Negro workman through the powerful influences of the trade unions who rule San Francisco.”⁵⁴

Ray Thompson experienced these exclusions firsthand. Born in 1905 to a Black working-class family in San Francisco, Thompson remembered an aunt who lived near his childhood home. “She took in washing,” he recalled, “the usual thing that any Black person would do in ‘Frisco in those days...[since] job opportunities for Black people were very, very restricted.”⁵⁵

⁵² Robin Dearmon Jenkins, “Linking up the Golden Gate: Garveyism in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1919-1925,” *Journal of Black Studies* 39, no. 2 (Nov., 2008): 273-274.

⁵³ Sidney Roger, *A Liberal Journalist on the Air and on the Waterfront: Labor and Political Issues, 1932-1990*, an oral history conducted in 1989 and 1990 by Julie Shearer, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1998.

⁵⁴ Delilah L. Beasley, *The Negro Trail Blazers of California* (Los Angeles: Times Mirror Printing, 1919), 149, quoted in Allen Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 49.

⁵⁵ Ray Thompson, interview with Jesse J. Warr, III, 1978, Oral History Project: Afro-Americans in San Francisco Prior to World War II, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, California.

Confinement to low-paying work in the domestic and service sectors prompted a search for better opportunities elsewhere, including across the bay. “A good many Black people worked on the railroad going in and out of Oakland,” Thompson continued. “That was the biggest amount of work.” Over the first decades of the twentieth century, the Black population of San Francisco steadily declined, while Oakland’s Black community expanded. The trend correlated with the growth of service-oriented railroad jobs and the relative availability of industrial employment.⁵⁶

The different employment prospects offered by the cities were common knowledge by the 1920s. C.L. Dellums, who went on to become a founding organizer of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and a leader in West Oakland’s Black left, recalled changing his initial plans to migrate to San Francisco in 1923 because while traveling from Texas a Black Pullman porter advised him that in San Francisco “you will never find a job.”⁵⁷ In contrast, the porter noted, the “few Negroes around here in the Bay District are in Oakland, so you can make some contacts.” African American migration patterns indexed an emerging racial geography that linked white capital and Black labor in the minds of many trade unionists. These racial divisions enabled a regional form of labor arbitrage, with the East Bay city functioning as an industrial colony, a place with significantly lower labor costs than San Francisco.⁵⁸ This was the context in which Kaiser chose to set up shop in Oakland.

The Returns of Neocolonial Infrastructure

⁵⁶ Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 23.

⁵⁷ C.L. Dellums, interview with Joyce Henderson, 1973, Earl Warren Oral History Project, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵⁸ A war on the closed shop was simultaneously underway in San Francisco, but trade unions were more entrenched there than they were in Oakland. William Issel, “‘Citizens Outside the Government’: Business and Urban Policy and San Francisco and Los Angeles, 1890-1932,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 57, no. 2 (1988): 124; Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

When Kaiser set out for Cuba in 1927, Oakland had cemented its reputation as a business-friendly city with global ambitions. His departure coincided with the founding of Oakland's port authority, an entity structured around the interests of capital and the U.S. military. The mayoral appointees comprising the Oakland Board of Port Commissioners included a cigar wholesaler, a bank founder and department store owner, and other members of the local business elite. One of the board's first acts was fast-tracking the development of a municipal airport, so the Army could embark on the first flight to Hawai'i from the North American mainland.⁵⁹ The Port Commissioners undoubtedly recognized that the expansion of U.S. military infrastructure had clear commercial benefits. If the transpacific flight anticipated deeper logistical ties between Oakland and Pacific markets, the origins of which are recounted in the first two chapters, an earlier event hastened the city's integration into the Atlantic world. The completion of the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal in 1914, which promised to connect West Coast cities to Caribbean economies, served as a major catalyst for the Port of Oakland's incorporation.⁶⁰ Oakland's port emerged as a node within a constellation of imperial infrastructure. With a governing body deliberately insulated from the pressures of electoral democracy, it was primed for the efficient movement of cargo from the Pacific to the Atlantic and back.⁶¹

This rapidly modernizing seaport was a critical piece of Kaiser's Cuba venture. At the beginning of the venture, Kaiser shipped so many boxes of supplies to Havana via the Port of Oakland that he had to commandeer the printing department of an East Bay newspaper for

⁵⁹ Oakland Board of Port Commissioners, Meeting Minutes, July 5, 1927, Board Meetings Archive, Port of Oakland. <https://www.portofoakland.com/port/board-of-commissioners/board-meetings/archive/>.

⁶⁰ G.B. Hegardt, Chas. D. Marx, and Chas. T. Leeds, *Report on Port of Oakland* (Oakland: Board of Port of Commissioners, 1925), 7.

⁶¹ Ralph T. Fisher, "Why do we have a Port Commission?" August 22, 1934, Port of Oakland Archive.

almost a month in order to produce the requisite volume of shipping labels.⁶² The heavy logistical load reflected the scale of the undertaking. The 700-mile Cuban Central Highway was the most expensive infrastructure project of its kind at the start of construction. The project proved immensely profitable for the Kaiser corporation. Responsible for a 200-mile leg spanning the entire province of Camagüey and part of Oriente, the construction company netted nearly \$2.1 million on a roughly \$18 million contract.⁶³ This was more than double the total revenue accrued in its first 14 years of business and a rate of profit considerably greater than any of its past contracts.

The Port of Oakland made Kaiser's lucrative foray into Cuba logistically feasible, but it was a business connection that brokered his arrival in the country. Kaiser entered Cuba as a subcontractor of the Boston-based Warren Brothers firm, the company tasked with building the largest portion of the Central Highway.⁶⁴ Kaiser's invitation to join Warren in Cuba stemmed from the companies' ongoing financial entanglements, as well the expectation that the Oakland firm would enhance the construction process. By the late 1920s, Kaiser's reputation for efficiency centered on his use of cutting-edge technology, especially the Le Tourneau earthmoving scrapers whose patent he had purchased for \$50,000.⁶⁵ It also derived from his well-known successes in supply chain and resource management.⁶⁶ Warren hoped that Kaiser's

⁶² M.R. Henry, "Kaiser's First Plant Was in Livermore," *Livermore Herald News*, 2 September 1967.

⁶³ "Kaiser Paving Company: Cuba Account 46 months to 12/31/30," carton 297, folder 20, HJKP.

⁶⁴ Kaiser had cooperated with the company on roadbuilding contracts along the West Coast. Impressed by Kaiser's energetic performance, Warren became an early backer of his business and, for over a decade, the firm's majority shareholder. Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington*, 17.

⁶⁵ "History of Kaiser Projects," n.d., carton 296, folder 29, HJKP.

⁶⁶ Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington*, 31.

technological assets and demonstrated expertise would allow the firm to complete the highway quickly, while keeping expenditures down. But in the end, Kaiser's greatest asset proved to be his opportunism, a knack for exploiting the possibilities of neocolonial Cuba.

Kaiser's entrance into Cuba's burgeoning construction market was a lucky break for a contractor barely turning a profit on California highway jobs. But for Warren, it was a long time coming. The company was the largest highway builder in the United States during the 1920s, and its corporate footprint spanned the Americas.⁶⁷ With access to copious amounts of capital, it had a clear advantage over its rivals. The firm's bid for the Cuban Central Highway came with the backing of the National City Bank of New York, as well as a million-dollar deposit, double the amount offered by its closest competitor.⁶⁸ Cuban contractors submitted bids as well. One firm with close ties to Cuban president Gerardo Machado obtained a segment of the work, a deal that captured the venality of his regime.⁶⁹ But the bulk of the contract went to Warren and Kaiser.

The U.S. financial sector greeted the coming of the Central Highway with optimism, albeit with certain reservations. The entire project was expected to total at least \$75 million, which meant a bonanza for Wall Street. The Chase National Bank financed an initial \$10 million at six-percent interest with more loans yet to come.⁷⁰ But there was a tension in the venture. In March 1927, the U.S. Commerce Department published a bullish report on Cuba's "Good Roads

⁶⁷ Linder, *Projecting Capitalism*, 113.

⁶⁸ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. I* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 66-67.

⁶⁹ On the nepotistic relationship between the Cuban contractor and Machado, see LeRiverend, *La República*, 250; Lionel Soto, *La Revolución de 33* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1979), 57; Rolando Rodríguez, *Rebelión en la República: Auge y caída de Gerardo Machado, Tomo I* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 2013), 181.

⁷⁰ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. II* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 227; Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment, 1902-1934*, 284.

Movement,” but its prediction that the Central Highway’s \$2-per-day wage would “cause the wages of cane-field workers, who are now earning from \$1 to \$1.35 a day, to rise” would have struck many investors as bad news.⁷¹ The highway promised to ease the transportation of Cuba’s sugar crop, which by the 1920s was overwhelmingly controlled by U.S. capitalists. But it also aspired to diversify a national economy long stalled in a monocrop dependency.⁷²

The infrastructure had different meanings for different constituencies. And for a Cuban government striving to balance the confidence of foreign investors with the charms of economic nationalism, this was part of its appeal. The highway had the potential to boost employment and purchasing power while also generating income for foreign creditors. Machado insisted there was no conflict between these interests. “We are prudent, conservative, if you wish, in all our estimates,” he stated in a September 1926 speech announcing the opening of bids on the highway, “because we have the greatest interest in maintaining our credit; because our credit... means more to Cuba than all the revenues we could possibly obtain.”⁷³ Promises of prudence came with concrete reassurances. Since taking office in 1925, Machado had kept his pledge to a Wall Street audience to crack down on strikes and independent unions.⁷⁴ Such interventions in the labor market were paired with fiscal safeguards. In devising a funding mechanism for the

⁷¹ United States Department of Commerce, *Commerce Reports*, no. 12, March 21, 1927, 765.

⁷² Jencks, *Our Cuban Colony*, 275; Joseph Hartman, *Dictator’s Dreamscape: How Architecture and Vision Built Machado’s Cuba and Invented Modern Havana* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 115.

⁷³ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. II* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 61.

⁷⁴ Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, 259-260.

highway, Machado's Secretary of Public Works Carlos Miguel de Céspedes looked to the public-private system of tax-revenue bonds employed by the fascist government of Benito Mussolini.⁷⁵

The marriage of foreign finance and domestic infrastructure undergirded Cuba's claims to modernity. But such claims did little to change dominant U.S. perceptions of the nation as perennially in need of outside intervention. Henry Kaiser echoed this trope when he likened the roadbuilding venture to a civilizing mission. Following his first trip to Cuba in the winter of 1927, he pointed to the island's "primitive conditions" and "state of undevelopment" as self-evident justifications for his presence⁷⁶

Kaiser resorted to tidy abstractions when recounting his time in Cuba. But a more textured sense of what he experienced can be gleaned from the observations of a contemporary visitor who, like the Oakland businessman, traveled to the country from the East Bay Area. Berkeley Police Chief August Vollmer visited Cuba in 1926 in conjunction with his work as a police consultant. Renowned for applying methods of counterinsurgency from the U.S.-occupied Philippines to the professionalization of police departments in Berkeley and Los Angeles, Vollmer's services were in demand in Machado's Cuba and in many places around the world.⁷⁷ Recounting his time on the island to a group of Berkeley officers, he painted a picture of striking inequality. "On the same street with a four-oxen cart will be the finest Rolls-Royce in the world,"

⁷⁵ This financial arrangement underpinned Machado's dubious claim that he had not broken his promise to the Cuban people to avoid contracting new debt. *Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. II* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 212-213. On the economic dimensions of fascist governance, see Clara E. Mattei, *The Capital Order: How Economists Invented Austerity and Paved the Way to Fascism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

⁷⁶ Kaiser quoted in "Kaiser Gets Twenty Million Dollar Cuban Road Contract," *Pacific Street and Road Builder* (March, 1927), carton 297, folder 30, HJKP.

⁷⁷ On Vollmer and the entanglements of U.S. empire and U.S. policing, see Julian Go, "The Imperial Origins of American Policing: Militarization and Imperial Feedback in the Early 20th Century," *American Journal of Sociology* 125, no. 5 (March 2020): 1193-1254. Stuart Schrader, *Badges without Borders: How Global Counterinsurgency Transformed American Policing* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 67-78.

declared Vollmer. “Outside the city of Havana in one field they will be plowing with a wooden plow and in the one next to it using the finest tractors money can buy. On a modern plantation everything perfect as can be and right next door will be a little oldfashioned farm where they are still doing things they did five hundred years ago.”⁷⁸ Kaiser would have glimpsed similar scenes of contrast during his time in the island’s capital and on train rides to and from Camagüey. Such images gave the impression of a country characterized by developmental unevenness. Like Vollmer, who praised Cuba’s police force for ensuring that “the foreigners that come there feel so secure,” Kaiser identified notable signs of “progress” on the island’s bumpy road to civilization. For both men, rescuing Cuba from its backwardness required U.S. intervention, but in their eyes, Machado had the foresight to recognize this historical truth and the pluckiness to move forward on ambitious projects of modernization, whether in policing or public works. Ironically, Cuba’s plans for national development might have something to teach the United States. Vollmer captured this irony while reviewing the island’s relative successes in the field of crime control: common images of Cubans “running around in an uncivilized state looking like a very backward people” clashed with the fact that they “have less cutting scrapes and shooting scrapes than in the city of Oakland.” Such comparisons made clear that Cuba’s backwardness was not evenly distributed; in some areas, the country was actually ahead of its northern neighbor.

Kaiser gestured at a similar conclusion in a speech he delivered at the Hotel Camagüey to an audience gathered for the sixth Pan-American Conference. The conference occurred alongside U.S. invasions in the Caribbean Basin, from Nicaragua to Haiti, and campaigns of state terror at

⁷⁸ Berkeley Police Department: Officers Meeting notes, September 24, 1926, box 48, folder 2, Berkeley Police Department Records, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

the hands of despotic U.S. proxies like Machado. The 1928 event hid this brutality behind a ceremonial façade. Under the paternalistic aegis of Pan-Americanism, the Cuban hosts sought to showcase the progress of their young republic while conveying their acceptance of U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere.⁷⁹ Tellingly, Cuban Ambassador to the United States Orestes Ferrara criticized a proposal supporting the principle of nonintervention. In a conference report, Ferrara defended the Monroe Doctrine, whose interventionist mandate was inscribed in the Platt Amendment to the Cuban constitution at the behest of the United States.⁸⁰ The Machado government's acquiescence to U.S. military and financial rule drew heavy criticism from Cuban radicals and labor leaders, who found themselves subject to state violence ahead of the conference. A statement from the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party issued in the lead-up to the event asked rhetorically, "what kind of peace and what guarantees of independence can [the conference] give, if the 'representatives' of [the peoples of Latin America] are the same 'Machados,' who sold out to Wall Street and martyr the workers and peasants of their countries?"⁸¹ For Kaiser, Machado's authoritarian streak and deference to the United States were assets not liabilities, as long as they resulted in "stable" conditions.⁸² In his Pan-American speech, he mixed notes of condescension and admiration, complimenting "this little Island of Cuba" for building a national highway system before the United States had the

⁷⁹ Alonso Aguilar, *Pan-Americanism from Monroe to the Present: A View from the Other Side* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 65-66.

⁸⁰ "Copias de ponencias e informes a la VI Conferencia Panamericana," 1928, caja 400, no. 35, Fondo Donativos y Remisiones, Archivo Nacional de Cuba. Such statements behind the scenes clashed with Machado's public calls for revising the Platt Amendment. Jencks, *Our Cuban Colony* 270; and Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, 252.

⁸¹ Instituto de Historia del Movimiento Comunista y del la Revolución Socialista de Cuba, *El Movimiento Obrero Cubano: Documentos y Artículos, Tomo II, 1925-1935* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1977), 99.

⁸² Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 40.

“courage” to do the same.⁸³ “Long live President Machado and his able assistants,” Kaiser declaimed, “who have brought this great vision into action.” Kaiser’s tribute to a government whose repressive measures and unconstitutional efforts were widely known at the time jibed with his support for a privatized and top-down system of public works in Northern California. His speech implied that Machado’s decisions to farm out development to U.S. businessmen, bypass the inefficiencies of democracy, and plow ahead on infrastructure modernization was an example worthy of emulation.

Sowing and Reaping in Eastern Cuba

The Central Highway constituted a parable of progress for Machado and his backers. Other Cubans, however, were deeply skeptical of the narrative. This was especially true in eastern Cuba, where Kaiser’s outfit was based. Such skepticism left an imprint in the lyrics of *son*, a musical genre born in African-descended communities on the eastern end of the island. By the late 1920s, *son* enjoyed a global audience and its sounds dominated the Cuban airwaves.⁸⁴ In “A Baracoa Me Voy,” an early-1930s track by Antonio Machín, the singer vows to travel to Baracoa, a coastal town known for its contributions to the *son* tradition, even though there is no highway [“aunque no hay carretera”] route available.⁸⁵ In centering the absence of an infrastructure central to Machado’s rule, Machín highlighted the ways that national development prioritized some geographies at the expense of others. He also suggested that Cuba’s overlooked communities would continue to live, move, and generate culture regardless of government plans.

⁸³ Henry J. Kaiser speech, Sixth Pan American Conference, 1928, carton 262, folder 1, HJKP.

⁸⁴ On the cultural geography of *son*, see Rebecca M. Bodenheimer, *Geographies of Cubanidad: Place, Race, and Musical Performance in Contemporary Cuba* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 204-234.

⁸⁵ I am grateful to Raúl Fernández for drawing my attention to this song.

More explicit expressions of disenchantment were recorded in a 1928 letter by a Caterpillar Tractor Company representative. In his report on the use of Caterpillar equipment in Cuban highway construction, the representative made a number of references to public opinion. In one revealing anecdote, the representative described the general mockery greeting the arrival of roadbuilding tractors on the eastern end of the island. "The usual anxious crowd attended the unloading of these tractors," he wrote. "There were bets on whether these funny looking machines would turn over or not. The main reason a lot of people attend these unloadings is the selfish desire and hope that something will turn over and smash to pieces and for no reason at all other than amusement."⁸⁶ In portraying ordinary Cubans as hostile to modern technology, the story reinforced U.S. notions of Caribbean backwardness. But it also hinted at the dim view of the highway among the majority of Cubans who were never asked to register their opinions on the direction of national development. The Caterpillar representative went on to note that in his survey of the local population he encountered "the belief of the people that the starting of the Carretera [Highway] was all a joke" and "that the job would never be completed and that it was another scheme and bluff."

It is impossible to know how representative these sentiments actually were, but Cubans in the eastern provinces of Camagüey and Oriente had many reasons to view the highway's conceit of national progress as little more than a farce. In the early twentieth century, the eastern portion of the country functioned as a colony within a colony, or, as Cuban historian Humberto Cartaya Espinosa puts it in his study of Camagüey's labor movement, "an underdeveloped province in an

⁸⁶ F. Maldonado to P.E. Holt, "Subject: La Carretera Central de Cuba," Oct. 1928, box 4, folder 14, Caterpillar Tractor Company, Photographs, 1927-1932, Baker Library Special Collections, Harvard University.

underdeveloped country.”⁸⁷ Eastern Cuba’s underdevelopment inversely correlated with the wealth it generated for foreign landowners. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, North American capitalists flocked to the region, establishing a steady procession of sugar plantations on the highly productive virgin soil of recently cleared forests.⁸⁸ When highway construction began, Camagüey and Oriente plantations were ground zero of the United States’s global empire of sugar productions.⁸⁹ Cubans of African descent, along with migrants from Haiti and Jamaica, comprised the bulk of the plantation workforce.⁹⁰ The region’s demographics and record of working-class militancy accounted for its reputation as the “Black Belt” of Cuba.⁹¹ The area also had a reputation as a bulwark of white supremacy and reactionary politics, symbolized by the fact that Cuba’s chapter of the Ku Klux Klan was born in Camagüey in 1928.⁹² If U.S. empire superintended the hyper-exploitation of Cuba’s racialized working class, nowhere was the rate of exploitation higher than in the eastern provinces. Small wonder that, in an area ruled by North American capital, the everyday realities of foreign domination made grand promises of national development seem duplicitous and absurd to many locals.

⁸⁷ Humberto Cartaya Espinosa, *Algunos aspectos de las Luchas Obreras en Camagüey* (Camagüey: Mención. Concurso de Historia, 1980), 184.

⁸⁸ Reinaldo Funes Monzote, *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History Since 1492* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 217-262.

⁸⁹ Ferrer, *Cuba*, 185-193.

⁹⁰ Philip A. Howard, *Black Labor, White Sugar: Caribbean Braceros and Their Struggle for Power in the Cuban Sugar Industry* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2015).

⁹¹ On the Communist “Black Belt thesis” in Cuba, see Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 107-137.

⁹² Carlos González Echevarría, *Origen y Desarrollo del Movimiento Obrero Camagüeyano* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1984), 93.

Kaiser's entrance into Camagüey followed a path blazed by a generation of U.S. investors. As was typical of his ilk, he caught land fever on arrival. Kaiser's purchase of property at the outset of highway construction tracked with the broader trend of U.S. financial power displacing Cuba's old colonial elite.⁹³ In 1927, when Kaiser bought his 11,000-square-foot parcel, foreigners owned the overwhelming majority of Cuban real estate, while U.S. financial interests controlled around three-quarters of the country's sugar industry.⁹⁴ Adjacent to the future highway on the outskirts of Camagüey's provincial capital, Kaiser's property initially functioned as a Cuban branch office for his company, but it doubled as a rental property and a speculative investment aimed at capitalizing on the advent of Kaiser-built infrastructure.⁹⁵ Kaiser was essentially betting on his own contribution to Cuba's development.⁹⁶

⁹³ For a discussion of this broader trend, see Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*.

⁹⁴ Ferrer, *Cuba*, 187-191; and Jencks, *Our Cuban Colony*, 284.

⁹⁵ J.F. Reis to A.B. Ordway, May 7, 1929, carton 297, folder 22, HJKP.

⁹⁶ Kaiser bundled the remaining mortgage payments and bought the land outright after construction concluded. Darío E. Castillo Socarrás, Escritura Número 70: Ciudad de Camagüey, República de Cuba, 1 de junio de 1931, 405-409, Fondo Protocolos Notariales, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey.

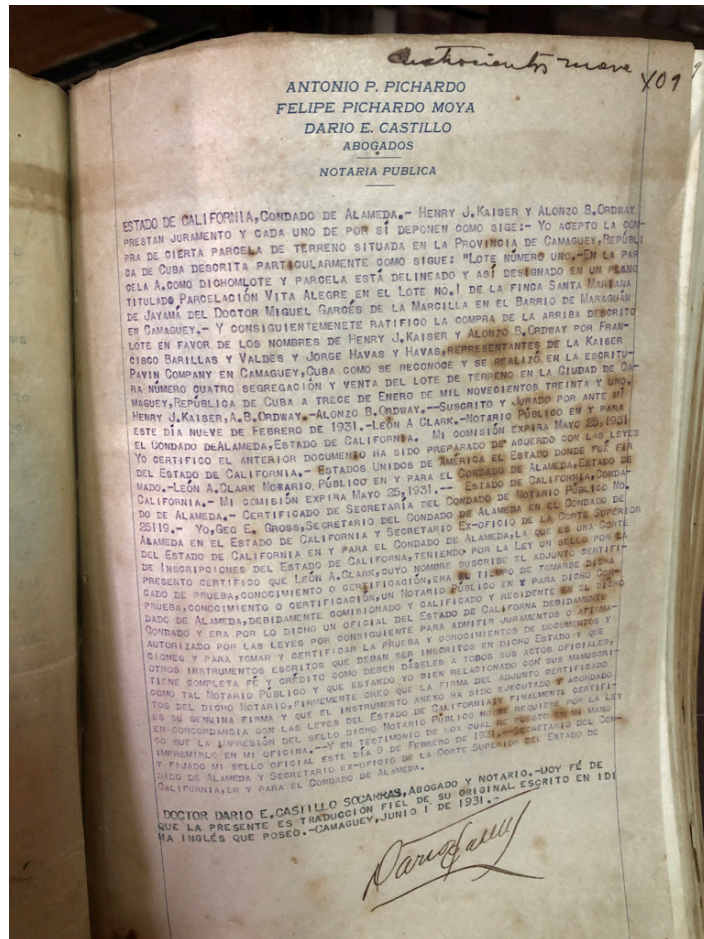


Figure 12. Kaiser property deed, Camagüey, Cuba, 1931. Courtesy of Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey.

Like the rest of Camagüey, this tract of land was in a state of transition. Formerly part of an agricultural zone known as Finca Santa Mariana, a verdant area brimming with orchards of mango, guava, cocoa, tamarind, and citrus, the property was morphing into a suburban subdivision when Kaiser bought it.⁹⁷ An invasive plant known as *marabú* pervaded the parcel, signaling its diminished agrarian capacity.⁹⁸ The stubborn bush-like weed spread through the abandoned farms and plantations of twentieth-century Camagüey, charting the boom-and-bust

⁹⁷ Rosa María Betancourt Rodríguez, interview with author (Camagüey, Cuba), March 30, 2022.

⁹⁸ Andrés García y Fernández to G.G. Sherwood, March 16, 1939, carton 297, folder 22, HJKP.

march of sugar cultivation.⁹⁹ The proliferation of vast plantations in eastern Cuba simplified an ecosystem teeming with biodiversity and fertile soils into a monocultural belt, precipitating the decline of subsistence crops, while deepening reliance on food imports from the United States.¹⁰⁰

Camagüey's landed aristocracy fell in tandem with the region's agricultural diversity. Kaiser purchased the property from Miguel Garces de Marcilla, who had acquired the land by marrying into the Betancourt family.¹⁰¹ The Betancourts were among the most prominent landowning families in Camagüey at the turn of the twentieth century. But by the 1920s they were losing ground to U.S. investors. With each passing generation, their agricultural holdings fractionated into smaller and smaller farms, which could not compete with territorially extensive and heavily capitalized sugar estates.¹⁰² This marked a decisive reversal of the family's fortunes. In the 1830s, well before plantations carpeted the valleys of eastern Cuba, Gaspar Betancourt Cisneros played an instrumental role in integrating Camagüey into wider webs of commerce by commissioning the construction of its first railroad. Ninety years later, one of his descendants would sell off a Betancourt property to a U.S. contractor linked to the infrastructure of the future, a highway designed to facilitate the region's conversion into a U.S.-administered sugar colony.

This was not the only instance in which the highway infringed on Betancourt land. To accelerate the pace of construction, Machado's public works agency established an Office of Expropriation to seize private property that stood in the road's path or on sites designated for a

⁹⁹ On the political ecology of *marabú*, see Funes Monzote, *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba*, 251.

¹⁰⁰ Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Geotransformación de Cuba* (Havana: Editorial Científico-Técnica, 2018), 87.

¹⁰¹ Garces's stake in a broader swath of land owned by the Betancourts is depicted on a 1929 property map in Eduardo Tomas Adán, *Escritura Número 87: Ciudad de Camagüey, República de Cuba, 3 de junio de 1929*, 461, Fondo Protocolos Notariales, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey.

¹⁰² Rosa María Betancourt Rodríguez, interview with author (Camagüey, Cuba), March 30, 2022.

sand pit or quarry. The urban farm of Emma Betancourt Vuida de Agramonte was among the properties slated for seizure. But she did not comply with the state's wishes. Her name appears on an official list of "owners who refused to cede" land for the highway.¹⁰³ The outcome of her case is unclear, but the government did acknowledge in the same report that in certain instances an owner's refusal was met with "the measure of forced expropriation." In general, refusals of land cessions were rare, despite the fact that the state offered no compensation. In lieu of cash, the Department of Public Works touted "the many patriotic reasons to abandon such [land] claims and the benefits...not only for the public interest but also for [the owners] themselves from the Highway crossing through their farm."¹⁰⁴ In other words, Machado's government told farmers to hand over pieces of their land out of devotion to their homeland with the possibility that someday proximity to a highway would bring more tangible rewards. The Office of Expropriation claimed to have saved the state "thousands of pesos, since except for a tiny number of owners for whom it has been necessary to expropriate their lands, almost all...have selflessly ceded their lands to the State at no cost, even though the sacrifice for many of them implied considerable generosity, being landowners with scarce wealth."¹⁰⁵ For small landowners struggling to stay afloat amid the relentless tide of U.S. capital, payments in the form of national pride did nothing to lighten financial burdens. That more of them did not join Emma Betancourt in resisting government expropriation indicates the effectiveness of state repression.

The savings and conveniences of expropriation that accrued to the Cuban government also benefited Kaiser. Land seizures spared the firm the hassle and cost of locating and securing

¹⁰³ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. IV* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 282.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 260.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 257.

the rights to aggregates for road construction. An exemplary record of acquiring and mobilizing concrete inputs was a primary reason the company had obtained the Cuba contract and a critical factor in its subsequent rise. A Kaiser official later bragged that “one of the actions that speeded and made the [Cuba] work successful was the opening up and developing of 30, more or less, rock quarries and sand pits to supply the [highway] job and thus cut down on the transportation costs.”¹⁰⁶ The official made clear that such operational successes in the corporation’s largest job to date bolstered its reputation and paved the way to even larger contracts. He did not mention, however, that this valuable experience in resource management took place on land expropriated by an authoritarian state.

Machado’s sprawling apparatus of state violence dispossessed Cuban smallholders, repressed strikers on sugar plantations, and intimidated political opponents. All of this depended on the logistical capacities of railroads, ports, and roadways. The Central Highway would contribute decisively to the infrastructure of counterinsurgency. As Leland Jencks wrote of the Central Highway in the late 1920s, “Incidentally, this highway will increase the ability of the Cuban government to employ its armed forces in the suppression of local disorder.”¹⁰⁷ This function was more than incidental. Policing was woven into the fabric of the road. In 1928, Machado issued a presidential decree establishing an Army division devoted to “highway surveillance.”¹⁰⁸ In the summer of 1932, a period marked by mounting unrest on the plantations

¹⁰⁶ Kaiser edits to *The Earth Changers* (manuscript) by Robert C. Elliott, 1956, carton 258, folder 17, HJKP.

¹⁰⁷ Jencks, *Our Cuban Colony*, 275.

¹⁰⁸ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central, Vol. IV* (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 131.

of eastern Cuba, the division head in Camagüey submitted an “urgent” request to the provincial governor for detailed information on the province’s highways along with maps of their routes.¹⁰⁹

The highway served as a conduit of state repression after its completion in 1931. But as a work in progress it was a focal point of policing in its own right. Like the highway surveillance division, the Army’s “delegate of public works” was housed within Cuba’s Rural Guard, a military detachment established by the United States for the protection of rural property. In practice, this meant protecting U.S.-owned plantations and related economic ventures from sabotage and labor militancy.¹¹⁰ Camagüey’s main Rural Guard station bordered the Central Highway in the suburbs of the provincial capital, a short distance from Kaiser’s property.¹¹¹

In a confidential report forwarded to Machado, Camagüey’s public works delegate addressed rumors that a Cuban highway contractor was using shoddy materials and proceeding at a suspiciously slow pace. According to his investigation, not only were the rumors false, but in fact the contractor’s “executed works look to be more complete and advanced in comparison with” the works of Kaiser and Warren.¹¹² The report issued a tacit rebuttal to Kaiser’s denigrating charge that Cuba’s “primitive conditions” necessitated the intervention of U.S. businessmen. It accorded with the assessment of a Cuban engineer who observed that Kaiser managers were “completely unfamiliar with local conditions such as climate, terrain,

¹⁰⁹ “Comunicaciones, relaciones, etc relativa a la solicitud del Gobernador de la relación de puentes aproches y carretera construida hasta 1933 en los municipios de la Provincia de Camagüey con el propósito de preparar un plano. Camagüey,” 28 de junio de 1932 a 9 de enero de 1933, legajo 44, no. 536, Fondo Gobierno Provincial de Camagüey, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey, Cuba.

¹¹⁰ On the history and function of the Rural Guard, see Ferrer, *Cuba*, 191.

¹¹¹ Cap. Arturo Potter, “Plano General de Camagüey, No. 7: Aprobado por ley de 15 de Julio de 1925,” 1929, M 294, Fondo Mapoteca, Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

¹¹² Sección de Expropiación y Reintegros de Secretaria de Obras Publicas, “Inspección en las obras de la Carretera Central, en la provincia de Santa Clara, April 12-July 17, 1928, Caja 32, No. de Orden 49, Fondo Secretaria de la Presidencia, Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

transportation facilities, the type of labor personnel available, etc.”¹¹³ The implicit rejoinder would have flattered Machado given his personal ties to the Cuban contractor. Regardless of its accuracy, the document is significant in confirming that Machado’s security state kept a watchful eye over highway construction. It is also significant in light of its author: an Army lieutenant by the name of Ofelio Betancourt. In the previous year, one of Betancourt’s relatives had sold family land so that Kaiser could build an office next to the highway. Another had resisted a government order aimed at plowing the national road through her urban farm. The Betancourts’ varying experiences with the Central Highway shed light on the choices available to Cuba’s increasingly landless former elite in an era of U.S. ascendancy.

Cuban Public Work

The work of highway surveillance, like the state bureaucracy more generally, provided a salary as well as a psychological wage to Cuba’s downwardly mobile native elite. The Central Highway offered other opportunities to different segments of Cuban society. The Machado government conceived the infrastructure as, in part, a jobs program to shore up support for its increasingly authoritarian regime. In designing the program, the state drew sharp lines around citizenship status. At a time when the country’s sugar-based economy acutely depended on migrant laborers from Haiti and Jamaica, the highway contract served to reinforce the nation’s ethnically segmented labor market: it stipulated that contractors prioritize the employment of Cuban citizens.¹¹⁴ By some accounts, quotas were established to ensure their compliance.¹¹⁵ This

¹¹³ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central*, Vol. IV (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 33.

¹¹⁴ Negociado de Caminos y Puentes, *Memoria Administrativa y Descriptiva de las Obras de la Carretera Central*, Vol. I (Havana: Secretaría de Obras Públicas, República de Cuba, 1930), 228.

¹¹⁵ One academic observer reported on a citizenship quota of 70% while the Caterpillar representative mentioned above asserted that the quota was 95%. The quota agreements were likely informal. Bowing to pressure from U.S. business interests, Machado had helped scuttle legislation from 1925 that would have instituted an across-the-board

was not the first time Kaiser encountered demographic clauses in a contract, but it *was* the company's first exposure to a project explicitly construed as an engine of social citizenship. Kaiser complied with the national labor requirement, and, to fill the remaining openings, recruited Spanish immigrants.¹¹⁶ Cuban citizens and European immigrants also comprised most of the accountants and engineers employed on the project. One of the latter was George P. Havas, a native of Hungary whom Kaiser poached from the engineering department of a Cuban sugar plantation. Havas's performance so impressed his new employer that he earned a permanent spot in the company, eventually rising to the position of chief engineer and overseeing a global portfolio of projects.¹¹⁷ While the Machado government intervened to ensure that Cuban citizens obtained most of the 6,000 manual and technical jobs on the highway, all 50 supervisory positions were reserved for Kaiser managers from the United States.¹¹⁸

The roadbuilders formed the Cuban equivalent of a labor aristocracy, but to the North Americans managing the project, they were as "primitive" as the island's infrastructure. Such perceptions served to naturalize the workers' subordination. Evincing this racist logic, one U.S. observer asserted that, "The use of native and Spanish help proved quite satisfactory," since they "were more easily cared for in simple bunk houses than could be possible for laborers in the United States."¹¹⁹ After long, back-breaking shifts under the hot Caribbean sun, the roadbuilders

citizenship quota of 75% for Cuba's workforce. Edwin J. Foscue, "The Central Highway of Cuba," *Economic Geography* 9, no. 4 (Oct., 1933): 409; F. Maldonado to P.E. Holt, "Subject: La Carretera Central de Cuba," Oct. 1928; and Pérez, *Cuba Under the Platt Amendment*, 163.

¹¹⁶ Edwin J. Foscue, "The Central Highway of Cuba," 410.

¹¹⁷ George Havas resume, 1957, carton 282, folder 27, HJKP.

¹¹⁸ "El Camino Cuba," *Kaiser Builder*, May 1953, carton 282, folder 6, HJKP.

¹¹⁹ Edwin J. Foscue, "The Central Highway of Cuba," 410.

retired to open-air tents crammed with rows of hammocks. Like their accommodations, the wages of Cuban laborers fell below U.S. standards. The workers who hacked through the forests of Camagüey, graded asphalt, erected bridges with reinforced concrete, and transported construction equipment and materials to mobile work sites earned less than \$2 a day.¹²⁰ Meanwhile, the prevailing wage for a cement finisher in San Francisco was about \$10 a day.¹²¹ Kaiser's labor costs for a comparable venture near his corporate headquarters would have been orders of magnitude greater than they were in this Caribbean nation.

One employee on the project confounded the binary between U.S. management and Cuban labor. James Andrew Shaw—whom we encountered earlier in the chapter—traveled with the firm to Cuba on account of his reputation as one of the company's top construction workers.¹²² Toiling alongside Cubans, Shaw forged intimate ties to the island and its people. When possible, he parted ways with Kaiser managers to explore the country on his own. Toward the end of construction he found romance with a Cuban woman, which caused him to skip out on the return voyage to the United States with Kaiser's team.¹²³ Shaw did eventually return to the Bay Area, traveling alone by way of a United Fruit Company steamship.¹²⁴

That Shaw seemed to have more in common with Cubans than his fellow English-speaking U.S. nationals may have had something to do with Cuba's racial system, which struck

¹²⁰ "El Camino Cuba," *Kaiser Builder*, May 1953, carton 282, folder 6, HJKP.

¹²¹ U.S. Dept. of Labor, *Bulletin of the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics*, no. 457 (1928), 66.

¹²² James Shaw interview, 1943, carton 283, folder 4, HJKP.

¹²³ Gordon Barteau, "Kaiser's Early Days Recalled by 'Old Tote,'" *Oregonian*, 28 November 1943.

¹²⁴ Passenger Lists of Vessels Arriving at New Orleans, Louisiana, June 27, 1930; Roll Number 135; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).

many Black Americans at the time as comparatively flexible.¹²⁵ It may have also had something to do with the racist paternalism of Kaiser managers. Alonzo Ordway, who onboarded Shaw mere months after leaving his officer position in the Engineers' Minstrels, remained his boss on the Central Highway.¹²⁶ Ordway's recollections of his Cuba days betrayed a deeply patronizing attitude toward the workers he supervised. Invoking the misadventures of on-the-job training, he recalled with mock frustration, "no matter what was wrong with any engine Cuban drivers wanted to get out a wrench and tinker with the carburetor," so we "finally had to attach carburetors in places that couldn't be reached with a wrench."¹²⁷ He went on to mock the supposed inability of Cuban repair men and drivers to distinguish between oil and grease. Despite their alleged unfitness, Cuban workers managed to complete the highway construction well ahead of schedule.

And they did so largely by hand. The cutting-edge equipment that represented Kaiser's added value to the project turned out to be extraneous. Kaiser managers soon discovered that "no machine could compete with the cheap native labor of Cuba."¹²⁸ Accordingly, manual laborers

¹²⁵ The pervasiveness of African lineage and the "the opportunity to comingle in communities of color in laxer locales than white-majority environments that restricted or outright prohibited their presence" help explain why many Black visitors from the United States felt "restorative feelings of belonging" in Cuba. Nevertheless, Black Americans did encounter discrimination at the hands of Cuban and U.S. officials as well as steamship companies when traveling to the island. John A. Gronbeck-Tedesco, *Cuba, the United States, and the Cultures of the Transnational Left, 1930-1975* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 130; Frank Andre Guridy, *Forging Diaspora: Afro-Cubans and African Americans in a World of Empire and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 151-158.

¹²⁶ Symbolic of Ordway's treasured place in the Kaiser Company, the 28-story Ordway Building, named for Kaiser's loyal employee, was completed in 1970. It remains the tallest building in Oakland, an emblem of the Kaiser corporation's dominance over local affairs.

¹²⁷ "Ord Remembers Cuba," *Oakland Tribune*, 28 February 1971.

¹²⁸ "History of Kaiser Projects," n.d., carton 296, folder 29, HJKP.

along with oxen and donkeys rendered the vaunted labor-saving technology obsolete.¹²⁹ Though his contract required that “all equipment becomes the property of the Cuban government upon completion,” instead of delivering the earthmovers to the state, Kaiser instead sold them to a private firm before the construction finished.¹³⁰

In lieu of mechanization, other factors helped lower Kaiser’s labor costs. The authoritarian policies of the Machado regime were among the most critical. State surveillance and repression played a crucial role in keeping wages down. Moreover, Cuba’s Department of Public Works promised to buffer the risks to contractors posed by labor unrest. The highway contract specified that Kaiser and Warren would not be held liable for work delays in the event of a “general strike,” which did in fact occur for 24 hours on March 20, 1930.¹³¹ But support from Machado’s pro-business state did not exhaust the cost-controlling mechanisms available to Kaiser. The firm also experimented with productivity-raising measures that relied less on coercion than on winning workers’ consent. One such measure involved both encouraging a sense of pride in the highway’s completion and pitting laborers against each other. Clay Bedford, who succeeded Ordway as general manager in Cuba, recalled dividing the roadbuilders into groups and “promoting competition” between them. Honed in a male-dominated construction camp, the technique relied on an appeal to masculinity. It sought to speed up the pace of labor by mobilizing a form of manliness that idealized triumph in physical contests. According to

¹²⁹ “Kaiser: The First Fifty Years” (draft), 1964, carton 296, folder 30, HJKP.

¹³⁰ Contract quoted in Kaiser Paving Company: Schedule ‘A’ Cost of Manufacturing or Producing Goods (1928), carton 297, folder 25, HJKP; Heiner. *Henry J. Kaiser*, 46-47. The earthmovers do not appear in the inventory of equipment transferred to the Cuban government: “Testimonio de escritura del Convenio celebrado entre la República de Cuba y la Warren Brothers Company, para la construcción de la Carretera Central—Otorgada en mayo 12, 1932,” 1932, caja 399, no. 20, Fondo Donativos y Remisiones, Archivo Nacional de Cuba.

¹³¹ Ibid. On the significance of the 1930 General Strike, see Fabio Grobart, “36 años de la Primera Huelga General contra Machado,” *Granma* 20 March 1966.

Bedford, the tactic proved a great success. “This was one of the main reasons we finished the Cuban job a year ahead of schedule,” he claimed. “It was a Kaiser technique which we later used in both dambuilding and shipbuilding.”¹³² Whether the tactic was as pivotal as Bedford remembered is less important than what it reveals about Kaiser management. In Cuba, as in Northern California, the firm’s managerial efforts depended on favorable labor markets and business-friendly regimes. But fostering an identity of interest between the corporation and its employees had distinct advantages, especially when weighed against the fiscal and social costs of cracking down on strikes and unions. This was an important lesson of the Cuba venture, one that helped Kaiser weather the storm of the Great Depression.

Kaiser’s Homecoming

The Kaiser Company completed its leg of the highway in 1930, a time when mass starvation gripped the Cuban countryside. Similarly dire conditions confronted the firm as it turned its attention back to the United States. In the early 1930s, U.S. unemployment hovered around 25 percent. Rampant joblessness had triggered a wave of evictions, which led in turn to an epidemic of homelessness. Meanwhile, gross national product had contracted by almost 30 percent from its pre-crash level. General contractors felt the downturn acutely. Between 1929 and 1933, new construction plummeted by nearly 80 percent. The drastic fall in economic activity decimated local tax bases. Municipalities and state governments responded by pausing paving contracts and other development projects, idling a vast amount of building capacity. The combination of widespread poverty and unused construction inventories gave rise to places like Pipe City. Located in a sprawling storage lot bordering railroad tracks on the Oakland waterfront,

¹³² Heiner, *Henry J. Kaiser*, 47.

the self-governing community built hundreds of homes inside uninstalled slices of sewer pipe.¹³³ Pipe City was hardly unique. Similar landscapes sprouted across the region and around the country, illustrating the magnitude of the crisis, as well as the capacities of ordinary people to take matters into their own hands. For businesses dependent on local public works, there was no clearer symbol of the looming threat of bankruptcy.

Disturbing as they were, such scenes did not spell imminent disaster for Henry Kaiser. Having netted millions of dollars and a wealth of experience in large-scale infrastructure building in neocolonial Cuba, his fortunes no longer rose and fell according to the rhythms of the local business cycle. His newly acquired capital did not just cushion his reentry to Northern California; it was a springboard to the incipient world of national development. Kaiser had set his sights on his next big venture at the tail end of construction on the Cuban Central Highway. The announcement of bidding for the Hoover Dam, an installation poised to bring water and electricity to vast swaths of the North American West, came at the perfect time. While in Cuba, the impending project stoked his imagination. “I lay in my sweltering tent and dreamed it over and over,” Kaiser recalled, conjuring a stock image of tropical primitiveness.¹³⁴ The Nevada dam constituted the most expensive civil contract the federal government had ever commissioned. Deeming the project too large to tackle on his own, Kaiser invited his Oakland colleague Warren Bechtel to join him in Cuba to discuss the possibility of a collective bid.¹³⁵

¹³³ For Great Depression statistics, see Robert S. McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1993). On Pipe City, see John Curl, *For All the People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperation, Cooperative Movements, and Communalism in America* (Oakland: PM Press, 2009), 169; Upton Sinclair, *Co-op: A Novel of Living Together* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), Chapter 1.

¹³⁴ Kaiser quoted in McCartney, *Friends in High Places*, 29.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Back in the United States, the team of bidders coalesced around six groups of contractors. Bechtel and Kaiser led the effort. Together, they fronted the largest share of the \$5 million in working capital required by financial backers, an investment which, before the Cuban windfall, would have been unthinkable for Kaiser.¹³⁶ With varying stakes in the project, the contractors were not equal partners, but their name suggested otherwise. During a stakeholders' meeting in the Bay Area, they chose to incorporate under the name of Six Companies. This was a mocking allusion to the Six Companies Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of San Francisco, a prominent mutual aid organization formed in 1882 to support Chinese immigrants facing legal exclusion and surging racial violence.¹³⁷ That the name was intended as a racist joke is made all the more apparent by the fact that the dam contract prohibited "Mongolian labor."¹³⁸ One week after the official completion of Cuba's national road, the Bureau of Reclamation awarded the dam to Kaiser's consortium, its \$49 million bid a full \$5 million lower than its closest rivals'.¹³⁹

Yet again, Kaiser had won a contract by underbidding the competition. And as usual, he resolved to make up the difference with rock-bottom labor costs and a breakneck pace. Fortunately for the Six Companies, the economic crisis ensured there was a vast supply of laborers desperate enough to work for practically any wage. The contractors also had a government amenable to their needs in the administration of Herbert Hoover. Congress named the dam after Hoover, and it was a fitting monument to an engineer president whose rhetoric and

¹³⁶ Hiltzik, *Colossus*, 169-171.

¹³⁷ Jane Griffith, "Hoover Dam: Land, Labor, and Settler Colonial Cultural Production," *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 1 (2017): 31.

¹³⁸ Linder, *Projecting Capitalism*, 123.

¹³⁹ In contrast to the flurry of bids for municipal and state roads, the dam project only attracted three bidding offers. Very few entities had the capital to complete for such a large project.

policies betrayed his callousness toward the unemployed.¹⁴⁰ Hoover's presidency meant that ruthless employer tactics—from union busting to tolerance of unsafe work conditions to payments in scrip that could only be redeemed at company stores—were fair game.¹⁴¹

But these coercive measures had unanticipated costs. Six Companies' record of abuse prompted a series of strikes, which threatened the corporation's bottom line. There were reputational costs as well. The contractors' corner-cutting practices and repression of organized labor drew negative publicity. In the wake of Roosevelt's election, political pressure mounted to accommodate workers' grievances.¹⁴² To repair their damaged image, the contractors turned to political lobbying and public relations. Kaiser spearheaded the PR offensive, using tactics that would soon become standard practice in the construction industry. To court elected officials, he established a Six Companies office in Washington D.C. His first invitation to the White House came by way of a handwritten letter from Bank of America founder and fellow Bay Area resident Amadeo Giannini in the spring of 1933.¹⁴³ In the letter, Giannini introduced Kaiser to Roosevelt as "a man of outstanding ability, very highly thought of in this community, and...a friend and customer of the bank since the first day he came to California." The networking paid off. Before long, Kaiser had earned the good graces of the president and prominent New Deal allies.¹⁴⁴ He may have been a newcomer in Washington, but he was no stranger to political lobbying. His tenure in the Contractors Association of Northern California familiarized him with

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Linder, *Projecting Capitalism*, 122-123.

¹⁴² McCartney, *Friends in High Places*, 40-41.

¹⁴³ Marquis James and Bessie Rowland James, *Biography of a Bank: The Story of Bank of America N.T. & S.A.* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954), 467.

¹⁴⁴ Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington*, 38-39.

the craft. But it was his time abroad that taught him how to cozy up to a head of state. In 1920s Cuba, Kaiser's public embrace of Machado helped smooth his company's landing. Now, in the 1930s, he was casting his lot with Roosevelt.

Lessons from his Cuba days also informed his media campaign. It was in Machado's Cuba that Kaiser learned the value of framing public works as a conduit of social citizenship. Applying that wisdom in a nationally broadcasted interview, he portrayed the Hoover Dam as a wellspring of jobs, noting that of the thousands of people on the Six Companies payroll, "all were American citizens and over 37% were ex-service men."¹⁴⁵ Associating the construction project with native-born, patriotic men was a tried-and-true way of selling it to the public.

Marketing and political maneuvering only went so far. In a 1933 speech, Kaiser acknowledged that the dam building hinged on a cooperative workforce and that cooperation came with a price: Workers' dedication would flag "if it were not obvious in the group as a whole that they are getting what they like to call 'a square deal.'"¹⁴⁶ The contractors set the minimum wage at \$4 a day, which according to Kaiser, afforded a "standard of subsistence...certainly well above that which is dictated by the nation-wide unemployment." But "a square deal" meant more than decent pay. "More money wages," he insisted, "important as it is, will not buy cooperation." If workers suggested otherwise, this was only because "it was inevitable...that a certain percentage of...unhappy men who have no sense of attachment should move into this area." Here, Kaiser evoked the specter of floating laborers, working-class men who played indispensable roles in the seasonal industries of the North American West but whose

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Henry J. Kaiser, Richfield Reporter, 1935, carton 262, folder 6, HJKP.

¹⁴⁶ Hoover Dam speech, 1933, carton 262, folder 4, HJKP. The Kaiser quotations in the next three paragraphs come from this source.

transience and flouting of patriarchal family norms rendered them outcasts.¹⁴⁷ That their presence was “inevitable” spoke to their paradoxical social position. Such men were essential to the completion of rural construction projects but outside the bounds of respectability. It is no accident that many of them gravitated to the IWW’s rebellious milieu. 400 Wobblies worked on the dam, many of whom had journeyed to the job site from Kaiser’s hometown of Oakland.¹⁴⁸ The Wobblies formed a radical nucleus, churning collective action out of workers’ discontent.

Kaiser attributed these protests to the agitation of deviant radicals, men out of step with the true sentiments of his well-tended workforce. The contractors may have balked at a pay rise, but they did not scrimp on workers’ welfare. By way of example, Kaiser pointed to the recently developed company town of Boulder City. In contrast to reports of scrip payments, shabby dorms, and exorbitant rents, he contended that every dam builder was “well housed and better fed than the great average of his fellows.” Likewise, while accidents and injuries remained endemic at the worksite, Kaiser asserted that the health of workers had not been neglected. The Six Companies’ hospital merited special emphasis. According to Kaiser, the new facility had “an equipment which would be the envy of many hospitals in metropolitan areas ten times the size of Boulder City.” The emergency medical center at Hoover Dam marked Kaiser’s first foray into health care provision, a sector that soon became pivotal to his corporate empire.

In Kaiser’s view, such services helped win workers’ confidence, while domesticating a population accustomed to itinerancy. But what really moved the needle toward greater cooperation was something more intangible than employee benefits. The chief task for public

¹⁴⁷ Frank Tobias Hibgie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁸ Lannon, *Fight or Be Slaves*, 58.

works employers was cultivating a “‘sense of belonging’, which is to say [workers’] understanding that they are a part of...a great achievement.” Among large-scale U.S. industrialists, this was not a novel recognition. Welfare capitalism, the implementation of corporate policies designed to cultivate a workforce whose loyalty and dependency inoculated it against the appeals of union organizers, had been a mainstay of U.S. corporations since the 1910s.¹⁴⁹ Ironically, it took a sojourn abroad for Kaiser managers to embrace what had become the prevailing practice among big corporations. It was the Cuban Central Highway project that showed these managers how fostering a competitive pride in labor could increase productivity without raising costs. The Hoover Dam builders certainly enjoyed better wages and accommodations than their Cuban counterparts, but a similar logic governed both workforces. Beneath the lofty rhetoric of pride and belonging was an ongoing experiment in labor management. The goal remained the same across the different national contexts: the highest level of efficiency at the lowest possible price.

The Six Companies experiment in welfare capitalism responded to and attempted to neutralize labor’s collective demands, just as Kaiser’s lobbying and publicity efforts sought to tamp down pressure from federal officials. Still, Kaiser and his fellow contractors were forced to make some substantive changes beyond their voluntary concessions. In its investigation of the job site, Roosevelt’s Department of Interior uncovered tens of thousands of labor violations. The sheer volume meant they could not be ignored.¹⁵⁰ The investigation led to various reforms,

¹⁴⁹ On the history of welfare capitalism, see Jacoby, *Modern Manors*; Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism: The Shoeworkers and Tanners of Endicott Johnson, 1890-1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Stuart D. Brandes, *American Welfare Capitalism, 1880-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Andrea Tone, *The Business of Benevolence: Industrial Paternalism in Progressive America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁵⁰ Lannon, *Fight or Be Slaves*, 41.

including adjustments to Six Companies overtime policy, as well as a fine that Kaiser succeeded in winnowing down from \$350,000 to \$100,000. The Department of Interior also pushed the corporation to end its *de facto* prohibition on hiring African Americans. Though a few Black workers were eventually hired, all of them were consigned to the most degrading and lowest-paid positions. This continued a long-standing pattern. As Kaiser moved into the New Deal orbit, racial divisions of labor remained a cornerstone of his business.

Uneven Development in 1930s Oakland

Kaiser's first contract to begin under the auspices of a New Deal agency was also his first major job in his hometown. In April 1933, a Kaiser-led consortium signed a \$4.5 million contract to construct the East Bay half of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge.¹⁵¹ One of the longest bridges ever built, the structure spanned miles of open water. Its midpoint landed on Yerba Buena Island, which hosted military bases and a former stone quarry used in the development of Oakland's harbor. A familiar roster of Kaiser employees participated in the gargantuan venture. James Andrew Shaw, who had acquired ample experience in bridge construction while working in Cuba, was brought on as a laborer. Once again, Alonzo Ordway supervised his work.

There were other continuities with the Cuba project. Owing to Kaiser's reputation as a maverick in the field of aggregate assembly—a reputation elevated by its exploitation of sand and rock in 1920s Cuba—the company obtained an additional contract to supply concrete for both halves of the structure. A newly opened Kaiser gravel pit, 30 miles southeast of Oakland, constituted the main source of aggregates.¹⁵² The concrete operation also relied on a South Bay

¹⁵¹ Bridge Builders, Inc. auditors report, April 30, 1937, Carton 319, Folder 22, HJKP; "Record for Speed Set in Preparation of Actual Construction of Bay Span," *Oakland Tribune* 9 July, 1933

¹⁵² M.R. Henry, "Kaiser's First Plant Was in Livermore," *Livermore Herald News* 2 September 1967.

cement mill, which developed its product out of oyster shells harvested from tideland beds that once fed local residents.¹⁵³ To metabolize these various materials into \$3 million worth of concrete, Kaiser built a mixing plant on the Port of Oakland.¹⁵⁴ Between 1933 and 1936, the industrial dock welcomed a steady stream of rail cars filled with geologic resources mined in the Oakland suburbs, as well as boatloads of cement manufactured from the fruits of local waters.

Funding for the bridge came from Roosevelt's Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). The RFC's purchase of toll revenue bonds provided tens of millions of dollars in low-interest loans to the State of California.¹⁵⁵ The financing generated thousands of jobs, with the estimated impact on the East Bay's economy totaling a quarter-billion dollars.¹⁵⁶ On a visit to the newly opened work site in July 1933, RFC director Wilson McCarthy explained that "immediate relief of unemployment is, of course, the reason for the existence of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation."¹⁵⁷ His statement underscored the RFC's departure from its Hoover-era origins as a lender of last resort to banks and railroads, an agency once derided by its critics as the "millionaire's dole."¹⁵⁸ Under Roosevelt, the RFC transformed into one of the federal government's most important tools for jumpstarting public works *and* generating jobs.

In the reformist climate ushered in by Roosevelt's administration, Kaiser took proactive steps to comply with federal labor law. One such law was the Davis-Bacon Act of 1931, which

¹⁵³ Richard Walker, *The Country in the City: The Greening of the San Francisco Bay Area* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 57; Matthew Morse Booker, *Down by the Bay: San Francisco's History Between the Tides* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013), 149.

¹⁵⁴ "Bridge Concrete Mixing Plant Nears Completion," *Oakland Tribune* 17 July 1933.

¹⁵⁵ "Financing Equally Big Job as Building of Span," *Oakland Tribune* 9 July, 1933.

¹⁵⁶ "Bridge Work to Aid Eastbay Commercially," *Oakland Tribune* 9 July, 1933.

¹⁵⁷ "R.F.C. Director Views Work on Bay Bridge," *Oakland Tribune* 17 July, 1933.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, *Building New Deal Liberalism*, 27.

fixed wages at the local union rate for federally funded projects. After Roosevelt's election, Congress and the Department of Labor broadened the act's reach. In setting a wage floor and tacitly promoting unionization, the law served as a foundation for Roosevelt's public-private welfare state.¹⁵⁹ At a time when federal programs accounted for half of all spending on construction work in the United States, Davis-Bacon marked an enormous intervention in the national economy.¹⁶⁰ The policy clearly applied to the building of the Bay Bridge. But Kaiser questioned whether it covered the firm's concrete mixing plant, even though the plant was built and operated solely for the purpose of supplying materials for the project. If it fell outside the law, the savings would be substantial. On August 21, 1933, company attorney Paul Marrin wrote to Henry Kaiser with some good news: the plant's workforce did not have a right to the prevailing wage.¹⁶¹ The law did, however, apply to workers on barges who ferried the plant's aggregate mix to the aquatic construction site. Marrin asked that the information be forwarded to Kaiser manager Alonzo Ordway for the purposes of implementing the diverging wage scales.

The New Deal state created insiders and outsiders, and Ordway was well-suited to managing the boundary between them. His prior experience overseeing employees across hierarchies of race and nationality inured him to the realities of unequally valued labor. As a manager in Cuba, he had mobilized white-supremacist tropes to naturalize wage differentials rooted in colonial underdevelopment. The same managerial gaze was now trained on a public works project with a legal demarcation in the production process, a division of labor that

¹⁵⁹ Richard K. Vedder and Lowell E. Gallaway, *Out of Work: Unemployment and Government in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 2.

¹⁶⁰ David Bernstein, "The Davis-Bacon Act: Vestige of Jim Crow," *National Black Law Journal* 13, no. 3 (1993): 288.

¹⁶¹ Paul S. Marrin to Henry J. Kaiser, August 21, 1933, carton 4, folder 9, HJKP.

likewise widened the margin of profit. In 1930s Oakland, concrete workers classified as bridge builders enjoyed the privileges of social citizenship, while their shoreside counterparts did not.

Martin Adams was among the former.¹⁶² His incorporation into the New Deal state typified the routes of upward mobility available to white workers of his background. Born in Arkansas in 1912, Adams had lived and worked on a family farm until the depression forced its sale. He migrated to the Bay Area on the advice of his brother-in-law who had secured work on the Bay Bridge and informed Adams that given his family connection he was “pretty well-assured of a job.” Within a few months of his arrival, he landed work unloading cement and concrete aggregate for the bridge’s deck. He earned \$5.50 for an eight-hour day, “the cheapest wage the state would let ‘em pay there.” Before long, he received a promotion to labor foreman, which upped his pay to \$8. Bridge building was difficult and dangerous labor, but overall Adams found “a good working climate” in the Bay Area, which he attributed in no small part to his union, Laborers local 261. He had backed Roosevelt from the beginning and his experience led him to believe that “he done a lot of good. I thought he was just as good as we could have got.”

Despite their physical proximity and similar job descriptions, there was a social and economic gulf between laborers like Adams and the laborers employed at Kaiser’s concrete mixing plant. Unlike Adams and his fellow bridge builders, the latter did not reap the full benefits of the New Deal state. The experiences of the concrete workers at the Port of Oakland facility did not make it into official archives, but there are some things we can infer about them. We know that these workers would have collected significantly smaller paychecks than those entitled to the prevailing wage. The disparity in wages corresponded with a gap in union

¹⁶² Martin Adams Oral History Transcript, interview with Harvey Schwartz, May 21, 1987, Labor Archives and Research Center Oral History Project, San Francisco State University.

membership. Since they were under the purview of the Davis-Bacon Act, nearly all of the bridge builders would have been members of building trade unions, which at the time were almost exclusively the preserve of white men.¹⁶³ By contrast, the mixing plant employees would have been hired on an open-shop basis, which remained Kaiser's preferred way of doing business.¹⁶⁴ Historical hierarchies in the local labor market provide clues about their demographics. The testimony of Harold Lumsden, a Black construction worker in the interwar Bay Area, suggests that these workers may well have been Black, as well as noncitizens.¹⁶⁵ Lumsden joined the small circle of Black men employed in the region's construction industry after emigrating from Jamaica in 1921. "When I came here," he remembered, "I think I was one of the very few [Black people], very few, except for about two or three fellows from Oakland, that did that type of work." According to Lumsden, most of the Black men hired by local contracting firms were recent immigrants, including a number of Cape Verdeans who had previously worked on Hawaiian sugar plantations. The industry's color line circumscribed their possibilities. "Most of the Negroes that did construction work did that hard construction work," Lumsden observed. The first job he listed under the racialized rubric of "hard construction work" was "mixing concrete." Racial divisions in the local labor market generated a hiring pool of Black construction workers trained in the industry's less desirable occupations. Meanwhile, residential segregation concentrated these workers in West Oakland, the closest neighborhood to the Port of Oakland.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Bernstein, "The Davis-Bacon Act: Vestige of Jim Crow," 288-289.

¹⁶⁴ Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington*, 39.

¹⁶⁵ Harry Lumsden, interview with Jesse J. Warr, III, 1978, Oral History Project: Afro-Americans in San Francisco Prior to World War II, San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco, California, 16.

¹⁶⁶ On local practices of residential segregation, see Chris Rhomberg, *No There There: Race, Class, and Political Community in Oakland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 52-53.

Accordingly, a reserve army of lower-paid laborers who knew how to handle concrete lived just a short walk from Kaiser's mixing plant.

Rebellion and Reform

As the Kaiser Company entered the world of New Deal capitalism, legacies of neocolonial Cuba continued to impact its daily operations. They also affected its balance sheet. Only a month after construction began on the Bay Bridge, reports of a Cuban uprising streamed into Kaiser's offices. Just as the firm was starting to capitalize on a vast expansion of domestic infrastructure building, the revolt drew its attention to the foreign country that accounted for most of its capital and from which Kaiser continued to draw passive income as an absentee landlord.¹⁶⁷ Apart from its dismal implications for the island's property values, the rebellion cast doubt on the outstanding debt payments Kaiser sought to collect on the Central Highway contract. Kaiser's Cuba earnings had come in the form of regular cash installments over three-plus years of work. But Cuban treasury notes bearing 5½-percent interest comprised around \$312,000 of additional compensation.¹⁶⁸ These government bonds appeared at risk of default amid the series of events that would come to be known as the Cuban Revolution of 1933.

The debt from the highway and from other Machado-era public works added to the pile of resentment that ignited in the uprising.¹⁶⁹ Many Cubans recognized that the national road had not been designed for the people who paid for it. During its construction, car ownership did not

¹⁶⁷ He leased the Camagüey property to a man named Miguel Gomez soon after completing the purchase. G.G. Sherwood to J.A. Martinez, September 20, 1939, carton 297, folder 22, HJKP.

¹⁶⁸ Henry J. Kaiser to Warren Brother Company, June 29, 1933, carton 297, folder 26, HJKP.

¹⁶⁹ On the politics of "odious debt" in post-Machado Cuba, see Peter James Hudson, *Bankers and Empire: How Wall Street Colonized the Caribbean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017): 222-252.

exceed one percent of the country's population.¹⁷⁰ Cuba's creditors, along with North American tourists, foreign-owned plantations, and U.S.-backed forces of counterinsurgency, seemed like the real beneficiaries of the project. In his 1934 poem *West Indies, Ltd.*, Afro-Cuban author Nicolás Guillén evoked the highway and similar imperial machinations, deriding "the asphalt lake" blighting the landscape of a nation transformed into "the grotesque headquarters of companies and trusts." In 1930s Cuba, the highway resonated as an infrastructure of extraction. It embodied U.S. imperialism and paved the way for rebellion in more ways than one.

During the summer of 1933, transit workers in Havana sparked a general strike that coursed through the country's transportation arteries. Within weeks, the nationwide movement toppled the Machado regime. Machado's deployment of extrajudicial violence and an array of anti-democratic policies ultimately backfired. For U.S. elites, his downfall offered a cautionary tale. Pushed to the brink, Cubans had repurposed imperial infrastructure for emancipatory ends.

In the Bay Area too revolt was spreading along transportation corridors. In August of 1933, Communist Party members were appealing to U.S. troops stationed on warships off the coast of California to resist deployment to Cuba, where Roosevelt's Departments of Navy and State were already countering the country's revolutionary movement. The *Western Worker*, a Communist-affiliated weekly, reported on these efforts from its San Francisco headquarters. One article summarized the anti-imperialist message directed at "the thousands of marines and sailors now in West Coast ports": "those warships already sent and others that may be sent if necessary are only to protect the billion and half invested there by American bankers, sugar, and tobacco

¹⁷⁰ For historical Cuban automobile statistics, Marcelo Israel Gorajuría Marichal, *Historia y pasión del automóvil en Cuba* (Havana: Ediciones Cubanas/Artex, 2015), 60.

interests, and to force the Cuban people to submit to them.”¹⁷¹ Through confidential surveillance reports commissioned by the Industrial Association—a coterie of Bay Area employers associated with the Chamber of Commerce—local capitalists kept tabs on the Cuba solidarity movement, as well as Communist organizing in the region’s military bases.¹⁷² Sometimes the intelligence gathering entailed infiltrating leftist groups. Other times it simply meant paraphrasing the *Western Worker*. The reports often exaggerated the Communists’ reach, but, as historian David Selvin shows, when it came to Red conspiracies the employers were generally “persuaded by their own propaganda.”¹⁷³ It is unclear whether Kaiser read the intelligence briefs, but as a longtime member of the local network of “business leaders” clustered around the Chamber of Commerce, he would have been familiar with their content.¹⁷⁴

Rumblings of insurgency continued to spread along the shores of the Bay. With Communist Party membership rising sharply during the depression, local businessmen became more and more convinced that global revolution was metastasizing in the region. Strike activity was also escalating, including at the Oakland shipyard where Kaiser sourced steel products for

¹⁷¹ On the broader history of the anti-imperialist left in 1930s California, see 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), 150-181; Elizabeth Sine, *Rebel Imaginaries: Labor, Culture, and Politics in Depression-Era California* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

¹⁷² For surveillance of Cuba solidarity, see Consolidated Report Containing Confidential Info Received from Various Sources, no. 62, October 11, 1934, box 1, folder 12, San Francisco employer surveillance reports on the Communist Party, Labor Archive and Resource Center, San Francisco State University [hereafter: surveillance reports]. For surveillance of organizing on military bases, see Consolidated Report Containing Confidential Info Received from Various Sources, no. 56, September 1, 1934, box 1, folder 11, surveillance reports.

¹⁷³ David F. Selvin, “An Exercise in Hysteria: San Francisco’s Red Raids of 1934,” *Pacific Historical Review*, 58, no. 3 (Aug., 1989): 373.

¹⁷⁴ On the composition of this network, see William Issel, “‘Citizens Outside the Government,’” 117-145. On Kaiser’s longstanding commitment to the Chamber of Commerce, see “An address delivered by Henry J. Kaiser before the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce,” July 19, 1945, carton 262, folder 101, HJKP.

the bridge.¹⁷⁵ Meanwhile, struggles over the use of Oakland's harbor were yielding conspicuous concessions from the state. Since turn of the twentieth century, Oaklanders with no other place to go had built homes in wooden boats on the Oakland estuary. The community was part of the multiracial counterculture, encountered in chapter two, that Oakland elites denigrated as the "riff-raff of the water front." Local landowners had long pressured the government to raze these informal dwellings on the grounds that they were lowering property values and obstructing the development of docks. In 1923, in the face of a looming eviction, the houseboat residents submitted a petition to the Army Engineers, which had jurisdiction over the waterway. In defense of their claims, R.B. Tappan cited the strong moral character of his fellow "ark dwellers" and rebuked the government for taking "sides with the well to do and against the poorer class of citizens."¹⁷⁶ The plea did not move the federal officials, who soon forced residents to relocate their homes. Still, the community did not splinter. By the 1930s, it was swelling with new members, as the economic crisis took its toll. In February 1934, the ark dwellers were again threatened with removal but this time the federal government intervened on their behalf. "Many of the occupants of the arks are people of little means, who might be homeless if thrown off the government property," stated a federal official, explaining why the government would not aid a local effort to displace the houseboat residents.¹⁷⁷ The agency's about-face on the ark dwellers' right to occupy public property indexed the shifting political landscape of the Roosevelt era, a

¹⁷⁵ "Welders on Bridge Strike," *Oakland Tribune* 24 August 1933.

¹⁷⁶ R.B. Tappan, "Statement of Facts," April 13, 1923; doc. C30/210, box 6; San Francisco District – "General Administrative Files, 1907-1937" (HMS: 77-0059) – Oakland Harbor; Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Record Group 77; National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region (San Francisco).

¹⁷⁷ H.A. Finch to Geo. Sperbeck, February 27, 1934; doc. C39/9, box 7; San Francisco District – "General Administrative Files, 1907-1937" (HMS: 77-0059) – Oakland Harbor; RG 77; NARA-Pacific Region (SF).

change correlated with an explosion of poverty and the intensification of working-class militancy.

The urgency of reform grew in tandem with poor people's sense of entitlement. In a 1933 report to the City Council that distilled the anxieties of local businessmen, Oakland's city manager fumed that the vast majority of unemployed "transients" had refused placements in state-run rural work camps. "We estimated that 1,500 would appreciate the opportunity to work for their food and clothing," he wrote, "but it seems that many of the unemployed have come to the conclusion that the world owes them a living whether they work or not, and they do not choose to work."¹⁷⁸ Refusing conscription in relief camps marked a rejection of conditions that the *Western Worker* compared to slavery.¹⁷⁹ Instead, hundreds of out-of-work Oaklanders chose to build makeshift homes on the shores of the Oakland estuary in the vicinity of the houseboats. Long used as a commons by Oakland's multiracial working class, the waterfront provided fertile ground for scavenging, fishing, and informal dwellings. In the 1930s, it became a base of recruitment for the Communist-led Unemployed Councils, a formation best known for staging eviction defenses and organizing relief marches to advance its demands for government aid.¹⁸⁰

The waterfront also gave rise to the Unemployed Exchange Association (UXA), one of the largest cooperatives in Northern California. Like the Councils, the UXA put its critique of the economic status quo into practice by developing alternative forms of community and survival. Founded by Pipe City residents in July 1932, the organization established a barter economy on

¹⁷⁸ Oakland City Manager to Oakland City Council, March 15, 1933, box 54, folder 13, George C. Pardee Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁷⁹ "Twenty-Two Slave Labor Camps Open By January 1st," *Western Worker* 1 January 1932.

¹⁸⁰ Porter Chaffee, an oral history conducted in 1977 by Randall Jarrell, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2004.

the shores of Oakland. It specialized in salvaging “junk” which it stored in an abandoned grocery store. The UXA’s activities expanded beyond repurposing unclaimed items. Its members secured salvageable goods from homes and businesses in return for building repairs and, before long, a range of other services. Eventually it parlayed its refurbished holdings into a fleet of trucks built from scraps, and an array of self-sustaining enterprises, from lumber mills and ranches to a nursery for children. To avoid the Oakland Police’s notorious redbaiting, the cooperative eschewed formal affiliations with trade unions and socialist groups. But labor radicals of various stripes made up a sizable portion of its ranks. Within the organization, vocally leftist members were often stereotyped as “not very willing workers,” the kind of people who “won’t do anything but sit down and talk.”¹⁸¹ But these same members left an imprint on the UXA. Their influence helped spur the group into action during the Bay Area general strike of 1934.

The four-day strike turned the world upside down. One hundred and thirty-thousand workers participated, amounting to over 10 percent of the region. Countless others gravitated to the festival of defiance thronging public streets. Communist journalist and former sailor Paul William Ryan, who used the pen name Mike Quin, contrasted the “atmosphere of panic” that “prevailed in the business districts” with the “almost carnival spirit...apparent in working-class neighborhoods.”¹⁸² The strike took off after rank-and-file Teamsters walked off the job in solidarity with local maritime unions, whose work stoppage had shuttered ports up and down the Pacific Coast for two months. The spark came on July 5, when a massive burst of police repression killed two picketers, and injured dozens of others. A barrage of gunshots, nightsticks,

¹⁸¹ Self-Help Cooperatives, Field Notes, 1933, carton 14, folder 19, Paul S. Taylor Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁸² Mike Quin, *The Big Strike* (New York: International Publishers, 1979 [1949]), 148.

and tear gas bombs rained down indiscriminately on strikers and their supporters. The violence spilled across the region and Kaiser's bridge building operation was directly affected. By impeding the movement of materials used in the bridge, the maritime strike had already disrupted the construction. But the events of July 5 hit even closer to home. As Mike Quin reported, "Workers on the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge (then under construction) were forced to abandon the job for the day because of stray bullets whistling around their heads."¹⁸³

Memorialized as "Bloody Thursday," the police riot was a point of no return, transforming the port shutdown into an act of mass refusal that ground the region to a halt. Following the Teamsters' lead, local unions voted overwhelmingly for a general strike. A strike committee set about building an alternative supply chain to keep essentials circulating. Union leaders vowed that gasoline and other necessities would continue to reach doctors and hospitals.¹⁸⁴ A "permit system" authorized labor-friendly businesses to remain open.¹⁸⁵ Restaurant workers gave their approval to 29 Oakland restaurants.¹⁸⁶ But these establishments could nourish only a fraction of the city's population. The UXA stepped into the breach alongside union members, Communist groups, and other local cooperatives. In his lightly fictionalized history of the UXA, Upton Sinclair described the organization's participation in the logistics of the strike: "There were numbers of unemployed teamsters and longshoremen who belonged to [the UXA], and all its trucks got permits and went freely through the picket lines. They were hauling food for the workers; and you may be sure their contact men were out picking

¹⁸³ Quin, *The Big Strike*, 111.

¹⁸⁴ "All East Bay Paralyzed by Strike Today," *San Francisco Chronicle* 17 July 1934.

¹⁸⁵ Quin, *The Big Strike*, 151.

¹⁸⁶ "29 Restaurants in Oakland Get Permits," *Oakland Post-Enquirer* 17 July 1934.

up all the perishable stuff that was lying about.”¹⁸⁷ Sinclair found another emblematic scene at the UXA “industrial center,” where the “walls...were festooned with bunches of bananas” destined for strikers and their sympathizers, and where women were hard at work “sewing and pressing old pants.”¹⁸⁸ UXA members played a vital part in fulfilling the needs of Bay Area residents amid the suspension of business as usual. Their experience building a cashless system of commerce out of the refuse of the Oakland waterfront left them well-equipped to do so.

No event did more to inflate the fears of local capitalists than the general strike. This had everything to do with the context in which it occurred. When the dockworkers first walked out, the shipping firms responded with a well-worn strategy of divide and conquer. Drawing on the playbook used to undermine the metal trades strike of 1919, the firms recruited Black strikebreakers and housed them on ships to bypass waterfront pickets. But in the end, a shortage of recruits made the strategy unviable. West Oakland—home to the majority of Oakland’s early twentieth century Black community, which constituted around 3 per cent of the city’s 300,000 residents—grew into a bastion of solidarity with the strike. C.L. Dellums, by then a well-known organizer in the area, remembered addressing a gathering of Black men, many of whom were, like Dellums, recent migrants from Texas. After a “good educational talk on labor and civil rights” followed by “some rabble-rousing,” the group of 150 men unanimously told Dellums they would not cross the picket line.¹⁸⁹ Such shows of solidarity helped make antiracism and radical internationalism foundational precepts of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which formed directly out of the waterfront strike. The incipient union and its

¹⁸⁷ Sinclair, *Co-op*, 317.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁸⁹ C.L. Dellums, interview with Joyce Henderson, 1973.

interracial supporters conjured the specter of revolution in the minds of local elites: in the early 1930s, “civil rights” was a watchword of the Communist Party.¹⁹⁰

When the general strike began, the Red Scare panic exploded into general hysteria. Though Communists played a notable role in facilitating the event, it was hardly the Soviet plot that the mainstream media made it out to be. Nevertheless, Oakland Police used the strike as a pretext to “‘Crack Down’ on ‘Reds,’” as the *Oakland Tribune* approvingly reported.¹⁹¹ Residents in the wealthy enclave of Piedmont enacted armed checkpoints at the Oakland border.¹⁹² The governor mobilized 4,500 National Guardsmen under the leadership of Major General David Barrows.¹⁹³ Barrows, for his part, likened the strike to a Communist insurrection and drew parallels to his post-World War I deployment to Siberia where he had served as an intelligence officer with the American Expeditionary Force tasked with rolling back the Bolshevik revolution.¹⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Kaiser officials watched, with horror no doubt, as unionized employees on the Bay Bridge abruptly stopped their shifts. The *San Francisco Chronicle* puzzled over the supposed irony that a sympathy strike would occur on a civic project that was “once a

¹⁹⁰ The Industrial Association set its sights on the local League for Civil and Economic Rights, which according to a surveillance report focused on “the alleged brutality of the Police Department.” Consolidated Report Containing Confidential Info Received from Various Sources, no. 56, September 1, 1934, box 1, folder 11, surveillance reports. On the broader conflation of civil rights demands and Communist agitation in U.S. history, see Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Black Scare / Red Scare: Theorizing Capitalist Racism in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023), 40-57, 139-163.

¹⁹¹ “Police ‘Crack Down’ on ‘Reds,’” *Oakland Tribune* 17 July 1934

¹⁹² Quin, *The Big Strike*, 153.

¹⁹³ “State Troops Ready For Any Emergency, Declares Barrows,” *Oakland Post-Enquirer* 18 July 1934.

¹⁹⁴ “‘Blood-and-Iron’ Barrows Turns Hitler Fan; Advocates Use of Force to Prevent Set-Up of Workers’ Government,” *Student Outpost*, March 11, 1935, carton 15, folder 3, David P. Barrows Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

God-send to jobless.”¹⁹⁵ But a mood of rebellion pervaded the region. The general strike was understood at the time as a world-historical event. It made international headlines, including in Cuba, where the Revolution of 1933 continued to unfold. A frontpage article in *Bandera Roja*, the newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, identified Bloody Thursday and the general strike as clear signs of “the growing radicalization of the U.S. proletariat.”¹⁹⁶ Along with nearly simultaneous upheavals in Minneapolis, Toledo, and the Eastern textile industry, the strike “began to shift the momentum in favor of workers” nationally, according to historian Sharon Smith.¹⁹⁷ Unionization drives in the Bay Area surged in its wake.¹⁹⁸ The passage less than a year later of the National Labor Relations Act (commonly known as the Wagner Act), the cornerstone of New Deal labor law, showed the extent to which working-class revolt had turned the tides of U.S. politics. As a public works contractor intimately connected to the New Deal state, Kaiser could not help but take note of the enormous changes taking place.

These changes help explain why, several months after Bay Area longshoremen returned to work—with the exception of a contingent dispatched to organize laborers on the docks and plantations of Hawai‘i—the Kaiser corporation decided to donate property to an organization instrumental to the operation of the general strike.¹⁹⁹ In April 1935, a Kaiser official wrote to the UXA with an offer to “permit your use” of several of the company’s buildings in North

¹⁹⁵ “4000 Out of Jobs When Work Halts on Gate, Bay Bridges,” *San Francisco Chronicle* 17 July 1934.

¹⁹⁶ “Colosal Huelga en Toda la Costa del Pacifico. E. Unidos,” *Bandera Roja* 11 July 1934.

¹⁹⁷ Sharon Smith, *Subterranean Fire: A History of Working-Class Radicalism in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 107. See also Irving Bernstein, *The Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010 [1969]), 217.

¹⁹⁸ Lannon, *Fight or Be Slaves*, 67.

¹⁹⁹ On the International Longshore and Warehouse Union’s inroads in Hawai‘i, see Gerald Horne, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawai‘i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).

Oakland.²⁰⁰ The offer came free of charge, but the UXA had to agree to “maintain a watchman on the property” and keep the grounds “in a clean and orderly manner, allowing no accumulation of rubbish or waste materials.” In other words, the UXA had to shed its scavenging practices and operate more like a respectable, properly secured business. Kaiser’s support for a cooperative built by unemployed Oaklanders began its long record of charitable investments in the working-class districts of its hometown. As with its efforts in the late 1960s to promote Black capitalism and “bring Kaiser resources to the [Oakland] ghetto,” the act of philanthropy sought to shore up the corporation’s legitimacy as a civic leader and, implicitly, to pacify a restive population in a time of rebellion.²⁰¹ The strategy followed the government’s lead. As scholar John Curl writes, the UXA had previously accepted a grant from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), but did so reluctantly given its “fear of the strings attached” by the New Deal agency.²⁰² The fear was understandable. As Curl notes, FERA funding served “as a carrot to influence the internal affairs of cooperatives,” as it notably did with another Bay Area-based co-op, “whose grant was held up due to the presence of a ‘radical faction.’”²⁰³ But the greatest threat to the UXA stemmed not from corporate or state cooptation, but from attrition. The steady income offered by federally funded employment on public works projects proved too good to pass up. By the mid-1930s, UXA members were defecting in droves to government jobs.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Kaiser Paving Company to UXA, April 11, 1935, carton 1, folder 2, HJKP.

²⁰¹ “Kaiser Volunteers Pitch In & Help,” *Oakland Tribune* 28 February 1971; Edward C. Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules Oakland?* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 169. On Black capitalism as a mode of counterinsurgency during the rebellions of the late 1960s, see Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990 [1969]).

²⁰² Curl, *For All the People*, 175.

²⁰³ Ibid., 176.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 182-183.

Kaiser's donation to the UXA, as with its simultaneous embrace of the New Deal ethos, signaled a broader transformation within the company. A world-spanning insurgency pushed the firm toward reform, while large-scale government contracts pulled it into the ranks of private-sector backers of the welfare state. Kaiser continued to benefit from its close ties to the Roosevelt administration, racking up a bevy of federal infrastructure projects over the remainder of the decade. Beginning with the construction of the Bonneville Dam in the mid-1930s, the corporation employed a fully unionized workforce.²⁰⁵ By the late 1930s, Henry Kaiser could proclaim that his firm had "faithfully followed the policies of [the Roosevelt] administration with reference to collective bargaining, both in letter and spirit, whether we were or not within the purview of the Wagner Act."²⁰⁶

Kaiser's loyalty to the New Deal state paid off once again during World War II. In 1940, his company secured a massive contract to manufacture Liberty ships in a cluster of shipyards in the East Bay city of Richmond. The ships played a critical role in the war effort, transporting cargo to the Pacific theater from the newly built Oakland Army Base. The shipbuilding venture, along with smaller contracts for the construction of military installations in places like Panama and Guam and the production of inputs for everything from concrete to incendiary bombs, made Kaiser the most prolific military industrialist of the era. In 1944, the United Steel Workers of America invited him to address their Cleveland convention. His firm had recently made inroads into steel manufacturing for the war by way of a lavish loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. In his speech, he extolled the virtues of the "Union Shop principle," declaring that as labor and capital "come to realize the value of the labor contract, the battle techniques give

²⁰⁵ Linder, *Projecting Capitalism*, 123.

²⁰⁶ Kaiser quoted in Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington*, 40.

way to agreement and understanding.”²⁰⁷ In the same year, Kaiser was shortlisted for Roosevelt’s vice presidency.²⁰⁸ As a friend of the president and a well-known recipient of vast amounts of public money, his critics took to calling him “the coddled darling of the New Deal.”²⁰⁹

The Welfare State as a Colonial Relation

In the span of a decade, Kaiser had morphed from an anti-union businessman and unabashed supporter of Cuba’s authoritarian president to a “progressive industrialist” and poster child of New Deal capitalism. This was a significant change to be sure but it was not a clean break with the past. The Kaiser corporation only found itself in a position to capitalize on the construction of the U.S. welfare state because it had accumulated capital in neocolonial Cuba. With sufficient liquidity to bid on depression-era infrastructure projects, the company parlayed initial successes into future contracts by drawing on lobbying tactics, labor practices, and resource management techniques honed on the island. Lucrative government contracts drew Kaiser into an alliance with the New Deal state, while popular rebellions from Oakland to Havana underscored the need for accommodations with the laboring classes.

But reform had a different meaning depending on where one stood in the ambit of U.S. empire. As Kaiser pivoted to domestic infrastructure building and the employment of unionized labor, it simultaneously embraced a foreign policy that prioritized U.S. financial interests at the expense of Cuba’s economic recovery. The company’s stake in the island no longer rested on government investment in national development but on the collection of debts and rents. This

²⁰⁷ Henry J. Kaiser speech to United States Steel Workers of America, May 12, 1944, carton 262, folder 61, HJKP.

²⁰⁸ James Stack, “Henry J. Kaiser: Nothing Was Impossible,” *Boston Globe*, September 3, 1967.

²⁰⁹ “Facts in brief about Henry J. Kaiser,” 1946, carton 276, folder 8, HJKP.

depended in turn on austerity budgets. That the New Deal's countercyclical program of public spending stopped at the water's edge served Kaiser just fine.

In the fall of 1933, when Cuba defaulted on \$80,000,000 of public works bonds, nearly \$1.5 million of which remained on the balance sheets of Kaiser and Warren Brothers, the tension between foreign debt and economic sovereignty was cast in high relief. The default occurred during the brief presidency of Ramón Grau San Martín, a politician who favored state interventions akin to those of the New Deal. Grau's promotion of a Cuban welfare state went hand in hand with his suspension of interest payments on foreign debt. Doubting the legality of the debt, he justified the suspension on the grounds that efforts undertaken by Machado to prolong his presidency likely violated the Cuban Constitution. Roosevelt vehemently opposed the move and authorized his State Department to work behind the scenes to unseat Grau. He wielded a powerful weapon: the withholding of diplomatic recognition. The decision all but guaranteed Grau's ouster. Kaiser and Warren closely monitored Cuba's post-revolution developments, and joined their fellow bondholders in lobbying the U.S. government. In a letter dated August 28, 1933, Warren Brothers treasurer Ralph L. Warren assured Kaiser that "While the State Department and the Ambassador are necessarily rather non-committal [sic], we believe that we are having the active sympathetic support of both in bringing about an equitable adjustment of our affairs."²¹⁰

But even after Grau's departure, Cuba's debt remained in limbo. Several months later, a Cuban lawsuit charged the U.S. contractors with defrauding the Cuban people by jacking up construction costs on the Central Highway. This undoubtedly compounded the bondholders' anxieties. In another letter to Kaiser, Ralph Warren relayed the details of the allegations, which

²¹⁰ Ralph L. Warren to Henry J. Kaiser, August 28, 1933, carton 297, folder 26, HJKP.

included “collusion with...various officials in order to secure extortionate prices” for the highway work.²¹¹ Unlike Warren executives, Kaiser did not receive an initial indictment, but, as a landowner in Cuba, he would have been disturbed by the decision of Cuban prosecutors to go after the property of the accused. In the end, the lawsuit was more a nuisance than a genuine danger. But it portended additional roadblocks to the prompt repayment of Cuba’s debt. To remedy this situation, Warren and Kaiser continued to petition the Roosevelt administration to intervene on their behalf. While Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy for Latin America theoretically took military intervention off the table, it did nothing to restore the Cuban territory occupied by the naval base at Guantánamo, making Washington’s promise of noninterference seem like a mixed message at best. But even in the absence of direct force, the U.S. government still held considerable leverage over the Caribbean nation. Warren officials kept Kaiser abreast of the coercive measures used by the Roosevelt administration to influence Cuba’s fiscal policy. These included threats to adjust the quota of Cuban sugar imports, restrict funds from the Export-Import Bank, torpedo Cuba’s credit, and sever diplomatic channels.²¹²

Despite these various efforts, the creditors remained unpaid, and, by World War II, the priorities of the Roosevelt administration began to shift. Cuba’s role as a military partner to the United States now mattered more than its outstanding debts. Indicative of this change was the administration’s decision in 1942 to back the plans of Cuban president Fulgencio Batista to repair the Central Highway. While the U.S. War Production Board typically blocked nonmilitary public works in areas under its jurisdiction, the administration gave its approval to the Cuban

²¹¹ Ralph L. Warren to Henry J. Kaiser, August 4, 1934, carton 297, folder 23, HJKP.

²¹² Ralph Warren to G.G. Sherwood, June 28, 1934, carton 297, folder 23, HJKP; Ralph Warren to G.G. Sherwood, April 3, 1939, carton 297, folder 26, HJKP; Charles R. Gow to Henry J. Kaiser, November 8, 1938, carton 297, folder 24, HJKP; Ralph Warren to G.G. Sherwood, November 26, 1938, carton 297, folder 26, HJKP.

highway repairs on the grounds that they would generate employment and thereby stave off “political and social problems” stemming from Cuba’s “war sacrifices.”²¹³ The road was also “of considerable interest to [the U.S.] War Department” as “a part of the land-water route to Puerto Rico.” The utility of Cuba’s highway as a critical node in the U.S. war effort took precedence over its function as a conveyor belt of wealth for foreign investors. Kaiser saw the writing on the wall. As the Second World War loomed, he opted to part with his Cuban property, taking a substantial loss on the original investment, but netting a tax deduction as a consolation.²¹⁴ He also relinquished the treasury bonds for pennies on the dollar.

Even with these sizable losses, the Kaiser Company considered the Cuban venture an overall success. Having negotiated a contract with the Cuban government that delivered prompt cash payments for small increments of construction, it walked away from the project with over \$2 million in profit. Likewise, while Cuba’s post-1933 instability and the shifting prerogatives of U.S. foreign policy cut into the earnings of some foreign companies, overall U.S. capital retained its hegemony on the island. While geopolitical shifts afforded the Cuban economy some breathing room, Cuba’s neocolonial relationship to the United States hardly changed during Roosevelt’s presidency. Writing in 1935, U.S. author and Cuba solidarity activist Carleton Beals sarcastically called Roosevelt “the good-hearted monarch of the New Deal,” ridiculing his posture as a benevolent reformer in the Caribbean nation.²¹⁵ For Beals, official rhetoric may have changed—as the Good Neighbor Policy illustrated—but the basic facts of U.S. imperialism remained the same. Cuban sugar exports and market access for U.S. imports proved as crucial to

²¹³ Sumner Welles to the President, December 12, 1942; box 28, folder “Cuba” pt. 2; The President’s Secretary’s Files, 1933-1945; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY.

²¹⁴ G.G. Sherwood to A.B. Ordway, October 4, 1939, carton 297, folder 22, HJKP.

²¹⁵ Carleton Beals, *Rifle Rule in Cuba* (New York: Provisional Committee for Cuba, 1935).

Roosevelt's economic agenda as they had for his predecessors'. And his administration's unwavering support for Machado's heir, the brutal dictator Fulgencio Batista, suggested that securing those ends would continue to trump all other concerns.²¹⁶ The structural transformations of the 1930s did not fundamentally alter the imperial division of labor.

During the Great Depression, the bounties of U.S. empire underwrote the construction of a domestic welfare state. Government and corporate reforms aimed to stabilize the U.S. economy and pacify the working class. But U.S. workers did not benefit equally from the New Deal order. Hierarchies of race and gender determined who could access public works jobs, as well as social security checks, government-backed mortgages, and other entitlements.²¹⁷ They also structured the distribution of employee benefits, collectively bargained and privately administered welfare states which New Deal regulations helped inaugurate. Here too Kaiser played an influential role. The corporation's pioneering contribution to employer-sponsored health insurance helped entrench a system of social rights that delivered, in the words of historian Gabriel Winant, "security for the insiders of collective bargaining and insecurity and precarity for the outsiders who provided them care."²¹⁸ In the postwar era, Kaiser's high-wage industrial workforce, which was disproportionately white and male, received quality medical care from Kaiser Permanente's low-wage medical staff, which was disproportionately Black and female and, not incidentally,

²¹⁶ On the eve of World War II, Batista moved to the left, forging an alliance with the Cuban Communist Party and legitimately winning the presidential election in 1940. This marked a break from his role in the aftermath of the 1933 revolution, a role he would resume in the decade leading up to the revolution of 1959, as an authoritarian military ruler who repressed political dissidents and upheld the hegemony of foreign capital. Rebecca Herman, *Cooperating with the Colossus: A Social and Political History of US Military Based in World War II Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 43.

²¹⁷ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

²¹⁸ Gabriel Winant, *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021), 14.

included many migrants from the Caribbean.²¹⁹ Such inequalities of social citizenship correlated with the global unevenness of social democracy. As Kaiser's transnational career lays bare, the New Deal's insider-outsider binary rested on a broader split between metropole and colony.

These unequal relationships did not maintain themselves. The transformation of the Kaiser Company over the twentieth century reflected a continuous effort to reassert profitable hierarchies of difference in the face of periodic crisis. As such, colonial relations traced by the company evolved, in the postwar era of decolonization, into an economic order predicated on an ever-changing division between the onshore and the offshore, between an increasingly postindustrial capitalist core and an unevenly developed Third World. Such changes laid the groundwork for the Black Panther Party, one of Oakland's most well-known political formations, as well as the Black-led struggle over the terms of globalization that roiled Oakland's waterfront in the final decades of the twentieth century.

²¹⁹ Juan D. De Lara, *Inland Shift: Race, Space and Capital in Southern California* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 118-119.

Chapter 4

Seize the Port: The Black Panther Party and the Struggle over Globalizing Oakland

The syncopated rhythms of a globalizing city reverberated through the halls of Ed Howard's Place. The nightclub was among an array of Black-owned institutions that helped fill the void of disinvestment in postwar Oakland. In the 1970s, it was an economic and cultural base for African Americans, who by the end of the decade made up half the city's population. As such, Howard found it unsurprising when the club became a hangout for members of the Black Panther Party (BPP). But for some of his employees, the Panthers' arrival prompted anxiety. "They were like 'The Black Panther Party! The Black Panthers are in here! The Black Panthers are in here!'" recalled Howard. "And I said 'What are you so nervous about?'" For Howard, the Panthers were "just guys I knew from West Oakland." In the neighborhood that birthed the Party, Howard had crossed paths with many of its members. In the early 1960s, he befriended Huey Newton—who would go on to found the Black Panthers with Bobby Seale in 1966—at an informal gambling house run by a mutual acquaintance. At the time, Howard was affiliated with the Afro-American Association, a Black study and consciousness-raising group whose Bay Area meetings exposed Newton, Seale, and other future Panthers to the culture of Black Power. By the time Ed Howard's Place opened its doors in 1973, the BPP was in its seventh year and Howard's relationship to the group was one of "total support."¹

During the 1970s, Howard welcomed numerous Panthers into his establishment, Oakland's only Black-owned nightclub with live entertainment, a place to catch B.B. King, the Whispers, and many other popular acts performing soul, rhythm & blues, disco, and jazz. He also

¹ Ed Howard, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), April 8, 2023.

backed the Party financially, employing its members as servers, contributing to its bids for local office, and hosting numerous events for Panther-aligned political candidates. Indicative of his support was Howard's donation of nightclub tickets to a fundraising raffle organized by Elaine Brown's 1975 city council campaign.² Brown, who chaired the Black Panthers from 1974 to 1977, was running on a platform of redistribution that targeted the city's foremost economic engine, the publicly administered Port of Oakland. According to Howard, her campaign sparked a conversation about the governance of the port that was "just all around Oakland" at the time. "The port was like a city or an entity in itself separate from Oakland, the way it was structured," he continued, echoing a talking point from Brown's campaign. "All the money didn't come into Oakland. It was Oakland but [the city] wouldn't get [any] benefit out of it."³ Though the port was municipal property, its business-friendly charter ensured that its enormous revenues seldom landed in city coffers. This state of affairs was all the more vexing amid the economic downturn of the 1970s, which followed a long period of deindustrialization after World War II. It was in this context that Brown and the Panthers struggled over Oakland's waterfront, a struggle that Howard was determined to aid in any way he could.

Historians have highlighted the contributions of public colleges and government-financed poverty programs to the rise of the Panthers in 1960s Oakland, but few have considered how the political economy of the 1970s shaped the Party's evolution.⁴ With capital flight accelerating and

² "Campaign Kick-Off Forecasts Victory," *Black Panther*, February 15, 1975.

³ Ed Howard, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), April 8, 2023.

⁴ On the Panthers' relationship to the postwar welfare state, see especially Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). By situating the Party's evolution in the political economy of the 1970s, this chapter complicates depictions of the Party's later years as a time of irrevocable decline, hopeless reformism, and inexorable retreat from radical internationalism. For examples of this declension narrative, see Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland: University of California Press,

the welfare state contracting, the Panthers sought a foothold in the private sector from which to vie for control of public institutions.⁵ People like Ed Howard helped sustain the Party and its broader constituency in a period of fiscal austerity. Howard's nightclub was a space of leisure and community for Black Oaklanders who were buffeted by a perfect storm of inflation, unemployment, and disinvestment.⁶ The club's Kivu Room, Kakuri Lounge, Kianga Showroom, and Kabila Kitchen—the Swahili names he gave his children—signaled that community's Pan-African character. The club was also a source of income for the Panthers and an enthusiastic backer of their causes. Part of a larger constellation of donors, assets, and businesses, including the Panther-owned Lamp Post bar, Ed Howard's Place afforded the Party a semblance of stability in an age of financial turbulence. Such economic linkages were never an end in themselves. The Panthers' search for capital and for spaces of congregation dovetailed with their efforts to capture the local state. And these efforts were yoked in turn to more distant revolutionary objectives. Controlling the levers of municipal government promised access not only to bigger budgets, but also to the infrastructural power to transform a globalizing city.

As Howard attested, maritime infrastructure was at the heart of the Party's local agenda. Throughout the 1970s, the Panthers proclaimed that revenues monopolized by the Port Commission could free Oakland from austerity. At a time when the city was slashing social

2013), 379-386; Sean L. Malloy, *Out of Oakland: Black Panther Party Internationalism During the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 211.

⁵ The line between the private and the public sector was always porous. Howard himself acquired the capital he invested in his nightclub as the co-owner with his brother of Social Dynamics Inc., a consulting firm that helped governments roll out federally funded poverty programs in their jurisdictions. Among the firm's employees was Ron Dellums, a social worker, Berkeley city councilman, and Black Panther Party ally, who would soon be elected to Congress. Ronald V. Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions: A Public Life from the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 46.

⁶ While white people made up anywhere from 6 to 15 percent of its patrons, according to Howard's estimate, the club was a definitively Black space. Jack McDonough, "Soul Showcase in Oakland: Howard's," *Billboard*, January 17, 1976.

services, business on the waterfront was booming. Oakland had helped drive the postwar revolution in container shipping that facilitated both the global dispersion of industry and the U.S. War in Vietnam.⁷ By the late 1960s, its waterfront boasted the second busiest container port in the world, as well as the largest military supply depot on the Pacific Coast. The Panthers hoped to use revenues from these logistical activities to bridge Oakland's vast economic divide. But claiming the port for radical ends promised more than a fiscal stimulus. "The Port of Oakland sits directly across the ocean from China—our friends in China—and North Korea also," recalled Elaine Brown, evoking the Panthers' transnational political geography. "So we could develop a whole universe of things through the control of the port, the fully containerized Port of Oakland."⁸ Addressing the question of self-determination in a region with a vanishing tax base, the Panthers reimagined the East Bay waterfront as a strategic nexus between local social welfare and Third World solidarity. This political horizon made the BPP a natural ally of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which had operated at the intersection of economic justice, interracial solidarity, and militant internationalism since emerging out of the general strike of 1934. The Panthers also enjoyed considerable support among Black Oaklanders whose families had migrated to the region from the Jim Crow South to work in Kaiser shipyards and other waterfront industries during and after World War II.

The struggle over the governance of the East Bay waterfront was also a contest over the terms of globalization in the postwar city. As deindustrialization battered Oakland's flatlands, the Panthers set about building an economic base that could cushion the blows of capital flight and

⁷ On Oakland's pioneering role in the containerization of global trade, see Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) 240-249, 258-265; Mark Rosenstein, "The Rise of Maritime Containerization in the Port of Oakland" (M.A. thesis, New York University, 2000).

⁸ Elaine Brown, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), July 9, 2015.

predatory investment. During the 1970s, the Party acquired over a dozen properties across the region to shield its members from the depredations of the private housing market. It also opened a shoe factory—one of the only manufacturers of its kind to operate in the Bay Area during the decade—and made plans to establish a “Multi-Ethnic International Trade and Cultural Center” to “stimulate international trade and cultural exchange between Oakland and South American, Asian and African nations.”⁹ In doing so, the Panthers looked to places such as China, North Korea, Cuba, Tanzania, and territories held by the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) for models of a socialist road to development that could guide their fight for a cash-strapped municipality in the heart of U.S. empire. Taken together, the Party’s developmental initiatives aimed to create nothing less than a local stepping stone to an alternative world-system.

The Panthers’ economic ventures, as with their plans for Oakland’s port, both anticipated the emergence of neoliberal globalization and staked out an alternative. They were part of a wider struggle—crystallized in the resolution for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1974—to disentangle global supply chains from the violence of imperialism.¹⁰ Since the late 1960s, the Panthers had treated the UN both as a platform for advancing a new global economy and as a venue for conducting diplomatic negotiations. The Party’s turn to municipal politics in many ways mirrored its bid for international recognition. In both cases, the Panthers strived to realize their radical goals within preexisting political structures, building multiracial coalitions to navigate governing bodies generally hostile to their existence. The Party’s early forays into international diplomacy laid the

⁹ “A Multi-Ethnic International Trade and Cultural Center,” *Black Panther* (supplement on base of operations), November 9, 1972.

¹⁰ Johanna Brockman, “Socialist Globalization against Capitalist Neocolonialism: The Economic Ideas behind the New International Economic Order,” *Humanity* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 109-128.

groundwork for the municipal foreign policy of its later years.¹¹

Continuities notwithstanding, the organization did change in fundamental ways amid the political-economic shifts of the 1970s. The waning antiwar movement, the easing of Cold War tensions, the rightward drift of U.S. politics, the escalation of state repression, and the onset of a deep-seated fiscal crisis hastened the Party's attrition. In this climate, survival was a top priority. To that end, the Panthers sought to increase their quantity of productive assets, real estate holdings, and ties to local businesses, as well as enter the electoral arena. These decisions were rife with contradictions. Writing in the Bay Area in the late 1960s, the radical Black scholar Robert Allen warned that "the corporatists are attempting with considerable success to co-opt the black power movement. Their strategy is to equate black power with black capitalism."¹² Allen's critique certainly applies to the Black Panther Party of the 1970s. Nevertheless, the Panthers' pivot to local politics and economic security should be examined in light of the limited options available. The Party's reorientation stemmed from a pressing need for institutional resources that could support the organization and its base in precarious times.¹³ In the long run, the Panthers still hoped to turn the eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay into an outpost of global revolution. But short-term exigencies compelled them to make compromises with the system they sought to dismantle. The results were decidedly mixed. The Party's newfound embrace of electoralism reinforced top-down practices in the organization and used up much of its time and

¹¹ On the municipal internationalism of the post-1968 U.S. left, see Keith Riley, "Cities of Solidarity: Left-Liberal Coalition and the Rise and Fall of Local-Level Foreign Policy" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 2022).

¹² Robert L. Allen, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990 [1969]), 17-18.

¹³ The Panthers' pursuit of local state power in 1970s Oakland is often framed as an example of cooptation, a case study that illustrates how "revolutionaries" became "race leaders." While such a critique remains an important one, it is critical to assess the balance of power and the broader context of backlash and austerity surrounding the turn to electoralism. For an exemplary version of the critique, see Cedric Johnson, *From Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the Making of African American Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

resources. But it also uplifted the Panthers' community services—"survival programs," as they were known—which empowered new leaders and destabilized gender hierarchies.¹⁴ For both internal and external reasons, the group fell far short of its revolutionary objectives and, in the early 1980s, the last vestiges of the Party dissolved. Still, its plans for Oakland contained a powerful vision, one that is worth recovering. If the city had long been a critical node of war and trade, the Panthers insisted that its future lay at the crossroads of radical internationalism.

The Militarized Landscape of Postwar Oakland

The fight for the future of globalizing Oakland took place in an economic, social, and ecological context indelibly shaped by World War II. Midcentury Oakland was a city made by war. The ebbs and flows of military spending shaped its demographics as well as its built environment. In the postwar era, a large volume of federal dollars continued to pour into the city,

¹⁴ Recent studies of the Panthers place the survival programs and the women who ran them at the center of the Party's history, revising older depictions of the organization as a hyper-masculine group primarily concerned with revolutionary violence. The first wave of historiographical revisions came from Panther women themselves. Beginning in the 1990s, JoNina M. Abron, Elaine Brown, Kathleen Cleaver, Ericka Huggins, and others published memoirs and essays that documented their experiences in the Party and challenged male-centric histories of the organization. JoNina M. Abron, "'Serving the People': The Survival Programs of the Black Panther Party," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 177-192; Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992); Kathleen Neal Cleaver, "Women, Power, and Revolution," in *Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and their Legacy*, eds. Kathleen Cleaver and George Katsiaficas (London: Routledge, 2001); Ericka Huggins and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School," in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Dayo F. Gore, Jeanne Theoharis, and Komozi Woodard (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 164-165. Scholars building on this work have highlighted the Panthers' gender politics, as well as the intellectual contributions, organizing work, and social-reproductive labor of Panther women. Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Kiran Garcha, "Bringing the Vanguard Home: The Role of Children, Home, and Family in the Black Panther Party" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2020); Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest, "'The Most Qualified Person to Handle the Job': Black Panther Party Women, 1966-1982," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998): 305-327; Tracye A. Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of the Black Panther Party, 1966-1971," in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998); Mary Phillips, "The Power of the First-Person Narrative: Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3-4 (2015): 33-51; Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Jakobi Williams, "'Don't no woman have to do nothing she don't want to do': Gender, Activism, and the Illinois Black Panther party," *Black Women, Gender & Families* 6, no. 2 (2012): 29-54.

but their distribution was highly uneven. The promises and disappointments of war mobilization and militarized social citizenship formed the backdrop to the Black Panther Party's politics. As such, the Party's struggle for the Oakland-East Bay waterfront must be understood as a movement decades in the making. In her memoir, Elaine Brown located the Panthers' 1970s electoral campaigns on this longer timeline. Her account begins with the Second World War, when the industrial giant Henry J. Kaiser launched his shipbuilding empire in the East Bay Area. "Oakland's massive port," wrote Brown, "had demonstrated its capacity to produce instant war profits for Kaiser, particularly if he had the support of cheap labor." For Kaiser, such labor came in the form of Black migrants from "sharecropper shanties in the South." The Panthers' political ambitions in the 1970s centered on this same population, a community lured to the region during the war but which found itself mired in joblessness when it ended. As Brown put it, "Our campaign was designed to inspire our people to take control of their own destinies, without reliance on the Henry Kaisers." For Brown and her comrades, the contest was clear: Oakland's waterfront would either be controlled by military-industrial capitalists like Kaiser or by the people who once comprised their workforce. The latter, she believed, were ripe for "revolutionary change."¹⁵

The family of Huey Newton epitomized the social history of work and migration that Elaine Brown outlined. His father, Walter, had worked a variety of jobs in rural Louisiana, including as a laborer in a sugar cane refinery and as a railroad brakeman, but in an interview with a Panther journalist Huey placed particular emphasis on Walter's experience with

¹⁵ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 321.

sharecropping.¹⁶ During World War II, Walter moved his family to Oakland and found work at the Naval Supply Center on the western edge of the waterfront. According to Newton, his father's employment trajectory—from sharecropper to war worker—and his family's migration from Louisiana to Oakland were key factors in his “personal radicalization.”

In his memoir, Newton elaborated on the role of Kaiser Industries and other military-industrial outfits in the dramatic growth of the East Bay's Black community. While employers like Kaiser recruited Black migrants as low-wage laborers during the war, “[t]hey expected the people to go back South after they were no longer needed.” Things did not work out that way. According to Newton, “the South had little to offer, and the people had other ideas.” The refusal of Black migrants to leave their new home reflected a pattern in local labor history stretching back to the nineteenth century. Bay Area capitalists periodically recruited workers whose racialized status allowed them to lower the cost of labor. They did so under the assumption that such workers would only reside in the region temporarily. When migrants defied these expectations, they were treated with contempt. As Newton put it, “the Establishment found ways to punish” Black people who overstayed their welcome.¹⁷

If Kaiser Industries lacked the power to deport Black migrants rendered surplus to its operations, it did have the ability, as the region's biggest private employer, to relegate them to the margins of the labor market. Ed Howard's family offers an instructive example of the corporation's uneven impact on Black households. After migrating from Waterproof, Louisiana during World War II, both of Howard's parents found work at local Kaiser shipyards. But after

¹⁶ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin, 2009 [1973]), 10; “‘We Have to Attend to Our People’: An Interview with Comrade Huey P. Newton,” *The Black Panther*, September 2, 1972.

¹⁷ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 145

the war, shipbuilding work dried up and they were forced to take lower-paying positions elsewhere. In the late 1950s, their son began looking for a full-time job of his own. Ed Howard figured that his Industrial Design degree from Oakland's Laney College would qualify him for work at Kaiser's engineering firm. But for years, he earned nothing but rejections from the company. Finally, Howard caught a lucky break and landed a job at the firm in 1962, following a stray encounter with a sympathetic manager. At the time, he was one of the only African Americans to hold a white-collar position at Kaiser, a reflection of the racial division of labor structuring the region's deindustrializing economy.¹⁸ As Black Communist and Oakland native William L. Patterson observed in an essay on the Panthers' origins, the peacetime economy "made jobs, but...Blacks were the last to be hired," and they were typically "discriminated against in the skilled jobs."¹⁹ Accordingly, structural racism in the labor market formed one of the Panthers' foundational grievances.

Racialized poverty was not the only reason the Black Panther Party emerged in 1960s Oakland. The Party's efforts to build a constituency among Black migrants and their children drew on an older tradition of organizing in the docks, railroads, and shipyards of the East Bay flatlands.²⁰ The family of Black Panther ally Ron Dellums, who, from 1971 to 1998, served as Oakland's Congressional representative, embodied this political lineage. Dellums's memories of

¹⁸ In the late 1960s, Howard established the Configuration Engineering Drafting Training program, which provided a small number of Black and brown young adults from Oakland, including Black Panther Oleander Harrison, with two years of training before placing them in Kaiser jobs. According to Howard, Kaiser executives backed the program because they reasoned, "we got to protect our interests" at a time when cities across the country "were burning....They thought we [Oakland] were going to be the first ones to burn down the whole country." The training program was thus an attempt to pacify an inner-city rebellion. Ed Howard, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), April 8, 2023.

¹⁹ William L. Patterson, "The Black Panther Party: A Force Against U.S. Imperialism," excerpted in Huey Newton, *To Die for the People* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009 [1972]), 166.

²⁰ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 4-6.

his childhood in 1930s and 1940s West Oakland were peppered with the sounds of locomotives chugging along a tangle of tracks culminating at the port. “The more elegantly pitched noise of the passenger trains,” he remembered, “promised that there existed a larger world beyond.”²¹ West Oakland’s long-distance transportation infrastructure provided a portal to faraway people and places, germinating an internationalist consciousness in its working-class residents. So too did the stories of the many Black Oaklanders who labored on local rails and wharves. Dellums’s father, Vernie, spent time in both of these workplaces. After migrating to Oakland from his childhood home of Corsica, Texas, he “ran on the road” as a Pullman porter.²² In doing so, he followed the path of his older brother C.L., whose contribution to the general strike of 1934 is documented in the previous chapter. A leader in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) and a stalwart organizer and political agitator, C.L. initiated Vernie into the East Bay’s tradition of civil rights unionism.²³ In his next job, Vernie moved from the railcar to the pier, hauling freight as a unionized stevedore at the Port of Oakland. With his brother’s support, he helped develop the interracial political culture of his ILWU local during the 1940s and ‘50s. After the outbreak of World War II, the Dellums family played a prominent role in dismantling Jim Crow employment practices at East Bay shipyards. The Kaiser company was a critical target. In the campaign to integrate Kaiser, C.L. Dellums joined forces with Frances Albrier. A former leader in the Oakland branch of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, Albrier cut her teeth in the local labor movement during the 1920s and ‘30s organizing her fellow Pullman car maids

²¹ Ron Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions*, 9.

²² Ron Dellums Oral History Transcript, carton 9, folder 28, Robert L. Allen papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²³ On this broader tradition, see Robert R. Korstadt, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

into a women's auxiliary of the BSCP. She made national headlines during the war as the first Black woman hired as a welder at Kaiser's naval production facility.²⁴

Growing up in midcentury Oakland, Ron Dellums heard countless stories from his father and uncle about these hard-fought struggles and the radical politics behind them. But the war-time economic context that enabled impressive gains in the material lives of Black Oaklanders did not last. African Americans were the first ones laid off in the period of postwar reconversion, forcing many Black women back into the abhorrent conditions of domestic service they had left behind during the war.²⁵ Black men, for their part, faced rampant unemployment and the pressure to take any job available. As a young adult, Dellums navigated these changing conditions within a radical milieu of his own. Tellingly, he found his political niche not in a unionized workplace but on college campuses and within federally funded poverty programs. Dellums participated in the Afro-American Association—which emerged in the early 1960s at the University of California, Berkeley—alongside Ed Howard, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale. In 1962, he embarked on a career as a social worker with a commitment to organizing in the Bay Area's Black neighborhoods. Later in the decade, he became a leftist politician known for his vocal opposition to the Vietnam War. In Dellums's experience, the burgeoning culture of Black Power intersected with his family tradition of working-class internationalism and Black labor militancy.²⁶

²⁴ Frances Mary Albrier, interview with Malca Chall, 1977-1978, Black Women Oral History Project, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. On Black women organizing in the BSCP, see Melinda Chateauvert, *Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

²⁵ Thelma Dale, "Reconversion and the Negro People," *Political Affairs* 24, no. 10 (October 1945): 894-901 in *Organize, Fight, Win: Black Communist Women's Political Writing*, eds. Charisse Burden-Stelley and Jodi Dean (New York: Verso, 2022).

²⁶ Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 95-96.

When Ron Dellums entered the dynamic world of Black social movements in the 1960s Bay Area, freeways loomed larger than railroads in the everyday experiences of Black Oaklanders. But much of the West Oakland landscape of his youth remained intact. Though Kaiser and his counterparts shuttered their shipyards in the postwar era, the federal government continued to inject vast sums into the region's military installations and war-related industries. Two sprawling military sites still dominated the Oakland waterfront: the Naval Supply Center, where Huey Newton's father had worked in the mid-1940s, and the adjacent Oakland Army Base, each of which occupied hundreds of acres of reclaimed wetlands.²⁷ The militarized Port of Oakland, which had briefly provided an income stream to many members of the Black community that bordered it, morphed into an employer of relatively few in the postwar era.²⁸

The World War II military buildup had a lasting impact on the local environment. In the second half of the twentieth century, the volume of trains, trucks, and ships converging at the port continued to rise, with lethal consequences for the surrounding community. Diesel emissions from these intersecting transportation systems fueled high levels of asthma and lung cancer among West Oakland residents.²⁹ The Black scholar Nathan Hare was living in the Bay Area when he wrote his 1970 article, "Black Ecology," an assessment of the social forces behind the "greater degree of all varieties of pollutants in the black ghetto." Racist housing policies trapped Black people in neighborhoods with harmful land uses, while the racist devaluation of

²⁷ By 1950, Walter Newton no longer worked at the Naval Supply Center. In that year, he described his employment as laborer for the municipal street department. *Seventeenth Census of the United States: 1950—Population and housing, Oakland, Alameda County, California, Washington*, sheet no. 87. [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).

²⁸ For data capturing the racial disparities in Port of Oakland employment, see "1,000 Permanent Jobs at Base," *South China Morning Post*, May 25, 1971.

²⁹ John Gulick, "Landside Risks: The Ecological Contradictions of Port of Oakland Globalism" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 2000), 479, 571.

these neighborhoods justified the siting of new highways, garbage dumps, and toxic industries within them. Hare's description of environmental "colonies" plagued by "alien automobile polluters who daily invade and 'foul the nest' of black urban residents" reflected the predicament of West Oakland after World War II.³⁰

Air pollution was one way that Black Oaklanders bore the ecological consequences of the simultaneous growth of the Port of Oakland and the chain of suburbs encircling it. Another was the loss of cherished natural space. Once a common means of supplementing diets in the working-class neighborhood, fishing on the East Bay shoreline became less viable owing to the military's destruction and continued pollution of tideland fisheries around the bay.³¹ As a child, Huey Newton would occasionally swim in the bay, but its distinctly "dirty water" made it a dangerous recreation.³² For Ed Howard, who lived with his family in the segregated Bayview Villa project right next to the Port of Oakland, the shoreline was a thrilling place to explore, but its perils were undeniable:

In Bayview Villa we were right there by the water almost, on the train tracks. We used to walk across the train tracks all the time. Matter of fact, my mother used to always be so concerned, telling us, 'Stop doing that,' because, you know, it was dangerous. You know, all the trains, that's the end of the line...and they're coming and going, and I did have a friend got run over by the train when I was a kid. Got cut in half.

Despite his proximity to the bay, Howard never actually made it to the shoreline; all the "debris and stuff" stood in his way.³³ For many Black residents, Oakland's waterfront figured not as a

³⁰ Nathan Hare, "Black Ecology," *The Black Scholar* 1, no. 6 (April 1970): 3, 8.

³¹ On fishing by African Americans in pre-World War II West Oakland, see Interview Jerry Lange, 2007, tape 1, Oral History Collection, African American Museum & Library at Oakland, California. https://archive.org/details/caolaam_000108/caolaam_000108_t01_access.HD.mov.

³² Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 16.

³³ Ed Howard, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), April 8, 2023.

gateway but as an enclosure.

The slow violence of environmental destruction and employment discrimination complemented the brutality of the Oakland Police Department (OPD). After World War II, the OPD used rising crime rates as a pretext to wage an all-out assault on Black neighborhoods. As historian Donna Murch observes, the department engaged in “rampant excursions into African American communities,” and “by the midfifties, the OPD began to systematically surveil and criminalize black migrants.”³⁴ One explanation for the OPD’s well-established pattern of abuse in places like West Oakland was the origins of its officers. Huey Newton identified the department’s “recruitment of Southern whites” as integral to its role of “not only [enforcing] the economic and political policies of Oakland’s elite, but also, the practice of racial injustice.”³⁵ The department’s style of enforcement was notable for its lawlessness. Diane Thomas, whose family hailed from Louisiana, grew up in West Oakland in the 1950s and ‘60s with an older sister who would go on to join the Black Panther Party. Thomas recounted that it was common knowledge among Black Oaklanders at the time that the OPD planted “things to frame people like drugs and stuff like that.”³⁶ Such illegal practices, paired with the dragnet-style policing of Oakland’s Black neighborhoods, led to the disproportionate arrest of young Black migrants. During the Vietnam War, many of those arrested were forced to decide between joining the army or going to jail. The “choice” between prison and combat—typically posed by a judge to a teenager charged with a petty crime—captured the circumscribed possibilities of young people of

³⁴ Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 38.

³⁵ “Oakland: An All-American Example,” 1974, series 1, box 50, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Inc. Collection, Special Collections, Stanford University [Hereafter: HPNFC].

³⁶ Diane Thomas, interview with author (phone), January 31, 2023. The OPD’s history of planting incriminating evidence has been well documented. See Ali Winston and Darwin BondGraham, *The Riders Come Out at Night: Brutality, Corruption, and Cover-Up, in Oakland* (New York: Atria, 2023).

color growing up at the intersection of over-policing and underemployment.³⁷ In 1965, Black people comprised 31 percent of U.S. combat troops and 24 percent of Army deaths in Vietnam, but only 12 percent of the national population.³⁸ Statistics like these, which were widely known at the time, illustrated the fundamental interconnection of the foreign and domestic theaters of U.S. state violence.³⁹

State violence dominated Oakland's labor market in other ways, too. As the Cold War took off in the late 1940s, the Bay Area once again became a magnet for military contractors. Discriminatory hiring practices notwithstanding, these firms hosted some of the only decent-paying jobs available to Black people from working-class families. And yet, as antiwar sentiment and a broader radical consciousness circulated between the campuses, streets, and prisons of the Bay Area, civilian employment in the war economy began to pose a greater dilemma. Denunciations of U.S. militarism in the age of the Vietnam War led to a broader reappraisal of the history of U.S. war-making. The incarcerated intellectual and BPP member George Jackson, who spent most of the 1960s confined at San Quentin State Prison on the western shores of the San Francisco Bay, took aim at the "Good War" myth of World War II in a letter from 1970. Rejecting the obligatory reverence for the "Greatest Generation," Jackson wrote instead of a "second great war for colonial markets" and an economic stimulus soaked in blood.⁴⁰ As young radicals reckoned with the ongoing history of U.S. imperial violence, many came to share

³⁷ For a generative discussion of the prison-or-war binary, see Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 1-5.

³⁸ Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1995), 243, 255.

³⁹ Eldridge Cleaver devoted a chapter in *Soul on Ice* to analyzing the U.S. government's interest in the recruitment of Black soldiers for the war in Vietnam. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Books, 1968), 121-127.

⁴⁰ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), 10.

Jackson's view that participating in the war economy past or present amounted to a devil's bargain.

Bobby Seale arrived at this perspective while working for a military contractor. After a "bad-conduct discharge" from the Army at the hands of a racist officer, Seale cycled through various aircraft firms as a sheet-metal mechanic. All the while, he took classes at Oakland's Merritt College and began to forge ties to the Revolutionary Action Movement, the Afro-American Association, and other radical student-led groups.⁴¹ A termination notice would typically arrive a few months after the start of his employment upon the discovery of his disreputable service record. One of his longest stints was at the Kaiser Aerospace & Electronics plant located on the eastern edge of the Oakland waterfront. Seale left that position after more than a year not because he was fired but because he decided he had had enough. In his memoir, he described the decision as a refusal of complicity: "I quit that job fifteen months later, because the war was going on and I felt I was aiding the government's operation."⁴²

Seale's decision to leave his job at Kaiser in protest of the Vietnam War reflected generational changes as well as continuities. Two decades prior, Seale's parents had migrated from Texas to the Bay Area, hoping to benefit from the rising tide of the war economy. Their dreams of upward mobility never came to pass. Seale recalled his family's constant anxieties about money and his father's periodic layoffs, which he attributed to his struggle to break into a white-dominated carpenters' union.⁴³ A disciplinary record, which hindered the economic

⁴¹ Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 101, 110-111.

⁴² Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1991 [1968]), 11-12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6.

prospects of Seale and many members of his generation, constituted a different kind of barrier.⁴⁴ But the outcome was similar. Like their parents, Seale and his peers seldom derived any lasting benefit from the war economy. The persistent experience of economic exclusion suggested that Black people were never meant to share in the bounties of U.S. wars, even as they were pressured to risk their lives in them. Seale's ethical qualms about working a military-industrial job took shape within this political-economic context.

Disrupting Oakland's militarized economy and the policing infrastructure upholding it became a central mission of the Black Panthers. The city's significance to the Party went beyond its status as the organization's birthplace. In the 1970s, Panther leaders began to speak of Oakland's unique position in the operation of U.S. empire. "Oakland serves as a base," wrote Newton, "for maintaining prices, due to the low trade costs super-containerization of its port affords business and industry." As a pioneer of container shipping and a vital node in the global supply chain, Oakland facilitated cheap imports from East Asian nations. This logistical function was inseparable from the seaport's military capacities. Indeed, early adopters of containerization such as Sea-Land and Matson, whose roots in the transport of Hawaiian sugar are detailed in chapter one, made a lucrative business out of the movement of military cargo from the Oakland Army Base to Pacific Rim installations. On the return voyage, the companies filled their ships with commodities from Asian manufacturers. "Especially since World War II," Newton continued, "Oakland has served as a base for federal trade and military production and transportation. With its easy access to Asia, particularly, (due to a geographic location to the

⁴⁴ In Seale's case, the barrier to regular work was a dishonorable discharge at the hands of a racist military officer, not an arrest record. But both forms of discipline made it difficult to stay employed and both were administered by white-dominated institutions of state violence. For a similar account of a racialized "negative employment scheme" in this case conducted by the postwar Los Angeles Police Department, see Mike Davis and John Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2020), 205.

Pacific Ocean and the rest of the American continent, and its corner on railway termination points) Oakland has been able to get federal financing to turn a natural phenomenon into a multi-million dollar business.”⁴⁵ The Port of Oakland’s business took the form of diesel-spewing trucks and trains endlessly rumbling through the West Oakland neighborhood that Newton grew up in. Bordering the port, the area bore the brunt of its environmental degradation. It also bore the brunt of the globalization of manufacturing and the resultant flight of capital that the shipping hub facilitated. And yet, the millions of dollars of revenue generated by this activity did not circulate in the predominantly Black working-class neighborhood. Oakland’s role in the transnational movement of commodities, materiel, and military personnel was hardly abstract in a community that saw many of its burdens and few of its benefits. For Newton, the contradiction between Oakland’s critically important waterfront and the vast swath of racialized poverty surrounding it made the Panthers’ pursuit of local power all the more strategic.

The Evolution of the Black Panther Party

In October 1972, Black Panther Party Minister of Information Elaine Brown discussed her decision to run for a seat on the Oakland City Council with a group of students at Grove Street College.⁴⁶ The North Oakland campus had helped birth the Party in the mid-1960s, and remained essential to its political project in the subsequent decade.⁴⁷ Huey Newton and Bobby

⁴⁵ “Oakland: An All-American Example,” 1974, series 1, box 50, HPNFC.

⁴⁶ The college was officially known as North Peralta Community College. It was the former site of Merritt College, which relocated to the Oakland hills in 1971 after a protracted student struggle to save the North Oakland campus. Peralta Community College District agreed to maintain both locations, as a concession to the student movement, but closed the North Oakland campus in 1975. The decision to shutter the college was widely understood as retaliation for its linkages to the Black Panthers. Moreover, as Anne Bernstein, an activist in the anti-closure struggle, recalled, the local elites who made the decision were likely endeavoring to squelch “campus protest,” especially in the predominantly Black working-class flatlands: “They needed to ensure there wasn’t a central place where everyone could gather and shut things down.” Anne Bernstein, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), October 3, 2023.

⁴⁷ Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 215-220.

Seale, who was campaigning with Brown as a mayoral candidate, first met at the college and decided to launch the organization after participating in its movement for Black studies. In the six years since its founding, the Party had grown from a local group known for its armed patrols of the Oakland police to a global phenomenon with dozens of chapters, an international section in Algeria, and an array of survival programs providing everything from breakfast to medical care in Black neighborhoods across the United States. Now the Panthers were returning to their roots, opting to consolidate their resources and membership in a single Oakland chapter and, for the first time, vying for power in local elections.⁴⁸

Most of the students Brown addressed were, like Newton and Seale, the children of southerners who had migrated to the region in the middle of the twentieth century in search of war-related jobs. Billy X Jennings, whose family moved west from Alabama in the 1950s after his father secured employment on a California naval base, was a rank-and-file Panther serving as an organizer at the college. He was responsible for turning out students to Party events, including Brown's talk, and more broadly for recruiting volunteers for its local campaigns and survival programs. Jennings was the first in his family to attend college, an experience shared by most of the Black students he worked with on campus. He attributed this fact to the economic "opportunity" that the military opened up in the region. "At that time you had a lot of installations," Jennings recounted, "from the Travis Air Force Base to the Vallejo submarine base, all the way to Hayward, and there were private contractors too." The Bay Area's war

⁴⁸ The Panthers first entered the electoral arena in 1968 under the aegis of the Peace and Freedom Party. Their goal at the time was to generate publicity and critique the status quo. 1973 marked their first serious attempt to compete for local office, signaled by their decision to run as Democrats. Five years earlier, the Panthers had publicly denounced the Democratic Party as the "overt enemy" of Black people. Kathleen Cleaver, "Position of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense on the Seventh Congressional District Election and the Candidacy of John George in the Democratic Party," January 31, 1968, carton 5/reel 16, folder 3, Social Protest Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

economy provided many in his parents' generation with "jobs they could survive on," while affording their children access to higher education at the very moment that Cold War defense spending and the California Master Plan for Higher Education were fueling the sector's expansion.⁴⁹ The Grove Street students had intimate ties to the East Bay's militarized landscape. This reality was not lost on Brown when she designated the region an ideal site for a "revolutionary base of operations." "Oakland is a military-industrial city," she explained. "Its whole operation is based on war. Four out of five of Oakland's federal dollars go into the Vietnamese war, and only one dollar goes back allegedly to take care of the people's needs." Therefore, she continued, "We believe that by running for these offices and by winning, we can...change the face of the city of Oakland."⁵⁰ For Brown and the Panthers, changing "the face of the city" ultimately meant dismantling its coastal belt of military installations and war-related industries and repurposing its parts for revolutionary ends.



Figure 13. Elaine Brown campaign speech at Grove Street College, 1972. *The Black Panther*, November 9, 1972.

⁴⁹ Billy X Jennings, interview with author (Sacramento, CA), April 7, 2023.

⁵⁰ Elaine Brown, "We're Talking about Winning in Oakland," *The Black Panther*, November 9, 1972.

Though their tactics had changed, Brown contended that revolution remained the Party's goal. She characterized the Panthers' electoral campaigns and survival programs as the first step toward "liberating the territory of Oakland." According to Brown, the Party's newfound focus on community service and local state power drew inspiration from the infrastructure established by anticolonial forces in Mozambique. As Brown recalled, "You can go to every revolutionary organization you can find—and the one we looked at was FRELIMO in Mozambique—and that's one of the tools they always use: free clinics, free food, etc."⁵¹ The Party established a direct line of communication with FRELIMO and, during the 1970s, it periodically furnished the nationalist organization with medical supplies from its East Bay clinic.⁵² The anticolonial revolution in Mozambique offered the Panthers in turn a blueprint for organizing the Black working class of the East Bay Area. But Brown made clear that only the nonviolent aspects of the Mozambican insurgency would apply in a place like Oakland, with "its super technological weapons, where they do not have to commit a troop to take out the whole city, because they have 'smart' bombs, helicopters, and all kinds of things so that it doesn't even require the entrance of one troop."⁵³ In this heavily policed "military-industrial city," seeking power extra-legally was downright suicidal.

Brown's rejection of political violence contained a tacit rebuke of Eldridge Cleaver. Cleaver had split with Huey Newton and the Oakland chapter in the previous year over the question of armed struggle. During his exile in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cleaver devised plans for a direct assault on the U.S. state through a series of guerilla attacks targeting "bridges,

⁵¹ Elaine Brown, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), July 9, 2015.

⁵² Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 193-194; Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 147.

⁵³ Elaine Brown, "We're Talking about Winning in Oakland," *Black Panther*, November 9, 1972.

highways, traffic signals,” and other urban chokepoints.⁵⁴ He envisioned Panther rebels trained in Third World nations clandestinely returning to the United States to wage war on the country from within. Though Cuba and Algeria offered asylum to Cleaver and other Party exiles, their governments proved reluctant to arm and train would-be Panther combatants.⁵⁵

The unwillingness of foreign allies to sponsor a Panther insurrection points to another factor behind the Oakland chapter’s reinvention: a desire for self-sufficiency. Given its roots in a neighborhood racked by poverty and structural racism, it is no surprise that the organization initially depended on outside supporters. Among these supporters was a set of wealthy white donors who provided the cash that enabled the Panthers to build a national network of chapters and a global platform during the “Free Huey” campaign of the late 1960s. But, as Newton later acknowledged, such dependencies oriented the Party away from the community in which it originated, licensing a form of militancy that was unburdened from the complexities and compromises associated with Black survival. “In the past we received money from wealthy White philanthropists, humanitarians, and heirs to the corporate monopolies,” wrote Newton. “At the same time we were engaging in a blanket condemnation of the small victimized Black capitalists found in our communities.”⁵⁶ Newton’s autocritique suggested that the Panthers’ reliance on white donors had detracted from the urgent task, recognized at the Party’s outset, of forging structures of economic cooperation within Black communities that could materially

⁵⁴ Korea Trip, blue notebook, 1970, carton 5, folder 8, Eldridge Cleaver Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley [hereafter: ECP]; “Slow Boat to Cuba,” n.d., carton 2, folder 27, ECP.

⁵⁵ Sean Malloy, *Out of Oakland*, 126-129, 188-192; Teishan A. Latner, *Cuban Revolution in America: Havana and the Making of a United States Left, 1968-1992* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 107-108, 111-115.

⁵⁶ Huey Newton, “Black Capitalism Re-Analyzed I, June 5, 1971,” *To Die for the People* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2009 [1972]), 103.

sustain their movement.⁵⁷

The Party's early fundraising efforts allowed it to side step difficult questions about the capital required to finance revolutionary infrastructure. According to Jimmy Slater, a Black Panther reassigned from Cleveland to Oakland in 1972, the Party's general aversion to financial matters undermined its longevity. "We had certain things the Black Panther Party had built and established," recalled Slater, "however, because of our hate for capitalism, we didn't sustain anything....In order to keep the movement going, you've got to have capital."⁵⁸ The Oakland-based Panthers eventually did try to acquire independent sources of capital. That they began to do so in earnest in 1972 was no accident. The Party's ballooning debts and near brush with insolvency during that year made the search for sustainability through access to property, productive assets, and government revenue all the more urgent.⁵⁹

Beyond the practical problems of waging guerilla war as a resource-starved outfit in a country with the strongest military the world had ever seen were theoretical disagreements about the proper role of the vanguard and the masses. In the early 1970s, the Party's Oakland chapter deemed political violence a reckless deviation from the painstaking work of community building. The decision to prioritize local organizing—which in Elaine Brown's words involved "a step-by-step revolutionary process, to clarify the issues, develop the mass mind, solidify a base of

⁵⁷ On the role of co-ops in the Panthers' initial vision, see Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 182. One of the tactics the Party used to force the hands of uncooperative businesses was to organize community boycotts with the goal of securing regular donations. See Huey Newton, "Black Capitalism Re-Analyzed II (Practical Application), August 9, 1971," *To Die for the People*, 109-111.

⁵⁸ Jimmy Slater quoted in "'Talkin' the Talk and Walkin' the Walk': An Interview with Jimmy Slater, conducted by Charles E. Jones," in *The Black Panther Party (Reconsidered)*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 152

⁵⁹ Andrew M. Fearnley, "The Black Panther Party's Publishing Strategies and the Financial Underpinnings of Activism, 1968-1975," *The Historical Journal* 62, no. 1 (2019): 210.

struggle, prepare our people to achieve freedom as nonantagonistically as possible”—marked a turning point in the Party’s development, but not a total rupture with the past.⁶⁰ The Panthers originated as a group dedicated to armed self-defense, a term that was initially appended to its name. Influenced by southern traditions of self-defense and inspired by Frantz Fanon’s critique of the Western Marxist tendency to privilege the industrial proletariat, Newton and Seale insisted that a “lumpen” population of “brothers on the block,” young Black men with no toehold in the formal economy, comprised the real agents of revolution. Reflecting on the period leading up to the Party’s founding, Newton noted that “weapons were a recruiting device” intended to activate the revolutionary potential of “street people.”⁶¹ In his memoir, he compared the impact of the Party’s “armed propaganda”—its initial practice of visibly carrying guns—to the galvanizing force of Fidel “Castro’s guerillas.”⁶² But in the 1970s, the Oakland chapter moved away from masculinist notions of revolutionary change toward nonviolent modes of politics. The pivot to electoral campaigns and the provision of basic services rendered children, elders, and people of all genders equal participants in revolutionary struggle, made the Black church central to the Party’s activities, and opened the door to a cohort of women leaders.⁶³ At the same time, the Party’s strategic decision to organize within the Black community, rather than at the industrial point of production, represented a through line in its history.

The Oakland Panthers committed to building mass support on the local level by acquiring infrastructure rather than sabotaging it. They did so in line with Newton’s theory of

⁶⁰ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 231.

⁶¹ Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 113.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 152.

⁶³ Huey Newton, “On the Relevance of the Church, May 19, 1971,” *To Die for the People*, 60-74.

“intercommunalism,” which announced a rhetorical and strategic pivot from anticolonial nationalism to a politics of community self-determination. Newton contended that “the struggle in the world today is between the small circle that administers and profits from the empire of the United States, and the peoples of the world who want to determine their own destinies.”⁶⁴ If U.S. empire was *the* decisive factor in the maintenance of a white supremacist capitalist order that knew no borders and if confronting it with force was not yet possible, then subverting its authority on the local level offered a viable path forward. As political theorist Delio Vasquez writes, “while Newton’s analysis of capitalist imperialism (reactionary intercommunalism) can be described as ‘non-territorial,’ his prescription for how to resist it—how to bring about revolutionary intercommunalism—emphasizes the importance of territorial control, alongside economic and ideological power.”⁶⁵ In Oakland, the Panthers found a space to resist the imperial drive of the United States.

As chair of the Party from 1974 to 1977, Elaine Brown was responsible for mapping out the territory of intercommunal struggle. Early on, she identified the Port of Oakland as a central coordinate. Brown’s focus on Oakland’s increasingly automated port stemmed from a belief in the emancipatory potential of advanced technologies of production and circulation. The advent of mechanized container shipping in the early 1960s had drastically reduced the ranks of dockworkers on the waterfront, while accelerating a predatory form of global integration.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Huey P. Newton, “Intercommunalism: February 1971,” *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, eds. David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 187.

⁶⁵ Delio Vasquez, “Intercommunalism: The Late Theorizations of Huey P. Newton, ‘Chief Theoretician’ of the Black Panther Party,” *Viewpoint*, June 11, 2018.

⁶⁶ As the *Black Panther* reported, “Containerization is one reason why the longshore workforce has been cut in half since 1960 — despite the fact that the shipping business itself has been booming. “Who Controls the Port of Oakland,” part III, *Black Panther*, May 15, 1976.

Though it was currently used for reactionary purposes, the same technology could be harnessed for revolutionary ends. As Brown noted in a 1976 speech, “technological advancement is not bad or good; it is a question of control and whose interests it serves.”⁶⁷ In the same speech, Brown envisioned a post-work future, in which “machines could turn out those things I wanted, [and] I’d be very happy because then I’d be able to write and sing my songs.” If wrested from the imperial interests that currently controlled them, Oakland’s mechanized ship-to-shore cranes could likewise serve as instruments of liberation—infrastructure for satisfying basic human needs and fostering cross-border solidarity.⁶⁸

While Brown imagined the port as the linchpin of a liberated city, she also invoked it as an untapped resource for immediate reforms. For Brown, the governance of Oakland’s waterfront was a case study in fiscal mismanagement. Accordingly, she made port finance and the broader municipal budget an important site of political contestation. In a campaign speech reprinted on the front page of the *Black Panther* in December 1972, she explained how Oakland’s global seaport belied the city’s supposed inability to adequately house its residents: “Large sums of money come into this city from other countries of the world, and from resources gained through the Port of Oakland. This money is not being put to proper use. We can, together, use the money that is right here in the city of Oakland to implement a decent housing program.”⁶⁹ In her analysis, Brown took aim at the Port of Oakland’s 1927 charter, which limited nearly all of the port’s revenues to operational expenses and capital projects on the waterfront,

⁶⁷ “B.P.P. Chairperson Speaks At Women In The Economy Conference: Elaine Brown: We Really Just Want To Live,” *Black Panther*, May 15, 1976.

⁶⁸ For a similar theorization of automation centered on the experience of Detroit, see James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker’s Notebook* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009 [1963]), 33-60.

⁶⁹ “The First Step Toward the New City: Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown Address Campaign Organizing Meeting,” *Black Panther*, December 23, 1972, 1.

insulating its lucrative business from the rest of the city. By winning power in city hall, the Party could begin the process of revising the charter and, in Brown's words, "use the political machinery to overwhelm the port board with our people."⁷⁰ A vote for the Panthers was a vote for a future in which working-class residents benefited from Oakland's world-city status.

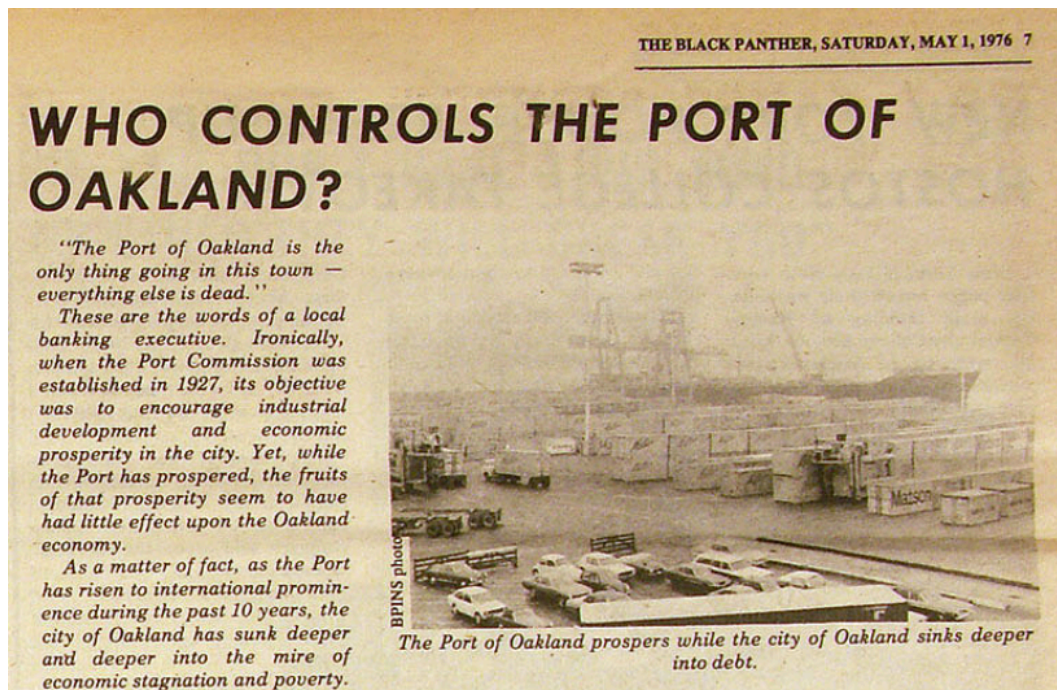


Figure 14. Containerized Port of Oakland in *Black Panther* exposé, 1976. *Black Panther*, May 1, 1976.

The Panthers' electoral support suggests this vision had substantial appeal. In the 1973 election against Republican incumbent John Reading, Bobby Seale earned enough votes for mayor to force a runoff. Elaine Brown, for her part, garnered around 40 percent of the vote in her city council race. When Brown ran again in 1975, her share of the electorate increased to nearly 45 percent. She also secured the backing of a multiracial coalition of organized labor, including both the United Farmworkers and the Teamsters who were otherwise at loggerheads for much of the '70s. In elections for local antipoverty boards responsible for allocating millions of dollars of

⁷⁰ Elaine Brown, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), July 9, 2015.

federal funds, the Party obtained some outright victories. In 1972, four Panther candidates prevailed in their elections for spots on the twenty-four-member Berkeley Community Development Council, while six Panthers won seats on the eighteen-member West Oakland Planning Committee.⁷¹ Such representation placed Party members in a position to approve funding applications submitted by Party entities such as the George Jackson People's Free Medical Clinic.⁷²

Tens of thousands of Oaklanders voted for Panther candidates, shaking up a city dominated for decades by white Republicans. The Party's electoral organizing prepared the ground for Oakland's political realignment, reflected in the election of Panther ally Lionel Wilson as the city's first Black mayor. Elected in 1977, Wilson held the office for over a decade. At the start of his tenure, he made a number of overtures to the Panthers including by shepherding the passage of a "Feed the Cities, Not the Pentagon" resolution, which called for a peace dividend for U.S. cities.⁷³ Aiding Wilson in this legislative push was Carter Gilmore, the first African American elected to the Oakland City Council. A longtime union leader at the Granny Goose potato chip factory in East Oakland, Gilmore entered the world of electoral politics as a volunteer for Bobby Seale's mayoral campaign.⁷⁴ Beyond electoral successes, the Party's voter outreach brought numerous people into organized politics. For Brown, voting was never an end in itself, but "an affirmative statement that you are now a participant at the lowest

⁷¹ Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 200-215; Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 148-156.

⁷² Joan Kelley, Report on BCDC Board of Directors Meeting (Held 9/21/72), September 25, 1972, series 2, box 19, folder 1, HPNFC.

⁷³ Later in his tenure, Wilson ended his overtures to the Oakland left in favor of tax-free enterprise zones and other neoliberal policies designed to lure business. "Mayor Lionel Wilson, Elaine Brown Lend Strong Support: Oakland City Council Adopts Feed the Cities, Not the Pentagon Resolution," *Black Panther*, October 15, 1977.

⁷⁴ Billy X Jennings, interview with author (phone), April 4, 2023.

level of political activity.” Elections were the first step in a long-term campaign. By building a constituency of politically conscious Oaklanders, the Panthers were, in Brown’s words, amassing the power “to seize this city and more importantly to seize that Port of Oakland.”⁷⁵

Oakland and the Third World

Brown and the Panthers did not just demand a more equal distribution of the port’s hefty revenues; they also struggled to transform Oakland’s relationship to the wider world. Transnational travel was an important element of that struggle. By the mid-1970s, Brown had toured revolutionary outposts across the Third World. She spent time in Algeria, the Soviet Union, and Cuba, and visited East Asia twice. The latter two trips were particularly formative. In the summer of 1970, Brown embarked on a month-long tour of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the People’s Republic of China, and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Eldridge Cleaver and a coterie of radicals comprising the U.S. Peoples’ Anti-Imperialist Delegation.⁷⁶ The promise of socialist development loomed large in her recollections of the trip. Back in the Bay Area, Brown described Pyongyang as “a very fast moving city” within “a highly developed, industrial, agricultural state,” a place where health care, education, housing, and clothing were freely available to every citizen. Beijing distinguished itself as a city with a population comparable to New York’s, but where the “land space is plenty enough for them to live comfortably.” Even North Vietnam, a country “stifled” by generations of French, Japanese, and U.S. occupation, struck Brown as remarkably dynamic. “The Vietnamese people are in fact still under these ridiculous conditions, engaged in trying to rebuild their country,” said Brown

⁷⁵ Elaine Brown, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), July 9, 2015.

⁷⁶ Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 107-192.

about her time in Hanoi. “And they’re building factories. They have factories there. And they have cooperative farms, and hospitals.”

When she returned to China in September 1971, this time with Huey Newton and several other Black Panthers, infrastructure was again front and center. The group entered the People’s Republic via Hong Kong, which Brown remembered as a “significant port” that “furnished a corridor through which China could move its own trade, and could listen to the rest of the world and influence its machinations without apparent involvement.” Brown found inspiration in Hong Kong’s role as an interface between a socialist territory and the broader world. “It was what Oakland could be to the Black Panther Party,” she mused during her visit. As in her previous travels, Brown and her delegation had an itinerary replete with tours of factories, schools, and communes. Observing everyday life in a socialist country of more than 700 million made the Panthers’ plans for Oakland, a city of less than 400,000, seem all the more viable.⁷⁷

As a city council candidate, Brown used her extensive time abroad as a selling point to voters. Campaigning at a local antiwar rally in January 1973, she began her remarks by referencing her trip to Hanoi. In Vietnam, Brown received a message that she vowed to spread: the Vietnamese people and the broader Third World are “waiting for the American people to liberate America.”⁷⁸ “Our struggles are all connected,” she added. In her official declaration of candidacy, Brown was even more explicit in connecting her overseas travels to the Panthers’ plans for Oakland. “Having traveled around the world twice, to many major world capitals, trade and industrial centers,” she wrote, “I have gained information and contacts that have prepared me

⁷⁷ ““In North Korea, North Vietnam, Peking China, We were Greeted as the Anti-Imperialist Delegation and as Human Beings as Respected Members of the Human Race’: An Interview with Elaine Brown,” *Black Panther*, October 3, 1970; Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 302; Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 348-353.

⁷⁸ “Anti-War Messages of Bobby, Elaine, and Ericka,” *Black Panther*, February 3, 1973.

to initiate programs to build needed trade and industry, via our Port of Oakland, which will produce more jobs as well as increase business.”⁷⁹ In this way, Brown framed her ties to Third World nations, forged over several years of travel, as assets for Oakland. Linking her overseas trips to the Panthers’ local agenda, Brown conjured a municipality enriched by the cultivation of transnational alliances. Implicit in her statement was a vision of a global city oriented around mutually beneficial exchanges and subnational diplomacy with countries hospitable to the Panthers.

Realizing that vision depended on a series of international delegations, but it also required more sustained work in the halls of the United Nations. From its outset, the Party had treated the UN as an important political arena. Inspired by Malcolm X’s attempt to bring U.S. human rights violations before the international body, Newton amended the Panthers’ 10-point program in 1968 with a call for “a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the Black colony” of the United States.⁸⁰ In the same year, the Party began to use the UN as a venue for dialoguing with Third World governments. Through meetings with their New York-based delegates, the Party established diplomatic ties with Cuba and Tanzania.⁸¹ The UN also played a symbolic role in the Panthers’ foray into electoral politics. As Brown recounted, China’s decision to enter the UN soon after her visit in 1971 helped inspire the Party’s turn to local elections.⁸²

The insurgent potential of the United Nations was most palpable in the General Assembly

⁷⁹ “A Multi-Ethnic International Trade and Cultural Center,” *Black Panther* (supplement on base of operations), November 9, 1972.

⁸⁰ Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time*, 63.

⁸¹ Sean Malloy, *Out of Oakland*, 110-114.

⁸² Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 313.

(UNGA), which emerged in the 1960s and '70s as an important forum for anti-imperialism. When the assembly adopted a Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974, the Panthers took note. The NIEO aimed to undo the “remaining vestiges of alien and colonial domination, foreign occupation, racial discrimination, *apartheid*, and neo-colonialism in all its forms [which] continue to be among the greatest obstacles to the full emancipation and progress of the developing countries and all the peoples involved.”⁸³ The resolution insisted that decolonization would only be meaningful if it extended to the economic realm through a program of reparations, technology transfer, resource nationalization, and price-setting power for exporters of primary commodities. The NIEO’s promotion by the Group of 77 nations, whose populations comprised 70 percent of the world, made it a viable alternative to an economic order that enshrined the rights of private capital and locked in the global south’s unequal integration, thereby preserving imperial hierarchies in a putatively postcolonial age.⁸⁴ That economic order would come to be known as neoliberal globalization. The Panthers called it reactionary intercommunalism, a term synonymous with the rise of U.S. empire as the superintendent of global capitalism.⁸⁵ Party theoreticians identified how the financial and military power of the United States was “making the world safe for multinational corporations.”⁸⁶ They framed the Party’s efforts to seize Oakland’s government as

⁸³ United Nations General Assembly, Resolutions Adopted on the Report of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Sixth Special Session: Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Economic Order, Resolution No. 3201 (S-VI), May 1, 1974.

⁸⁴ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 142-175; Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 218-261.

⁸⁵ On U.S. empire’s role in superintending global capitalism after World War II, see Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2012).

⁸⁶ “Big Business Attacks U.N. Voting Structure: Making the World Safe for Multinationals,” *Black Panther*, October 22, 1977.

complementary with the Third World struggle for economic sovereignty. *Black Panther* editors praised the Group of 77 for launching the UNGA special session that would establish the NIEO: their efforts showed “how this world institution must be used to carry forward the worldwide struggle against imperialism; of working within the existing world system to radically change that system.”⁸⁷ Such praise doubled as an endorsement of the Party’s own strategy of pursuing radical change within an existing system of governance.

The extensive coverage of NIEO proceedings in the *Black Panther* reflected the Party’s evolving relationship to formal politics, as well as its changing conception of internationalism. These changes were clearly expressed in a series of articles from 1976. One piece reported on a five-day conference devoted to the “Social Implications of a New Economic Order.” Held in Switzerland, the gathering drew an array of Third World leaders, including delegates from Mexico, Algeria, and Mali. But the photograph positioned above the article does not show a conference hall packed with suited dignitaries or a podium graced by a head of state. Instead, it depicts a Black woman carrying a bundle of sticks on her back. Her gaze is directed downward at her bare feet. The caption reads, “African woman forced to perform hard labor because of world economic inequalities.”⁸⁸ The photo and caption underscored the stakes of the conference, illustrating how the injustices of global capitalism fell disproportionately on the backs of African women.

⁸⁷ “Editorial: The U.N. Session,” *Black Panther*, April 13, 1974.

⁸⁸ “Third World Countries Urge New Economic Order,” *Black Panther*, February 7, 1976.

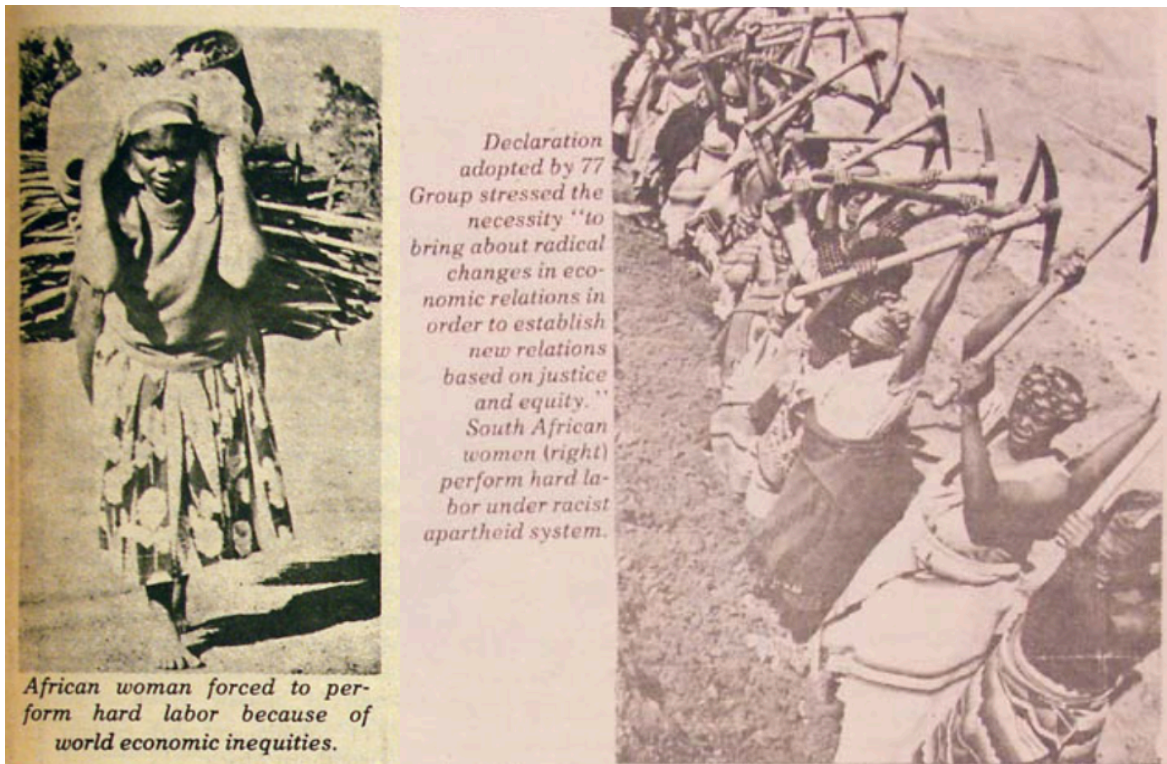


Figure 15, Figure 16. Black Panther Party's new visual language, 1976. *Black Panther*, February 7, 1976 and February 28, 1976.

A similar textual and visual message can be found in a subsequent news story about a NIEO-focused meeting of the Group of 77.⁸⁹ While the article centers on economic policies such as the proposal by Guyana's delegate to abolish the International Monetary Fund, the accompanying photograph again shows Black women at work. In the image, dozens of women stand should-to-shoulder in a field. They are wielding pickaxes, which are raised over their heads in unison. The photo evokes motion, coordination, and strenuous work. The caption beside it informs the reader that these are "South African women perform[ing] hard labor under [the] racist apartheid system." The scene and the accompanying description illustrate capitalism's tendency to turn racial and gendered differences into profitable differentials, suggesting that the fate of Black women in apartheid South Africa was a microcosm of inequalities structuring the

⁸⁹ "77 Nation Group Adopts Declaration on World Economic Order," *Black Panther*, February 28, 1976.

broader world-system. But these women are not mere victims, as their collective force makes clear. If South African women epitomized the ruthless exploitation of global capitalism, they also embodied its gravediggers.

Such images bore the ideological imprint of the majority-women editorial collective that ran the *Black Panther* in the 1970s.⁹⁰ In this period, gender became an ever-present lens in the Party's analysis. While early editions of the paper cast the guerilla soldier as the definitive revolutionary subject, later editions shifted focus, foregrounding, as Ashley Farmer observes, "black women's everyday acts of militancy." In doing so, Farmer notes, "Panther women expanded the definition of who could be a radical or revolutionary actor and of what constituted a revolutionary act."⁹¹ The juxtaposition of Third World statecraft with Black women's collective labor captured the Party's own attempt to fuse radical electoral campaigns with the politicization of everyday life. This blend of formal politics and bottom-up organizing shifted the site of revolutionary solidarity from the masculinist sphere of armed struggle to the everyday bonds of feminized labor.

Like its cultural productions, the Party's foreign relations exhibited major shifts over the course of the 1970s. An instructive case is the Cuban exile of Huey Newton and the broader relationship between the Cuban revolution and the Panthers' pursuit of local political power. Cuba not only provided safe harbor to an embattled Panther leader; the country's revolutionary process offered lessons to U.S. radicals fighting to liberate their city. Tracing the ties between the Oakland Black Panthers and the Cuban revolution brings to the fore an assemblage of

⁹⁰ Linda Lumsden, "Good Mothers with Guns: Framing Black Womanhood in the Black Panther, 1968-1980," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 86, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 904.

⁹¹ Farmer, *Remaking Black Power*, 84, 85.

infrastructure—from factories to medical clinics—that sustained the Panthers’ political vision in a time of backlash and austerity. In the 1970s, the Party looked to Cuba not as a paragon of armed struggle but as a model of socialist development.

Well before Newton arrived in Havana, the Oakland Panthers had abandoned all pretense to guerilla war. But allegations of violence continued to stalk them. Newton fled to Cuba in 1974 to avoid standing trial for a murder charge, which he denounced as a frame up by a vindictive local police department. During his three years in exile, he contributed to his adopted society as a university instructor teaching subjects such as North American politics and Black history. But he found his work at a cement truck factory to be more fulfilling, because, Newton recalled, “I felt that I was participating in the Cuban Revolution in the way that I could be most needed.”⁹² Such work also contributed to Newton’s political development. “I gained some information and knowledge,” he continued, “not only how to repair a cement truck but also I could observe life at a very direct level in a socialist country.” Newton relayed these observations to Oakland via regular communications with Elaine Brown. In notes from an island-wide tour, versions of which were passed onto Brown, Newton documented the everyday realities of the transition to socialism. His most detailed passages describe the workings of Cuban farms and factories. For example, at Havana’s La Pasiega Spaghetti Factory, Newton was struck by the presence of educational classes, a nearby daycare and medical clinic for workers and their families, and “factory micro-brigades, [which] have built an apartment building” for the workforce.⁹³ Across the island, Newton found similar instances of socially oriented production, grassroots

⁹² “Exclusive Interview With Huey P. Newton: I Cannot Be Intimidated Because I Have Given My Life To The People,” *Black Panther*, July 30, 1977.

⁹³ Huey P. Newton, typed notes from Cuba tour: “all provinces visited except for Matanzas,” December 1974-January 1975, series 1, box 2, folder 15, HPNFC.

mobilization, and state infrastructure tailored to basic human needs. The experience left a deep impression on him. Newton had once painted the Panthers as “an integral part of the army of resistance” launched from Cuba’s shores by Che Guevara.⁹⁴ By the mid-1970s such martial language became strictly metaphorical. For Newton, the Party’s new mission was more akin to the developmentalist side of Cuba’s revolution. In 1976, Newton told an interviewer in Havana that he was still “impressed by Che [and] Fidel,” but no longer “believed an armed insurrection could work” in the United States.⁹⁵



Figure 17. Huey Newton (fourth from right) in Havana, Cuba, 1977. *CoEvolution Quarterly*, Fall 1977.

Back in Oakland, the Black Panthers set about building their own island of socialism. In creating medical clinics, communal housing, community schools, and other social programs in

⁹⁴ “¡Exclusivo! Desde la Carcel de Alameda, California, Entrevista a Newton,” *El Mundo* (Cuba), 18 de agosto de 1968, Suplemento especial-3, available in Biblioteca Nacional de Cuba José Martí, Havana, Cuba.

⁹⁵ Raymond Boone, “Newton gives views on Cuba, Cleaver, Kissinger and Third World,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 1, 1976.

conjunction with bids for local office, they found inspiration in Cuba's example. Tellingly, while Cuba had previously figured as little more than an occasional token of Third World resistance in the Party's newspaper, coverage of the country's revolutionary process abounded in the pages of the *Black Panther* during Newton's exile. In the mid-1970s, Panther journalists wrote detailed articles on Cuban elections and on the program of participatory democracy spearheaded by the Committee to Defend the Revolution.⁹⁶ In February 1976, the paper featured a profile of Cuba's health care system.⁹⁷ The article highlighted the stunning progress in rural medical service following the overthrow of Fulgencio Batista. The same edition included an in-depth report on the People's Free Medical Clinic, a Panther program that, like its Cuban counterpart, met the medical needs of a previously neglected population.⁹⁸ By showcasing the parallels between Cuban and Panther social programs, the *Black Panther* placed Oakland squarely within the Third World project of socialist transformation.⁹⁹

The Political Economy of Survival

The construction of a grassroots system of social support was acutely needed in the 1970s,

⁹⁶ "Intercommunal News: 95 Per Cent Turnout For Cuba's People's Power Elections," *Black Panther*, November 6, 1976.

⁹⁷ "Cuban Revolution Brings Advances in Health Care," *Black Panther*, February 21, 1976. On Cuba's health care system and medical internationalism, see Don Fitz, *Cuban Health Care: The Ongoing Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020); Julie M. Feinsilver, "Fifty Years of Cuba's Medical Diplomacy: From Idealism to Pragmatism," *Health Travels: Cuban Health(care) On and Off the Island*, ed. Nancy Burke (San Francisco: University of California Medical Humanities Press, 2013), 105-128.

⁹⁸ "People's Free Medical Clinic Model In Community Health Care," *Black Panther*, February 21, 1976. On the history of Black Panther health care programs, see Alondra Nelson, *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

⁹⁹ Clive Y. Thomas, "'The Non-Capitalist Path' as Theory and Practice of Decolonization and Socialist Transformation," *Latin American Perspectives* 5, no. 2 (1978): 10-28; Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nation: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007).

as the United States weathered a multi-year recession compounded by soaring inflation.¹⁰⁰ But unlike Cuba, which was enjoying a period of relative stability due to high global sugar prices and rising trade with the Soviet Union, the Black Panther Party lacked an export commodity to fund its socialist infrastructure.¹⁰¹ The Panthers sought to remedy this predicament by parlaying their existing assets into a local economic base.¹⁰² Their efforts began with the Stronghold Corporation. Established by Panther lawyers David Lubell and Martin Kenner in 1970, Stronghold managed the proceeds from the newspaper sales, literary contracts, and speaking engagements of Party members.¹⁰³ With the organization under siege, the corporation promised to “maximize the extent to which the [Party’s] monies can be safe from attack, attachment, lien by federal and state governments.”¹⁰⁴ It also allowed the Panthers to “minimize taxes” and invest in bonds with a Wall Street firm, an illustration of the contradictions inherent to anti-capitalist institution building in a capitalist society.¹⁰⁵ In the corporation’s first year, the Panthers’ various revenue streams generated over \$200,000, with nearly \$100,000 in net profit.¹⁰⁶

Much of this income funded mortgages and rents for Panther offices and community

¹⁰⁰ The economic downturn is one reason the Black Panthers, and Black Power groups across the country, saw a decline in donations and book sales after 1972. While predominantly Black working-class neighborhoods had experienced an economic crisis long before 1973, the onset of stagflation worsened it. On the declining finances of Black Power groups in the 1970s, see Andrew Fearnley, “The Financial Underpinnings of Activism,” 216.

¹⁰¹ Aviva Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 48-9.

¹⁰² While this chapter largely focuses on the Panthers’ licit enterprises, the Party did eventually turn to Oakland’s underground economy as another income stream. See Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 221-223.

¹⁰³ Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 119-120. Andrew Fearnley, “The Financial Underpinnings of Activism.”

¹⁰⁴ David G. Lubell, Structure for Income Producing Assets and Property of the Black Panther Party, series 2, box 21, folder 19, HPNFC.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.; Andrew Fearnley, “The Financial Underpinnings of Activism,” 206.

¹⁰⁶ Stronghold Consolidated Productions, Inc., Receipts and Disbursements, November 1, 1970 to October 31, 1971, series 2, box 21, folder 22, HPNFP.

spaces, as well as communal housing for the rank-and-file Panthers who sustained them. By the end of 1972, the Party owned or rented 21 properties, 13 of them in the East Bay Area, most of which were acquired by Panther real estate agent Arlene Slaughter.¹⁰⁷ The equity amassed in these properties enabled the issuance of bail bonds, a lifeline for an organization riddled by state repression.¹⁰⁸ But the properties were first and foremost spaces for Panthers to live, gather, and work. Decommodified shelter made full-time activism possible, offering a refuge within a steadily inflating housing market.¹⁰⁹ At the time, urban real estate in the Bay Area was experiencing a renaissance amid the takeoff of the national “back to the city” movement.¹¹⁰ In the Party’s West Oakland base, capital started flowing into vacant lots and home rehabilitation projects.¹¹¹ That this majority-renter neighborhood was ripe for profitable redevelopment stemmed from decades of redlining and organized abandonment by state officials and absentee

¹⁰⁷ List of all property owned and rented by Stronghold, December 6, 1972, series 2, box 19, folder 11, HPNFP.

¹⁰⁸ *Columbia University Black Panther Project: Interview of Mickey Phillips by Lewis Cole, July 5, 1990* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2005), 36.

¹⁰⁹ “All-Transactions House Price Index for Oakland-Berkeley-Livermore, CA (MSAD), April 1, 1975 to October 1, 2022, FRED Economic Data, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/ATNHPIUS36084Q#0>.

¹¹⁰ On the back-to-the-city movement as a capital-driven effort to increase ground rents, see Neil Smith, “Toward a Theory of Gentrification: A Back to the City Movement by Capital not People,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 45, no. 4 (1979): 538-548.

¹¹¹ Efforts to boost property values in West Oakland often proceeded under the auspices of philanthropy. For example, in 1974 the Oakland Economic Development Foundation (OEDF), whose donors included Bay Area corporations such as Kaiser Industries, Pacific Gas & Electric, Wells Fargo, and Bank of America, purchased an empty lot in West Oakland from the city’s Redevelopment Agency for \$1,500 with the intent of raising its market value to \$35,000. To do so, the OEDF employed Black students from McClymonds High School as construction workers and paid them the minimum wage. Such development increased ground rents in the neighborhood, which squeezed tenants, but the OEDF framed it as a driver of “job opportunities for a good number of minority students following graduation.” Nils Eklund, memo, January 4, 1974, carton 53, folder 23, Edgar F. Kaiser Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley [hereafter: EFKP].

landlords.¹¹² The Party used its public platform to inveigh against predatory real estate investment. And by acquiring housing in the private market, it sought to chip away at the monopoly power of the rentier class.¹¹³ But even when Panthers had the funds to rent or purchase property, they were often stymied by hostile owners who refused to do business with them. In a letter to Huey Newton, Oakland businessman Albert McKee shed light on the barriers obstructing the Panthers in the private market. In a plea for back rent, McKee complained to Newton that “I have suffered not only financial losses, but harassment as a result of the stand I took in leasing my property to you.”¹¹⁴ According to Billy X Jennings, such “harassment” typically came from FBI agents who would “come around and bug” landlords who had decided to rent to Panthers.¹¹⁵ This only added to the reluctance of local property owners to lease their spaces to the Party.

In the face of economic exclusion, the Black Panthers developed a variety of tactics to get their foot in the door of local real estate. Connections to Bay Area colleges proved crucial. The Party frequently housed its members in shared apartments leased by students. “We had a lot of students,” remembered Jennings, people who were frequently “moving around” or leaving the area after a few years. And when a student did not “need the apartment anymore,” he continued, “we’re keeping the apartment. We’re paying rent on it every month.”¹¹⁶ Another tactic involved

¹¹² Keannga Yamahtta-Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Rebecca K. Marchiel, *After Redlining: The Urban Reinvestment Movement in the Era of Financial Deregulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

¹¹³ The Party singled out the Grubb & Ellis real estate firm for its predatory practices and close ties to local government. “The City Structure’s ‘Anointment Appointment’ Process,” *Black Panther*, January 6, 1973.

¹¹⁴ Albert McKee to Huey Newton, June 23, 1971, series 2, box 20, folder 1, HPNFC.

¹¹⁵ Billy X Jennings, interview with author (Sacramento, CA), April 7, 2023.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

the use of white front buyers or sympathetic owners willing to transfer their titles.¹¹⁷ In the early 1970s, the American Friends Service Committee agreed to hand over one of its properties to the Party, with Stronghold taking up the outstanding debt on the holding.¹¹⁸ The East Oakland house became the residence of five Panthers and their children. Living rent free, the Panthers could devote their energies to running the George Jackson Free Health Clinic, the Oakland Community School which their children attended, and the Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (S.A.F.E.) program, an escort and transportation service for elders.¹¹⁹ Drawing on a multiracial network of Bay Area leftists, the Party acquired properties to house the people who kept the survival programs running.

Access to real estate allowed the Party to undertake care work at a time when the welfare state was shrinking. It likewise opened the door to manufacturing in an age of runaway factories. In the early 1970s, the Panthers obtained two industrial properties in Oakland with plans to produce clothing and shoes. The businesses would serve multiple purposes. The garment factory was intended to produce free clothing for Oaklanders at a monthly rate of 300 to 400 garments.¹²⁰ Panthers would staff the factory. And because their basic needs were already met, they would not command any labor costs. To cover materials, machines, and rent, the Party would reserve a portion of the factory for the production of golf bags, which would then be sold for a profit. The choice to enter the golf bag industry was not a random one. Eldridge Cleaver captured a popular sentiment when he wrote in the mid-1960s that “the new symbol of white

¹¹⁷ *Columbia University Black Panther Project: Interview of Mickey Phillips by Lewis Cole, July 5, 1990*, 36-39.

¹¹⁸ Allan Brotsky to Wesley Huss, September 17, 1971, series 2, box 19, folder 12, HPNFC.

¹¹⁹ Elaine Brown to Allan Brotsky, April 17, 1976, series 2, box 19, folder 10, HPNFC.

¹²⁰ Huey Newton, “On the Relevance of the Church, May 19, 1971,” *To Die for the People*, 66.

supremacy is golf.”¹²¹ The Panthers reasoned that producing a luxury good favored by the executives of multinational corporations was a more ethical way to generate capital than producing a staple of working-class consumers. Newton described this arrangement as “robbing Peter to pay Paul.”¹²² This small act of redistribution would lay the groundwork for a moral economy within the ruins of industrial capitalism.

The shoe factory had a similar mandate. Its main purpose was the production of shoes freely available to anyone who needed them. In contrast to the garment factory, the plant would employ formerly incarcerated Oaklanders, many of whom gained experience in shoe-making during their time in prison. Since the promise of employment increased one’s chances for parole, the factory would serve as a vehicle of decarceration and a means of bringing new people into the Party. The free shoe and clothing programs embodied the Panthers’ new ethos of “survival pending revolution.” Channeling the *We Charge Genocide* petition produced by William Patterson and the Communist-aligned Civil Rights Congress in 1951, Party theorists contended that economic deprivation, coupled with police violence and racial terror, amounted to the state-sponsored genocide of Black people. It followed then that resisting this eliminatory drive by organizing for survival was a precondition of revolutionary change.

The Panthers’ forays into manufacturing also reflected an alternative vision for Oakland’s economy. Since the end of World War II, the city had steadily lost industrial capacity. Lured by lower taxes and cheaper land rents, factories migrated to nearby suburbs along with white residents pursuing the financial and social promise of the suburban home.¹²³ Advances in

¹²¹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 162

¹²² Huey Newton, “On the Relevance of the Church, May 19, 1971,” *To Die for the People*, 66.

¹²³ Robert Self, *American Babylon*.

shipping technology and transportation infrastructure over the second half of the twentieth century enabled manufacturers to site production ever further from centers of distribution, setting capital in motion once again. The sunbelt region of the United States became a prime destination, enticing corporations with comparatively low wages, taxes, and levels of unionization.¹²⁴ In the 1970s, the search for cheaper labor costs morphed into a global race to the bottom.

Manufacturers began to off-shore production to lower-income countries, which, thanks to capital-friendly trade agreements, seldom moved up the value chain in the process.¹²⁵ As the first seaport on the West Coast to embrace container shipping and the just-in-time logistics revolution that it spawned, Oakland played a critical role in the globalization of manufacturing.¹²⁶ But since rising port revenues did not offset the city's shrinking tax base, this process wreaked havoc on its municipal coffers. The globalizing economy left in its wake an assortment of empty factories and idle equipment in formerly industrial cities. Before long, the real estate sector began to fill the vacuum. The final decades of the twentieth century saw numerous factories converted into housing units largely unaffordable to working-class households.¹²⁷ The resultant increase in property values triggered a cycle of displacement that expelled long-time residents from their neighborhoods.

The Panthers' efforts to revive manufacturing in Oakland's once industrial core

¹²⁴ Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, *Sunbelt Capitalism: Phoenix and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹²⁵ Vijay Prashad, *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* (New York: Verso, 2012).

¹²⁶ On the logistics revolution, see Edna Bonacich and Jake B. Wilson, *Getting the Goods: Ports, Labor, and the Logistics Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008). Charmaine Chua aptly argues that from the perspective of the Third World, the logistics turn is better understood as a counter-revolution. Charmaine Chua, "The Logistics Counter-Revolution and the Transpacific Empire of Capital," presented at University of California, Irvine Department of Global and International Studies, October 6, 2022.

¹²⁷ Steven Greenhouse, "Old Factories Becoming Apartments," *New York Times*, July 7, 1974; Samuel Stein, *Capital City: Urban Planning in the Real Estate State* (New York: Verso, 2019), 32-49.

represented a different form of urban renewal. While deindustrialization decimated the city's tax base, it also lowered the barrier to entry for new industrialists. To begin production in the garment factory, the Panthers only needed \$1,800 in start-up capital, which included first and last month's rent on both the facility and its 18 machines.¹²⁸ Rent at the shoe factory was a mere \$125, less than 20 percent of the monthly cost of Huey Newton's Lake Merritt apartment.¹²⁹ The Panthers recognized that capital flight from cities left them well positioned to acquire industrial space and equipment. In a 1974 article on the Party's free shoe program, a Panther author discussed the prospect of opening a new manufacturing facility, observing that "There will be many vacant spots within the heart of the city to house the factory." In addition, the mass exodus of shoe manufacturers from U.S. metropolises guaranteed there would be an abundance of used technology ready for purchase. "Boston alone has had over 60 shoe factories move out in the past 11 years," the author continued, "leaving a great number of machines stored there which can be bought for dirt cheap prices."¹³⁰ A similar pattern was playing out in the Bay Area. In May 1972, Austin Allen visited the Santa Rosa Shoe Company to scout out the factory on behalf of the Party. At the top of his subsequent report, he noted that the factory was the only one of its kind still operating in the region.¹³¹ The Bay Area had once been home to numerous shoe manufacturers but in the postindustrial age only one remained and it was located a full 60 miles

¹²⁸ Memo: Recap cash requirements current projects, June 11, 1971, series 2, box 21, folder 22, HPNFC.

¹²⁹ List of all property owned and rented by Stronghold, December 6, 1972, series 2, box 19, folder 11, HPNFC.

¹³⁰ Guest Edited by the Black Panther Party, *CoEvolution Quarterly*, September 23, 1974, 44.

¹³¹ Austin Allen to June Hilliard, c.a. May 1972, series 2, box 21, folder 1, HPNFC.

from Oakland.¹³²

Surveying the economic landscape of the 1970s, the Party decided that conditions were ripe for factories of its own. But many obstacles stood in their way. In a June 1971 memo, a Party member told Newton that attempts to secure a contract with a golf bag company to cover the costs of the garment factory's inputs had been unsuccessful.¹³³ As with local property owners, such companies were probably reluctant to do business with a Black organization advocating revolution. Zoning posed another obstacle. The City of Oakland agreed to grant an initial permit for the shoe factory but only on a temporary basis. After the first year, Party member Gwen Hodges submitted a written request for an extension. Her request was provisionally granted, but the renewal requirement meant the business's continued existence depended on the whims of a governing body deeply hostile to the Panthers.¹³⁴ Despite these impediments, the Party decided to move forward with its industrial plans, obtaining multiyear leases for both factories by the middle of 1971.

Not every government agency gave the Party short shrift. Its garment factory was supported by a loan from the federally funded Oakland Small Business Development Center (OSBDC).¹³⁵ The OSBDC's director, Joseph Debro, was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1928. Like the Black Panther Party's founders, his family was among the generation of Black Oaklanders who had migrated during the 1940s in search of war work and an escape from the

¹³² Richard Walker, "Industry Builds Out the City: The Suburbanization of Manufacturing in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1940" in *Manufacturing Suburbs: Building Work and Home*, ed. Robert Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 92-123.

¹³³ Memo: Recap cash requirements current projects, June 11, 1971, series 2, box 21, folder 22, HPNFC.

¹³⁴ Thomas H. Doctor to Gwen Hodges, December 29, 1971, series 2, box 21, folder 1, HPNFC.

¹³⁵ Arlene Slaughter to Martin Kenner, Sept 23, 1971, series 2, box 19, folder 11, HPNFC.

violence and precarity of the Jim Crow South.¹³⁶ Before joining the OSBDC, Debro worked as an engineer on a California freeway project and learned firsthand about the pervasive discrimination Black people faced in the Bay Area's contracting and construction sectors. As director of the OSBDC, Debro channeled funds from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to local Black workers and businesses. This was not the first time the OEO had aided the Party. Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had previously commandeered resources from a North Oakland OEO poverty center to publish the Party's founding ten-point program. Now, the OEO was directly backing the Panthers' work, an encapsulation of the War on Poverty's dual function as an instrument of pacification in U.S. ghettos and an unintended vehicle of radical movements for self-determination.¹³⁷ But the funding was not enough to sustain the business. The Party paid rent on its industrial properties for over a year, but they stayed dormant for most of that time. Unable to mobilize sufficient resources to keep the factories running, the Party reneged on its leases and before long abandoned the properties altogether. By 1974, the Panthers no longer entertained the possibility of manufacturing apparel. They opted instead to "visit various businesses, churches, etc., to ask for funds for the purchase of the clothing," which they would then give away for free.¹³⁸

Despite their ultimate failure to become operational businesses, the Panthers' factories point to developmental roads not taken in 1970s Oakland. Indeed, they were not the only Black-led manufacturing ventures to appear in the city. United Manufacturers and Research Enterprises

¹³⁶ On Joseph Debro and the OSBDC see John J. Rosen, "Guardians of the Black Working Class: Labor and Racial Politics in Postwar San Francisco" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Chicago, 2014), 170-192.

¹³⁷ Ananya Roy, Stuart Schrader, and Emma Shaw Crane, "'The Anti-Poverty Hoax': Development, pacification, and the making of community in the global 1960s," *Cities* 44 (April 2015): 139-145.

¹³⁸ Guest Edited by the Black Panther Party, *The CoEvolution Quarterly*, September 23, 1974, 45.

(UMARE) charted a similar course.¹³⁹ Spearheaded in 1969 by members of Blacks Unified to Motivate Progress, a nonprofit founded by middle-class Black men who were active in Oakland's civic affairs, UMARE secured donations from the city's major corporations, including Kaiser Industries.¹⁴⁰ Like the Panthers, the organization made plans to launch an apparel manufacturer. But the plans never materialized. UMARE was hobbled by internal disputes and never secured sufficient funding to get off the ground.¹⁴¹

As the UMARE project made clear, there was nothing inherently radical about launching a Black-run manufacturing company in Oakland's urban core. But the goal for the Panthers was not to diversify the city's business-owning class; it was to establish an independent economic base to prop up a movement of poor and working-class Oaklanders. More ambitiously, the Panthers saw their manufacturing gambit as a step toward a more socially just supply chain. If the Port of Oakland knitted the city into a system of commerce that served the interests of multinational corporations, the Party believed that such a system could be made to work for the structurally unemployed.

Local Worldmaking

The Panthers' commitment to social transformation at local and global scales inspired their proposal for a Multi-Ethnic International Trade and Cultural Center, a sprawling complex which they hoped to construct on the eastern edge of the Oakland waterfront. The Party introduced the proposal during the electoral campaigns of Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown. Both

¹³⁹ Booker Emery to Darby Betts, April 22, 1969, carton 53, folder 2, EFKP.

¹⁴⁰ Kaiser also collaborated with Ed Howard to offer free business consulting to the various enterprises seeded by Dignity, Inc., the "economic arm" of the Afro-American Association. E.R. Ordway, "Inter-Office Memorandum: BUMP-Blacks Unified to Motivate Progress," carton 53, folder 2, EFKP. "Perseverance Pays Off For Volunteers Working On Programs Sponsored by Dignity, Inc.," *Kaiser Home Office*, August 1968.

¹⁴¹ Alfred Williams resignation, July 10, 1969, carton 53, folder 2, EFKP.

candidates touted the center as a way to capitalize on the city's booming commerce. By creating thousands of jobs along with new sources of municipal revenue, the publicly owned institution would ensure that all Oaklanders benefited from the steady stream of shipping containers passing through the port.¹⁴² With its large collection of shops and exhibits uplifting the cultures of Third World countries, the center would also foster a cosmopolitan spirit in the city. The center's broader purpose was to advance an alternative form of global trade and foreign relations. The Panthers envisioned its ethos of international cooperation tempering the drive of Western militarism and commercial exploitation. "Trade without cultural understanding and mutual respect leads to international contempt and hostilities," noted a *Black Panther* article promoting the center. "This kind of 'trade' does nothing to build the kind of world the people of all lands desire."¹⁴³ The Panthers strove to build that world in 1970s Oakland. Instead of retreating from global trade, the Party worked to establish a non-hierarchical mode of exchange that respected the political and economic sovereignty of all communities.

Lacking the finance and authority to implement such a program, the Panthers made efforts to implant their ideas in local soil with the ultimate goal of winning municipal power. They did so by fashioning an internationalist political culture rooted in the everyday experiences of working-class people. Their electoral campaigns became a laboratory for concretely linking the local and the global. Soon after the BPP announced its intention to run Panther candidates in the 1973 election, it staged a series of conferences that reflected its new synthesis of community service, municipal power, and anti-imperialism. The Anti-War, African Liberation, Voter

¹⁴² The candidates promised 3,000 permanent jobs at the center, and an additional 2,000 to construct it. Community Committee to Elect Bobby Seale Mayor, "Vote May 15th: Elect an Effective Democrat: Bobby Seale Mayor of Oakland," 1973, carton 5/reel 16, folder 6, Social Protest Collection, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁴³ "Oakland Mayor Steals Seale/Brown Trade Idea," *Black Panther*, September 15, 1973.

Registration, Survival Conference took place on June 24, 1972 in the Oakland Auditorium. A flyer for the event promised “10,000 free full bags of groceries (with large grade AA eggs in every bag),” as well as “10,000 sickle cell anemia tests” and “top entertainment.”¹⁴⁴ Ahead of the conference, the Party ran ads on KDIA—a local Black radio station—announcing its musical lineup of John Lee Hooker, Sister Love, and Oakland’s own Tower of Power.¹⁴⁵ The conference drew approximately 5,000 people, most of them young Black Oaklanders.¹⁴⁶ In addition to the musical performances, attendees listened to a range of speakers, including congressman Ron Dellums, Le Mal of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and Father Earl Neil, who headed the West Oakland church where the Panthers’ established their first Free Breakfast for Children Program.

Bobby Seale delivered a campaign speech that was periodically interrupted with applause. His remarks ranged across local and global issues, combining denunciations of racist police violence and discriminatory hiring practices at the Port of Oakland with calls to end the Vietnam War. To illustrate the tangible connections between these various struggles, he pointed to government budgets. “These billions of dollars are taken out of the people’s pockets, and used to murder people in Vietnam,” declared Seale. “These billions are used to murder and colonize our African brothers; and the same tax money, the same tax money that they take out of your pocket, is used to pay some racist, low-lifed [sic] policeman to beat and murder our own people

¹⁴⁴ Anti-War, African Liberation, Voter Registration, Survival Conference flyer, n.d., series 2, box 19, folder 3, HPNFC.

¹⁴⁵ At the time, Tower of Power was using the Panthers’ Oakland Community School as one of its practice spaces, a reflection of the close ties between the band and the Black Power organization. Billy X Jennings, interview with author (phone), April 4, 2023. “Bobby Seale: As Radical as the People,” *Ann Arbor Sun*, November 30, 1973.

¹⁴⁶ Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 147.

right here at home.”¹⁴⁷ In this way, Seale demonstrated the linkages between foreign wars and domestic policing as well as the inverse relationship between state violence and social welfare. The Panthers sought to the reverse this budgetary calculus: they aimed to defund the police and military in order to underwrite the expansion of the social wage.¹⁴⁸

The same local-global analysis informed the Party’s approach to voter outreach. During the conference, the Panthers circulated a petition, which doubled as a voter contact list. The petition articulated the Party’s internationalist vision. Speaking in the name of the “poor and oppressed people of the world,” it called on “the U.S. government...to stop its wars of aggression in Vietnam, in southern Africa, in Latin America, and its brutality and exploitation in all our communities, so that the world’s peoples may begin to live together in harmonic peace and freedom.”¹⁴⁹ The Panthers were well aware that a single petition would not alter the course of U.S. foreign policy or law enforcement. Its real purpose was not to persuade government officials to change their ways but to generate excitement for the Party’s agenda and enthusiasm for a movement that vowed to make Oakland a hub of anti-imperialism.

To build a pro-Panther constituency, the Party combined political education with a comprehensive program of voter outreach. Under the direction of the Panthers’ voter registration elections committee, hundreds of volunteer registrars canvassed neighborhoods in and around Oakland, engaging in thousands of one-on-one conversations with potential voters and

¹⁴⁷ “Survival on World Battlefields: Thousands Gather at Anti-War, African Liberation, Voter Registration, Survival Conference,” *Black Panther*, July 1, 1972.

¹⁴⁸ Seale made this point explicitly, telling the thousands gathered in the auditorium that “we’ve got to cut that police budget in half...and put it back into the community and build concrete survival programs.” Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Anti-War, African Liberation, Voter Registration, Survival Conference Petition, n.d., series 2, box 19, folder 3, HPNFC.

registering tens of thousands of Oaklanders to vote.¹⁵⁰ The ground covered by the registrars mapped the Party's presumptive base. The outreach circuit included unemployment and welfare offices, community colleges, public buses, and grocery stores. Churches proved auspicious targets. On a Sunday in February 1973, registrars signed up several dozen churchgoers at Morning Star, Galalee Baptist, St. Francis, Paradise Baptist, Elmhurst Presbyterian, and St. Benedicts.¹⁵¹ At a number of these churches, both Black and white individuals were registered, an indication that racially integrated congregations played a role in the Party's efforts to build a rainbow coalition of voters.¹⁵² The meticulous tally of ethnic data by volunteer registrars documented the coalition's diversity. People of Chicano, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, Italian, and Native descent were among those signed up.¹⁵³ The Panthers' voter outreach work reflected their belief that interracial solidarity on the local level prefigured larger scales of internationalism.

The same belief drew the BPP into the orbit of Bay Area dockworkers before and after the 1973 election. Known for its multiracial membership and radical internationalism, the International Longshore and Warehouse Union became a target of Panther organizing. In the leadup to the election, multiple Panther registrars and newspaper vendors passed through the

¹⁵⁰ Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 152; Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 227.

¹⁵¹ Voter registration data, February 25, 1973, series 2, box 19, folder 2, HPNFC.

¹⁵² Billy X Jennings emphasized the role of multiracial churches such as Glide Memorial in San Francisco in supporting the Party financially and organizationally. Billy X Jennings, interview with author (Sacramento, CA), April 7, 2023. On the construction of a rainbow coalition during the 1973 campaign, see Donna Murch, *Living for the City*, 211-212.

¹⁵³ Elections Committee to Comrade Servant, October 2, 1972, series 2, box 19, folder 1, HPNFC; Cheryl Curtis, "People that Party members registered," February 3, 1973, series 2, box 19, folder 1, HPNFC; Cheryl Curtis to Comrade Huey, "Voter Registration," February 7, 1973, series 2, box 19, folder 1, HPNFC; Voter Registration Committee to Comrade Huey, "Voter Registration," February 21, 1973, series 2, box 19, folder 2, HPNFC; Voter Registration Committee to Comrade Huey, "Voter Registration," February 20, 1973, series 2, box 19, folder 2, HPNFC.

doors of the San Francisco union hall of ILWU Local 10, which represented dockworkers throughout the region. The union hall was evidently receptive to the Party's message. On a single day in September 1972, two Party members sold nearly 100 copies of the *Black Panther* to ILWU affiliates and collected additional cash donations.¹⁵⁴

At the time, the Panthers were cultivating more personal ties to local longshoremen. In the early 1970s, Huey Newton decided to invest Party funds in the Lamp Post, an Oakland nightclub and restaurant founded by Newton's cousin, an ILWU dockworker named Jimmie Ward.¹⁵⁵ In histories of the Panthers, the Lamp Post often figures as a symbol of the organization's ill-starred foray into Oakland's illicit economy and Newton's descent into alcohol and cocaine addiction.¹⁵⁶ Less discussed is the establishment's function as a casual meeting place for dockworkers and Panthers. In his comparative history of dockworker organizing in Durban, South Africa and the San Francisco Bay Area, scholar Peter Cole references these connections: Given its ownership, it is easy to "imagine the Lamp Post as a popular place for longshoremen and Panthers."¹⁵⁷ Billy X Jennings, who was one of several Panthers working at the Lamp Post at the time, remembered dockworkers routinely dining and socializing with Panthers at the bar.

¹⁵⁴ The Elections Committee to Comrade Servant, "Voter Registration Drive/Newspaper Circulating," September 22, 1972, series 2, box 19, folder 1, HPNFC.

¹⁵⁵ Robyn Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, 161.

¹⁵⁶ The Panthers' involvement in the illicit drug trade was one of the primary justifications for the demonization of the group by right-wing and liberal critics. Without romanticizing this activity, it is important to place the Party's connection to Oakland's underground economy in context: in the 1970s the BPP was starved for capital, as was the city it was operating in. In this environment, there were few opportunities available to sustain the organization outside of an inconsistent and often constrictive dependency on outside donors and stray government grants.

¹⁵⁷ Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 113.

Jennings also recalled that a number of Party members carried ILWU union cards.¹⁵⁸ The Panthers and the ILWU had other affinities, from their compatible politics to their geographical overlap, but Cole writes that “despite shared members, geography, and politics, Local 10 and the Black Panthers never aligned.”¹⁵⁹ This was true for the most part. Nevertheless, members of the two organizations did work together on at least one occasion.¹⁶⁰

On May 31, 1976, the Black Panther Party hosted an African Liberation Day celebration at its Oakland Community Learning Center, a gathering that birthed the Zimbabwe Relief Coalition (ZRC) and consummated an alliance between the Panthers and the ILWU.¹⁶¹ The ZRC was a Bay Area organization committed to materially supporting the Zimbabwean struggle against the white supremacist regime of Rhodesia. The coalition responded to the calls of the African participants in the Oakland celebration for “concrete” contributions to their anticolonial campaigns.¹⁶² The Panthers’ connections to the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the other anticolonial parties represented at the event stemmed from relationships forged by *Black Panther* editor David Du Bois—son of Shirley Graham Du Bois and stepson of W.E.B. Du Bois—over his 13 years as a radical journalist based in Cairo.¹⁶³ When Du Bois moved from

¹⁵⁸ Bill X Jennings, interview with author (Sacramento, CA), April 7, 2023. Cole also confirms by way of Cleophas Williams, an Oakland longshoreman whom he interviewed, that there were some Party members in Local 10. Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power*, 113.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Moreover, the *Black Panther* did periodically report on ILWU solidarity activities. See, for example, “Intercommunal News: S.F. Dockers Refuse to Unload South African Produce,” *Black Panther*, February 23, 1974.

¹⁶¹ The Panthers’ Oakland Community Learning served as a ZRC hub. Zimbabwe Relief Coalition flyer, 1977, International Institute of Social History Collection, African Activist Archive, Michigan State University, Lansing, MI. <https://africanactivist.msu.edu/record/210-849-32280/>.

¹⁶² “Intercommunal News: Z.I.P.A. Forces Intensify Armed Struggle during Rainy Season: Bay Area Coalition Organizes Clothing Drive for Zimbabwean Refugees,” *Black Panther* February 12, 1977.

¹⁶³ David Du Bois’s connections to African anticolonial struggles and to postcolonial governments were myriad. In addition to his journalism work, Du Bois served as a public relations consultant in Cairo for Ghana’s head of state,

Cairo to Oakland in 1972, he made African liberation a cornerstone of the Panthers' political work, and, according to Jennings, ensured that "African leaders would always stop and visit the Panthers when they came to the United States."¹⁶⁴ Given their intimate ties to anticolonial struggles on the continent, the Panthers became a pillar of the Bay Area solidarity movement. As such, the Party's African Liberation Day celebration attracted a range of local activists eager to work with its members in bridging the freedom struggles of Africa and the United States. Among those activists were rank-and-file members of ILWU Local 10.

The longshore union had begun lending its support to African liberation struggles well over a decade before the ZRC emerged. In 1960, following the notorious Sharpeville massacre, the ILWU Dock Caucus called for a boycott of South African cargo in solidarity with the anti-apartheid movement. Two years later, a work stoppage by dockworkers in San Francisco delayed the unloading of South African cargo for several shifts, marking the first concrete step on behalf of African liberation by a U.S. union. Nevertheless, the initial solidarity of the ILWU was largely piecemeal. It was not until 1976, when rank-and-filers formed the Southern African Liberation Support Committee (SALSC) and joined forces with the Panthers and other Bay Area leftists in the Zimbabwe Relief Coalition, that a sustained solidarity movement took off.¹⁶⁵

Kwame Nkrumah. Michael Castleman, "Interview: David Du Bois: The Black Panther Party Today," *Ann Arbor Sun*, May 25, 1976. On Du Bois's family history, see Gerald Horne, *Race Woman: The Lives of Shirley Graham Du Bois* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

¹⁶⁴ Billy X Jennings, interview with author (phone), April 4, 2023.

¹⁶⁵ Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power*, 105, 189-190, 193.

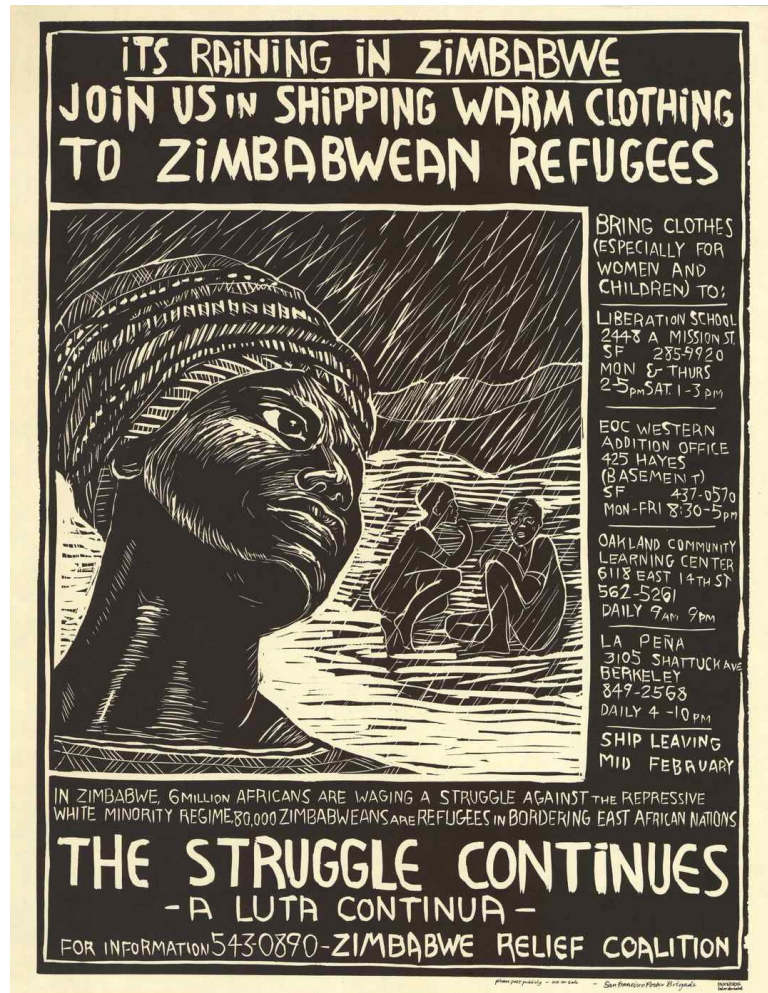


Figure 18. Zimbabwe Relief Coalition clothing drive flyer, 1977. Courtesy of African Activist Archive, Michigan State University.

The changing tenor of the movement prompted ILWU members to expand their repertoire of tactics. While longshore workers had previously used their proximity to global supply chains to disrupt the flow of commodities, in the mid-1970s they began using their strategic position to facilitate the delivery of aid. In the wake of the African Liberation Day celebration, Leo Robinson and other Local 10 unionists worked under the auspices of the SALSC, within the broader Zimbabwe Relief Coalition, to collect donations for Zimbabwean refugees in Mozambique. In February 1977, a *Black Panther* article publicized the coalition's ongoing work, noting that the ILWU had acquired two shipping containers which the ZRC

planned to fill with winter clothing.¹⁶⁶ In a major coup for the solidarity movement, the dockworkers had secured the containers as well as an agreement from shipping companies to transport them for free.¹⁶⁷ The article ended with an invitation to join scheduled “work parties to pack and organize the clothes.” The ILWU union hall would serve as the venue.

Several months later, Leo Robinson and a gathering of local leftists joined ZANU leaders Tapson Mawere and Tirivafi Kangai at the Oakland Community Learning Center for another African Liberation Day celebration. According to the *Black Panther*, the attendees “celebrated a year’s culmination of concrete work done by a number of progressive Bay Area organizations to aid the Zimbabwean armed liberation struggle.”¹⁶⁸ The significance of this work was measured in tons. Over the past year, the ZRC had collected and transported 32 tons of clothing for Zimbabweans in Mozambique. Additionally, the coalition had raised thousands of dollars to support Mozambique’s burgeoning health care system. In her remarks, Elaine Brown attributed these efforts to the collective labor of many individuals and groups working under the banner of Africa solidarity. “We mean power to all the people,” said Brown, emphasizing the global scope of the Panthers’ slogan. As was typical of the Party’s events, the celebration featured a range of cultural offerings, from documentary films to live music to poetry readings. Students from the Panthers’ Oakland Community School performed a series of songs, including the Isley Brothers’ recent hit “Harvest for the World,” an example of the kind of internationalist culture suffusing the school’s curriculum. The gathering spotlighted the ways that the Black Panther Party was

¹⁶⁶ “Intercommunal News: Z.I.P.A. Forces Intensify Armed Struggle during Rainy Season: Bay Area Coalition Organizes Clothing Drive for Zimbabwean Refugees,” *Black Panther* February 12, 1977.

¹⁶⁷ Peter Cole, *Dockworker Power*, 196.

¹⁶⁸ “O.C.L.C. African Liberation Day Program: Support for People of Southern Africa Celebrated,” *Black Panther* May 28, 1977.

changing the city from the bottom up. With a comprehensive program of political education and the infrastructural capacity to reach across borders, the Party and its allies were beginning to turn Oakland into a nexus of global radicalism.

By the end of the 1970s, the East Bay Area was thoroughly enmeshed in networks of global exchange thanks in part to the work of the Panthers. But globalization rarely uplifted the cause of Third World liberation or the material conditions of most Oaklanders. In the spring of 1979, a *Black Panther* headline declared, “China Invests in Oakland Project.”¹⁶⁹ The article reported on the recent purchase of retail space in a prospective development slated for Oakland’s Chinatown by an entity associated with the People’s Republic of China. Dubbed Hong Kong-USA, the project constituted one of the first commercial condominium ventures in the continental United States.¹⁷⁰ Plans for the complex featured a slew of restaurants and shops, as well as several stories of luxury apartments, a hotel, an office tower, and underground parking. It inaugurated an era of high-end redevelopment in a neighborhood, which, since the 1870s, had been predominated by working-class Chinese immigrants. The *Black Panther* described the Chinese investment in a matter-of-fact tone, exhibiting none of the editorializing that often colored the paper’s journalism. But close readers of the publication would likely see the news as vindication of the Panthers’ longstanding effort to broker commercial bonds between their “friends” in China and the city of Oakland. The article concluded with an important piece of context: “the Port of Oakland has been seeking to establish business ties with China and retail outlets in Oakland would enhance the Port’s bid for business.”

¹⁶⁹ “China Invests in Oakland Project,” *Black Panther*, April 30-May 13, 1979.

¹⁷⁰ Al Burgin, “Maybe there is a ‘there, there’ after all,” *San Francisco Examiner*, February 11, 1979.

The promise of normalizing trade relations between Oakland and China, a hallmark of the 1973 electoral campaigns of Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown, was becoming a reality but not in the way the Party had imagined. Several months after the Panther candidates' surprisingly narrow defeat, the *Black Panther* chided Oakland mayor John Reading for "stealing" their "international trade idea."¹⁷¹ Signaling the growing thaw in Cold War tensions during the 1970s, Reading had just returned from an official visit to the Soviet Union's Nakhodka port. The *Black Panther* mocked the mayor for having just "discovered that tremendous trade possibilities exist there for American businessmen and 'his' Port of Oakland" and urged him to "include the People's Republic of China and other Third World countries in his plans." Just a few years later, there was no prospect more tantalizing to Oakland officials, including politicians whom the Panthers had helped to elect, than regular trade routes between the East Bay city and a Chinese nation hurtling into the era of market liberalization.¹⁷²

The Panthers' plans for globalizing Oakland never came to fruition. Neoliberal globalization, which rested on a different conception of transnational trade, would rise in its stead. The success of the latter hinged on the defeat of the former. It was the suppression of alternative forms of economic organization, global integration, and human connection that

¹⁷¹ "Oakland Mayor Steals Seale/Brown Trade Idea," *Black Panther*, September 15, 1973.

¹⁷² Oakland started actively pursuing trade with China in the mid-1970s. The Oakland Board of Port Commissioners joined the National Council for United States-China Trade in 1976. One year later, Mayor Lionel Wilson and the Port Commissioners welcomed the "highest-ranking trade delegation from the People's Republic of China ever to visit the United States" for a tour of the Port of Oakland's container terminals. In 1979, a delegation of Oakland port officials embarked on a 12-day visit to Chinese ports that were in the process of modernizing. Oakland's attempt to lure Asian trade began a decade earlier, when the Port of Oakland hired a representative in Japan and opened a Tokyo branch office. Patricia P. Caperones to Shanti A. Vora, September 16, 1977; box 218, folder "Port of Oakland"; United States-China Business Council Records, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI. "Chinese Visit," *Oakland Post*, September 28, 1977. "Oakland port aides will visit Shanghai," *San Francisco Examiner* February 21, 1979. Ben E. Nutter, "The Port of Oakland: Modernization and Expansion of Shipping, Airport, and Real Estate Operations, 1957-1977," an oral history conducted in 1991 by Ann Lage, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1994, 114.

allowed free-market principles and law-and-order governance to appear as common-sense solutions to the crises of the 1970s.¹⁷³ In Oakland and elsewhere, this suppression took the form of attacks on the Black freedom struggle and the insurgent spaces that made it possible. Ed Howard's nightclub was one such space. In the mid-1970s, the Oakland Police Department began a relentless assault on Howard's business, which he attributed to complaints he had lodged against the department and the fact that his operation was "too efficient" to command a bribe. "Next thing I know people are telling me that the police are giving all kinds of tickets to them when they're leaving the club," remembered Howard. "That was the point that really started hurting my club." Howard appealed to the local political establishment, including Panther allies Ron Dellums and Lionel Wilson, both of whom knew him personally. But his ties to Oakland's ascendant Black political class made no difference. The harassment "never really stopped" and the stress of managing the besieged club prompted him to close it in 1979.¹⁷⁴ The fate of Ed Howard's Place, a Black cultural venue critical to the people-centered global city envisioned by the Panthers, underscores the insidious ways that police power, in tandem with transnational capital, reordered Oakland's economic landscape in the final decades of the twentieth century.¹⁷⁵

During that time, the question of survival remained paramount for Oakland's multiracial working class. Police violence and economic precarity continued to trigger uprisings and with

¹⁷³ Jordan T. Camp, *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal Carceral State* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁷⁴ Ed Howard, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), April 8, 2023.

¹⁷⁵ This fate would be shared by other Black cultural venues in Oakland during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. See Erin McElroy and Alex Werth, "Deracinated Disposessions: On the Foreclosures of 'Gentrification' in Oakland, CA," *Antipode* 51, no. 3 (2019): 887-893. On the role of police power in urban economic restructuring, see Max Felker-Kantor, *Policing Los Angeles: Race, Resistance, and the Rise of the LAPD* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Christina B. Hanhardt, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

them reminders that the legacy of the Panthers was integral to the city's political culture. It is no accident that, to this day, local rebellions continue to course through Oakland's waterfront. In November 2011, Elaine Brown participated in a daylong "general strike" called by the Oakland offshoot of Occupy Wall Street. The protest culminated in a massive march to the Port of Oakland, supported by ILWU dockworkers.¹⁷⁶ The occupation of the port reminded Brown of the Black Panthers' efforts, 40 years prior, to "seize the city of Oakland." "And for us the big piece was the Port of Oakland," she continued, "which is why I loved being with Occupy for the general strike when we shut down the port in 2011. I don't think I walked; I think I sailed, I was so happy that day."¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Malia Wollan, "Oakland's Port Shuts Down as Protesters March on Waterfront," *New York Times*, November 2, 2011. Leo Robinson and other rank-and-file members of the ILWU supported the Occupy movement. "'Solidarity of Labor Above All Else,'" *Workers World*, December 6, 2011.

¹⁷⁷ Elaine Brown, interview with author (Berkeley, CA), July 9, 2015.

Epilogue

In mid-March of 2020, most Oaklanders retreated indoors. Amid the rapid spread of COVID-19, the San Francisco Bay Area became the first region in the United States to order residents to shelter in place.¹ A cascade of closures and layoffs followed. Business as usual was upended. But like the region's hospitals, grocery stores, and other services deemed "essential," the Port of Oakland did not shut down. Global supply chains, of which Oakland remained an important node, continued to circulate the stuff of everyday life. Usually taken for granted, the steady operation of this life-sustaining infrastructure brought a semblance of stability in a time of precarity. Nevertheless, as the pandemic wore on, change did come to Oakland's waterfront. With illness, death, and lockdowns drastically reducing the global workforce, a crisis of supply—reflected in the barren shelves of grocery stores—led to a staggering drop in maritime traffic.² An eerie placidity descended on a coastline typically clogged with diesel-belching container ships, freight trains, and trucks. The sudden decrease of surface transportation activity contributed to a precipitous decline in carbon-dioxide (CO₂) emissions, especially in and around the hubs of global trade.³ Air quality on Oakland's waterfront improved to levels unseen in generations at the very moment that breath itself became a source of existential anxiety.⁴ A

¹ Rebecca Robbins, "In strictest U.S. coronavirus response so far, six Bay Area counties order 'shelter in place,'" *STAT*, March 16, 2020. <https://www.statnews.com/2020/03/16/coronavirus-bay-area-counties-shelter-in-place/>.

² Daniel Taylor, Alan Pritchard, Dale Duhan, and Shashank Mishra, "What's behind the empty grocery shelves," *Supply Chain Management Review*, August 10, 2020. https://www.scmr.com/article/whats_behind_the_empty_grocery_shelves.

³ Corinne Le Quéré et al, "Temporary reduction in daily global CO₂ emissions during the COVID-19 forced confinement," *Nature Climate Change* 10 (May 2020): 647-653.

⁴ Kevin Stark, "The Pandemic Led to Unprecedented Declines in Carbon Emissions. But That's Over Now," *KQED*, March 24, 2021. <https://www.kqed.org/science/1973339/the-pandemic-led-to-unprecedented-declines-in-carbon-emissions-but-thats-over-now>.

zoonotic virus, whose spread is intimately connected to the encroachment of capitalist agriculture on the world's dwindling forestland, set in motion economic disruptions that cleared the air in places like Oakland and temporarily slowed the pace of human-caused climate change.⁵ This series of events underscored the profound importance of ecological forces in shaping the future of Oakland and the world, while imparting a sobering reminder of the unpredictable nature of change over time.

If the COVID pandemic inspired reflection on the future, it also prompted a reckoning with the past. Pointing to the virus's putative emergence in China, Donald Trump used his presidency to tap a deep reservoir of anti-Chinese racism, whose origins stretch back to the Chinese Exclusion movement that swept across Oakland and the broader American West in the nineteenth century.⁶ As a result, Oakland and many other U.S. cities saw a marked rise in xenophobic vitriol and racist attacks directed toward people of Asian descent.⁷ The pandemic's racialized vectors were also reflected in COVID's disproportionately Black, Latinx, and Indigenous victims, trends consistent in data for the city of Oakland.⁸ A major factor behind these trends is the overrepresentation of women of color in low-wage healthcare occupations, a legacy of racial and gendered divisions of labor forged in slavery and empire.⁹ Indeed, a

⁵ Rob Wallace, *Dead Epidemiologists: On the Origins of COVID-19* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020).

⁶ Mae Ngai, "The Root of Discrimination Against Asian-Americans in the U.S. and Its Remedy," in *East-West Dialogue*, eds. Lujun Chen and Karl-Heinz Pohl (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 113-118.

⁷ Luke Wrin Piper, "Oakland police say hate crimes have slowed but Chinatown residents remain on alert," *Oaklandside*, July 13, 2022. <https://oaklandside.org/2022/07/13/chinatown-community-members-vow-to-continue-crime-prevention-efforts/>.

⁸ Maria Godoy and Daniel Wood, "What Do Coronavirus Racial Disparities Look Like State by State?" *National Public Radio*, May 30, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/05/30/865413079/what-do-coronavirus-racial-disparities-look-like-state-by-state>; Zack Haber, "Oakland's COVID Data Show Racial Disparities in 2021 Deaths," *Oakland Post*, February 10, 2022.

⁹ Janette Dill and Mignon Duffy, "Structural Racism and Black Women's Employment in the US Health Care Sector," *Health Affairs* 41, no. 2 (2022): 265-272; Olihe Okoro, Omolayo Umaru, and Meghana Ray, "Women of

disproportionate share of healthcare workers are migrants from longstanding spheres of American imperialism, such as the Philippines, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago.¹⁰ Structural inequalities in medical employment, combined with the devastating impact of COVID-19, laid the groundwork for a 2023 labor walkout by a coalition of unions at Kaiser Permanente, the largest managed healthcare company in the United States and the largest private employer in the city of Oakland. The strike saw 75,000 workers take to the picket line, forcing major concessions from Kaiser. It was the biggest strike the U.S. healthcare sector had ever seen.¹¹

The labor insurgency had been brewing for some time. It arrived on the wave of revolt rocking the United States in the age of COVID. In the previous year, Kaiser mental health workers had walked off the job. Tellingly, they situated their demands for reduced caseloads in the struggle for racial justice coalescing around the Black Lives Matter movement.¹² Kaiser executives watched these strikes unfold from the company's headquarters in the 28-story Ordway Building near Oakland's Lake Merritt. The building is named after Kaiser executive Alonzo B. Ordway, who began his career as a supervisor presiding over racial hierarchies in Kaiser workforces spanning Oakland and Camagüey, Cuba. The Ordway Building remains the tallest tower in Oakland's skyline, an emblem of the company's dominance over local affairs.

Color in the Health Professions: A Scoping Review of the Literature," *Pharmacy* 12, no. 1 (2024): 29; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Shamel Rolle Sands, Kenchera Ingraham, and Bukola Oladunni Salami, "Caribbean nurse migration—a scoping review," *Human Resources for Health* 18 (March 2020): 19.

¹¹ Kristen Hwang, "Kaiser unions went on strike twice in 12 months. The last walkout led to a 'historic' deal," *CalMatters*, October 17, 2023. <https://calmatters.org/health/2023/10/kaiser-permanente-union-strikes-california-contract/#:~:text=The%20short%20but%20disruptive%20strike,workers%20similarly%20disrupted%20the%20company.>

¹² Sabrina Chaumette, "Why I'll be on strike from Kaiser on MLK Day," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 2022.

But in the 2020s, as in the 1930s and '60s, Kaiser's dominance has been challenged by the collective action of working people united by their refusal of racialized exploitation.

The COVID emergency and its aftermath laid bare how historical fault lines of racial inequality determined access to healthy air, economic dignity, and vulnerability to premature death.¹³ In this context, another pandemic exploded into view: the scourge of racialized police violence. In the spring of 2020, tens of millions of people poured into streets around the world protesting the state-sanctioned killing of Black people and the systemic devaluation of Black life. By some estimates, the mass movement was the largest in U.S. history.¹⁴ "I can't breathe" became its rallying cry. The phrase captured the death-dealing reality of racial capitalism as it intersected with the spread of an airborne virus.¹⁵

In Oakland, the 2020 uprising came to a head on June 19 with protestors commemorating the Juneteenth holiday—marking the formal end of chattel slavery in the United States—by taking up the local tradition of shutting down the port.¹⁶ Led by a contingent from the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), thousands of people marched on the waterfront. In the late-morning sun, the march concluded in front of the Matson Terminal, which, as we have seen, developed into a launchpad of global commerce out of the post-emancipation

¹³ On racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), 28. On the intersection of the pandemic and social inequality, see Steven W. Thrasher, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide* (New York: Celadon, 2022).

¹⁴ Larry Buchanan, Quoc Trung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *New York Times*, July 3, 2020.

¹⁵ Ki'Amber Thompson, "Toward a World Where We Can Breathe: Abolitionist Environmental Justice Praxis," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 113, no. 7 (2023): 1699-1710.

¹⁶ Amanda Bartlett, "'The whole world is watching Oakland': Thousands gather for Juneteenth protest and port shutdown," *SFGate*, June 19, 2020.

racial fix of Chinese-staffed plantations.¹⁷ A series of speakers addressed the crowd in front of a backdrop of Matson shipping containers, metal boxes which had played a crucial part in the transportation of military cargo from Oakland to Asia during the American War on Vietnam. Cheers erupted when former political prisoner and Black Panther Party affiliate Angela Davis took the microphone. Donning a face mask, Davis proclaimed, “Whenever the ILWU takes a stand, the whole world feels the reverberations.”¹⁸ In recounting prior occasions when the union’s rank and file had walked off the job in solidarity with the oppressed, Davis emphasized the ILWU’s support of the 2011 port shutdown in conjunction with the Occupy movement, an event that included, among others, the ex-Black Panther Elaine Brown. She also pointed to the ILWU’s long history of radical internationalism, embodied in the union’s material contribution to liberation struggles in southern Africa. A more recent example, cited by Davis, was the ILWU’s embrace of the Palestinian cause, reflected in the longshore workers’ commitment, since 2014, to boycotting an Israeli shipping line.¹⁹

¹⁷ On the concept of the “racial fix” as the ways in which “race and racism are mechanisms for circumventing barriers that slow the treadmill of production,” see Ian Carrillo, “The Racial fix and environmental state formation,” *Current Sociology* 69, no. 5 (2021): 642.

¹⁸ Angela Davis, author recording of speech (Oakland, CA), June 19, 2020.

¹⁹ Alex N. Press, “Oakland Longshore Workers Say No to Israeli-Operated Cargo,” *Jacobin*, June 8, 2021.



Figure 19. Juneteenth port shutdown at Matson Terminal, Port of Oakland, 2020. Author photo.

Davis's Juneteenth speech situated present-day struggles at the lethal nexus of empire, race, and global capitalism in a history of worldmaking on the Oakland waterfront. This dissertation has had a similar aim. Spanning the American conquest of California and the postindustrial age, it has documented how the global orientation of the Oakland-East Bay coastline has been vigorously contested for over a century. Many of the most militant opponents of top-down development on Oakland's shores have been workers recruited into the economic order that it spawned. But working-class movements led by the likes of the ILWU have always been embedded in a broader culture of opposition. The rebellious and heterogeneous community that emerged on the Oakland-East Bay waterfront in the mid-nineteenth century invites a more capacious understanding of "working class" than people who labor for wages. From Chinese

fishing cooperatives to Black Panther Party communes, a diverse range of social formations have underwritten alternatives to U.S. empire on the water's edge of Oakland. The imprint of these radical experiments is visible today. In the Juneteenth port shutdown, bottom-up networks of care furnished the multiracial assembly of protestors with a range of free services, from street medicine to food and water. Their presence testified to the intimate forms of solidarity that have long sustained counterhegemonic movements on the waterfront.

A similar assembly of union members and mutual aid practitioners returned to the Matson Terminal in November 2023 and again in January 2024 to prevent the docking of the Cape Orlando.²⁰ The ship was slated to transport military equipment to an Israeli government that had destroyed hospitals, universities, apartment complexes, public infrastructure, and thousands of Palestinian lives several months into its genocidal war in Gaza.²¹ Another measure of the war's catastrophic toll was the nearly 300,000 metric tons of CO₂ emitted in its first two months, primarily from the shipment of military aid from U.S. ports and bases to Israel. In just eight weeks, war-related emissions exceeded the combined annual total of twenty Global South countries.²²

²⁰ Arab Resource & Organizing Center, "Thousands Shut Down Port of Oakland, Demand Ceasefire and an End to US Support of Genocide," *Indybay*, January 13, 2024. <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2024/01/13/18861935.php>.

²¹ Fatima Al-Kassab, "A top U.N. court says Gaza genocide is 'plausible' but does not order cease-fire," *National Public Radio*, January 26 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/26/1227078791/icj-israel-genocide-gaza-palestinians-south-africa>.

²² Nina Lakhani, "Emissions from Israel's war in Gaza have 'immense' effect on climate catastrophe," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/09/emissions-gaza-israel-hamas-war-climate-change>.



Figure 20. Block the Boat Palestine solidarity action at Matson Terminal, Port of Oakland, January 13, 2024. Author photo.

The devastation wrought by Israel’s U.S.-backed war has galvanized an international solidarity movement animated by an expansive vision of global justice.²³ Within that movement, Natives of the land now known as the East Bay Area have played a prominent role. Their participation is no accident. As Ohlone leader Corrina Gould explained in November 2023 at a solidarity march tracing the shoreline path between two Indigenous shellmounds: “The blueprint used to create genocide in Gaza and throughout the world was pulled from the playbook created by the United States government on American Indians here.”²⁴ Natives like Gould have not only

²³ Ameera Kawash, “Interconnected emergencies: Palestinian and climate activists join forces for Global Day of Action for Climate Justice,” *The New Arab*, December 8, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/features/palestinian-and-climate-activists-join-interconnected-crises>.

²⁴ Joshua Picazo, “Bay Area Indigenous leaders to hold annual ‘Black Friday’ prayer walk by Shellmounds,” *Local News Matters*, November 23, 2023. <https://localnewsmatters.org/2023/11/23/bay-area-indigenous-leaders-to-hold-annual-black-friday-prayer-walk-by-shellmounds/>.

called for an end to this violence, whose roots extend from the genocidal process of colonization inflicted on their peoples. They have also demanded the return of Indigenous lands, from the East Bay shellmounds to the olive orchards of Palestine. Such demands have been echoed by a growing cohort of activists who seek to transit from a socially and ecologically ruinous present to a liberated future in which every life is unequivocally precious.²⁵ The route of that journey remains to be seen, but history suggests that it will almost certainly pass through the water's edge of Oakland.

²⁵ Jeremy W. Peters, "It's Not Just Gaza: Student Protestors See Links to a Global Struggle," *New York Times*, May 1, 2024.

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