If you have ever flown into San Francisco International Airport (SFO) on a clear night—the often-foggy ones provide a different experience—you were likely confronted by a spectacular, perhaps disorienting tapestry of lights as you approached the Bay Area or banked over it. With sufficient knowledge of the region and the right vector of approach and seat assignment, those lights may have offered up to you a metropolitan map drawn by illuminated landmarks: bridges, freeways, ports, oil refineries, airports, and urban downtowns, as well as less easily identifiable suburban enclaves sprawling across flatlands, dotting hills, and snaking into canyons. The picture may have been completed by the black space of the Pacific Ocean and San Francisco Bay waters and of the various open lands not yet or perhaps never to be electrified.

The networks of lights perhaps said something to you about power: a subject you may already have considered in flight in relation to your seat assignment and the skin color, dress, words, or seatback video viewing choices of fellow travelers. Indeed, gazing down at the ground from aircraft has long opened up a perspective on power, albeit often in ways that serve it. Almost from the beginning, as scholars such as Chandra Bhimull and Jenifer Van Vleck make clear, aviation attended the projects of colonialism and empire across the globe by accelerating access to and mapping of territories and markets yet to be exploited while simultaneously producing vertical and hierarchical distance.
between those who engineered, controlled, and accessed flight and those (often the racially exploited and the colonized) who did not.¹

There is, in fact, a thread of boosterism that has used the view on approach to SFO to illuminate and celebrate the metropolitan growth that followed conquest, settlement, environmental transformation, and urban development (in other words, settler colonialism) in the Bay Area as well as the region’s expanding, imperial reach. Take Bay AreaReuters correspondent William Flynn’s *Men, Money and Mud*, a 1954 booklet published as part of the celebration of SFO’s new international terminal. A passenger flying into a recently modernized SFO at night, Flynn effuses, perceives it as a collection of gems. “The sheath of shimmering platinum against the cloth of black velvet is the hundreds of acres of land that has risen from the mud and muck of the Bay to be formed into the firm foundation of your destination, San Francisco International Airport. The rubies are the runway lights, the flickering signals on the buildings that sprawl over the western edge of the vast expanse of land.” These precious lights help to illuminate SFO’s status as a “metropolitan concentration of industry, of travel, of service” that

![Figure 1. Night shot of the Bay Area, looking west from the East Bay toward San Francisco. The lights of, among other things, the Port of Oakland, the Bay and Golden Gate Bridges, Treasure Island, and downtown and residential San Francisco are prominently distributed across “the cloth of black velvet” of San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. iStock.com/Gfed.](image-url)
connects the larger metropolitan Bay Area to Southern California, cities across the nation, Europe, and the “continents of the great Pacific Basin, already identified as the arena where will develop the next Era of Man.”

Flynn’s account of SFO’s development from muddy landing field to major international airport over the course of just three decades centers the heroic individualism of white men, assumes a hubristic certainty about the region’s progress, and revels in a triumph over nature. The realization of SFO is, in his view, the product of the expansive vision, rational planning, technical know-how, and political persuasion of an evolving cast of engineers, municipal officials, airline executives and other businessmen, military officers, pilots, and, ultimately, a citizenry that over time developed the good sense to follow the lead of these men and lend their financial support to the airport by means of bond measures.

This is all a little hard to take in the political and analytical present. But the account from above in *Men, Money and Mud* still raises the question of how a differently oriented story of colonialism and empire, and how Bay Area residents supported, survived, and otherwise lived it, might be told with SFO at its illuminated and illuminating center. What happens when we let those lights seen on approach help us analyze critically rather than celebrate things like the proliferation of business parks fertilized with technology and finance capital, the relative proximity of neighborhoods to industrial sites, the amount of earth moved and the number of rivers dammed to light up this largely hydroelectrically powered region? What do we learn from tracing brightly lit networks of roadways, railways, transmission lines, and concentrations of commercial development? And what do we perceive in their arrangement across a “cloth of black velvet”?

*A People’s History of SFO* takes up this challenge by using the history of the airport to tell a multifaceted story of power, development, and encounter in what is now a nine-county region with one hundred cities located on the left coast of North America, at the eastern edge of the Pacific Rim, around the large, shallow estuary of San Francisco Bay. Situated about a dozen miles south of downtown San Francisco upon former tidelands and open bay water in San Mateo County, SFO was, for many years, the Bay Area’s only international airport and is still its largest. As such, SFO is a manifestation of and has helped to shape multiple instantiations of accumulated and protean power in the region, conjunctures that I will often refer to as the Bay Area’s colonial present or its regional colonial present.

Built upon land and lifeways dispossessed from Indigenous peoples who had been in the area for millennia before being subjugated,
expelled, or killed, what became the Bay Area was next defined by its development as a settler society of Spanish and US empire with a brief stint as a hinterland of the Mexican republic in between. Within just a few decades of California statehood, as Gray Brechin and others have shown, San Francisco and, eventually, the Bay Area as a region, had established imperial relationships with other places in California, the United States, and the world beyond, while operating as a key node of US empire as a continental and global project. The Bay Area became, among other things, a financial and planning center for various extractive, agricultural, industrial, and technological enterprises; a locus of military development in times of war and peace; and a site of state- and capital-serving knowledge production. What the Bay Area’s colonial present looked like at any given moment was a product of the accumulated effects of colonial and imperial relationships of the past as they were extended into the present and imagined into the future. From the beginning, these relationships were shaped by the waves of human beings who conquered, occupied, settled, survived, were brought to, traveled through, worked in, sought opportunity in, found refuge in, and otherwise lived and died in the area.

Like other major airports, as scholars like Mark Salter, Gillian Fuller, and Ross Harley describe them, SFO has operated as a kind of assemblage. It is a complexly networked infrastructure whose operations have drawn together and been constituted by the interactions among various groups of humans (e.g., travelers, workers, and government officials); municipal, state, and federal laws and regulations; economic flows of different scales; built urban, suburban, and exurban environments; and natural phenomena such as the wind patterns that determine the orientation of runways. Not only have such actants made the airport an assemblage; SFO has, as an assemblage, drawn together and facilitated interactions among an even wider range of assemblages within the Bay Area and beyond. A focus on SFO, then, provides a particularly useful lens for viewing the shifting, often-unexpected entanglements and interfaces of multiple systems, relations, and structures—at once locally focused and, given the nature of air commerce, far reaching—that have shaped the Bay Area in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

SFO has also been a symbolic point of regional reference. Some observers have viewed it as an engine of economic growth and metropolitan ascendancy, and more generally as a site representing progress, cosmopolitanism, and freedom. But SFO has also been seen as a manifestation of inequality, poor planning, and ecological catastrophe.
Attending to conversations about SFO first brings into focus how political and business elites envisioned the Bay Area. Tracing these conversations over time also shows how people across the social spectrum viewed their region (and its constituent cities and neighborhoods). Collective understandings of the Bay Area as Anglo-Saxon imperial outpost, center of commerce, immigrant and queer sanctuary, environmentally friendly utopia, refuge from the Jim Crow South, and cosmopolitan technology hub, among other things, are all evident in commentary about SFO.

A People’s History of SFO thus offers a new perspective on how the Bay Area, through its emergence and expansion as a metropolis, has been made in both material and symbolic ways, at the interface of small human acts and political activity as shaped by and responsive to overlapping, constantly evolving networks of colonial and imperial power. Such networks are instantiations of a broader history of racial capitalism, as conceptualized by political theorist Cedric Robinson: that is, the global economic and political system predicated on and productive of hierarchical notions of racial and, by definition, gendered human difference that emerged in early modern Europe as a mechanism for reproducing wealth and the social groups that create it. Over time, racial capitalism’s manifestations in various colonial and imperial enterprises, state-building projects, financial transactions, and so on have led to an ever-growing proliferation of human differences and asymmetrical social relationships particular to time and place while significantly altering nature along the way. Although some of the most horrific manifestations of racial capitalism and its constituent regimes have been consigned to the past, we continue to live through their afterlives as well as through related, emergent formations that produce and destroy life for individuals and groups. We do this as their victims, as their beneficiaries, as the people who try to fix the problems caused by them, and sometimes as all three at the same time.

A People’s History of SFO, then, proceeds from the assumption that telling the story of the airport as infrastructural manifestation of accumulated power from the past and as nodal point in the production of new forms of it in the present opens up a window to some of this complexity that has defined the Bay Area and the lives lived there. As they have manifested within and around SFO, the interactions examined across this book shed light on some of the ways differently positioned Bay Area people have invested in, defied, remained ambivalent about, but ultimately been incorporated into the networked power that has defined the region. But this is also a study that exceeds both region and
airport, even as it uses them as focal points, by offering a more broadly relevant account of colonialism’s and empire’s legacies, emergences, and futures as lived within its North American, metropolitan laboratories. While acknowledging and contending to some degree with some of the most brutal, exclusionary, and targeted manifestations of these phenomena as brought to bear on the most vulnerable residents of the region—Indigenous dispossession, racial discrimination in employment, and exclusionary and punitive immigration policies, for example—it considers as well how they have been prosaically lived by a wide range of people connected with one another, with institutions and infrastructures, with social organizations and movements, and so on in often-contingent, unexpected ways.12

So, with that in mind, I will suggest that another productive visual (and aural) perspective could be found at SFO’s old cell phone waiting lot, located at the northwestern edge of the airport, not far beyond the end of runway 28, underneath the flight paths of ascending jets. Dusk here was often stunning, with illuminated aircraft flying into the
orange glow over the hills to the west. One could be awed by the still-marvelous technology, by the idea that a half-million-pound metal tube full of jet fuel, people, and their stuff can propel itself into the lower stratosphere and back. But the encounter could be unnerving, too. The sonic vibrations from ascending larger jets were sometimes felt in the chest; their jet wash perceptibly shook the waiting automobiles. As the jets wounded the earth and sky with noise and vaporized kerosene, they reminded us, if we let them, that we humans are immensely creative, destructive, and fragile.

The multisensory spectacle of the noisy, ascending jets is an apt metaphor for this book’s approach to ongoing projects of domination, displacement, and production in the San Francisco Bay Area. As they help to connect the Bay Area—socially, financially, imaginatively—with other regions, these jets leave behind a kind of wake: trailing vortices formed by air flowing from the bottom of the wings, around the wing tips, to the tops of the wings. These rotating vortices are invisible but still powerful as they dissipate slowly, falling to earth or remaining airborne, moving horizontally or not by the wind to the extent that it is blowing. Vortices from larger aircraft, known as wake turbulence, can knock smaller ones out of the sky and must be avoided.

The swirling, falling, shifting, decaying vortices are like the afterlives of key events in the colonial and imperial history of the Bay Area: structuring the production of difference and the political and social possibilities that follow, always unstable, contingent and unpredictable in their movement, often not apparent to those without insights into their existence, but with the potential to disrupt, terribly. And then more jets ascend, avoiding the turbulence from other jets by delaying takeoff, becoming airborne closer to or farther from the runway end, or executing their turns toward eventual flight paths at different coordinates, but leaving their own wakes nonetheless: different trajectories of ascent, different sonic vibrations, different trailing vortices, different instabilities, different contingencies, different possibilities layered across regional colonial presents.

There is one more view to consider: that from inside SFO’s concourses. Some observers emphasize the homogeneity of airport terminal spaces across the globe, at least once you get past the locally oriented design elements, views of surrounding landscapes, and nods to regional culture in the restaurants and gift shops. Airport spaces have been described as alienating “non-places,” to use the anthropologist Marc Augé’s well-known description, that are products of the growing circulation of people, information, architectural styles, and so on in a
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globalizing world. But contrary to some writing about airports, *A People’s History of SFO* proceeds from the position that airport terminals and other buildings can still tell us much about the places where they are situated and the populations that they serve. The concourse space is after all the site where locally specific concourses (i.e., gatherings, per another definition of the term) of multiple human actors engage in concourse (i.e., cooperative or combined actions, per yet another definition) with one another and with nonhuman things.

Indeed, complex stories of regional race, gender, class, and citizenship dynamics have unfolded inside metropolitan airport terminals that have served as transportation hubs, ports of entry, dining destinations, and, more recently, high-end shopping malls and museums. Once the province of elite travelers, airports used to sort people largely by who flew and who did not. Now they do so by the paid work people do there, the scrutiny paid to them at the security gates, the passports they hold and the questions asked of them at customs, where they shop and eat, their access or not to airline lounges, and whom they queue up

\[\text{Figure 3. SFO’s International Terminal departure hall, late 2021, at a moment of reduced, pandemic-era concourse. James Carpenter’s installation *Four Sculptural Light Reflectors* helps to throw light and shadow across the space. Photo by author.}\]
before and after as they board their flights. I can recall vividly some of the lessons about local social dynamics offered by the scene of service work at airports. The proliferation of white people working the fast-food counters at Sea-Tac in the early 1990s brought home the fact of that working class’s declining fortunes in the region. A decade later a white woman purposefully tossing trash at the feet of a veiled, Somali custodial worker at Phoenix Sky Harbor suggested the rising Islamophobia, the changing face of anti-Blackness, and the challenges facing East African immigrants in the region after 9/11.

But I had already learned similar lessons from my own family’s history. I actually do come from a line of porters in the occupational sense. The family surname preceded the occupation, set in motion, as it was, by a Mississippi slave owner bestowing his name on his human property, including my great-great-grandmother and her young daughter. “Porter” was later passed along through a generation of matrilineal naming because interracial marriages were illegal and quite possibly fatal in East Texas in the late nineteenth century. But in 1942, a product of such an unsanctioned union, my grandfather, then living in Shreveport, Louisiana, found employment as a porter (or skycap, as the job would later be called) at San Francisco’s airport. This event initiated the Black side of my family’s participation in what is known as the Second Great Migration from the southern United States to points north and west. Carrying white people’s luggage into and out of the terminal was servile but good-paying work, and my grandfather used it to secure geographic and social mobility for himself and his family, who joined him in the Bay Area the following year. My father earned extra cash working summers and weekends as a skycap at SFO during the 1950s, before graduating from college and embarking on a career in social work, civil rights activism, and eventually law.

In other words, exclusions and complicities, resonant with past events, proliferate in and around airport concourses (and terminals more generally), including SFO’s. The concourse is, after all, the scene of the whirling dance of contingent encounters where human actions and networks are brought together in medias res in ways that simultaneously define and transcend that regionally specific space. It is also where we observe one another engaged in such encounters, under and exceeding the surveilling eye of the state. The concourse is simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying, spectacular and banal, a site of movement and stasis, of aspiration and ennui. The view from it, then, suggests that we avoid thinking through Bay Area power and struggles
against it (as well as those beyond the region) in simple terms; we might instead approach regional colonial presents as scenes of asymmetrical and often contradictory connection.

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A People’s History of SFO offers a series of chapters that trace the development of SFO as a nexus of networked power while examining important airport-related phenomena that have shaped the Bay Area. The book first shows how relationships among widening arrays of people transformed the salt marsh, mud flats, and open water in northern San Mateo County upon which the airport was eventually built, all the while establishing some of the future facility’s economic, social, and political foundations. As a kind of prehistory of the facility, then, chapter 1 begins by describing the relationships established on and near this site by its original Ramaytush Ohlone stewards and then moves on to account for some of those orchestrated by the various settlers who lived and labored there under Spanish, Mexican, and then United States control.

As it describes some of the ways the airport became an assemblage itself, the book next examines how SFO reflected and produced emergent, multifaceted, and asymmetrical relationships across different spheres of human activity within changing colonial presents. Chapters 2 and 3 examine the development of the airport itself, from its opening as Mills Field in 1927 through its official designation as San Francisco International Airport in 1954. Chapter 2 takes the story through World War II. It emphasizes how the establishment and early growth of San Francisco’s airport were in significant part products of early commercial aviation’s ties to militarism, airport officials’ and boosters’ dreams of economic expansion and regional imperial destiny, and US government subsidy. In other words, it shows how the airport during its formative years was part and parcel of the racial capitalist restructuring of the Bay Area and the revamping of its modern settler state formations. Focusing on a multiday festival held in 1954 to celebrate the airport’s new terminal and “international” status, chapter 3 continues the story laid out in chapter 2 while addressing how SFO was, by the 1950s, in more dramatic ways than before, an assemblage that connected multiple actors—albeit in exclusionary ways—across the region and beyond.

The following three chapters shift the focus away from infrastructural developments—although those remain part of the story—in order to address how members of increasingly visible and vocal Bay Area constituencies engaged with the airport as workers, businesspeople, neigh-
bors, and travelers. All three chapters center airport-focused protests, as they offer perspectives on how struggles for dignity, rights, comfort, safety, and remuneration in the Bay Area have often been fraught, contradictory affairs. As they address the kinds of political struggles that often figure prominently in histories of the region, these chapters contend with some of the ways that liberal and even progressive efforts to gain access to and justice in a region known for its hospitality and cosmopolitanism could reproduce the inequalities and exclusions of the colonial present in complicated ways.

Chapter 4 examines Black labor and antidiscrimination activism at SFO from the late 1950s into the 1980s. It shows how Black work, business, and struggles to make them better at SFO were complex, entangled processes of liberation and complicity. These struggles were representative of how broader efforts to overcome Black social and spatial confinement in the Bay Area were uneven, incomplete, and, when successful, often only temporarily so. Chapter 5 addresses efforts by primarily white neighborhood and environmental activists (many of them women) to mitigate jet noise at and around SFO during the same period. By tracing their struggles, as well as the actions and words of those who lined up to oppose them, the chapter illustrates some of the ways that power in the region was challenged and reproduced at the nexus of environmental activism and governmental infrastructure development and resource stewardship. Chapter 6 explores how airport-focused activism around immigration from the late 1970s to the present often upheld the Bay Area as an enlightened social and political space. Yet such efforts—ranging from protests against the banning of “homosexual” travelers from entering the United States to those against President Donald J. Trump’s 2017 “Muslim ban”—included their own elements of exclusion and subordination, whether intentional or not.

Chapter 7 returns to SFO’s infrastructure by examining the development of its public art and museum programs from the late 1970s through the opening of the new International Terminal in 2000. The chapter attends to some of the ways SFO’s cultural works have articulated important critiques of persistent, asymmetrical social relationships in the Bay Area while contributing to a multicultural display that, as situated at the airport, smooths over some of the inequalities and exclusions defining the Bay Area in the twenty-first century. Finally, chapter 8 examines SFO’s sustainability programs and nascent efforts to address rising sea levels. Like other local entities, SFO has incorporated elements of progressive environmental and social struggles into its operations
over the past few decades. But such efforts to develop a putatively more equitable ecology of humans and things in and around the airport speak just as loudly of the limits of such moves. Although I try to end on a hopeful note, I also suggest that the future of accumulated, protean regional colonial presents may well be the spread of human hardship and the reclamation of the former salt marsh, mud flats, and open water upon which SFO sits by a rising San Francisco Bay.