My great-uncle Cliff was unlike me in so many ways. I, the progressive college student with upper-middle-class credentials. He, the conservative wheat farmer, struggling in the face of drought and economic decline. I, the veteran of the student activism of the 1990s. He, the veteran of World War II. I, a young journalist, working at my university’s daily newspaper. He, a member of the rural white working class, a demographic group that generated considerable hand-wringing from the big-city journalists who mentored me, particularly in later years, as Donald Trump rose to power. Trump’s “America First” vision struck a chord with Cliff and his neighbors along County Road 1806, in rural western North Dakota.

Cliff told lots of stories. He respected the past. He was a sensitive person, whose gentle care for his cattle garnered him the respect of other family members. He was also unpredictable. I never knew quite what to expect, including when our family gathered for the annual Christmas visit to his farm in 1999.

I certainly didn’t think we would end up talking about the protests outside the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. Yes, the November 30 demonstrations were still in the news, and yes, reports of their magnitude “shook the world.”1 Images of masked protesters, tear gas, and enormous
puppets of endangered sea turtles circulated internationally, and the protests had temporarily shut down the meetings of the massive institution.

But national news wasn’t plentiful around Zap, the nearby small town with two bars, one church, and fewer stoplights. Before the age of cell phones and satellite TV, the rural farmers in the area got their news through AM radio or staticky Channel 5, the NBC affiliate in Bismarck. While the protests may have caught the public’s eye, the World Trade Organization itself probably didn’t. The WTO emanated an air of uncontroversial technocracy, at least for people in the Global North. If the evening news started talking about it, you probably turned the channel.

Imagine my surprise, then, to see those same images of masks and tear gas on my great-uncle’s couch, on the cover of one of his farming newsletters. Cliff not only approved of the protests but supported the direct-action methods the protesters used to blockade the ministerial. The WTO was bad for small farmers like him. He didn’t know all the details why, and neither did I. But we both knew we didn’t like what was going on.

If “WTO” ever became a household word in the US or in Mexico, it was for a few years in the 1990s and early 2000s. Trade and globalization became prominent topics of public debate. Public demonstrations outside the meetings of the WTO and international financial institutions were nothing new, but Seattle initiated a new cycle of summit protests. Some marveled at how Seattle helped bring together the unlikely alliances of “Teamsters and Turtles,” unionists and environmentalists, and human rights advocates and anarchists. It even brought together my great-uncle and me.

Most people reacted positively to the abstract idea of “opening” nations to trade, and to the exchange of ideas and products. The WTO proponents called it “free trade,” and who didn’t like freedom? But activists argued that the deceptive new rules were written for the multinationals. This trade wasn’t free—it was private and managed. It wasn’t even about countries; it was about corporations. WTO rules removed protections for social goods like health care and water. They prevented organizing or collective bargaining. These policies would ratchet up debt and dependency for the Global South.

I didn’t know I would ever write a book on how people—including people like my great-uncle—came to oppose the WTO. I also didn’t know that
I would be completing it as issues of trade and globalization returned to prominence in profound, and destabilizing, ways.

The rise of Covid-19 in 2020 galvanized a new wave of appeals to confront dangerous and unknowable forms of globalization, as I discuss in this book’s epilogue. But anxieties about national independence in the face of a hostile world had already spiked with the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016. Trump’s campaign of “America First” was built around scapegoating China and slandering immigrants, and even on attacking longtime trading partners. Around the same time, the United Kingdom abruptly left the European Union, huffing about protecting traditional ways of life in the face of immigration and imports. Twenty years after the “Battle of Seattle,” the WTO is once again an object of attack, but more for the former president than for left-wing protesters.

To be clear, I don’t tell the story of this fleeting moment of agreement between my great-uncle and me simply to celebrate the political connections that Seattle made possible. This book, in fact, seeks to explore the tensions and limits of that moment and of these social movements, particularly around questions of race. Cliff, like Donald Trump today, saw trade through the lens of US greatness—and the threat the nation faced from foreign competition. Other perspectives, especially from the Global South, saw trade through the lens of a history of contending with US empire. Free trade was another example of US aggression. One central aim of this book is to think about how these issues of unequal and disproportionate US power are made visible (or not) when people talk about globalization.

What, then, can the movements that debated, discussed, and defied globalization in the 1980s and 1990s tell us about today? That’s the central question of this book. It traces the history of the global justice movement through three organizations. The first is a national peasant organization in Mexico, the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas, UNORCA). The second is a US-based national labor alliance named Jobs with Justice. The third is a radical Indigenous organization from southern Mexico, the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca—Ricardo Flores Magón (Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca—Ricardo Flores Magón, CIPO-RFM).
In doing so, this volume juxtaposes a range of stories. It highlights the Mexican origins of the idea of food sovereignty. It asks us to think through the Seattle protests in the context of whiteness and immigration. It explores the politics of anarchism and autonomy in Mexico. Its interpretation of the April 2000 protests against the International Monetary Fund and World Bank is based on interviews, news clippings, and organizational documents, and is seen partly through the eyes of a protester who was there—me. That said, while I wrote the book, I didn’t write it alone. It was only possible because of the intellectual labor of scholars and activists before me.

RACISM, EMPIRE, AND GLOBAL JUSTICE

Globalization was a big deal in the 1990s. People began using the term more and more in the late 1980s, but its use really skyrocketed between 1993 and 2000. It didn’t have a single definition, and in the early 1990s left-leaning intellectuals published books that helped define the problem of globalization for a new generation of activists. These early accounts stressed that it was a new problem—and that was what made it so urgent. According to one account, the problems of globalization stemmed from shifting manufacturing work to the Global South. In another, they stemmed from recent technological advances in fields like satellites and lasers. In another, they arose from recent policy decisions by international financial institutions. These works shared the idea, though to varying degrees, that solutions must also be global. Activists, one writer argued, must create their own kind of “globalization from below” to oppose this new, corporate-led “globalization from above.”

The global justice movement’s globe-spanning use of the internet, its international gatherings, and its targeting of supranational financial institutions (like the WTO) inspired many observers. For Marxists, the global reach of this new political enthusiasm signaled the coming of a truly international proletarian movement. For anarchists, it meant the prospect of interconnected local communities delinked from the troublesome nation-state. For liberals, it meant the chance for a new “global civil society” unbound by irrational nationalisms and populisms, particularly of the
working classes. Some argued that “globalization” and global flows were overpowering the sovereignties of individual nation-states. Liberals and even some conservatives argued that these all-encompassing forces had shorn people of the certainties of home, community, or the guarantees of the welfare state. Liberals especially saw popular reactions to globalization as likely to veer toward dangerous extremism, whether white nationalism, violent leftism, or Islamic fundamentalism. The will to find liberal, secular alternatives informed a wave of studies that emphasized how global justice movements could be birthing new forms of postnational democracy.7

But the language of the “global” was also vexed and contradictory, opening up new possibilities but sometimes foreclosing others. In the months leading up to the 1999 Battle of Seattle, the most prominent direct-action organization of the protests sent information packets to activists around the country. The packets attested that because world trade and inequality was a “global” issue not tied to any “single-issue identity,” activists could finally move beyond the “identity politics” that had “plagued” radical social movements.8 The packet never went on to define “identity politics,” but in the wake of the protests, activists of color like Elizabeth “Betita” Martínez published essays arguing that strategies and assumptions based in white experiences were creating exclusion and oppression in the movement, ultimately weakening its impact and harming communities of color.9

The essays generated important conversations within the emerging global justice movements. In addition, some of the recent movement scholarship has examined the questions of racism, representation, and empire that Martínez and others raised.10 Yet other scholarship has treated racism as a secondary consideration. For some analysts, since the movement’s brand of transnational organizing was multinational or anti-imperial, it didn’t matter as much if it was multiracial or not.11 While Jeremy Brecher and colleagues’ widely cited work makes general statements about the need for social movements to struggle against racism and inequality within their organizations as well as outside, it also suggests the whiteness of Seattle was not of particular importance, partly since African Americans had their own global justice expressions in other venues. Citing the Martínez essay but misreading its spirit, Brecher et al. suggest that “it
would be patronizing to assume that the African American community should simply show up at events like the Battle of Seattle and participate on terms set by other groups."12 Some works emphasize the diversity of the global justice movement but leave out the Global South.13 One positions the movement in a lineage of urban-based internationalism, yet that lineage is composed of distinctly white efforts, among them a movement that explicitly excluded Blacks.14 Some scholars suggests that considerations of race are secondary, or even divisive and troublesome, to movements that seek to become transnational.15 One analysis of the impact of global anticorporate movements warned that waging battles against corporate environmental racism was bound to create particularistic racial “identity politics.” Talking about racism would threaten the new global connectivities.16

While the perspectives above are only one thread in a larger literature, the majority of the English-language scholarship on global justice movements continues to feature predominantly white movements from the US and Europe.17 As political theorist Anthony Bogues noted in 2003, political engagement with questions of globalization at the time had mostly failed to consider Black histories of struggle against global inequalities. Those struggles helped create things like the program for a New International Economic Order (NIEO), a set of proposals for concrete reforms to narrow the gap between the Global South and the North in the 1970s.18 Global South activists and officials, often drawing on the work of (Latin American) dependency theorists and others, noted how the South was trapped in an unfair trading relationship with the North. It was selling away at low prices their nonrenewable natural resources and raw materials—like lumber and corn—to buy refined products from the North at high prices. These activists proposed measures to stabilize the prices of raw materials and agricultural commodities. They advocated for transfers of needed technology to reduce the South’s dependency on the North. As Adom Getachew has shown, intellectuals and revolutionaries in Africa and the Caribbean in the twentieth century defined empire not simply as the “alien rule” of a particular colony but also as an “international racial hierarchy.” They understood decolonization as being not only about creating their own sovereign states but also about “worldmaking,” about undoing inequality on a global level.19
To be clear, this book is not about governments and intellectuals, it’s not about the NIEO, and it’s not only about the Global South. But the dissonance traced here—between pronouncements of “global” social movements at the 1999 WTO protests and the simultaneous fretting about “identity politics”—has guided my interpretations of what the book is about: the ways that popular organizations helped build the global justice movements, and how the politics of race, class, and empire shaped them. Drawing inspiration from work in transnational American studies and cultural histories of empire and resistance, I explore multiple origin stories in different countries—in this case the US and Mexico.20

Grassroots Globalism

You probably wouldn’t think that a national peasant and farmer organization in Mexico, a US-based union alliance, and a radical Indigenous organization in Mexico’s far south would have much in common. Yet comparing the three—UNORCA, the Jobs with Justice coalition, and CIPO-RFM, respectively—has shown me that they all developed a set of practices that grounded their opposition to seemingly distant, global economic forces in local, front-lines struggles.21 The existing literature on global justice tends to focus on middle-class NGOs and intellectuals, on the one hand, or radical direct-action protesters, on the other. It focuses on the flexible and deterritorialized “networks” these groups created or the international gatherings and “spaces” that they helped build.22 In focusing on working-class and poor people’s responses to neoliberal economic restructuring, this book seeks to think about organizations that inhabited particular places and represented specific constituencies but also interacted with these broader networks.23

The book argues that, despite the massive differences between these three organizations, they each developed a form of what I call “grassroots globalism.” Rather than an ahistorical theoretical concept, grassroots globalism is a distinct kind of politics that these organizations developed between the 1980s and the early 2000s. It emerged in the late twentieth century to respond to conditions distinct to that moment. While the term grassroots connotes a kind of romantic authenticity, I don’t intend to