# INTRODUCTION

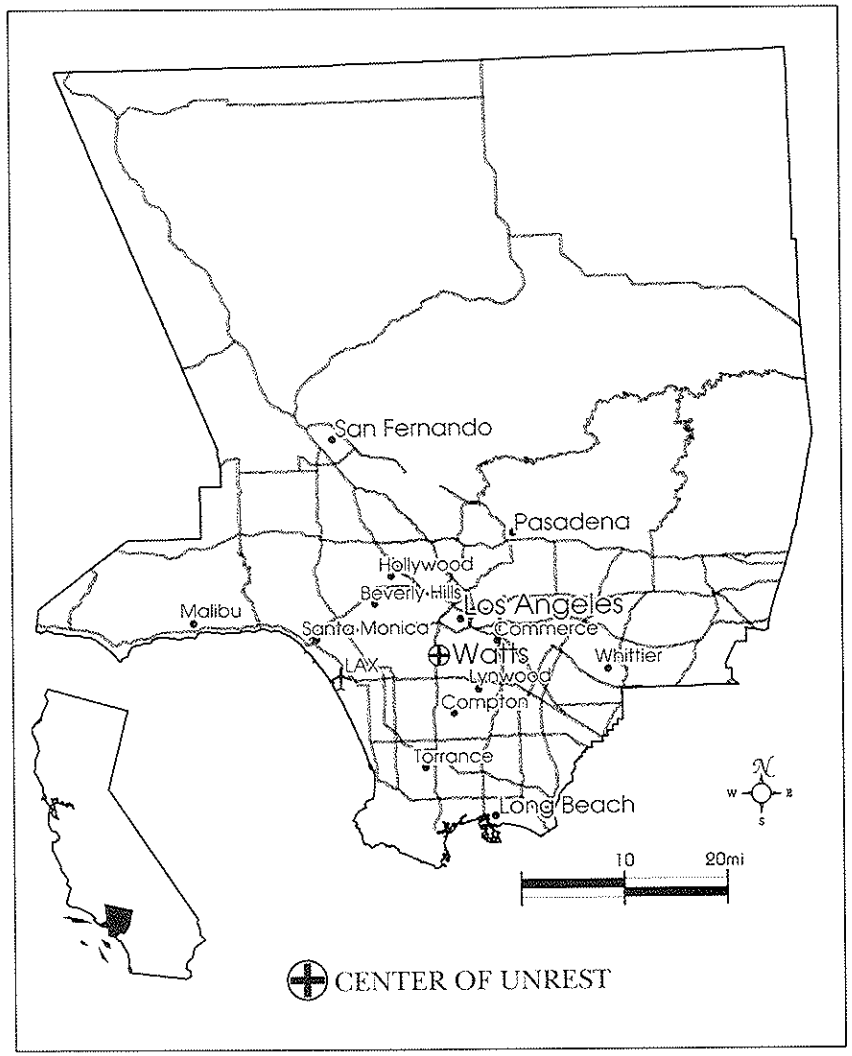
AT LEAST 34 PEOPLE DIED IN LOS ANGELES during the Watts Uprising of August 1965; 1,000 more were injured, and 4,000 arrested. Property damage was estimated at $200 million in the 46.5-square-mile zone (larger than Manhattan or San Francisco) where approximately 35,000 adults "active as rioters" and 72,000 "close spectators" swarmed. On hand to oppose them were 16,000 National Guard, Los Angeles Police Department, highway patrol, and other law enforcement officers; fewer personnel were used by the United States that same year to subdue Santo Domingo.[1]

Within the larger area of conflict, the twenty-square-mile district of Watts-Willowbrook was devastated. In its eastern portion lived one-sixth of Los Angeles County's black population of little more than one-half million (the county included the city and other territory); two-thirds of the adult residents had less than a high school education and one in eight was illiterate. Income levels were lower than any other section of the county except for the skid row district of downtown LA.[2] Though most of those killed were black, most of the property damage was suffered by a ruling elite and middle class who were predominantly white.

In the area bordered by Washington Boulevard to the north, Rosecrans Avenue to the south, Alameda Street to the east, and Crenshaw Boulevard to the west, 261 buildings were damaged or destroyed by fire, along with almost all of the latter's contents. The epicenter of destruction was on 103d Street. In one three-block area 41 buildings occupied primarily by food, liquor, furniture, and clothing stores were demolished. Few homes, churches, or libraries were damaged, a fact that supports the contention that the Watts Uprising was no mindless riot but rather a conscious, though inchoate, insurrection.[3]

■

In the period before the Red Scare, Los Angeles possessed one of the stronger left and progressive movements in the nation; this left was based predominantly in the working class—trade unions—and the black community, work-




Los Angeles



ing class and middle class alike; the middle class did not exercise the hegemony in black political life that it came to later. The repression of the left created an ideological vacuum that would later be filled by black nationalism, and this nationalism exploded in Watts in August 1965. This nationalism eventually had at least three strands: the Nation of Islam, "cultural nationalists," and the Black Panther party; the first two assumed primacy during the 1960s, while the latter—which had ties to the reviled left—disappeared. To comprehend the background for these epochal changes, it is instructive to survey briefly the history of the left in Los Angeles.

As late as 1947 journalist Eugene Lyons claimed that the Communist party had a more secure foothold in the entertainment industry in LA than in any other industry in the nation. David Caute has claimed that from the 1930s through the 1950s, there were approximately three hundred Reds in Hollywood.[4] The influence of LA Communists extended further than did that of their comrades in other parts of the nation because they had within their ranks lavishly paid screenwriters like John Howard Lawson and Dalton Trumbo (for a time the highest-paid writer in Hollywood); they could pay higher dues, which meant production of more literature (including a weekly regional newspaper), hiring of more functionaries, and many other activities. That Lawson and his colleagues were materially successful only served to attract more adherents to their banner; California's own singular version of the "American Dream"—a fantasy of affluence, sunshine, and good times—exerted a powerful and pervasive influence on the citizenry. Lawson and Trumbo demonstrated that one could be a leftist and enjoy that dream too.

Testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952, former Communist leader Max Silver maintained that at the party's zenith in the 1940s there were 4,000 Communists in the city, with an extensive number of branches among professionals (especially doctors and teachers), oil workers, auto workers—and Negroes.[5] Despite the city's well-deserved reputation as an antiunion redoubt, Los Angeles had one of the highest concentrations of Communists in the nation. This political movement had a significant representation in a key union, the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union.

Before the Red Scare dawned, Pettis Perry was the leading black Communist in Southern California. He was from a poor, working-class background and, like so many others, joined the party as a result of the Communist role in the ultimately successful struggle to free the Scottsboro Nine, a group of

African-American males imprisoned and slated for death because of allegations that they had raped white women.

In a brief memoir Perry recalled the severe repression exerted on party members and the broader left, suggesting that because of the notorious "Red Squad" of the Los Angeles Police Department, the party was outlawed until the early 1930s; leftists were "beaten, jailed, some maimed for life," he maintained. In 1937 Perry spearheaded a struggle in LA that forced a number of retail stores to hire black women as clerks. By 1938 he was chairman of the party in LA County. That same year he received more than 65,000 votes when he became the first Negro to run for the State Board of Equalization; he received a like number of votes when running for Congress in 1940. In 1942, as the first Negro to run for secretary of state, he received over 40,000 votes.[6] By 1965 the Communist party in California only rarely was running candidates for offices; if it had been putting more on the ballot, it is highly unlikely that they would have fared that well.

Perry's contentions about repression of the party apparently are no exaggeration. The left journal *New Masses* noted that elites "all have the jitters" because of the 1934 General Strike in San Francisco, spearheaded by ILWU leader Harry Bridges, a presumed Red. Bridges, unlike Perry, was "well-born," having left Melbourne traveling east to the San Francisco Bay area. He seemed worse to some than the ultimate alleged class traitor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. "Let anyone who doubts American fascist potential come to Los Angeles and see them realized" was one writer's conclusion. It was difficult in the 1930s to circulate propaganda, appear on a picket line, or hold a radical play without being battered by the Los Angeles Police Department.[7]

Just as civil rights activity in the Deep South in the 1960s was to energize Los Angeles, changes in the national political landscape in the 1940s were similarly influential. The impact of the victory of Ben Davis, a black Communist from Harlem, elected to the New York City Council in 1943, was felt in Southern California.[8] The World War II alliance between Moscow and Washington made it more difficult automatically to categorize Communists and leftists as traitors, thus marking an advance of the left across the country. The acceleration of factory production during the war was accompanied by an increase in black migration from the south to LA, and an increase in union organizing efforts. Ties between blacks and Reds were strengthened and would remain strong for some time after the war.

In 1946 Charlotta Bass, the publisher of the *California Eagle,* the city's leading black newspaper, asked John Howard Lawson, by this time the leader of the party in Hollywood, to join her board of directors.[9] Bass would go on to play a leading role in former vice president Henry Wallace's Progressive party. Her overtures to Lawson and her ties to this left-wing party were not then deemed unusual. Her political odyssey exemplifies the decline of the organized left in Black LA and the rise of narrow nationalism.



In the early fall of 1949, Bass's friend Emil Freed, a Jewish trade unionist, had been imprisoned for his tireless labor on behalf of the striking workers of the Conference of Studio Unions. He was told that Bass's paper the *Eagle* "is being given a rough time. . . . the Southside is being flooded with free copies of other Negro papers to kill its circulation and advertisers have been approached."[10] This campaign proved successful; the *Eagle* had been driven out of business by 1965; in its wake arose the *Los Angeles Herald-Dispatch,* a militant right-wing nationalist organ that engaged in baiting of the Jewish community, especially the black Jewish celebrity Sammy Davis, Jr., and provided an initial forum for the Nation of Islam.

This turn of events was a blow to the black community of LA. Bass had collaborated with Loren Miller, a black lawyer who led the successful struggle in the 1940s against enforcement of racially restrictive covenants in deeds. The long-range repercussions of this struggle would be felt when Proposition 14, designed to overturn fair-housing legislation, became a major issue in the elections of 1964. The collaboration of Bass and Miller against restrictive covenants exemplified the potential for important contributions by the black middle class to progressive struggles on race and reform.

Bass was also close to the writer Arna Bontemps, who as a young boy would frequently visit her office. Over the years, as Bontemps developed a reputation as a writer, he had cooperated informally with the left. However, when in 1961 Bass asked her younger friend if he would consider coming to Los Angeles for a speaking engagement for the benefit of the *People's World,* the Communist weekly, he demurred. Times had changed.[11]

The Civil Rights Congress, an alleged Communist front, was formed in 1946; its chapter in Los Angeles included a broad sprinkling of left-influenced unions with substantial black membership. On the chapter's board at various times were representatives of the ILWU; the Food, Tobacco and Allied Workers Union; and the United Furniture Workers Union. The chapter's sponsors in 1946 ranged from Lena Horne to Frank Sinatra.[12] The CRC provided a visible channel through which people could join together across racial lines

to combat bigotry in a militant fashion; moreover, it was a living and graphic reminder that there were numerous nonblacks of goodwill who were willing to fight racism generally and police brutality against blacks specifically. The cases it targeted, such as that of the black prisoner Robert Wesley Wells, received statewide, national, and international recognition.

The CRC boasted a score of branches citywide with hundreds of dues-paying members and thousands of supporters. In addition to expressly political activities, the CRC sponsored films on racial prejudice, regularly observed Negro History Week, and organized classes on the history of civil rights struggles, along with folk-singing, plays, and other cultural activities. In 1952 the Hollywood branch of the CRC held an extraordinary conference to "examine and study the problem of white chauvinism, to exchange ideas and experiences."[13] By 1965 the very idea of holding such a conference in LA would seem far-fetched.

The CRC also worked closely with the left-influenced National Lawyers Guild, establishing in 1949 a lawyers' panel that eventually comprised fifty-three attorneys. Most of these lawyers were white, but most of their cases concerned police brutality against blacks.[14] The CRC collaborated with other forces on the left, such as the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization; they worked effectively against racially restrictive convenants in deeds, carrying on the work of Loren Miller and Charlotta Bass. In an unprecedented move, pressure from the left led to the Screen Actors Guild adopting a resolution "pledging to use all its power to oppose discrimination against Negroes in the motion picture industry."[15] Later, Dalton Trumbo was pivotal in organizing a conference at the Hollywood Masonic Temple that lambasted "treatment of minorities in film."[16] When the liberal—though anti-Communist—Helen Gahagan Douglas, a prominent figure in Hollywood, entered the race for a congressional seat in 1946, the Republicans selected Fred Roberts, who was black, to run against her. But black voters chose to cast most of their votes for Douglas—a future victim of the Red Scare—and she triumphed.[17]

Though the CRC had chapters from coast to coast, the LA contingent was one of its strongest. As branch after branch fell victim to the Red Scare, the unit in LA remained viable virtually until the CRC's demise in 1956. In 1955 it was discovered to no one's surprise that the LA branch had been infiltrated by the FBI; the local executive secretary of the CRC was an informant for the FBI, paid to disrupt activities. This was a prelude to COINTELPRO, the Counter-Intelligence Program of the Federal Bureau of Investigation,



launched in 1956, which was designed to obliterate organizations like the CRC. COINTELPRO and related initiatives were successful; by 1965 the CRC had disappeared and with it the kind of multiracial activism for which it was noted. Despite the disintegration of this primary "Communist front," the federal government maintained a keen interest throughout the 1960s in the LA Communist party, holding numerous investigative hearings designed to intimidate real and potential leftists, particularly those who advocated a more aggressive variety of trade unionism.[18]

Nevertheless it was impossible to liquidate the LA left altogether in part because there remained a modicum of support for its singular brand of militant antiracism and trade unionism, particularly among blacks and, to an extent, among the Jewish population. When the Communist Bernadette Doyle ran for state superintendent of public instruction in 1950, she received 500,000 votes in a bipartisan primary; her party affiliation was not listed on the ballot, but her credentials were well known, and like Pettis Perry, she received a hefty number of votes from blacks.[19]

Still, the Red Scare took its toll. It was well recognized that disaffected blacks were a prime recruiting target for Communists, and this realization led directly to anti–Jim Crow concessions; but the price paid for these concessions was the weakening of the left and strengthening of the ultraright, especially within the Los Angeles Police Department, which proceeded to run rampant without fear of challenge. In South LA, the behavior of the LAPD was more closely akin to that of marines than of social workers.

There was a particular fear that blacks, given the atrocious racism they faced, would turn Red, and this led directly to pressure to disavow any taint of radicalism. Hence, in 1952, prominent black actresses Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers felt obligated to "disavow and repudiate the conference on equal rights for Negroes" planned by left-wing forces in Hollywood.[20] Yet a study released that same year showed there was "not one Negro secretary, cutter, art director, cameraman, grip, reader, prop man, accountant . . . in the motion picture industry." According to the Hollywood Arts, Sciences, and Professions Council, which sponsored both the conference and the study, "a blacklist [against the left] could not exist today [in the film industry] if it were not based on a 300 year old blacklist against the Negro people."[21] The import was that the illiberalism sustained by Jim Crow facilitated the conservative attack on the left in Hollywood.

With the defeat of the left-influenced Conference of Studio Unions, gone

was the possibility to move the recalcitrant studios to hire more blacks or to portray them accurately. Los Angeles was a major battleground during the domestic Cold War, and the consequences of this conflict were to be felt in 1965; the strength the left had managed to amass had the potential to affect dramatically the plight of African-Americans in cinema in all respects. Despite an alleged "civil rights revolution," this promised transformation had not occurred by August 1965.

Blacks had been barred effectively from one of the most vital industries in Los Angeles; worse, that same industry often libeled blacks on those few occasions when it represented them. Yet blacks were forced to stand apart from the one force—the left—that was seeking to reach across racial lines to combat this exclusion and defamation in a militant fashion.

By 1963 the *New York Times* was reporting that "many" of the studios "have no Negroes." By 1969 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission had asked the Justice Department to bring suit against both the studios and the unions on the basis of their failure to hire or include blacks.[22] Though they had distanced themselves from the left in Hollywood, blacks had not been rewarded with jobs; worse, an ideological and organizational vacuum created by the erosion of left influence was being filled by an often narrow black nationalism.

■

The creation and subsequent filling of this vacuum defines the meaning of the Watts Revolt of 1965 and, indeed, the meaning of the 1960s. By the time the 1960s arrived, it was clear that Jim Crow not only had to go but was going. However, the civil rights movement had its most dramatic and substantive impact in the Deep South, not Los Angeles. For many black Angelenos it was disorienting to hear talk of a revolution in race relations but to see little evidence of it in their lives. Moreover, by 1965 militant and multiracial confrontation of police brutality and other ills was disappearing; in such an environment it became easier to imagine that a monolithic Euro-American populace stood opposed to the faintest hint of black progress.

Unions, hampered by Red Scare restrictions, such as the Taft-Hartley bill, found it difficult to organize or embrace the black migrants flooding into Southern California. Thus excluded, these migrants turned in growing numbers to the Nation of Islam, attracted by its doctrine of self-sufficiency and "do for self." Blacks were faced with a paradox: at the same time they were



undergoing a proletarianization process in their move from the fields of Texas and Louisiana to the factories of Los Angeles, unions and working-class ideology were declining while the fundamentally middle-class ideology of the NOI was ascending. This "Nation of Shopkeepers" ideology not only created illusions about the economic destiny of blacks, it also served to reinforce the passive acceptance of the decline of unions. Gangs, with their dream of emulating other racial and ethnic groups by constructing illicit commercial empires, played a similar ideological role. Significantly, both gangs and the NOI recruited heavily in prisons, where the Civil Rights Congress previously had chalked up some of its more important victories; with the decline of unions and working-class organizations there was a concomitant growth in the ranks of the "lumpen proletariat" and its own distinct ideology.[23]

Part of the appeal of the NOI was its relentless pursuit of a middle-class ideal in the oppositional garb of Islam; its promise to "clean up" the perceived rough edges of the incoming black migrants paralleled what the National Urban League was attempting. Though the community that both purported to represent was predominantly working class, both organizations stressed the donning of the middle-class uniform of suit and tie as a route to respectability. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was firmly in the grips of a more traditional middle-class leadership, exemplified by the light-skinned banker H. Claude Hudson. As working-class organizations declined, gangs flourished by stressing racial, religious, and family ties.

Eventually the rise of gangs influenced the nascent Black Panther party and the NOI, as well as music, dress, language, cinema, and other areas of peculiar relevance to Los Angeles. This influence was transmitted via the BPP to the predominantly white Students for a Democratic Society, the Weathermen or "Weatherpeople," and others.

The rise in influence of gangs brought with it a brand of black nationalism that hurt black women. Nationalism generally can have negative consequences for women, and the black nationalism developing in LA was no exception.[24] Part of the "liberation" proclaimed by many male black nationalists in LA was the "right" to emulate the patriarchy of the Euro-American community. Moreover, the influence of gangs and the lumpen proletariat with their penchant for settling disputes through violence and their devaluing of women through prostitution complicated male-female relations in the black community. The subjugation of black women served to negate many of the positive aspects of black nationalism, such as pride in being black. Still,

these gangs filled a socioeconomic vacuum left by the decline of unions and a love and caring vacuum left by the weakening of family structure.

The black nationalism that ultimately detonated in Watts was not just a reaction against white racism; it was also a reaction against the historic and stereotypical notion that blacks were the "female" of the races: subordinated, subordinate, dominated, timid. Through black nationalism a slice of race cum gender privilege could be reclaimed by means of a sometimes brutal masculinity that, after all, was normative among other races and ethnicities in the sprawling city of Los Angeles.

That black nationalism was ignited in Los Angeles should not have been surprising given the atmosphere of what might be called "compounded racism." Not only was the city torn by the simple biracial polarity that existed in most of the country, it was also home to other groups—principally Mexican-Americans and Asian-Americans—who often carried negative ideas about the darker skinned. Moreover, many black Angelenos had roots in Louisiana, where conflicts between lighter- and darker-skinned blacks had a lengthy history. In an environment where class consciousness had been suppressed, color consciousness was enhanced, providing fertile soil for the growth of black nationalism.[25]

Black nationalism, in part, represented an attempt to create a bond between darker- and lighter-skinned blacks and to curb tensions that had developed because, among other reasons, employers of whatever hue often favored the latter over the former. Similarly, societal norms infected by white supremacy dictated to darker women and men that through skin lighteners and hair straighteners they should mimic their lighter counterparts. To be sure, black nationalism did not simply arise in Southern California in 1965; it was a phenomenon that had waxed and waned in the United States since at least the nineteenth century, just as Islam was no stranger to Africans in the Americas.[26] What was relatively new about this black nationalism was its potent antiwhite character and, to a lesser extent, its muscular nature. The Nation of Islam was born in the early 1930s, but at that time there was a left movement to provide a multiracial and militant alternative; thus, the NOI's ranks were thin. As the left weakened, however, the NOI began to grow: by 1965 the NOI probably had as many members and influenced as many as the Civil Rights Congress at its zenith. The rise of the NOI in LA made for a contradictory and confused black nationalism. The theology of this sect maintained that blacks were Asiatic at a time when black nationalism to many meant an



identification with Africa along with pride in nappy hair and dark skin. The NOI's identification with Asia was at times the cause of some ambivalence among its adherents.

Nationalism was not monolithic. Aside from the NOI, there were "cultural nationalists," often artists and intellectuals influenced by the transatlantic currents of Negritude, as well as anti-imperialists who identified with armed struggle in Africa, Asia, and Latin America but did not want to fight for their government in Vietnam or Santo Domingo—or Watts.

The Black Panther party, which bloomed in the ashes of Watts, had ties to the diminished left. Its internationalism was an enhanced reflection of what its members had experienced in a California that diverged sharply from the national pattern of simple biracial polarity. However, the socioeconomic decline of South LA and related factors created conditions favorable for the flourishing of gangs and a culture that left a deep and damaging imprint on everything it touched, including the BPP. Concomitantly, COINTELPRO targeted the BPP, and this hastened its demise.

There is a link that joins the apparently conflicting agendas of the middle-class ideology of the NOI, "cultural nationalists," the NAACP leadership—and the gangs. The NOI, the cultural nationalists, and some of the gangs clamored for blacks to control businesses in black communities. This was a touchy issue since to some it implied a form of "ethnic cleansing" in South LA; it was made more sensitive by the left's lengthy campaign for Negro self-determination with its inference of black control of institutions in the black community. When the goal of black control moved toward realization, those who were positioned to benefit were many black entrepreneurs close to the NAACP leadership and the Sons of Watts, an organization viewed by many as a glorified gang.

Working-class blacks did benefit in the aftermath of the revolt. Many received government jobs and joined public-sector unions. However, they rarely asserted themselves with the kind of working-class ideology that was expressed in South Africa, for example, by the mostly black Congress of South African Trade Unions. The right wing's constant emphasis on reducing the size of government ensured that these black workers would face constant insecurity.

The NAACP was affected profoundly by the Red Scare. It was forced to oust from organizational influence black and nonblack leftists alike. Those whites who fought racism militantly were branded as Red or Pink and purged.

Frank Barnes, the militant president of the Santa Monica branch, was suspended from his post office job on loyalty charges after organizing a picket line for jobs at a local Sears Roebuck store. In the charges, filed pursuant to Executive Order 9835, it was alleged that he had been and was at that time "affiliated or sympathetic with an organization, association, movement, group, or combination of persons designated by the Attorney General as subversive." Barnes was also a fervent advocate of internal democracy in the centralized NAACP, and shortly thereafter he was ousted from the presidency; removing him from influence set the stage for the NAACP in LA to be dominated by middle-class professionals often distant from the concerns of working-class black Angelenos.[27] By 1965 the NAACP would hesitate to collaborate with Communist union leaders like John Howard Lawson or Emil Freed or even a union leader who simply ran afoul of the Red Scare, such as Frank Barnes.

The triumph of the middle class in the NAACP ultimately was harmful for South LA. As black migrants flowed into Southern California after World War II, they were associated with the dislocation their arrival was said to bring. More blacks meant more opportunities for antiblack racism and more competition for scarce housing and employment. Many of the new arrivals in Watts particularly were scorned for their alleged untidiness, viewed as a relic of their rural backgrounds. Unlike many in the middle class, they did not wear suits and ties daily because their employment did not require it or allow it. Unlike those bourgeois leaders at the apex of the NAACP leadership, they did not have deep roots in Southern California. Year-of-arrival consciousness became a substitute for class consciousness.

By the time of the Watts conflagration of 1965, the NAACP was scorned and deemed out of touch with the black masses. That this leadership tended to be lighter skinned than the majority of the community they purported to represent became an issue of no small significance in August 1965. Similarly, the black Christian church had failed to attend to the temporal needs of many of its parishioners. Taken together, the perceived failures of these two venerable institutions created an opening for the Nation of Islam with its militant rhetoric about presumed oppressors.

The triumph of the middle class in the NAACP underscored the vitality of the California Dream. Those with attractive homes, well-tailored suits, large cars, and hefty bank accounts were thought to be better people and happier; this description did not apply to many in South LA. The events of 11–18 August 1965 assumed the form of a "food riot," an eruption of



commodity fetishism, and a potlach of destruction among those denied the dream. The organizational channels through which the marginalized traditionally had expressed their anger had been eroded.

In the resulting void along with nationalism, year-of-arrival consciousness, and the like arose generational conflict. Justifiably, the youth of 1965 asked what the older generation had done to combat Jim Crow; many of the youth did not recall or were made to forget the militance of W. E. B. Du Bois and Ben Davis, not to mention Pettis Perry. Thus, the answers they received were incomplete, unsatisfying, unimpressive. The younger generation concluded that there had been an excess of middle-class prudence and the time had come for militance. Unfortunately, this laudable response was colored by the ascending influence of gangs, whose often violent bravado could have benefited from a dash of prudence.

Although the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 precipitated a new conversation on race, South LA was not disposed to participate in it. The sacrifices of black youth, from Emmett Till to the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, earned them a distinct place at the table, along with the NOI, cultural nationalists, gangs, the BPP, and the NAACP; to many of the youth, all appeared attractive except the last. Simultaneously, the attack on Aid to Families with Dependent Children—i.e., welfare—was not just an attack on women, it was an attack on youth.

Hence, the meaning of the 1960s cannot be divorced from what had happened in the 1950s, most notably, the Red Scare. Those forces arising in the 1960s were marked indelibly by what happened in the previous decade. Ironically, this meant that those activists who arose in the 1960s not only were obligated by the prevailing consensus to keep apart from figures like Ben Davis, John Howard Lawson, Pettis Perry, and Frank Barnes, they often were unaware of their existence.

The decline of the left also set the stage for the rise of ultraright forces bent on eviscerating the public sector; it was the government—city, state, and federal—that sought to hamstring racial discrimination via legislation and regulation, and the weakening of this sector had a negative impact on blacks. Government was the chief employer in LA; in it blacks—City Councilman Tom Bradley for one—were placed at the highest levels, as they were not generally in the private sector. The attack on government was, in effect, an attack on blacks.

The Watts Uprising was a milestone marking the previous era from what

was to come. For blacks it marked the rise of black nationalism, as blacks revolted against police brutality. But what began as a black revolt against the police quickly became a police revolt against blacks. This latter revolt was a milestone too, one marking the onset of a "white backlash" that would propel Ronald Reagan into the governor's mansion in Sacramento and then the White House. White backlash proved to be more potent than what had given it impetus, black nationalism. This too was the meaning of the 1960s.

■

To discuss the Watts rebellion without examining its roots in the global political economy would be to offer an incomplete and faulty analysis. As evidence, one has only to consider the rich and exciting school of scholarship that seeks to explain the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, and ultimately in all of the Americas, by examining broader questions of political economy. Even those who do not accept every aspect of this thesis have been forced to engage it.[28]

Thus far, those who have examined a question of similar epochal significance—the dismantling of legalized racial segregation—have avoided, for the most part, incorporating in their analysis broader questions of political economy and the global correlation of forces, despite the fact that this dismantling took place as the Cold War began and as policy makers admitted freely that their actions were motivated by global developments.

I have argued that just as the conflict between capitalism and slavery led to the abolition of bonded labor, the conflict between capitalism and the possibilities of socialism led to the abolition of formal Jim Crow. I am certain that at some point in the twenty-first century, historians will be obligated to tackle this important question—the dismantling of legalized segregation—by reference to the Cold War. Similarly, I am convinced that these future historians will be captivated by the apparent paradox that as Jim Crow subsided, black nationalism grew; and, concomitantly, that as the presumed liberalizing influence of anti–Jim Crow measures were exerted, conservatism began to grow. My thesis is that the solution to these seeming conundrums can be found by examining the declining fortunes of the left. Besides seeking to comprehend the uniqueness of the black experience in the West, examining the dynamics of insurrection, and reflecting on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and age, this book seeks to chart the impact of the world on Afro-America and vice versa.



Its domestic context aside, the Watts Revolt in its scale and intensity brought to the forefront the question of national security. In some respects it offered a paradigm of what might happen if a nuclear warfare emergency arose: there were hints of martial law, military rule, and a coup d'état. The revolt even sparked fears in some quarters that the Soviet Union had manipulated the situation or could take advantage of it. These fears were not unprecedented. Historically, there had been concern that disaffected blacks would be sympathetic to the blandishments of foreign powers, thus jeopardizing existing sovereignty.

In February 1942 Japan launched the last direct frontal attack on the U.S. mainland, a stone's throw from where I once resided in California; during World War II blacks, via the NOI, had manifested some sympathy for Tokyo's claim to be "protecter of the colored races."[29] California was not distant from Vietnam and was not only part of the Atlantic world; it was also part of the Pacific. Military spending in this region boosted the University of California by way of research dollars lavished on science departments and contractors like Douglas Aircraft and TRW. Thus, the call in August 1965 by a number in Watts to support the National Liberation Front and the Communist party


1. In this pre-1948 photo, a black man observes housing from which he is excluded because of race.

in Vietnam angered and frightened many; this call was echoed shortly thereafter by some BPP activists.[30] The BPP had political relations with Cuba, China, North Korea, and other forces deemed hostile to Washington. This global context was a decisive factor facilitating domestic civil rights concessions.[31]

The impact of the Mexican heritage of California must be considered also. Blacks could receive civil rights concessions for national security reasons; in California there was the added incentive of a competing, compounded racism. By the time Los Angeles experienced another burst of civil unrest in 1992, the city's Latino, or Spanish-speaking, population was growing more rapidly than monolingual blacks. This created an opportunity for blacks in the city and state to assume the position of "middle man minority" and consequently to gain top posts in City Hall and Sacramento much more rapidly than their Latino counterparts.

In 1965 a major concern among white elites was whether concessions

2. In the fall of 1946, Ronald Reagan (*center at microphone*) appeared in an antiracist radio play sponsored by a "Communist front," called "Mobilization for Democracy."



to blacks after August 1965 would send the message to Chicanos that more militance would be rewarded. In a state where race relations meant more than biracial polarity, where by 1992 not only the Spanish-speaking but Asian-Americans as well outnumbered blacks, it was difficult for blacks in the city and state not to be internationalist in outlook. But this could mean contact with many deemed potentially antagonistic to Washington—those with roots in Ho Chi Minh City, for example—or at least could open the door for neighbors like Mexico to take advantage of regional problems.[32] Demographers suggest that the population trends of today in California, where blacks are just ahead of Native Americans in numbers, like many other trends eventually will sweep eastward from here. Thus, blacks and nonblacks alike across the nation can benefit from understanding this state's peculiar experience.

Renewed affinity with the continent of Africa was supposedly at the heart of black nationalism. Yet, the February 1965 murder of Malcolm X in New York City by his former NOI comrades weakened the relations he had developed with Nasser's Egypt and Nkrumah's Ghana. The NAACP was loath to associate with its logical counterpart, the African National Congress of South

3. Civil Rights Congress leader William Patterson (*left*) and local leader Anne Shore appear at a 1949 LA rally.

Africa, because of the ANC's alliance with South African Communists.[33] "Cultural nationalists" expressed ideas remarkably similar to those of Leopold Senghor of Senegal and his doctrine of "Negritude." Janet Vaillant has maintained that colonial repression in this West African state undergirded this philosophy. "Cut off from the give-and-take of local politics, to which they had become accustomed," she noted, "young educated Senegalese were thrown back on ideas and theories. Unable to act for the time being, they considered cultural questions with added fervor."[34]

By 1965 many blacks were "cut off" from anti-imperialist and trade union politics; "cultural questions" filled the vacuum. Writing poems was deemed to be more important than who controlled the means of production. And just as Senghor's praxis was marked by the bacchanalian influence of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the cultural nationalists in LA were marked by a certain liber-


4. Dalton Trumbo bids farewell to fellow left luminaries from the film industry and friends as he goes off to prison. *Left to right:* Helen C. Nelson Bessie; Alvah Bessie; the Reverend W. M. Small of New Light Baptist Church; Trumbo; Herbert Biberman; Mrs. Carl Crain; Rev. Crain, pastor of Long Beach Christian Church; Margaret Larkin Cole; Albert Maltz; Lester Cole.



tine abandon that took full advantage of the unfolding "sexual revolution," a revolution that was marred by the rise of gangsters and their particular approach to heterosexual and homosexual relations. Thus sexual abandon, along with year-of-arrival consciousness and nationalism, evolved to fill the vacuum created by the erosion of class consciousness.

The transatlantic influence exemplified by Negritude may not have been accidental. In 1956, the year the CRC dissolved and the left went on the defensive in the midst of revelations about Stalinist rule, Senghor addressed a host of black intellectuals, including Richard Wright and Mercer Cook—but not Du Bois, who was barred because the government would not grant him a passport—at a forum in Paris apparently backed by Paris and Washington.[35] Anti-Communists maintained that Moscow influenced virtually every nation in the world through the manipulation of local Communists. But global influence was far from being a Communist monopoly. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had shown that women could organize across national


5. Charlotta Bass (*center*), publisher of the *California Eagle*, campaigns for Congress in October 1950.

boundaries, influencing social policies in many nations.[36] Martin Luther King, Jr., was influenced profoundly by India.[37] Certain forms of black nationalism could also be produced and reproduced and were influenced by global trends, be they from Tokyo or Dakar.[38] Cultural nationalists in LA might agree rhetorically with Amilcar Cabral that there should be a "return to the source," to Africa, for inspiration; but the anti-Communist environment in which they existed made it more likely that their source would more closely resemble Leopold Senghor than Nelson Mandela.

In the 1990s nationalism of various brands is spreading in the aftermath of the left's decline; this trend has taken hold in neighborhoods from LA to Kabul.[39] This is a global development. In sum, just as Toni Morrison has complained that race is a looming absence in the discourse on U.S. literature, we must acknowledge that considering the African-American experience while ignoring the looming presence of the rest of the world does a disservice to all sides, including the U.S. experience as a whole.[40] In the pages that follow I sketch the impact of race, region, class, gender, age, and the like on postwar Los Angeles; but all of these factors must be considered in the light of developments in Vietnam, the Soviet Union, China, Africa, the world.