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The Ascension of Black Power Politics: A Regional Study of Migration from Louisiana to California, 1927-1975

By

Xavier Pierre Buck

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

in the

Graduate Division

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in Charge:
Professor Waldo E. Martin, Jr., Chair
Professor Elena Schneider
Professor Jovan Lewis

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Abstract

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Blacks from Louisiana and its surrounding areas constituted the majority of black migrants to California in the postwar era, but the scholarship on their historical experiences as well as their influence on California's political economy is scanty at best. Their experiences with the Great Flood of 1927, the Huey Long and New Deal eras, white land monopolies, as well as their wealth-building strategies in Protestant denominations, masonic lodges, and farming collectives — all of which helped shape their Louisiana lives — were integral to their economic expectations and strategies in the West. With a keen sense of state and municipal operations building upon their Louisiana experiences, blacks in California mobilized government resources to improve land in the municipal and economic periphery at greater speeds than these neighborhoods' previous residents. In their quest for economic independence, they caused $40 million in damage in the Watts Uprising of 1965, built educational and health institutions, modeled social democratic programs to deliver essential services to their community, and ultimately used their southern proletarian experiences to build economically cooperative communities. Grounded in an original microanalysis of black political economies in Louisiana, I argue, also originally, that black experiences in Louisiana from 1927 – 1945 were integral to black political organizing, cooperative economics, and government partnerships in California from 1945 – 1975.

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My dissertation has benefited tremendously from the council of Dr. Waldo E. Martin, Jr., my mentor and friend. I'll never forget that I chose to come to UC Berkeley after we rode through the Berkeley hills listening to Chaka Kahn. Whether it was through private study or as a graduate assistant in his class, he shaped much of my early thinking and continued to help me refine my dissertation until it was completed. Dr. Elena Schneider introduced me to Atlantic World history where I began drawing comparisons between black revolts across time and space. Coupled with courses with Dr. Jovan Lewis in African American Studies and Geography, I was encouraged to go beyond the traditional confines of historical research. Not only were they there for me academically, but they also lent support and advice during more difficult periods in my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My dissertation is about how working-class black people leveraged local, state, and federal governments to obtain greater economic control over their lives and communities in Louisiana and California from 1927 - 1975. In turn, I look into how their relationship to government altered their politics across time and over vast geographic spaces. By focusing on black economic strivings, government, and migration in the twentieth century, I highlight the South's role in the development of Black Power politics in the West.

There is already plenty of scholarship showing that the majority of black migrants who moved to California came from Louisiana and the region around its borders, but there has been little written on the relevance of these particular regions to black political thought and economies. As Josh Sides wrote in *L.A. City Limits*, "Less well understood is the way in which the social and political experiences of migrants from different parts of the South influenced their expectations of Los Angeles and their reactions when those expectations were not met."[1] I conducted a parish-by-parish study on black politics in Louisiana to gain a deeper understanding of the variety of the southern black political thought in the first half of the twentieth century. After following black migration patterns in 1930s and 1940s Louisiana and into 1950s and 1960s California, I quickly realized how important economic independence was to everyday people. While many philosophical ideas emerged out of the South and proliferated in the Northeast, Midwest, and West, black people were overwhelmingly concerned with obtaining quality jobs, building wealth, and gaining complete control over their economic futures. Although the economics of Black Power have often been overshadowed by critiques of capitalism, they're vital for understanding the genealogy of Black Power politics starting in the South and developing across kinship networks in other parts of the country.

I originally became interested in this subject while researching my own family history. Lafayette and Annie Lester and their teenage son, Albert, left Camden, Arkansas in the early 1900s to move further south into Red River Parish, Louisiana. Growing up in California, the overwhelming narrative I was taught was that blacks moved out of the South—not further into it. When I followed my family out of Arkansas and into northwest Louisiana, an area notorious for lynchings, I had trouble comprehending why they would move in this direction. They weren't moving to an urban area like New Orleans or Houston, but instead to another agricultural part of the South. And then again, this wasn't just any part of the rural South, but near Shreveport, the last capital of the confederacy and the deadliest place for black people during Reconstruction.[2]

Lafayette and Annie Lester rented farmland in Arkansas and then again in Louisiana, but worked for themselves, something that was likely very important to former slaves. They had twelve children together, the majority of whom stayed in Arkansas, meaning they moved away from family with their youngest son, rather than closer to kin. After Annie passed away and Lafayette grew older, he moved back to Arkansas to live out the rest of his years with family, meaning it was still safe for him to return. Their son Albert married a woman named Rosa Chitman in Red River Parish and started his own family, originally laboring for her father. But when Rosa Chitman's father, Tobe, disappeared mysteriously from the records, the family began sharecropping for a white family in the same area. It seems that Albert and Rosa's economic

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[1] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 39

[2] Gilles Vandal, "Bloody Caddo': White Violence Against Blacks in a Louisiana parish, 1865-1876," Journal of Social History, vol. 25 (1991): 373-381

conditions worsened over time and prompted them to escape to California in the 1950s. After following my own family's migration, my burning questions were why did Lafayette and Annie move towards violence in northwest Louisiana rather than away from it? Was it common for blacks to move further into the South? What were they in pursuit of? How did migration shape their politics and personality? Was there really any difference in working in the state of Louisiana as opposed to Arkansas? Did the state borders actually matter or were southern laws, violence, and economies homogenous?

On Geography

The debt peonage system, by far, was the most egregious institution of the Jim Crow South, because it denied black families their human, civil, and economic rights that American law promised them as citizens born in the United States. The thirteenth amendment, one of three of those passed under Reconstruction, outlawed slavery, except for the punishment of a crime. Shortly after Emancipation, southern states passed Black Codes criminalizing vagrancy. Even though blacks toiled under slavery for hundreds of years, it was now illegal for them to refuse, or appear to refuse, work. Local sheriffs rounded up blacks across the South and crammed them into sham courtrooms where white judges sentenced them to prison like it was compulsory education. When these black victims were unable to pay for the cost of arrest and court fees, their sentences were extended. Then they were often sold to plantation owners or industrial companies who paid the prisons a monthly rate towards paying down their debt. Throughout the Jim Crow era, blacks performed backbreaking labor picking cotton, cutting sugarcane, mining coal, and other difficult tasks. As "criminals" their rights were legally stripped and these laborers were subject to insufferable abuse, such as whippings, to maintain efficient production. However, unlike under slavery, corporations were not interested in keeping their laborers alive, because there was a steady influx of prison laborers they could purchase.[3] It comes as no surprise that in the twenty-first century, construction workers and archeologists are finding a mass of unmarked black gravesites from the twentieth century. In 2018, 95 black burials were uncovered in Sugarland, Texas, a suburb of Houston, where a convict leasing sugar plantation was the primary economic force prior to it being subdivided and turned into "one of the best places to live."[4] The convict leasing system was probably the most lethal institution to black Americans in the first half of the twentieth century.

The other form of debt peonage was sharecropping and tenant farming. Black laborers gave a share of the profits from their crops to plantation owners because they leased their land. But because they were not paid until after the harvest, they were forced to purchase food, housing, clothing, medical services, and other provisions on credit, with ridiculous interest rates, offered to them solely from a planter who served dually as their employer and landlord. In this deeply capitalist system with little accountability or legal protection, the workers were forced into perpetual servitude through debt peonage. Plantation owners kept the books for their employees and falsified documents to exaggerate their debt, though the interest rates alone were exorbitant enough, and used their debt to force them to labor on their land year after year. Louisiana was controlled by a small group of white elites who owned large acreages of land across the state and, for the most part, controlled government as well. Greta de Jong wrote

[3] Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2008)

[4] Tom Dart, "Building over history': the prison graveyard buried under a Texas suburb," *The Guardian*, June 22, 2019

extensively on planter power in Louisiana: “Prominent names in local politics were likely to be the same as those that headed the sugar and cotton industries, or to be related to planters through business or family ties.” Planters had a ludicrous amount of power in the state, but local police departments helped them maintain power in rural parishes. Jong continues, “Law enforcement officers frequently acted as if they were the private employees of plantation owners rather than public servants who were supposed to protect the whole community.”[5] Planters institutionalized race through Jim Crow laws to maintain a cheap labor supply, increase efficiency, and expand their profit margins.

Debt peonage shared many characteristics with slavery, but black Louisianans in the twentieth century had considerably more mobility than their forefathers and mothers in bondage. Debt limited their mobility, but in some instances, individuals left one plantation to work on another. Friends and family shared what plantations were better to work on than others and used this information to choose where they would live and work. Fleeing from plantations when there was debt still owed was dangerous, but many migrated into nearby Texas to hide and start new lives. Even as people moved across the state, they kept in touch with family through letters, continued visiting one another, and often moved from city to city together.

In the 1920s, many black families moved into Louisiana’s urban centers, like Monroe, Shreveport, Lake Charles, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans, but then migrated back into rural areas in the 1930s when the Depression strained their financial resources. As agricultural work mechanized and the industrial sector grew in the 1940s, many people moved back into Louisiana’s urban cities. The oil and wartime booms catapulted Louisiana into the forefront of industrialism, opening thousands of non-agricultural jobs to blacks. Unfortunately, many black families were displaced as whites scrambled to control the oil sitting below black-owned land. Blacks were violently dispossessed of their land and forced into greater economic peril. Blacks were conscious of how race was used to keep them poor and support white wealth development. They may not have iterated “racial capitalism,” but they were more than aware of how race followed the economic modes of capitalism and continued to oppress them.

Unlike the other southern states, there was very little black out-migration from Louisiana prior to the 1940s. Many left Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and other southern states for cities like New York, Newark, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Chicago in the 1910s and 1920s, but out-migration from Louisiana didn’t commence until the Great Flood of 1927 pushed a small number of blacks to Chicago and Detroit. Prior to the flood there was a small migration of black artists from New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta to Chicago and New York, but it wasn’t a mass migration as seen in other states. However, there was a lot of intrastate migration during the 1930s, and World War II really changed the geographic trajectory of blacks in Louisiana. Even during this time, thousands of blacks poured into southern Louisiana for wartime jobs and its reputation for being more tolerant than the rest of the South. The migration from Louisiana to California was particular in that this population had experienced southern agricultural and industrial life prior to moving and most families had little experience migrating prior to moving west. If Louisianans migrated anywhere in the 1920s, it was more likely to cities within Louisiana, into nearby Houston, or very rarely to the Midwest. In California, blacks remained a miniscule fraction of the population prior to World War II. While migrants to northern cities likely already had family there who migrated decades prior, black

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[5] Greta de Jong, “With the Aid of God and the F.S.A.”: The Louisiana Farmers’ Union and the African American Freedom Struggle in the New Deal Era,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 107

migrants to California were settling new communities altogether. After decades of resistance in Louisiana, some black families chose to relocate to California in pursuit of better jobs, homeownership, and political freedom. Many others fled to California, escaping violent situations coupled with debt, the oil boom, and interpersonal relationships. The sudden urgency to pick up and move across the country in this particular time period is important for understanding the swift rise of Black Power politics— particularly self-defense, institution building, and community control— in the West in the 1950s and 1960s.

As I wrote my dissertation, I often reflected on Katherine McKittrick's argument that black lives are "often displaced, rendered ungeographic."[6] It is only relatively recently that the U.S. government has started to recognize black dwellings on the otherwise large plantations historicized as centers of agricultural ingenuity, beautiful odes to colonization, wedding venues and gathering places, and former terrain developed into modern suburbs. The Whitney Plantation, founded in 2014, is the only plantation in Louisiana exclusively dedicated to telling the stories of enslaved people. To this day, there are no plantations that tell the stories of sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Black rural history in twentieth century Louisiana would have all but disappeared if it weren't for newspapers, oral histories, planter bookkeeping records, letters, and obituaries. Blacks have not only been erased from geographies promoted by public history but have been "rendered ungeographic" until they arrive in northern and western cities. Cities like Chicago and Oakland have been historicized as spaces where black migrants develop race consciousness, become industrialized proletariats, and sharpen their radical politics. In contrast, the South remains a static geography of planter abuse—a place blacks had to leave because they were rendered powerless. Or alternatively, a place interested in more conservative civil rights and integration rather than self-defense and community control.

Again, McKittrick reminds us that "Geography's and geographers well-known history in the Americas, of white masculine European mappings, explorations, conquests, is interlaced with a different sense of place, those populations and their attendant geographers that are concealed by what might be called rational spatial colonization and domination: the profitable erasure and objectification of subaltern subjectivities."[7] So what do we learn from exploring black geographies, or the spatial meanings created through black experiences and histories, in Louisiana? For one, parishes with black farming collectives were political and economic epicenters just as much as urban cities were. People moved in and out of urban and rural spaces usually looking for better jobs, but this topographical divide is useless for understanding their pursuit of freedom. What is more useful is studying migrations towards centers of economic independence whether they be dense or decentralized, in Louisiana or elsewhere.

Two, state borders between Arkansas, Mississippi, and Alabama were a lot more fluid than those with Texas, Oklahoma, and later California. Moving West had figuratively meant *moving towards freedom* since Reconstruction, but what was considered the West and how far people were willing to travel changed over time. A large part of imagining and migrating West was yearning for the dismantling of white land monopolies such as those found in most of the Deep South, but was less common in Texas, Oklahoma, and California. Hence, by the 1950s Los Angeles had the highest black homeownership rate in the country, followed by Houston.

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[6] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x

[7] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), x

Three, state borders were jurisdictions only relevant to the planter class' ability to control black land, labor, and rights through state legal systems. My ancestors likely saw little difference moving between the Arkansas and Louisiana border because both geographies offered little opportunity for economic mobility. What difference would it make to them if they were incarcerated and owned by the state of Arkansas as opposed to Louisiana? What difference would it make to them if they could be lynched in either state? What difference would it make to them if they could be robbed of their land in either jurisdiction? Absolutely nothing. What mattered was whether they were moving towards or further away from economic independence. Although Louisiana was its own particular place with its own history, racial dynamics, and power structure, many black laborers found little difference between them and the rest of the Deep South. It was another place that offered low wage work and guaranteed intergenerational unfreedoms. Because of this, Greater Louisiana, or the state and its surrounding areas, are the focal point of my study. When accounting for black geographies, it is useless to adhere to strict borders unless they help to define tangible freedoms.

Four, economic forces catalyzed black movement, but kinship and social networks folded vast geographic distances into neighboring townships. It wasn't uncommon to see black journalists publish articles discussing Mississippi and California in the same sentence. Many southern families were large, stretched across various topographies, and shared information on where they could find the best jobs, land ownership opportunities, and how they could break free from debt peonage. In *A Nation Under Our Feet*, Steven Hahn writes extensively about how black kinship and social networks proliferated in the rural South from Reconstruction to the first wave of migration North in 1915. They were the vehicles for exchanging information and organizing clandestine political movements. In Louisiana, these same networks were strengthened for three more decades before most black emigrants headed West. Both the people who stayed in Louisiana and those who left continued to organize within these networks at home, away, and in all the geographies in between. These networks became vital for bridging political and economic movements in Louisiana and California and ultimately blurred state borders.

I am interested in how black geographies can help us understand the genealogy of Black Power in very local contexts that became national definitions. Perhaps this story could have been written about migration from Mississippi to Chicago or Georgia to New York, but those migration stories have been told endlessly. Black politics in the West have not only been understudied, but there are no book-length manuscripts on connections between Louisiana and California despite many scholars noting their relationship. There are very few locales that have such a strong connection set between 1940 – 1970, as opposed to 1915 – 1970. Although there are several studies on twentieth century black life in Louisiana, most notably Adam Fairclough's *Race & Democracy*, very few studies discuss archival sources outside of New Orleans and Baton Rouge. Although southern Louisiana is a popular place of study, it doesn't fully capture most black experiences in the state or account for the places most blacks departed from to California.

Greta de Jong's *A Different Day* is the most thorough study of rural black politics in Louisiana. She uses dozens of taped interviews of rural people who became involved in CORE to show how blacks shifted from informal resistance to organized protest between 1900-1970. Her book was incredibly influential, but when I troubled state borders and factored in intrastate and outward migration, I saw a new way of understanding rural politics. I am less interested in shifts towards organized protest, because I argue that blacks were already well-organized prior to the postwar era through kinship networks, church denominations, masonic organizations, and benevolent societies. Families and communities were already carrying out the ideals of self-

defense, community control, and institution-building long before the NAACP, CORE, and others gained a foothold in the state. Because their organizing was either clandestine or hidden behind seemingly apolitical church denominations, masonic organizations, and benevolent societies, many scholars have assumed their actions were informal resistance. But if their goal was economic independence rather than integration then public protest was only one of many strategies they used as an organized people and cannot be used to measure their participation in formal movements. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of literature on the Black Power Era and explain why I chose to focus on economic independence as the primary objective of black organizing efforts in Louisiana and California.

Defining Black Power

The Black Power Era was a multifaceted cultural, political, and economic movement. By the early 1960s Malcolm X had become the greatest spokesperson for the Nation of Islam as well as one of black America's most revered leaders. Through his organizing and rhetorical work, he set the stage for the political and cultural aspects of the Black Power Era. In a 1963 interview at UC Berkeley, he spoke about the philosophy of self-defense within the Nation of Islam saying, "We're taught to display courtesy—to be polite. But we're also taught that anytime anyone in anyway inflicts or seeks to inflict violence upon us, we are within our religious rights to retaliate in self-defense to the maximum degree of our ability. We never initiate any violence upon anyone but if anyone attacks us, we reserve the right to defend ourselves."[8] Through his work in the Nation of Islam and later the Organization of Afro-American Unity, Malcolm X ignited a generation of young activists to pick up the tools of liberation, or guns, and defend themselves. In the same interview, he expounded on his belief in self-determination and his hope for racial cohesion. He proclaimed, "There will come a time when black people wake up and become intellectually independent enough to think for themselves as other humans are intellectually independent enough to think for themselves. Then the black man will think like a black man and he will feel for other black people. And this new thinking and feeling will cause black people to stick together and then at that point you'll have a situation that when you attack one black man you are attacking all black men." Malcolm X spoke self-defense, self-determination, and intellectual inquiry into the atmosphere and, in turn, influenced a generation of activists and intellectuals. While he may have been one of the greatest spokespersons of his time, upon his assassination in 1965, he also became the unequivocal spirit of the Black Power movement.

Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the man credited with coining the term "Black Power", Stokely Carmichael, delivered a speech at UC Berkeley just three years after Malcolm X. Carmichael prefaced his definition of Black Power with a critique of integration. He said, "In the past six years or so, this country has been feeding us a 'thalidomide drug of integration,' and some negroes have been walking down a dream street talking about sitting next to white people. That does not begin to solve the problem. We didn't go to Mississippi to sit next to Ross Barnett (former governor of Mississippi), we did not go to sit next to Jim Clark (sheriff of Selma, Alabama), we went to get them out of our way." Carmichael believed that blacks advocating for integration was useless in combatting white supremacy, but if whites organized their own communities and advocated for integration, then there would be real systemic change in the United States. Speaking to a largely white audience, he outlined what white people should be doing and then succinctly explained what Black Power

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[8] "Classic Malcolm X interview at UC Berkeley," The Post Archive, *YouTube*, October 11, 1963, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4QXYcljEM4

was. Carmichael said, "We must wage a psychological battle on the right for black people to define themselves as they see fit, and organize themselves as they see fit."[9] And so Malcolm X's spirit promoted self- defense and racial consciousness while Stokely's organizing efforts tied in a way of life for black people to relentlessly work to define themselves.

Nevertheless, scholars have debated what the most significant or lasting effects of the Black Power Era were. It was definitely a political movement that continued the work of Malcolm X in more secular arenas. Arguably the most popular organization that flourished in the 1960s was the Black Panther Party, a grassroots self-defense organization in Oakland, California that quickly became the vanguard of revolution with chapters in most major cities across the country. Their co-founder, Huey P. Newton, has been described as the personification of Malcolm X, because he picked up his philosophy, organized the "brothers on the block," and executed on Malcolm's ideas.

But as influential as Malcolm X was, there were other significant figures who set the stage for the Black Power Era and continued the work long after Malcolm passed. In Monroe, North Carolina, Robert F. Williams ran the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He successfully integrated a local library and swimming pool, but when the Ku Klux Klan drew their guns on him, he retaliated in self-defense and shot back. Williams' book, *Negroes with Guns*, was widely popular among young black activists after being published in 1962 because it demonstrated his philosophical pivot from gradual policy change and integration to armed self-defense. After being falsely accused of kidnapping a white couple, Williams fled to Cuba and then the People's Republic of China. While away he became the president of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), a black nationalist organization that applied Maoism to black conditions. RAM was the only secular organization Malcolm X joined prior to his death and was very influential to the Black Panther Party's leadership. It was important to Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, the Black Panther Party, and countless others to connect their quest for liberation to other third world struggles. They recognized that America's foreign policy mirrored state violence against black leaders and organizations at home. While they fought in the metropole, they sought connections to other countries facing western occupation and neocolonialism. They also maintained strong connections to communist leaders like Mao Zedong in China and Fidel Castro in Cuba. The Black Power movement was global as much as it was domestic.

The Black Power Era was undeniably political, but to some scholars and to many people, the cultural revolution, characterized by large afros, daishikis, black student unions, and chants that "black is beautiful," was its greatest impact. It was a wakeup call to the world that being black *was in* even though the white power structure tried to limit their influence to the fringes of society. Its cultural advocates hoped to influence white America and turn the soul of the nation against white supremacy and capitalism.[10] Black art collectives and theaters thrived in Harlem, Chicago, Watts, and other major black centers. Olympians John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their fists in solidarity with the black liberation struggle after winning their race in Mexico City. Music artists altered their sound to match the times. The Temptation's Eddie Kendricks went from singing mainstream Motown hits to calling for collective strength in "My People…Hold

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[9] Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," University of California Berkeley, 1966

[10] William L. Van Deburg, "What is 'Black Power'?" in *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement an American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992)

On." Even in churches, black messiahs replaced portraits of white Jesus and many installed large sculptures of a black Madonna.[11]

One of the fundamental building blocks of the cultural revolution was redefining black womanhood. Many black women contributed to defining what a revolutionary woman was by publishing books, articles and pamphlets, making public statements, creating art, and organizing other black and third world women. In *Remaking Black Power*, Ashley D. Farmer articulates that black women activists imagined liberation not only as self-defense, institution building, and community control, but as breaking the confines of traditional women's work. In many instances, Black Power organizations were male-dominated and sexist, but black women never stopped critiquing, working within them despite of, and creating their own feminist organizations. Black identity formation was always gendered and therefore contested by women who played a significant role in the Black Power movement, but often received little credit. Farmer writes, "By demonstrating the different radical identities that black women could adopt, and how these models were related to the liberation of black men and women everywhere, they shaped the evolution of the era and molded a movement that redefined the meaning of race and identity in American life."[12] She challenges us to rethink women's political thought and organizing strategies and to go beyond Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael as the sole parents of revolution. To Farmer, the Black Power Era didn't start in 1965 with the assassination of Malcolm X, but instead black women revived black nationalist frameworks from the 1920s and 1930s and formed a new political identity in the 1940s and 1950s. Carmichael may have coined the term "Black Power" but black women and men had already been working towards self-determination and black nationalism for decades.

If the cultural revolution did nothing else, it gave people space to define what black culture was without white society breathing down their neck. For the first time, a mass of black people embraced their African heritage and features and unabashedly proclaimed that they loved their blackness. People engaged with new black visual art, music, fashion, sports protest, theology, and more and they witnessed their influence on the world and felt proud of it. The cultural revolution, in many ways, helped make political organizing seem feasible to the masses.

One of the greatest contributions of the Black Power Era were their Marxist critiques of capitalism. In 1965, deindustrialization transformed urban cities across the United States, took away jobs many black communities relied on, and moved them to other parts of the globe. Corporations eliminated urban industrial jobs and offshored them to other third world countries where they could exploit cheaper labor. Black Power proponents, many of whom were politically tied to the Third World, argued that to liberate black people, they had to eliminate capitalist systems that exploited them and third world people around the globe. Although Marxism arose out of the western European Enlightenment it was easily absorbed into the black radical tradition because the relationship between black laborers and white plantation owners in the twentieth century mirrored the bourgeois-proletariat divide described by Marx and Engels.

As black intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s reflected on how capitalist systems exploited black people at home and abroad during deindustrialization, they reinvigorated debates on the relationship between capitalism and slavery started by C.L.R. James, Eric Williams, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and many others in the 1930s and 1940s. Ultimately, Black

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[11] William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement an American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 63-111, 192-247

[12] Ashley D. Farmer, *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 19

Power proponents argued that racism followed the economic mode of western imperialism—capitalism—and therefore, racism could not be eliminated without dismantling the structure that buttressed it—capitalism once again. Or as Cedric Robinson forcefully wrote in *Black Marxism*, "In contradistinction to Marx's and Engel's expectations that bourgeois society would rationalize social relations and demystify social consciousness, the obverse occurred. The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism."[13] Robinson revived the black radical tradition by presenting "racial capitalism" as a framework for understanding how the racialism of non-European groups was only efficient in so much that it supported the production of capital. Chattel slavery was racialized because masters could more easily identify and therefore exploit his or her labor force. The globalization of capitalism produced overwhelmingly black urban ghettos because western governments and corporations exploited black and brown people who lived in a third world designed by western imperialism. Once again, the Third World was racialized and more easily exploited by western Europe and the United States.

Marxist studies have yielded a rich literature on black laborers and their unequal relationship to planters. Sharecroppers in the South had very little power over their economic futures because the planter owned their homes, the land their churches sat on, the food they ate, and their medical care. Sharecroppers cultivated thousands of dollars' worth of crops but didn't make high enough wages to provide for themselves. Planters defended their class position by keeping sharecroppers' wages low until New Deal farm subsidies provided funds to mechanize crop production and wartime prosperity offered non-agricultural jobs to black laborers. Sharecroppers didn't need to read Karl Marx to understand they were being exploited and to form class consciousness. Many black southerners joined the interracial communist party and the sharecroppers' union (SCU) to advocate for better wages, protect themselves from violence, and change farm policies that aided planter control. It was common for planters to abuse New Deal relief funds intended for laborers and so they also advocated for payments to be in laborers' names rather than in the planters.

The most notable SCU chapter was the Alabama Sharecroppers Union detailed in Ned Cobb and Hosea Hudson's oral histories and discussed in Robin D.G. Kelley's *Hammer and Hoe*. Although SCU was interracial nationally, the Alabama Sharecroppers' Union was all-black by 1933 and has often been used as an example of how the black radical tradition interacted with communism. In contrast, the Louisiana Farmers' Union (LFU) was always interracial, but blacks, in much smaller numbers, still participated in leadership and influenced their political strategies. The LFU organized sharecroppers and tenant farmers to send letters to the federal government about planters abusing relief funds and to lobby for farming loans so they could purchase land and farm on their own account. Ultimately, they were trying to dissolve planter land monopolies and promote avenues to economic independence.[14] Some scholars have described the New Deal as a failure because it was decentralized and inequitably distributed by local elites across the South. Blacks were often excluded from relief funds intended for them. But despite the federal government's implementation shortfalls, they reinvigorated a militancy in black laborers across the South because the federal government took an interest in their affairs in ways only

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[13] Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 2

[14] Greta de Jong, "With the Aid of God and the F.S.A.": The Louisiana Farmers' Union and the African American Freedom Struggle in the New Deal Era," *Journal of Social History*, vol. 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2000): 105-139

comparable to Reconstruction. Black laborers demanded their relief funds from their employers, organized around farming policy and wages, and used public and clandestine organizations to promote economic independence.

Labor exploitation, federal investment, and the subsequent militant response is one part of the economic story that has been well documented. It helps us to understand that whatever the strategy or theoretical framework was, economic independence was black people's ultimate goal throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the realities of debt peonage and white supervision, black Louisianans developed a lot of collective wealth through church denominations and secret societies. Black farming collectives were the most powerful organizing method for purchasing property, building educational institutions, protecting themselves from white violence, and securing economic independence. While many used the LFU to make marginal changes to federal policy, the longest strivings were made through farming collectives either financed through their own self-determination or by New Deal programs.

For example, black farmers came together in Lincoln Parish of north Louisiana to purchase several acres of land. Although they were familiar with agricultural work, five years later they built the Colored Industrial and Agricultural School to better train themselves and their descendants and attract other black farmers to the region. This school would later become Grambling State University. Black Louisianans were deeply concerned with long-term economic independence and built institutions that could sustain it. When they migrated to California, their goals didn't change but the political economy they toiled under did. Despite the differences, the relationship between militancy and government expectations continued to propel black economic strivings to the forefront of every liberation movement.

Critiques of capitalism were an important, and arguably the most significant, contribution to black political thought, however, they have dwarfed the economic strategies blacks used during this time period because they complicate anti-capitalist movements. In the midst of these critiques, black people recognized that because of deindustrialization they needed economic development and new jobs in order to sustain their communities. In the wake of urban uprisings in the early 1960s, many looked to funnel government, corporate, and philanthropic dollars into black-controlled businesses and institutions. Some boycotted white-owned businesses, especially mainstream food franchises, in their community until they were sold to black owners. Others used community-based strategies to collectively purchase land, homes, and businesses. This was usually realized through community development corporations (CDC) that managed public and private partnerships to build wealth in black communities.[15]

Desegregating the construction industry was another point of contention because it provided well-paid unionized jobs in the postwar era. It was also the industry responsible for razing black-owned homes and businesses and building new federal buildings, highways, and other government-sponsored projects implemented through eminent domain. Black contractors advocated for community control over government projects because all of the contracts were given to whites, and they argued that if they were given the contract, then the black community would be involved in the projects rather than displaced by them.[16]

Postwar federal policies to support economic development, and black exclusion or harm from them, continued to instigate economic militancy into the 1960s. In my dissertation,

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[15] Edited by Laura Warren Hill and Julia Rabig, *The Business of Black Power: Community Development, Capitalism, and Corporate Responsibility in Postwar America* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2012)
[16] Edited by David Goldberg and Trevor Griffey, *Black Power at Work: Community Control, Affirmative Action, and the Construction Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010)

economic militancy includes participating in group economics, modeling alternative political economies, developing black suburban enclaves, destroying property, boycotting white-owned businesses, and exhausting government, philanthropic, corporate, union, church, and organizational funds to improve land and design it in the image of modernity and black aesthetics. Black people used virtually every strategy possible both in the South and the West to obtain economic independence. All of these strategies were self-determinant, operated simultaneously, and produced radial change in short periods of time, yet there has been little written on their relationship to Black Power. Economic militancy wasn't expressed in the 1930s and 1940s and then picked up again in the 1950s and 1960s—it is one the longest continual legacies of black thought and activism since Emancipation. It is one of the clearest ways of explaining how Black Power, or self-defense, community control, and institution-building, developed in the South and continued to evolve in the West in the mid-twentieth century.

Building Alternative Futures

Chapter one explores the relationship between black politics and government intervention in the New Deal Era through the lens of newspapers and government documents. It starts in the Mississippi Delta when the Great Flood of 1927 compelled the federal government to intervene in state affairs and tracks black interactions with federal intervention and welfare programs into the late 1930s. During the New Deal Era, blacks witnessed governments exacerbate inequities and then shift to support their economic independence through farming collectives, a powerful institution that blacks in north Louisiana successfully modeled before the government mimicked it. Farming collectives, church denominations, masonic lodges, and colleges were pivotal institutions for building wealth and political organizing.

Chapter two is a demographic study of intrastate migration in Louisiana from 1940-1960. Using census data, I illustrate which parishes blacks left, moved to, and remained in. I show that black emigrants to California largely came from central and northern Louisiana in response to land dispossession coerced through acts of white violence. During this same period, southern Louisiana also saw an influx in migration due to job opportunities in petrochemical plants and salt mines more so than because it was seen as more tolerant. This chapter demonstrates how kinship and social networks proliferated across rural and urban spaces and helped blacks form a considerable amount of communal wealth despite their lack of political power and individual impoverishment. To add texture to census data, I use obituaries and oral histories to show the many directions black families moved and the geographic breadth they had to exchange information.

Chapter three follows black migrants to the southeastern section of Los Angeles, where they interacted with three different local governments in Watts, Willowbrook, and Compton. Using oral histories, government documents, and newspapers, I argue that their kinship and social networks were consolidated into dense environments that helped spur incredibly swift institution-building. At the same time, they came to California with high expectations of government, formed in Louisiana, and demanded they play a significant role in the economic development of their communities. Although experiences with government were very different in each locale, black migrants mobilized government resources faster than former white residents ever were able to do. After learning more about each sect of local government, they quickly shared information and formulated strategies to mobilize government resources across Los Angeles. However, when the government failed to provide decent housing, jobs, and safety to some blacks, primarily those living in dilapidated and overpoliced public housing, they

weren't just committing wrongs against them in that moment but continuing a series of violent acts of land dispossession started in Louisiana. Black people defended themselves from state violence as if they were defending themselves from Louisiana planters. But this time they were in an urban West environment where their networks were condensed and self-defense en masse did not have immediate repercussions. A mass of land-dispossessed black proletariats made public housing in Watts a center of black life and a geographic center for organizing the Watts Uprising, an event where $40 million worth of property was destroyed. This was class warfare, but blacks across class used the Watts Uprising to further mobilize government resources into the southeastern section of Los Angeles. Most scholars have depicted the Watts Uprising as chaotic—or an act of informal resistance. I find it less useful to look at formal organizations as proof of organized protest and instead I believe it's more productive to look at how quickly black leaders mobilized government resources to build longstanding institutions in the wake of the Watts Uprising. Self-defense, particularly in the case of the Watts Uprising, was a viable tool for creating the all-black town of Watts supported by community-controlled government resources that created the grounds for working- and middle-class blacks to obtain economic independence.

In chapter four, I put Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party and Ted Watkins, the founder of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, in conversation with one another. After the Watts Uprising of 1965, both leaders sought to build entirely new black communities as communicated in autobiographies, essays, speeches, newspapers, and personal papers. In Oakland, Newton and the Black Panthers modeled a socialist government that provided decent housing, food, clothing, healthcare, and education. Because they were anti-capitalist and therefore antithetical to American government, they didn't use any government funds to build their institutions and programs, but instead received philanthropic and community donations. In contrast, Watkins used every level of government to create a community-controlled hospital, mixed-income housing, high school, and medical school, among others. He sympathized with socialism but was ultimately a capitalist who believed in workers' rights to a fair wage and devised creative strategies to get the government involved in the community's economic future. To my knowledge, these two individuals never met in person, but their philosophies were formed with southern theoretical frameworks that complicate Black Power politics and economic militancy. I would argue that both leaders were Black Power proponents with visions for economically independent black communities, but their approaches reflected the various black power politics and strategies used simultaneously to build alternative futures.

Black movements for economic independence can be traced back to the shores of West Africa, but this study covers the period from 1927 – 1975 because this is when economic militancy was reinvigorated through government intervention. By centering black geographies, I hope to provide a new way of looking at migration and the formation of race and class consciousness. While the Black Power Era produced many political and cultural ideas, I am contributing to the limited literature on economic militancy and providing a framework for understanding the continuities between black institution-building, community control, and self-defense, in the South and the West.

Chapter 2: My Government, My Independence

In this chapter I argue that black Louisianans were well organized throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their institutional networks created pathways for blacks to share information about government and the role they should play in their economic lives. From 1927-1935, the federal government shifted from aggravating racial inequities in the Great Flood to supporting black economic independence through farming collectives. The New Deal Era reinvigorated an economic militancy in black communities who witnessed, and now expected, the federal government to play a positive role in their economic lives in ways they hadn't seen since Reconstruction.

The Great Flood of 1927

At the dawn of the Great Depression in 1930, Walter and Armelia Newton had recently moved from Parkdale, Arkansas, on the state's southeastern border, to Monroe, Louisiana, 60 miles southwest of Parkdale.[17] They left the rural bayous, rich with farmland, prairies, and swamps, of the Arkansas Delta when Walter took up a job mining in an urban gravel pit.[18] Just a few years earlier, the Great Flood of 1927 wiped away families, farmland, and housing from the delta region and pushed rural people into urban cities within the South and elsewhere. President Coolidge and his Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, called on the American Red Cross to provide relief in the Deep South, but instead they exacerbated existing racial inequities. The National Guard escorted white refugees safely into second floor offices, hotels, and department stores while 13,000 black refugees were forced at gunpoint to work and live on the levees. Another 5,000 blacks were crowded into warehouses and oil mills, disguised as Red Cross relief camps.[19] In the aftermath of the flood, the Newton's migrated further South for a new job opportunity in the city.

Day in and day out Walter and all his black neighbors carved permanent scars into the earth, extracting minerals used to make concrete, construct buildings, and build roads. With only a pickax and shovel, these black laborers unearthed gravel used to modernize southern infrastructure. While her husband worked, Armelia took care of the home and their four children, one of whom was only an infant born that year. Armelia was likely tied to a community of mothers and wives, all of whom stayed home while their husbands labored in the gravel pits. Every family paid $3 a month in rent most likely to the only white family in the neighborhood who also listed no occupation.[20] The community that Walter and Armelia moved to shared understandings of race, gendered work, and class position. It's also likely that many of them were flood refugees waiting on Louisiana's terrain to slowly rise from underwater while they watched the federal government exacerbate their plights.

In those miserable Red Cross relief camps, black refugees were assigned a number so they could be tracked, and despite the lack of food and clothes given to them, the National Guard was ordered to shoot on site anyone stealing provisions. In Greenville, Mississippi, 2,000 black

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[17] Year: *1930*; Census Place: *Police Jury Ward 5, Ouachita, Louisiana*; Page: *20B*; Enumeration District: *0026*; FHL microfilm: *2340549*; *Jet*, Sep 26, 1974

[18] "Geography and Geology," *Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/geography-and-geology-401/, accessed July 10, 2021

[19] Mike Swinford, "When the Levee Breaks: Race Relations and the Mississippi Flood of 1927," *Historia* (2008)" 151-163

[20] Year: *1930*; Census Place: *Police Jury Ward 5, Ouachita, Louisiana*; Page: *20B*; Enumeration District: *0026*; FHL microfilm: *2340549*

workers were forced to place sandbags at the levee only for it to break and sweep them away. In response to these horrendous conditions, J. Winston Harrington wrote in the *Chicago Defender* that Red Cross camps had "worse treatment than our forefathers experienced before the signing of the emancipation proclamation."[21] Herbert Hoover responded by launching the Colored Advisory Commission and appointed president of Tuskegee Institute, Robert Moton, to lead the initiative. The committee was supposed to do its own analysis of black conditions in relief camps and provide their own solutions, but the committee was toothless and only voiced Hoover's desire to placate black demands. Without federal legal protections, black people had little option but to confront armed national guardsmen directly. In Greenville, Mississippi, a small town forty-five miles northeast of the Newtons' first residence in Parkdale, riots almost erupted when a black woman was thrown in jail for protesting her husband's work order. Further south in Geismar, Louisiana, violence broke out when a 19-year-old laborer was struck on the head for asking to rest.[22] You can imagine how important it was for blacks in the delta region to find alternative work away from flood plains where even the federal government and their philanthropic partners were assaulting black families. When Walter found an opportunity working in a gravel pit in 1930, he probably saw it as a blessing to get him and his family away from the floodplains and over a temporary gap in income.

Nevertheless, quarries were dangerous, and the intensity of work weighed down on the body. When the Newton's found an opportunity to rent some farmland in nearby Morehouse, Louisiana and then West Carroll, Louisiana, they left the city and returned to rural life in the delta. However, this time the agricultural region they once knew had been shaped by environmental and government catastrophe. Hoover was praised in newspapers far and wide as someone who kept his word and truly cared about the flood situation in the Deep South, but he never provided economic relief to make up for agricultural income loss. Farmers in rural parishes in north and central Louisiana may have moved back into their homes and planted new seeds, but they remained devastated from losing a year's worth of income. When the Mcnary-Haugen Farm Bill, which would have subsidized American agriculture and appeased the populist farm block, was proposed in Congress, Hoover took President Coolidge's lead and opposed it.[23] Hoover's unwillingness to provide real economic relief not only affected white farmers, but an entire cast of black laborers. Farmers may have lost a year's income, but black sharecroppers and tenant farmers lost all of their provisions. For black Americans, Hoover wasn't just unwilling to give cash aid, but he endangered the scant standard of living they had. By continuing to support the relief camps despite the gross conditions, blacks quickly learned the federal government could be just as ominous as local officials.

By 1940, the Newton's farmed on their own account in an all-white neighborhood in Oak Grove, West Carroll Parish, Louisiana.[24] Some of their neighbors owned land and others rented like them, yet the Newton's paid $6 per month instead of $5 like everyone else.[25] Their world was completely different than it was in Monroe. Now they were racially isolated from their neighbors, and they lived among varying classes. It's also possible that they were penalized with higher rent for being black. One thing that remained the same is that none of the wives in their

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[21] J. Winston Harrington, "Use Troops in Flood Area to Imprison Farm Hands," *Chicago Defender*, May 7, 1927

[22] J. Winston Harrington, "Work or Go Hungry Edict Perils Race: Flood Victims Driven by Labor Bosses," *Chicago Defende*r, June 11, 1927

[23] "Electoral Vote May Pass Former High Record of Harding," *The Shreveport Journal*, November 7, 1928

[24] National Archives at St. Louis; St. Louis, Missouri; *WWII Draft Registration Cards for Louisiana, 10/16/1940 - 03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: *425*

[25] Year: *1940*; Census Place: *West Carroll, Louisiana*; Roll: *m-t0627-01466*; Page: *23B*; Enumeration District: *62-7*

neighborhood worked outside the home, but it's unclear if Armelia bonded with other white housewives because of the racial dynamics of Jim Crow.

Although they moved back into the rural South, they maintained their networks in the city. As Walter cultivated the land, he preached at Bethel Baptist Church in Monroe. The family moved back and forth between the agricultural hinterland and the urban center, entwining the two geographies into a mixed economy that had little to do with the manufacturing of raw materials and everything to do with spiritual, social, and economic relationships with black people in both locales. The migratory patterns created by the flood, poor federal policies, and Louisiana's economy helped fuse black social networks across topographies throughout the 1930s.

Living in the northwest corridor of Greater Louisiana, the Newton's would have witnessed two phenomena firsthand—the power of black farming, religious, and masonic collectives, which I'll discuss first, and the rise of populist governor Huey P. Long. The strongest social and political networks that weaved together urban and rural black communities were black farming collectives, the Prince Hall Freemasons, their women's auxiliary, Order of Eastern Stars, the Baptist and Methodist Episcopal Church denominations, and black colleges. These institutions created a network where blacks exchanged political and economic information necessary in forming a universal perspective on government intervention. These institutions were actively interested in working in rural parishes and influencing state and federal government.

Prince Hall Freemasons and Eastern Stars

The Freemasons originally established their Grand Lodge in New Orleans, a city where thousands migrated to after the Haitian Revolution in 1804 and the American Civil War in 1865. But in 1917, Grandmaster John G. Lewis of Natchitoches, a small city between Shreveport and Alexandria in north-central Louisiana, proposed moving the Grand Lodge inwards to the state capital of Baton Rouge. This move helped them operate in more rural parishes, like the one Lewis was from, and placed them in a greater position to influence state politics. The Lewis family produced three Grandmasters from 1903-1979 and maintained political continuity through their lodges across time and space.[26]

Rural communities across the state petitioned the Freemasons and Eastern Stars to create lodges in their community. After WWI, black masonic lodges proliferated across the state in both urban and rural spaces while Eastern Star lodges grew more gradually. But by the 1930s, economic hardship strained the Freemasons' financial resources and many lodges closed. Yet in the same decade, Eastern Star lodges proliferated and increased in membership.[27] As men moved around Louisiana in search of jobs, many black women stayed in their home parishes and maintained the community's social and political infrastructures. They sustained benevolence amid the economic crisis and held together social networks tying urban and rural spaces together. Because these networks were maintained by the Eastern Stars in the 1930s, the Freemasons and Eastern Stars became the primary financial backers of civil rights in Louisiana by the 1940s. They were publicly known for financially supporting the Louisiana Education Association and

[26] "M.W. Prince Hall Grand Lodge, F. & A.M. for the State of Louisiana: Historical Note," *Amistad Research Center*, accessed November 14, 2020

[27] Proceedings: M.W. Eureka Grand Lodge of F. & A.M. for the State of Louisiana and Jurisdiction, *Amistad Research Center*, Box 71-72

the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund.[28] Black women sustained the most important institutions of the black liberation struggle as black men sought new ways to channel money into their families and communities amidst economic hardship. Throughout the Depression, many black women also worked in white homes, farmed, and sharecropped even as they maintained their households and networks. Alongside the Freemasons and Eastern Stars, church denominations were the most important institutional networks in black Louisiana.

Black Catholics, Methodists, and Baptists

In 1879 P.B.S. Pinchback, Theophile T. Allain, and Henry Demas, three black men who served as governor and state legislators during Reconstruction, proposed the establishment of a black college to the Louisiana legislature. In 1880, Southern University was founded in New Orleans as an industrial college. Over the next forty years, the student population grew significantly, and university administrators began looking for a new location. In 1914, around the same time the Grand Lodge was moved inwards, they relocated Southern University onto an 884-acre campus in Baton Rouge and expanded their curriculum to include agricultural training. As Southern University found a new home, Mother Katharine Drexel, a white socialite from Philadelphia, established a new school in 1915 for blacks at Southern University' former campus. By 1925, her school had become Xavier University of Louisiana, the only black and Catholic college in the country.[29]

Catholicism had a long history in Louisiana's black community dating back to the eighteenth century. Free and enslaved blacks worshipped together prior to the Civil War and blacks, whites, and Creoles went to interracial churches into the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the racial dynamics of Louisiana still produced overwhelmingly segregated churches after German and Irish Catholics built their own racially exclusive churches in the late nineteenth century. As Europeans created separate Catholic parishes, the archdiocese argued that in order to keep blacks in the Catholic church, they needed their own parishes and leadership. Although blacks sought leadership positions, they adamantly opposed segregated parishes. Nevertheless, blacks were removed from white parishes, their schools were closed, and separate black parishes were built in New Orleans from 1906-1918.[30]

In Louisiana and the cities they migrated to, black Catholics struggled with how they would articulate their politics and make substantive change across parishes and in their communities. For example, in Chicago, they reached across racial boundaries and formed coalitions with white priests in power.[31] Although blacks didn't control leadership like in the Methodist and Baptist denominations to be discussed, they were well-organized in their segregated parishes. Especially in New Orleans' Creole community, black leaders were groomed and educated to fight the legal battles of Jim Crow, the most famous person being A.P. Tureaud who worked with Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP to desegregate the Orleans Parish school

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[28] "M.W. Prince Hall Grand Lodge, F. & A.M. for the State of Louisiana: Historical Note," *Amistad Research Center*, accessed November 14, 2020

[29] Valera T. Francis and Amy E. Wells, "On Opposite Sides of the Track: New Orleans' Urban Universities in Black and White," in *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Triumphs, Troubles, and Taboos*, edited by Marybeth Gasman and Christopher L. Tudico (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

[30] John Bernard Alberts, "Origins of Black Catholic Parishes in the Archdiocese of New Orleans, 1718-1920," a dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University (December 1998); R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2005)

[31] Karen J. Johnson, "Beyond Parish Boundaries: Black Catholics and the Quest for Racial Justice," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 264-300

system and Louisiana State University.[32] Black Catholics, anchored in New Orleans, fought for integration throughout the twentieth century but had very different goals than black protestants who comprised most of the state. As black Catholics fought for integration and leadership positions, black Methodists and Baptists led their conferences, denominations, and churches, and measured their freedom in property acquisition and education.

Unlike black Catholics in New Orleans, black Baptists and Methodists had a strong presence across Louisiana. Methodist circuit riders, or preachers who routinely alternated between churches, moved in between urban and rural spaces sharing the gospel as well as information learned moving from place to place. Kinship networks stretched across parishes as the circuit riders' descendants married into various families they settled next to.[33] At this time a lot of black preachers never had any formal training and were illiterate so the Methodist Episcopal Church had a genuine interest in training rural black men with little education to become preachers. During Reconstruction, they opened Straight University and the Union Normal School in New Orleans. But these colleges, which by 1935 merged to become Dillard University, trained traditional students in liberal arts and medicine, rather than illiterate preachers how to read Methodist doctrine.[34] Years later in 1923, they established the Gulfside United Methodist Assembly, a seminary school in nearby Waveland, Mississippi.[35] Located about 60 miles northeast of New Orleans, they recruited many black men in Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi to attend their school. Black men who were already preaching without any formal education could attend school for a summer and be placed on a circuit.[36] Hundreds of rural black men passed through Gulfside learning to read Methodist doctrine and gain a deeper understanding of the bible. It was also one of the few places black people could gather in numbers in the Deep South to organize against Jim Crow under the guise of religion. It served as a seminary and theological retreat, the only place of leisure for blacks on the Gulf Coast, and a meeting room for political organizing. All of these things brought rural blacks in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas together into one location to learn and share ideas.

Baptists didn't have circuit riders, but instead a more democratic process to electing their ministers. Even though they had less denominational hierarchy, they didn't lack organization. Black Baptists have been in Louisiana since 1812 when the first churches were established on plantations between Alexandria and Lafayette. Unlike early black Methodist churches formed under slavery, blacks were sometimes permitted to preach and choose their preacher rather than only listen to white ministers from the pews.[37] Many unofficial Baptist churches were also set up in obscure terrains or after nightfall. Black Baptists have a deep history in Louisiana that is evident in how quickly they organized after Emancipation and accumulated property into the twentieth century. From 1883 – 1902, the newly formed Louisiana Southern Baptist Association increased their membership from 5,000 to 125,000, established 1,200 churches, owned over

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[32] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 2008)

[33] "The Historical Register of the Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church," *Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church*, Centenary College of Louisiana Archives, 2004

[34] "A Brief History of Dillard University," *Dillard University*, accessed November 15, 2020

[35] "Gulfside United Methodist Assembly," *The United Methodist Church Archives & History*, accessed November 14, 2020

[36] "Proceedings of the Annual Session of the Louisiana Annual Conference," *Methodist Episcopal Church: Louisiana Conference*, Centenary College of Louisiana Archives, 1931

[37] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

$1,200,000 in property, and established Coleman College near Shreveport and Leland University in New Orleans. Their churches and schools stretched from northern to southern Louisiana, weaving through many rural parishes. Their eleven academies were in Gibsland, Alexandria, Baton Rouge, Donaldsonville, Cheneyville, Opelousas, Homer, Ruston, Shreveport, New Iberia, and Monroe.

County Map of Louisiana, www.mapsofworld.com

Black Baptists galvanized urban and rural communities to collectively acquire millions of dollars' worth of property, increase literacy, and raise generations of leaders. New Orleans Baptists were heavily involved in the denomination, but the majority of activity was happening in north Louisiana.[38] In 1923, they moved Leland University just north of Baton Rouge after a fire burned down the school in New Orleans. Black Baptists followed the trend of other black organizations and move their institutions out of New Orleans and into Baton Rouge. Most of their denominational leaders lived in north and central Louisiana and it made little sense to keep

[38] Wm. Hicks, "History of Louisiana Negro Baptists from 1804 to 1914," (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1915)

their institutions in New Orleans just because it was the largest city. The Baptists sought to connect thousands of congregants, many of whom did not live in dense areas, into a central location. Black leaders, such as those found in Baptist and Methodist churches and masonic lodges were actively looking for ways to bring together decentralized black communities. Evident in the following example, these institutions were the first place entrepreneurs requested support in their quest to build more collective wealth.

Farming Collectives

From 1863-1877, the federal government underwent a political process called Reconstruction to bring former Confederate states back into the Union and redesign democracy. During this era, blacks shed an astonishing amount of blood in their own quest for freedom. On one hand, black political power seemed attainable during Reconstruction because of the gains made in state elections. Three black men, P.B.S. Pinchback, Theophile T. Allain, and Henry Demas became state senators in Louisiana. In 1868, Oscar Dunn became the first elected black lieutenant governor of Louisiana and of any U.S. state. After Dunn passed, Pinchback became the first black governor of Louisiana and of any U.S. state in 1873. These were incredible gains, it seemed, for a people who were just emancipated.[39]

Yet, on the other hand, an increasing number of blacks faced white violence when they expressed their political freedom to participate in civil affairs. After President Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, Republican officials lost their grip on Louisiana's government and, in turn, Democrats instituted Black Codes in an attempt to reinstate slavery. The new Democratic legislature, established in 1865, denied black men the right to vote in their constitution and provoked Republicans to convene in New Orleans. During their 1866 convention, Republicans amended the constitution to disfranchise former Confederates and enfranchise black men. At the following convention, black supporters and white opponents to the amendment organized outside the Mechanics' Institute. After both parties exchanged words and bullets, riots ignited in New Orleans, leaving forty-eight people dead and over two-hundred wounded.[40] Two years later in 1868, hundreds of blacks were killed by white mobs in Opelousas for soliciting membership in the local Republican Party. Many others were forced out of St. Landry parish permanently.[41] By 1872, Republicans regained control over the legislature and instituted biracial governments throughout the state. Further north in Colfax, Louisiana, Democrats waged war against a black militia at the courthouse. After the battle, whites continued to kill blacks indiscriminately throughout the region. Approximately 150 blacks and three whites were killed.[42] In Louisiana's northwest corner of Caddo Parish, blacks were killed for organizing within the Republican Party when elections approached. They rightfully earned the name "Bloody Caddo" because whites whipped, lynched, shot, castrated, and ran blacks out of town for organizing within and voting

[39] W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935)
[40] James G. Hollandsworth, Jr., *An Absolute Massacre: The New Orleans Race Riot of July 30, 1866* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2001)
[41] Ted Tunnell, *Crucible of Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1984)
[42] Charles Lane, *The Day Freedom Died: The Colfax Massacre, the Supreme Court, and the Betrayal of Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2008); LeeAnna Kieth, *The Colfax Massacre: the Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008)

for the Republican Party.[43] Blacks made minimal political gains during Reconstruction and violence, more than anything else, shaped their freedom strategies.

As Reconstruction dwindled, blacks in northern Louisiana focused their attention on pragmatic economic gains as a way to obtain political power over time. In 1875, former slaves and their descendants, all of whom grew up on neighboring plantations in north Louisiana, came together and purchased small tracts of land in Lincoln parish. Despite white violence against blacks across Louisiana especially in the northern part of the state, this area became a safe haven for black farmers and educators. "When a young couple married, or when a family outgrew the hut in which they were living, the people of the community would give them a new start with a house raising. On the day of the house raising the women prepared a meal, while the men constructed the house. Log rollings were similar to house raisings in that they also were cooperative affairs."[44] These black farmers modeled collective land acquisition, institution-building, and agricultural cultivation that was imitated by President Roosevelt's Resettlement Camps fifty years later.

While black farmers in Lincoln parish worked cooperatively to acquire and improve land, two other black entrepreneurs, Alfred and Parthenia Richmond, purchased a 160-acre plantation in the same parish and passed it down to their son, Lafayette Richmond. Lafayette spent years contemplating how he could uplift the race in north Louisiana and shared his ideas in churches across the region, hoping to galvanize support and financial backers. In 1896, he partnered with other black farmers in Lincoln parish to found the North Louisiana Colored Agricultural Relief Association Union (NLCARAU). Because the community of farmers were already organized, the NLCARAU opened one hundred lodges in the rural parishes of Lincoln, Jackson, Claiborne, and Ouachita from the onset. They established their headquarters in Lincoln parish, organized a committee interested in founding an industrial school, and began the early work of founding a college similar to the Tuskegee Institute, which had just been founded in Alabama. They petitioned the founder and president of Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington, for help and, in turn, he sent Charles P. Adams to lead the school as their first and longest serving president. In 1901, Adams and the NLCARAU founded the Colored Industrial Agricultural School which would later become Grambling State University.[45]

Although Lafayette was a large landowner working with small farmers, southern racial codes and the churches connected blacks across class. Although the Freemasons and Eastern Stars are absent from the archival history of the NLCARAU, they organized themselves in lodges identical to those created by masonic orders. In the backdrop of white violence against black Republicans, the NLCARAU made political statements through their economic and educational strivings rather than through political parties. As shown in the next chapter, Lincoln parish remained a black stronghold throughout Jim Crow and the Great Migration despite the frequency of violence and land dispossession against blacks in neighboring parishes. Into the mid-twentieth century, their economic power would be converted into political power during their civil rights movement. Although it was rural, Lincoln parish became a center of black life,

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[43] Gilles Vandal, "Blood Caddo': White Violence Against Blacks in a Louisiana Parish, 1865-1876," Journal of Social History, vol. 25, issue 2 (Winter 1991): 373-388

[44] Doris Dorcas Carter, "Charles P. Adams and Grambling State University: The Formative Years (1901-1928)," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Associations*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976), 402

[45] Doris Dorcas Carter, "Charles P. Adams and Grambling State University: The Formative Years (1901-1928)," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Associations*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976), 401-404

wealth, and education where blacks witnessed far greater gains here than in neighboring cities of Monroe and Shreveport.

Walter and Armelia Newton would have been well-aware of the farming collectives' success in acquiring property, improving land, and building a school, especially as farmers who sought economic independence themselves. Lincoln parish was a model blacks aspired to emulate across Greater Louisiana. The churches and masonic lodges in Monroe connected blacks in the delta region with others in northern Louisiana, including Lincoln parish just thirty-five miles west of the city. Blacks in southern Arkansas, northern Louisiana, and the Mississippi Delta were connected by a tight-knit set of institutions and kinship networks and they shared common experiences in the Great Flood and Red Cross relief camps. Into the mid-1930s, they all witnessed Huey P. Long, the white political giant, rise from the agricultural hinterland of north-central Louisiana and become the state's pivotal populist governor. And through their networks, blacks spread firsthand accounts of Long's upbringing and political positions to black communities further south. Although he was a controversial politician who spat racial slurs in public speeches, many in the black community became fond of his populist policies, many of which they shared but were excluded from. As blacks experienced government play a role in their economic lives in the 1930s, they shared their new understandings of government, their expectations of them, and the economic militancy they provoked.

Populists and Progressives

Even though the Great Flood of 1927 hit black communities the hardest, everyone in the affected region was devastated. Federal relief programs aggravated black conditions, only provided meager support to whites, and was seen as a federal failure. One year later Huey P. Long emerged from the flooded soil of north-central Louisiana as a "man of the working class" and the new governor of Louisiana. Not only did he break the conservative political machine controlled by Standard Oil and the Ku Klux Klan, but he represented Democrats that served the populist farmers who did not receive adequate relief from the federal government. Although Republican candidate Herbert Hoover won the presidency in 1928, he did so without the support of the Deep South. Despite all the relief money he funneled into the region, every parish in Louisiana voted for his Democrat contender.[46]

Long heavily relied on support from rural constituents and, in turn, passed legislation for the poor and rural white working class. His economic policies increased state spending for infrastructure, education, and energy and paid for it by taxing rich individuals and corporations. Long was praised by many black Louisianans because his economic policy to uplift the poor included them more so than any other governor since Reconstruction. However, his record on voting rights, economic policy, and education were, ultimately, rhetorically powerful but minimal for black communities.[47]

By 1930, Long consolidated his power within the state by signing legislation that strengthened the power of the executive office, seized control of every state agency, replaced conservatives with his own allies, and taxed Standard Oil while accepting campaign contributions from other oil companies. That same year he successfully ran for U.S. Senate but did not physically move to Washington, D.C. until he finished building his political machine in

[46] David Leip, "1928 Presidential Election Results," *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*

[47] Glen Jeansonne, "Huey Long and Racism," *Louisiana Historical Association* vol. 33, no. 2 (Summer 1992), 265-282

Louisiana.[48] Once he had a firm foot in his home state and eyes on the presidency, he presented his economic policy platform to a national audience. Midway through the Depression, in 1934, he made a national radio speech outlining his "Share Our Wealth" plan. He argued that the federal government should cap the wealthy's fortunes, provide universal basic income to the poor, and provide fixed income to individuals 60 years and older. He went on to criticize his Democrat and Republican opponents of not implementing genuine change. "Both of these men, Mr. Hoover and Mr. Roosevelt, came out and said there had to be a decentralization of wealth, but neither one of them did anything about it…had Mr. Hoover carried out what he says ought to be done, he would be retiring from the President's office, very probably, 8 years from now, instead of 1 year ago."

Even though Hoover spent millions of dollars to modernize America's infrastructure, the Deep South included, he did not address the explicit concerns of people living in agrarian economies. Unlike Hoover, Long fully supported the Mcnary-Haugen Farm Bill. In his speech, he advocated for shorter workdays so fewer of one crop would be cultivated and for the government to cover the storage of surplus crops which would "balance your production with your consumption."[49] The poor working class in the Deep South, especially the populist farmer, wanted the government to play a role in redistributing wealth, uplifting labor conditions, and expanding opportunities for higher education. They believed that if these basic necessities were met, they would be self-sufficient enough to take care of their own families and communities.

Long's populist policies would have worked well with President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal policies had they not been competing for the same job. After Long helped Roosevelt become president, he isolated himself from him, citing that he was moving away from Standard Oil and Wall Street-controlled politics. But as Long prepared for the 1936 presidential campaign against Roosevelt, he was assassinated in the Louisiana state capital in 1935 after an attack by political opponents.[50] His assassination had profound affects across Louisiana. Over 200,000 people attended Long's funeral and Louisiana politics were broken into pro-Long and anti-Long factions into the 1960s.[51] During Roosevelt's next term, he incorporated many of the policies proposed by Long in the second New Deal.[52] There was a natural synergy between black and white farming collectives in north and central Louisiana, Long's Share Our Wealth plan, and Roosevelt's resettlement communities.

To support the agricultural economy during the Depression, the Roosevelt administration established resettlement communities in 1935 where "hundreds of thousands of rural migrants" who had moved to the cities "returned to the country and there scratched out a meager subsistence or lived with relatives."[53] These farm communities emphasized cooperation and collective life, attributes conservatives demonized as socialist, as opposed to private land ownership and enterprise. Although the federal government aggravated racial inequities during the Great Flood, they shifted to support farming independence for both blacks and whites across the South.

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[48] "Life and Times," *The Long Legacy Project*, accessed September 12, 2020

[49] "Every Man A King' Share Our Wealth Radio Speech by Senator Huey P. Long, of Louisiana, February 23, 1934," *The Long Legacy Project*, accessed September 12, 2020

[50] Robert Travis Scott, "The enduring mystery of who killed Huey P. Long," *The Times-Picayune*, September 5, 2010

[51] Richard D. White, *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006)

[52] William E. Leuchtenburg, "FDR and the Kingfish," *American Heritage*, vol. 36, issue 6 (October 1985)

[53] Dr. Melvin J. Banks, "The Sabine Farms Agricultural Project Experience in Adult Education" (August 1979)

Federal resettlement communities were established across Louisiana, East Texas, and other parts of the South. The Sabine Farms Agricultural Experiment, located about 40 miles west of Shreveport, Louisiana and just south of Marshall, Texas, resettled seventy-five black families on twelve thousand acres of farmland in 1936. Black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who moved to urban areas in search of jobs were asked to move back into rural areas organized as resettlement communities. They were financially backed by the Agricultural Resettlement Administration but controlled by black farmers. The following quote details their communal setup.

"The Community Center was located on twenty acres of land and represented an investment of $60,000 in buildings, equipment, and machinery with modern facilities for electric lights, running water, and modern sanitation…The buildings were located on a beautiful twenty acre wooded campus fronting the Marshall-Carthage Highway. They included an auditorium with a seating capacity of 400, a home economics building, a farm shop, a health center, a trading post and cannery, a combination dining hall and dormitory, a deep well, a combination office building and water tower, a slaughter house, a barbecue pit and a storage house. A well laid-out playing and recreation activities field was developed. In the 'high-days,' hundreds of people were attracted to the Center monthly to engage in recreational, educational, health, economic and civic activities. It became the hub of advances by Negro farmers throughout East Texas at a time when in the words of the Field brothers, 'the going was really [rough]. From the Center, there flowed [a] dynamic force which brought hope and fellowship to those who suffered during these depression years."[54]

For the first time since Reconstruction, the federal government invested an appropriate amount of money to help build a sustainable black community of farmers in the Deep South. The federal government purchased most of the land from planters, leased it for five years to black farmers, and then sold it to them in 150-acre tracts. Black farmers cleared the land, cultivated it, received funds to purchase livestock, and shared a bull with the community. Every state in the Deep South had at least one of the nine black resettlements and blacks were also sprinkled into twenty-six other mixed-race resettlements. Three of the nine black resettlements were located in the greater north Louisiana area: Desha Farms in Desha and Drew Counties, Arkansas, Mound Farms near Tallulah, Louisiana, and Sabine Farms near Marshall, Texas.[55]

Although only a small portion of the black population actually lived in these resettlements, they served as social and economic centers for many blacks living in other parts of the South. Because blacks had moved from rural to urban areas and then were relocated to a different rural area, they likely remained connected to large social networks and where they shared their experiences and ideas with others in the South. Their experiences showed how cooperative economics backed by state investment could forge a path towards upward mobility. These perceptions are noticeably different than the lessons learned from the Great Flood. On one hand, the federal government could exacerbate racial inequities, but on the other hand, they could radically improve black economic life.

Blacks were deeply invested in the values Huey P. Long and Franklin D. Roosevelt presented to Louisiana and the United States because they were facing the worse labor conditions, had the least opportunities to purchase land, worked the longest hours, were the last hired and the first fired from jobs, were most susceptible to natural disasters, and had been hurt rather than helped by the federal government during the Great Flood. Long offered an entirely new version of government that uplifted the poor, like themselves, even if it was not originally

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[54] Dr. Melvin J. Banks, "The Sabine Farms Agricultural Project Experience in Adult Education" (August 1979), 2-3

[55] Donald Holley, "The Negro in the New Deal Resettlement Program," *Agricultural History* vol. 45, no. 3 (July 1971), 184

intended for them. Long's legacy reverberated in black Louisianan communities so much so that in 1942, Walter and Armelia Newton named their son, Huey P. Newton, after him. Their son would go on to found the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California in 1966. While Huey P. Newton would later critique the name his parents chose for him because of Long's racist rhetoric and policies, he borrowed populist ideals—primarily critiques of elite corporations and a government that provided basic rights for the people—that he was raised with because his family hailed from northern Louisiana. As will be discussed in the final chapter, "Huey P. Newton" was not just a name—it was a political genealogy. The Newton's and thousands of blacks across Louisiana shared many of Long's populist and Roosevelt's progressive politics aimed at uplifting the poor. As they prepared to migrate to California, populist and progressive policies reinvigorated their economic militancy, or expectation that government should play a role in radically improving their economic lives.

In the next chapter, I thoroughly discuss intrastate migration patterns to further demonstrate that blacks moved through urban and rural topographies sharing information through kinship networks. As blacks moved out of Louisiana and into California, I show that most blacks moved from central and northern Louisiana rather than out of New Orleans. This is important because these were the people, more than anyone else, who experienced the Great Flood, who were geographically close to Long's populism and Roosevelt's resettlement communities, who expected government to intervene in their futures, and retained economic militancy into the Great Migration.

Chapter 3: The Economy of Black Migration in Louisiana

Black families moved across Louisiana and tied together political and economic ideas across various regions. In this chapter, I detail black political and economic strivings in most parts of the state and then, using census data from 1940-1970, argue that most migrants to California came from north and central, rather than southern, Louisiana. Black experiences in this particular region are incredibly important for understanding black expectation of government and economy when they migrated to California.

Intrastate Migration

My great-grandfather, Kelso Wilson Gaines, was born in 1892 in Bunkie, Louisiana, a rural town in Avoyelles parish of central Louisiana. After meeting Ida Plummer, a woman the same age as he and in the same parish, they married in 1910 and started a family.[56] They lived on the same street as Kelso's parents and siblings, where they farmed on their own account.[57] Avoyelles parish was primarily dominated by cotton, but Kelso's hometown of Bunkie also had an oil mill, brick company, a carriage warehouse, three hotels, and other small businesses.[58] Alongside these enterprises, small farmers worked on 10-50 acres of land and tended to do better than in parishes with large plantations. Thirty percent of farms were operated by blacks and 11% were owned by blacks.[59] Although the Gaines farmed on their own account, it's unclear if they owned their own land or if there were other industry jobs open to blacks in the parish. Whatever the opportunities or lack thereof, Kelso sought a different lifestyle in ministry.

In 1927, Kelso began taking classes at Gulfside United Methodist Assembly, a black seminary in Waveland, Mississippi established by Methodist Episcopalians. Not long after entering this institution, he was placed at a Methodist church in Colfax, Louisiana, a town notorious for its massacre against black Republicans and community members in 1873, while he continued his education.[60] With a growing family and new career, the Gaines family, including Kelso's mother and possibly Ida's mother, moved to Alexandria, a major city halfway between their hometowns and the church Kelso was assigned to.[61]

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[56] Year: 1930; Census Place: Police Jury Ward 1, Rapides, Louisiana; Roll: 816; Page: 13B; Enumeration District: 15; Image: 521.0; FHL microfilm: 2340551

[57] Year: 1920; Census Place: Police Jury Ward 9, Avoyelles, Louisiana; Roll: T625_605; Page: 13A; Enumeration District: 15; Image: 649

[58] Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Bunkie, Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, April 1909

[59] Total Number of Farms: Avoyelles County, Louisiana, 1920 Census, *Social Explorer*

[60] Proceedings of the session of the Louisiana Annual Conference, Methodist Episcopal Church Louisiana Conference, *Centenary college of Louisiana Archives and Special Collections*, 1931

[61] 1930 Census; Ancestry.com, "Louisiana, Statewide Death Index, 1900-1949" (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2002), Mary Keller Plummer

City map of central Louisiana

Nestled on the banks of the Red River, Alexandria had been a crucial trading post for central Louisiana's plantations since the early 19th century and it continued to be into the 20th century. Most cotton grown in Avoyelles would have been sent to Alexandria if it wasn't sold wholesale in their local towns. However, Alexandria was not just a cotton hub, but a place of opportunity for enterprising blacks. They had an active Negro Business League (NBL) chapter and businessmen reported significant earnings during their national conferences. The report of the annual NBL convention in 1915 noted that "Mr. C.L. Williams, of Alexandria, La., is President of the Alexandria Mercantile Co., one of the largest Negro enterprises in the State of Louisiana, having between $25,000 and $50,000 in stock."[62] To provide some context, other black mercantile companies in Texas reported between $2,000 - $5,000 worth of stock. There were plenty of business opportunities for blacks in Alexandria. It was surrounded by seventy-five timber mills within forty-five miles of the city and was dubbed the "sawmill capital of the world."[63] Despite these opportunities, Kelso didn't move his family to the city to start a business,

[62] "National Negro Business League Annual Report of the Sixteenth Session and the Fifteenth Anniversary Convention," Boston, MA: August 1915

[63] "The History of Alexandria Louisiana," *Alexandria: The Hub of Central Louisiana*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://www.alexandria-louisiana.com/alexandria-louisiana-history.htm

but to pursue his calling in ministry. While he traveled back and forth to school at Gulfside, he worked at the church in Colfax where he was ordained as a deacon in 1929.[64]

By 1930, Kelso was employed as a preacher and Ida was a homemaker. They had five children and had purchased a modest home worth $575 in the black section of Alexandria.[65] Although the 1930 census lists that he earned a wage by preaching, the Louisiana Methodist conference lists that he was paid $2 per month, and it's unclear what the family's financial situation was. Still, Kelso was the sole provider for a family of eight as they entered the Great Depression and may have worked other jobs beyond preaching.

During the Great Depression, the value of some of Louisiana's top commodities, such as cotton, timber, oil and rice, two of which were very important to Alexandria, plummeted, while the state was still trying to recover from the Great Flood of 1927. While Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and Monroe's oil industry stayed afloat, Alexandria didn't have any petroleum fields, and missed out on the little stability they provided.[66] Thankfully for Kelso, the Methodist Episcopal Church didn't let up on their mission and kept him employed as thousands of others lost their jobs.

Kelso graduated from Gulfside in 1931and was given a different church assignment. The Gaines family sold their home in Alexandria and moved to Wilson, Louisiana, a rural town in East Feliciana parish and about forty miles north of Baton Rouge.[67] East Feliciana presented Kelso and Ida with farm life once again, but in a slightly different way. They rented a farm and worked on their own account just like they had in Avoyelles in the early 1920s, but the demographics of the parish were different. While Avoyelles' population of 35,000 was less than one-third black, East Feliciana was over two-thirds black and only had half the population. Even though over eighty percent of the farms were operated by blacks, black farmland was worth half the value of white farmland.[68] In the midst of sugar plantations, the area was anchored by the Angola Prison, one of the most notorious prisons in the Deep South. It was originally founded in the late nineteenth century on an 8,000-acre plantation as part of the convict leasing system. Prisoners, who were primarily black, worked in the fields and lived in former slaver quarters.[69] Angola Prison served as a constant reminder of where black people could be sent, virtually enslaved, and worked to death if they crossed the Jim Crow line.

As unemployment swelled in the cities, East Feliciana reported only twelve people unemployed in 1930, likely because of its high number of black tenant farmers. The Gaines family avoided the ills of sharecropping and carved out a piece of freedom through the church. Ida was listed as a laborer and unpaid family worker rather than a homemaker, but their children continued their education. Access to schooling and subsequent literacy increased dramatically for

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[64] Sixty-third Annual Session held in Asbury Church, Natchitoches, Louisiana, October 23 to 26, 1930," *Dillard University Archives and Special Collections*, 1930

[65] Year: 1930; Census Place: Police Jury Ward 1, Rapides, Louisiana; Roll: 816; Page: 13B; Enumeration District: 15; Image: 521.0; FHL microfilm: 2340551

[66] Matthew Reonas, "Great Depression in Louisiana," *64 Parishes*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://64parishes.org/entry/great-depression-in-louisiana

[67] "Official Journal of the Sixty-fourth Annual Session of the Louisiana Conference Inc. pf the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Wesley Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, November 4 to 8, 1931," *Dillard University Archies and Special Collections*, 1931

[68] Total Number of Farms: East Feliciana County, Louisiana, 1930 Census, *Social Explorer*; Charles E. Hall, *The Negro Farmer in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Census of Agriculture, 1930)

[69] "History of Angola," *Angola Museum at the Louisiana State Penitentiary*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://www.angolamuseum.org/history-of-angola; Vanessa Tolino, "Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola," *64 Parishes*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://64parishes.org/entry/louisiana-state-penitentiary-at-angola

black Louisianans in the early twentieth century.[70] Even when their children could have been working on a farm, all of them finished four years of high school. The Methodist Episcopal Church paid Kelso $224 per month and provided free rent in exchange for preaching and managing the church.[71] Despite living in the agricultural hinterlands, the church provided a great deal of financial stability, which allowed the Gaines children to go to school. As people migrated out of rural areas and into urban ones in search of oil jobs, the Gaines family followed a different pattern. Kelso wasn't a part of a union or benevolent society, but his devotion to ministry defended him from the larger economic pitfalls that many Louisianans experienced.

In 1942 the Gaines family moved once again, this time thirty miles west of Baton Rouge, to Lottie, Louisiana, for a new church assignment. By this time, their youngest daughter was already twelve years old and their oldest son was twenty-three. During the seven years they lived in Lottie, their youngest son and daughter, Milton and Rosalie, "married into the community" and settled in Lottie for the rest of their lives. Their second oldest son also enlisted in the military before moving to nearby Baton Rouge, where he became a welder. After their oldest son, Tillman, enlisted in the military, he moved to Los Angeles and his younger sister, Ora Lee, followed him there some years later. Kelso also had another son, Kevin, who left Louisiana for San Francisco. With all of their children of age, Kelso and Ida left southern Louisiana for a new church assignment in Campti, Louisiana, halfway between Shreveport and Alexandria and just eleven miles north of Natchitoches. Northern Louisiana was markedly different than southern Louisiana. For one, blacks experienced more outright violence and had minimal success in registering to vote. Historian Nikki Brown has noted: "Not coincidentally, lynchings increased dramatically after 1900, primarily in the northern parishes of Caddo, Ouachita, and Morehouse. Between 1900 and 1931, more than half the lynchings in the state occurred north of Alexandria."[72] While the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), primarily led by creoles in New Orleans, focused their energy on desegregating housing and universities, blacks in northern Louisiana fought for quality jobs and land ownership.[73] Prior to WWII, civil rights organizations made very few inroads in the area, but there were black farming cooperatives, churches, masonic orders, benevolent societies, and social organizations gradually acquiring acres of land and improving it. These black economic coalitions became the basis for building political power later on.

Kelso preached in Campti until he retired in 1954. Shortly after, Kelso and Ida moved back to Alexandria to live down the street from where they had in the 1920s. Although their neighborhood was lined with family and friends, Alexandria had gone through some tumultuous times while they were gone. The federal government invested in four military training camps in the area during WWII, which brought tens of thousands of soldiers into the city. The camps were typical of the Jim Crow South. Black soldiers were segregated into an entirely different area off the main base, with little transportation. These conditions made it hard to travel to the main base and necessary to connect with the local black community. Many of the soldiers had never

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[70] Carl F. Kaestle, "The History of Literacy and the History of Readers," *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 12 (1985): 11-53

[71] "Official Journal of the Sixty-fourth Annual Session of the Louisiana Conference Inc. pf the Methodist Episcopal Church, held in Wesley Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, November 4 to 8, 1931," *Dillard University Archies and Special Collections*, 1931

[72] Nikki Brown, "Jim Crow & Segregation," *64 Parishes*, accessed December 18, 2020, https://64parishes.org/entry/jim-crowsegregation

[73] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 18-19*

experienced Jim Crow before and leaned on "Little Harlem" in Alexandria, the black epicenter of the city named after New York's premier black community, to get through the many instances of local racial conflict.

About a month after Pearl Harbor, a black soldier was shot at and unrightfully arrested by a white military police officer on (Robert E.) Lee Street in Little Harlem. The situation quickly escalated when black soldiers and civilians protested the officer's actions. According to the local black *Bayou Brief*:

"The soldiers were all unarmed; the military police and state troopers, however, had an arsenal at their disposal. For nearly two hours, 90 white officers were called to respond, and according to witnesses, including a handful of local police and state troopers, some of those 90 men attempted to quell the unrest by shooting indiscriminately at black soldiers and civilians—men, women, and teenage children."[74]

Local historians still argue to this day about how many blacks were killed, and where they were buried. But what we do know is that the Lee Street Riots in January 1942 signaled a new age of white violence and public black protest in Alexandria. Even though many of the soldiers were from the North, the entire black community in Alexandria was under fire. The NAACP led the response to the riots, explains Adam Fairclough. "Led by Georgia M. Johnson, businesswoman and newspaper editor, and Louis Berry, a student at Howard University law school and the son of a wealthy local businessman, the branch saved a number of blacks from the electric chair…the branch succeeded in making the 'three soldiers' case' a black cause célèbre that attracted national attention."[75]

When Kelso and Ida moved back to Alexandria in 1954, they lived about fifteen blocks from the epicenter of the riots. Since they happened in 1942, the NAACP had organized in the area and led the fight against discrimination, police brutality, and unfair trials in the armed forces. Black Alexandrians had organized privately for years in their churches and masonic lodges but there were brief moments of participation in more public, protest-oriented organizations like the NAACP. Lee Sartrain has observed that:

"Alexandria in Rapides Parish, central Louisiana, had short-lived and struggling NAACP branches in 1921, 1927, and 1930, usually inspired by single issues that directly affected the city's black community. During 1921 the city's black elite organized a branch under the leadership of Rev. H.R. Norris in response to a constitutional convention being held in the state in which the franchise question was of prime interest, including the issues of female enfranchisement. The branch was reorganized in 1927 in response to the Mississippi floods and focused on welfare issues that affected African Americans in the disaster. At a national level the NAACP campaigned against labor peonage in levee camps in Mississippi and Louisiana and publicized discrimination in federal aid to blacks who had been displaced from their homes and workplaces. The chapter chartered in April 1930 proclaimed that it was 'proud of the fact' that it had recruited 102 members in the depths of the economic depression, although it too was soon disbanded."[76]

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[74] Lamar White, Jr., "The Beginning of Hell," *Bayou Brief*, September 17, 2019; Ralph Matthews, M.P.'s Used Gas and Guns on Unarmed Soldiers," *The Afro American*, January 24, 1942; William M. Simpson, "A Tale Untold? The Alexandria, Louisiana, Lee Street Riot," *The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 133-149

[75] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 78*

[76] Lee Sartain, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 121

NAACP chapters struggled to operate outside of New Orleans partly because of the threat of violence, but also because of disorganization among leadership, the exclusion of working-class members, and color consciousness among New Orleans creoles.[77]

Kelso and Ida would have been familiar with the Alexandria NAACP from the 1920s, but its leadership and goals had changed by the 1940s. The early NAACP was concerned with directing federal relief into black communities and improving labor conditions on the levees, while the later chapter focused on ending police brutality and unfair trials. In both situations, leadership was responding to an immediate crisis, which helps explain why these early local NAACP chapters were short-lived. More importantly, they shifted from calling on the federal government to intervene in black tragedies to directly approaching the inconsistencies of local and state law. The Alexandria NAACP Kelso and Ida would come to know in the 1950s abandoned methods of government intervention and, instead, practiced direct action.

There were active NAACP chapters in New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Monroe, and some rural cities prior to WWII, but blacks in Alexandria relied more on churches and masonic lodges to organize around strategies of land acquisition, business development, job security, and civil participation. NAACP chapters in Baton Rouge and Monroe were much smaller than the one in New Orleans. Most blacks north of New Orleans were unwilling to join the NAACP because of the threat of violence and a pragmatic approach where they sought to achieve economic freedom as a prelude to political freedom. Many elected to organize quietly through masonic lodges and churches where financial cooperation and land accumulation was already the status quo. As tension mounted prior to the Lee Street Riots, locals met at Shiloh Baptist Church and organized the NAACP in Alexandria. They tapped into their institutional and kinship networks to form their own NAACP chapter, bridging their cause to other military riots and national civil rights campaigns. Ultimately, the Alexandria NAACP brought national attention to the plight of soldiers but brought little change to the city.[78]

There's no record of how the Alexandria community responded to the Lee Street Riots outside of the brief formation of the local branch of the NAACP. We have no way of knowing what Kelso and Ida were thinking when they moved back to Alexandria or what their family and neighbors told them. But we can look into whether or not violence, like the Lee Street Riots, shaped migration patterns in Louisiana. Kelso and Ida were one of the few black people who moved to Alexandria from 1940-1960. Rapides parish's (Alexandria) black population grew relatively slowly compared to other parishes around the state. Literature on the Great Migration often frames the movement out of the South as mass protest.[79] Based on this premise, we should be able to learn about what black people prioritized in their everyday lives and how it shaped their politics by analyzing their movement within the state of Louisiana.

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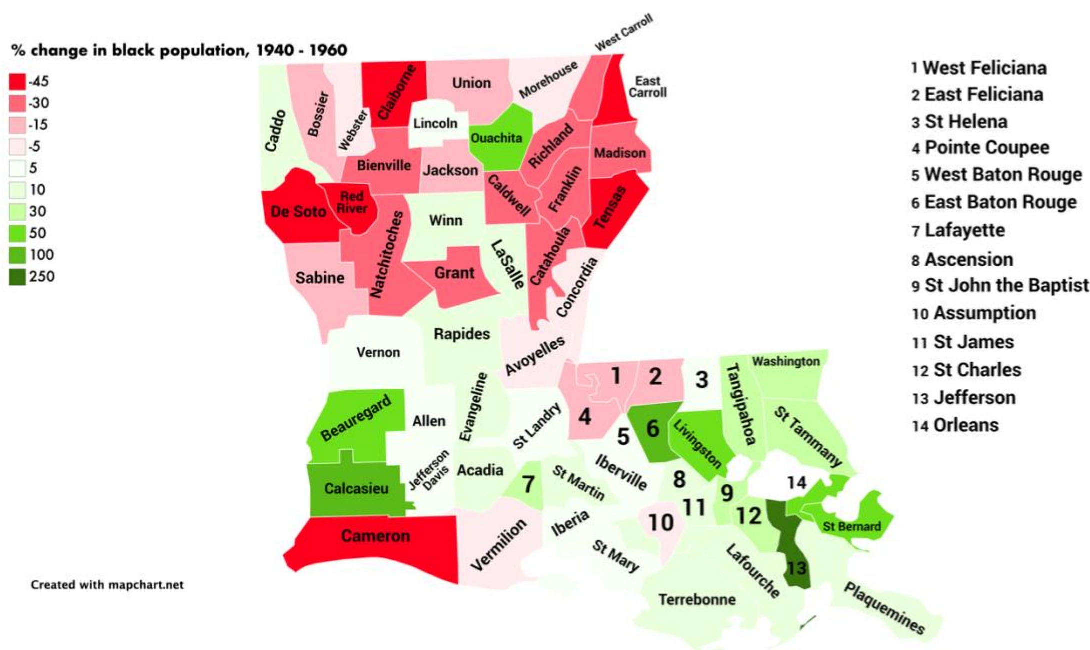
[77] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 18*

[78] Lee Sartain, *Invisible Activists: Women of the Louisiana NAACP and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1915-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007)

[79] See Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991); Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-45* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988). All three authors argue that blacks expressed their politics by migrating out of the south and into the urban North.



Black Population from 1940–1960, Census Bureau, *Social Explorer*

During the twenty-year period from 1940-1960, Louisiana's black population grew 22.4%, less than half of the white population growth (46.3%). Baton Rouge, Monroe, Lake Charles, Lafayette and the New Orleans metropolitan area saw the most growth because of an oil boom across the state. Adam Fairclough notes: "Indeed, oil helped to make Louisiana the most urbanized of the southern states: it boosted the growth of Shreveport, Monroe and Lafayette, fostered Baton Rouge and Lake Charles as ports and industrial centers, and gave the stretch of the Mississippi between Baton Rouge and New Orleans one of the world's biggest concentrations of refineries and petrochemical plants."[80] For the most part, blacks migrated out of rural parishes and into urban cities seeking jobs in the oil industry and greater economic freedom. However, even some rural parishes maintained their black populations or grew incrementally.

Black Louisianans had been moving many of their large institutions, like Southern University and the Freemasons Grand Lodge, from New Orleans to Baton Rouge since the 1910s, and the city was anchored by chemical plants, like United Oil, which hired blacks, especially during the defense industries ramp-up during WWII.[81] Baton Rouge was far from racially tolerant, but blacks carved out their own spaces for public protest and middle-class lifestyles. Even as they formed communities of black professionals and achieved a degree of economic mobility, a large portion of the population did not experience these same opportunities. In 1953, blacks in Baton Rouge organized the first bus boycott in the country (preceding the far

[80] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 33

[81] Barbara L. Allen, "Cradle of a Revolution? The Industrial Transformation of Louisiana's Lower Mississippi River," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 47, no. 1 (January 2006): 112-119

more famous Montgomery Bus Boycott three years later), after forty black bus companies were overlooked for a city contract that a mediocre white bus company, barely scraping by, was selected for. The white company didn't appropriately service black neighborhoods and increased fares despite of it. [82] Jim Crow laws forced black passengers to sit in the hot and dusty back of the bus and stand over empty seats reserved for whites who would never ride a bus traveling through black neighborhoods. Blacks traveling to McKinley High School or Southern University often had to take three buses, waiting in the rain, just to get to their destination because the bus company refused to alter their routes. In response, the entire black community of Baton Rouge organized a bus boycott through the churches and drove each other to their intended destinations in defiance of exclusionary government contracts and segregation.[83]

Searching for liberation, blacks shaped Baton Rouge as a hub for black political protest. It was a place where black leaders influenced city and state elected officials, and when they couldn't reach an agreement, these black leaders publicly protested. If change wasn't happening in Baton Rouge, it probably wasn't happening in the rest of the state, and black political power in the city became a pressing cause. Blacks in Baton Rouge wanted access to government contracts because bus lines and other projects, if fulfilled by black contractors, would help weave their institutions together and increase opportunities for collective economic growth. Political power was envisioned primarily to gain full access to the free market.

New Orleans was similar to Baton Rouge in that it had long-standing black institutions, public organizing mechanisms, and a sizable black population. Black life in post-WWII New Orleans was similar to cities outside the South. There was a thriving black middle class, but the vast majority of blacks were segregated in poor sections of the city and in public housing. Police brutalized blacks throughout the city. Despite numerous lawsuits by the NAACP battling police brutality, very little changed through the legal apparatus.[84] One case after another, blacks wrote letters to local and national NAACP offices detailing their experiences being brutalized by police. In 1949, black longshoreman, Frank Bates was beaten to death in a New Orleans jail while awaiting his trial. Another man was killed by Orleans parish police in jail that same year. In some instances, police officers were discharged after killing black teenagers, but they were never convicted in a court of law. Although the NAACP filed lawsuits and petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to involve themselves in cases of police brutality, they ultimately settled for advocating for black police officers.[85]

New Orleans was one of the most robust and influential black cultural centers in the country, but black New Orleans still experienced very little control over the laws and police departments that governed its communities. Nevertheless, black New Orleans had a tremendous amount of space to socialize, organize, and protest in public. They had a strong middle class who largely organized through the local NAACP and a well-organized black working class who organized in masonic lodges, churches, and unions. Even though they had little success influencing local government, some black communities in New Orleans were able to control their economic sphere. Most of their economic success was built on property acquisition and

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[82] Christina Melton, "Baton Rouge Bus Boycott," *64 Parishes*, accessed January 15, 2021, https://64parishes.org/entry/baton-rouge-bus-boycott

[83] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999),* 160

[84] Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2010)

[85] Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 122*

institution-building started in the late nineteenth century and carried over into the twentieth century. John Blassingame explains:

"The Negro in New Orleans quickly learned the responsibilities of free labor and managed to compete successfully against whites in many areas of economic life. this was especially true in certain occupations in which black workers initially garnered a disproportionate share of the jobs and managed to hold on to them until they were frozen out by white unions in the twentieth century. Although they did not compete as successfully against whites in the professions and industry, blacks obtained a significant share of the brokerage houses, retail groceries, cigar factories, and tailoring shops in the city. Negroes also began to learn more about the complexities of business organization and management and the nature and functions of labor unions; a number of the unions and businesses formed during this period were so strong that they lasted well into the twentieth century. Most of the economic failures of the Negro were due to forces outside the black community: racial discrimination, national and local depressions, and indifference and criminal negligence of federal officials."[86]

New Orleans shared political and legal difficulties with the rest of the state, and even had its own share of police brutality, but it was a stronger black economic capital with more possibilities for public protest and less lynchings. Blacks continued to gravitate to New Orleans and southern Louisiana as job opportunities grew in this more racially tolerant environment.

Despite the history of violence in Monroe against blacks in the first three decades of the twentieth century, white city elites rebranded Monroe as a progressive city in the decade-and-a-half leading up to WWII to lure black laborers to work at their oil refineries and black consumers to their retail chains. After the city flooded in 1927 and 1932 and cotton prices plummeted in the Great Depression, white elites reorganized the city's economy. Boosters promoted Monroe as progressive by playing up an election of a Jewish mayor, Arnold Bernstein, who served from 1919-1937. Although Monroe's business leaders at times were more concerned with becoming a modern city than enforcing a strict color line in the 1930s, their public relations campaign to paint Monroe as progressive was largely superficial.[87]

Nevertheless, there were some real differences between Monroe and elsewhere throughout Louisiana. Blacks were organizing in public rather than in private, especially through labor unions and the NAACP. It wasn't uncommon to hear conversations about how blacks put whites in their place by taking up arms as much as whites did.[88] But, even though blacks were bolder in Monroe than many other parts of the state, they didn't achieve more political power, but instead were wiped off the voter rolls by 1960. White Citizens Councils terrorized potential black voters wrote Adam Fairclough. "Black businessmen found their sales to whites fall off." Blacks who spoke up for their rights were isolated by whites who'd previous befriended them. In Monroe and across north Louisiana, "black teachers reportedly had to list, under oath, all their memberships…they were ordered to suppress all discussion of integration."[89] Despite efforts at accumulating political power, black migrants to Monroe were there because of quality jobs, labor union protections, and a robust social scene. Even though their numbers grew, the promises that the rebranded city of Monroe gave them fell at the wayside of white supremacy.

The black population in the southwest parishes of Beauregard and Calcasieu increased dramatically. Over 500,000 soldiers trained for war on Beauregard's military bases during

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[86] John Blassingame, *Black New Orleans, 1860-1880* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 49

[87] "Palace Executives Extol Monroe's Progressiveness," *The Monroe News-Star*, October 30, 1935

[88] Phillip J. Johnson, "The Limits of Interracial Compromise: Louisiana, 1941," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 69, no. 2 (May 2003): 319-348

[89] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 198-199

WWII.[90] Calcasieu's black population more than doubled after petrochemical and industrial plants moved to Mossville, an unincorporated black neighborhood outside of Lake Charles. Originally founded by former slaves in 1790, blacks in Mossville worked at the local sawmill or sugar refinery until petrochemical and industrial plants moved to the area and attracted thousands of black migrants.

Mossville was also under 60 miles from Port Arthur and Beaumont, two oil towns in east Texas that saw tremendous black growth during the same period despite military riots in 1943. While Alexandria's black population grew slowly after their military riots, Port Arthur and Beaumont saw significant growth despite similar events. Black job opportunities were often tied to company, union, or government protection of their right to work. Violence against blacks was often a response to whites undermining black job opportunities, inhibiting interracial cooperation, and protecting white wealth accumulation. Alexandria's black population didn't grow as much not only because of the military riots, but also because of the lack of oil industry jobs.

Located halfway between Lake Charles and Baton Rouge, Lafayette was known as a relatively more tolerant city dominated by Cajuns, a French-originating white ethnic group from Canada persecuted by the British in the eighteenth century. Economically, they benefited from being white, but socially, they felt like a minority because of their history of persecution.

The color line in Lafayette was less defined than that in north and central Louisiana. This reality became more evident when, in 1954, the Southwest Louisiana Institute (later the University of Louisiana at Lafayette) became the first public university in the South to integrate. While the court battle wasn't easy for Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP to win and the university president tried to limit black enrollment, there was no bloodshed or protest, typical of integration in other parts of the South.[91]

Lafayette, then, was relatively more racially tolerant and had a booming oil industry. Even though the black population grew 44.1% from 1940-1960, about eleven percentage points below Ouachita parish (Monroe), and the white population grew by 115.6%, this was probably attributed to blacks moving to other cities in southern Louisiana. Neighboring Lake Charles and Baton Rouge both saw surges in their black populations despite being outwardly less tolerant than Lafayette.

Baton Rouge, New Orleans, Monroe, and Lake Charles all saw significant growth in their black populations, but Shreveport and Alexandria grew noticeably slower. Shreveport was an oil town where its parish's white population grew by 64.7% as its black population grew by 27.7%. While neighboring Monroe was able to rebrand itself as progressive to an extent, the only place in Louisiana more violent than Monroe was Shreveport, and their bloody racial reality was inescapable. As the oil boom fattened white Louisianan's pockets starting in the late nineteenth century, black landowners were robbed of their fortunes. Blacks who found oil on their land in Shreveport were better off keeping it a secret as whites lynched them, ran them out of town, and forcefully stole millions of dollars' worth of black property and oil.[92] With 19 lynchings from 1900-1930, Caddo parish had more than any other in Louisiana and was a Ku Klux Klan

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[90] Mark Perry, "Louisiana Maneuvers (1940-1941)," *HistoryNet*, accessed January 4, 2020, https://www.historynet.com/louisiana-maneuvers-1940-41.htm

[91] Registrar, USL Southwestern Archives and Manuscripts Collection, Box 7

[92] Henry Wiencek, "Bloody Caddo': Economic Change and Racial Continuity During North Louisiana's Oil Boom, 1896-1922, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 199-224

stronghold.[93] Blacks were encouraged to work in the oil industry in Monroe, but they were discouraged in Shreveport. This was the only place where black population growth did not coincide with the city's oil boom.

Rapides parish's (Alexandria) black population grew by 25.5% as the white population grew by 66.5%. If anything, the Lee Street Riots slowed black migration, but it didn't deter as much as economic mobility attracted. There wasn't any oil in central Louisiana and blacks had a difficult time organizing in public. Rural blacks in northern Louisiana and the Mississippi Delta fled plantations for oil jobs, land ownership, and enterprise. Even though Alexandria was less violent than Shreveport, it only offered opportunities to purchase homes without an economic engine to fuel a black economy.

Thousands of blacks left rural parishes north of Alexandria for urban and rural parishes in southern Louisiana and urban centers in the North and West starting in the 1940s. The price of cotton decreased, cotton production mechanized, there was less need for field hands, and blacks resisted egregious labor conditions.[94] In northwest Louisiana, Claiborne parish's black population decreased by 42.9%, Red River parish by 40.6%, and De Soto parish by 30.7%. In northeast Louisiana, Tensas parish decreased by 31.5% and East Carroll parish by 31.2%. All of these cotton parishes saw a decrease in their white populations at similar rates likely because of the elimination of jobs. At the heel of southwest Louisiana, Cameron parish's black population saw a similar decrease at a rate of 35.2% because in 1957 Hurricane Audrey made much of the parish uninhabitable.[95] Cameron parish was the only one in southern Louisiana that had a population loss as significant as those in the northern part of the state. The lack of economic opportunity for blacks in northern Louisiana and the violence that followed it was its own natural disaster that swept up thousands of black laborers and pushed them further south.

As Louisiana industrialized, rural migrants moved to cities within the state, particularly the ones with oil jobs. As agricultural work declined, salt mining became a predominant industry in many rural parts of the state. For example, blacks and whites in Winn and Iberia parishes worked in the salt mines.[96] Yet although it is evident that job opportunities shifted migration patterns, the Shreveport area (Caddo, Bossier, De Soto, Red River, Webster, and Bienville), where most of the oil was, saw its black population decline. Northwest Louisiana was particularly hostile to black economic mobility and dispossessed thousands of blacks from their land through violence. It's unsurprising that the black populations in cities like Monroe and Baton Rouge grew and migrant communities from the Shreveport area popped up in Dallas and Los Angeles around the same time.[97]

Although quality jobs were the most important factor in rural outward migration, violence created completely different job markets for black and white laborers. The oil industry in Louisiana was incredibly important and facilitated mass migration from rural to urban settings.

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[93] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995, 1999), 8

[94] Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How it Changed America* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1991)

[95] N.M Ross and S.M. Goodson, *Hurricane Audrey* (Sulphur, LA: Wise Publications, 1997)

[96] Interior view of a salt mine in Winn Parish Louisiana in the 1940s, State Library of Louisiana Historic Photograph Collection, Louisiana Digital Library; Loading salt Avery's salt mine, New Iberia, La., 1920, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

[97] Henry Wiencek, "Bloody Caddo': Economic Change and Racial Continuity During North Louisiana's Oil Boom, 1896-1922, *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 199-224; Xavier Buck, interview of Christopher Jackson, January 6, 2021

Black people faced discrimination and violence in every corner of the state, which is why violence couldn't deter as much as job opportunities attracted. Violence didn't cause outward migration, but when used to dispossess blacks of their land, blacks protested with their feet and sought opportunities elsewhere. In places like Shreveport where trials were unfair, and violence was common, black political and economic power was only a dream.

The Many Directions of Outward Migration

Unlike the static immobility often ascribed to blacks in the Jim Crow South, the Gaines family moved around the state of Louisiana for jobs and family several times over the course of their lives. Once the Great Migration gained momentum, the family moved in a few different directions. Instead of just picking up everything and moving en masse to California, the majority of them stayed in Louisiana: two kids stayed in Lottie, one son moved to Baton Rouge, and Kelso and Ida moved back to Alexandria where their siblings still lived. A few of the children left for California: two kids went to Los Angeles and one son went to San Francisco. The Methodist Episcopal Church helped to facilitate movement around the state, but preachers weren't the only ones moving around.

Families migrated in several directions, which is particularly noticeable in black obituaries and church histories. For example, Lanes Chapel Missionary Baptist Church was found in Downsville, LA, about 25 miles outside Monroe, in 1867 "under a brush harbor, in spite of the cold, rain, heat and many other difficulties they may have had." Although the founders of the church were illiterate, they found ways to record minutes and read the bible. "The church clerk could not write at this time, but would keep in memory the proceedings of the meetings until he could reach Downsville. At which time he would have Mr. Billy Pipes, a white man to record it for him. Reverend Moss could not read, but when the Holy Scriptures were read and a mistake was made; he would call the readers attention to it." As they moved church into a building, they grew their membership to 165 people in 1893. They expanded their ministries by organizing a choir, Women's Missionary Society, Bible Band, and two Sunday School classes.

By 1906 they increased their membership to 400 and added eleven more Sunday School classes, a mission band, Baptist Training Union, and an usher board. Over the next forty years, they ordained dozens of deacons and ministers and built a robust leadership in the church. In 1946 they raised enough money to build a baptismal pool because the pastor said, "He wasn't going down under the hill to baptize in those snakes."

After decades of growth, the church membership declined in the 1950s as people moved North and West to cities like Los Angeles, Oakland, and Detroit. In 1964, they elected a new pastor who "completed our church and gave us a program like none we had never known for 97 years." Instead of only preaching on fourth Sundays, he preached every Sunday morning and night, which increased their membership and helped them establish more auxiliary groups. Within six years the church paid off their mortgage for their new building.[98] Even though many people moved away, the Lanes Chapel Missionary Baptist Church adjusted to make up for its loss in membership while retaining the social and financial networks of migrants across the country. Their 123rd anniversary bulletin, printed over forty years after people moved away, is sprinkled with advertisements and letters from migrant communities living in California. Boston Hendricks purchased an advertisement for his trucking business in Oakland. Ammons Cruises and Tours, also known as "The Working People's Agency," purchased an ad for their services in

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[98] One Hundred and Twenty-third Church History of the Lanes Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, August 19, 1990, The Isabelle M. Woods Papers, 1870-2010, LSU Shreveport Special Collections

San Jose. Mr. & Mrs. Allie Alton Simmons & Family in Atwater, CA sent their best wishes to the church. So did Reverend & Mrs. G.L. Burks in Los Angeles. Willie Faye Jenkins in Oakland recreated the 1950 version of Lane Chapel Elementary School with paper cut outs and mailed it to them. Many of these migrant communities continued to support home churches in Louisiana with donations towards their anniversary celebrations at a minimum. Many others used institutional networks to expand their business' reach from the West Coast to the Deep South.[99]

Kinship networks kept migrants connected to Louisiana even if they were all the way in California. Although census data shows a mass migration out of the South, obituaries show that black families moved around the South in addition to the North and West during the Great Migration. When Juretta Dantzter of Bonita, LA passed in 1966, she was survived by eight sons, two of which were in Bonita, one in Monroe, two in Chicago, and three in Los Angeles, not to mention 35 grandchildren.[100] Victoria Ammons grew up in Telulah, LA in the Mississippi Delta, but moved to Shreveport in 1906 when she was eleven. When she passed away in 1966 she was survived by three sisters and their children all living in Los Angeles.[101] Robert Blackman of Shreveport passed in 1952, leaving behind one daughter in Shreveport, another in Los Angeles, a son in Oakland, and a step-son in Los Angeles.[102] When Anne Brewster of Benton, LA passed in 1964, she was survived by her father in Benton, two brothers in Los Angeles, and another brother in Berkeley, CA.[103] In 1969, Artimese Cordova of Shreveport left to mourn four sisters in Los Angeles and one in Chicago, a son in Los Angeles, and a nephew in San Francisco. George Perishion Hendrix of Shreveport went to Grambling State and Southern Universities, sat on the Caddo Parish School Board, and was a member of several social and political organizations. When he passed in 1975, he left behind three sisters in Spearsville, LA, a brother in Baton Rouge, and a brother in Oxnard, CA.[104] When Dr. William Howard of Homer, LA passed, he was survived by two daughters in Marshall, TX, one daughter in Ithaca, NY, one brother in Homer, a brother and sister in Los Angeles, and two nephews in St. Louis. A local Shreveport musician, Hugh D. Huntly passed in 1958 and was survived by a son in San Antonio, two brothers in Shreveport and Kansas City, MO, and two sisters in Los Angeles.[105] Originally from Bienville Parish, B.L. Lewis lived in Shreveport for 50 years before passing in 1956. He had two daughters and a sister in Shreveport, a daughter and son in Houston, a son in Oakland, a granddaughter in Los Angeles, and a sister in Liberia.[106]

There is a lot of scholarship on the development of post-WWII black ghettos in the North and West, but scholars, journalists, and politicians have overlooked the mass of black people who moved within the South and have overemphasized the fraction of blacks who moved north and west. By the end of the Great Migration in 1970, almost 12 million blacks still lived in the South compared to 4.3million in the Northeast, 4.5 million in the Midwest, and 1.7 million in the

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[99] One Hundred and Twenty-third Church History of the Lanes Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, August 19, 1990, The Isabelle M. Woods Papers, 1870-2010, LSU Shreveport Special Collections
[100] "Funeral Services for Sister Juretta Dantzter," August 7, 1966, The Isabelle M. Woods Papers, 1870-2010, LSU Shreveport Special Collections
[101] "Obituary of Mrs. Victoria Ammons," May 25, 1966, The Isabelle M. Woods Papers, 1870-2010, LSU Shreveport Special Collections
[102] "Final Rites for Robert 'Red Rob' Blackman Held," *The Shreveport Sun*, October 18, 1952
[103] "Anne Brewster's Final Rites Held Monday," *The Shreveport Sun*, March 7, 1964
[104] "In Memoriam, George Perishion Hendrix 1918-1975," July 21, 1975
[105] "Last Rites Held Wed. For 'Dick' Huntly, Well Known Local Musician, *The Shreveport Sun*, September 6, 1958
[106] "Lewis Rites Friday, Aug. 31," *The Shreveport Sun*, September 1, 1956

West.[107] These obituaries shed light on the many pathways the Great Migration opened up and make sense of the data that shows how many people stayed in the South.

In Isabel Wilkerson's seminal work, *The Warmth of Other Sun*s, she argues that although families stayed connected during the Great Migration their relationships were permanently altered. "When they fled, there were things they left behind. There were people they might not see again. They would now find out through letters and telegrams that a baby had been born or that a parent had taken ill or passed away. There were things they might not ever taste or touch or share in again because they were hundreds of miles from all that they had known. From this moment forward, it would take a great effort and resources merely to sit and chat over salt pork and grits with a beloved mother or sister who had chosen not to go."[108]

One of the ways, she explains, black migrants tried to maintain their kinship networks was by sending money back home. "They wired money back home, as expected, and sent a large share of their straining paychecks than they could truly afford to the people they left behind."[109] Abraham Epstein estimated in his 1918 study of black migrants in Pittsburgh "that eighty percent of the married migrants and nearly half of the single ones were sending money home, most sending five dollars per week and some sending ten or more dollars per week out of weekly wages of fifteen dollars."[110] Although she makes note of the financial connections, Wilkerson is less convinced that black people were able to maintain their kinship networks as families spread across America. She argues that the Great Migration was "the greatest single act of family disruption and heartbreak among black Americans in the twentieth century." While the Great Migration most certainly altered many family relationships, it did not altogether disrupt their communication and gatherings.

I argue that rather than falling apart, black families molded to new conditions, tapped into decades-old strategies of cooperation, and constantly traveled and communicated to keep their networks alive. Sending money back home was one way of staying connected to real and fictive kin in the South, but so was seeking leadership in church denominations and benevolent societies, attending colleges and universities, traveling to visit family, and moving back and forth between the South and migrant communities.

California on my Mind, Louisiana in my Heart

When my grandmother, Ora Lee, left Lottie for Los Angeles, she wasn't escaping the South as much as she was an abusive husband. The story goes that she got tired of dealing with his alcoholism and abuse, took his army check, and hopped on a train to Los Angeles where she met her brother, Tillman. When she departed for California, she left behind a son to be raised by other family members, a decision she made as a young mother on the run. Tillman was already becoming well-established in Los Angeles through his masonic lodge. He was known for wearing gold rings on every finger and having elaborate parties at his home. He took care of his sister until she got on her feet.[111]

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[107] Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States," U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division (September 2002)
[108] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 238
[109] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 241
[110] Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 241; Abraham Eptsein, *The Negro Migrant in Pittsburgh* (University of Pittsburgh, 1918)
[111] Xavier Buck, interview of Gail Buck, April 13, 2020

A few years after moving, Ora Lee met my grandfather, Grover Lester, a migrant from Shreveport, and they married in 1953. They joined Paradise Baptist Church on Broadway and 51st Street despite Ora Lee growing up under her father who was a Methodist preacher. Grover was Baptist, Ora Lee liked the church, and it was near their home in the predominantly black Central Avenue district just south of downtown Los Angeles. By the late 1950s, the Lesters were more financially comfortable. Grover earned money as an aircraft mechanic at McDonnell Douglas, and by the 1960s he owned his own gas station and auto shop. Even though she raised six kids, my grandmother boasted that she never had to work a day in her life. As the family grew, they left Central Avenue and moved further south into Willowbrook, a quaint neighborhood that reminded many black migrants of the rural South.

Even as Ora Lee put down roots in Los Angeles, she remained very fond of Lottie. She traveled there by train every year to be with family where she could get a taste of gumbo and share her cakes. She could also check in with the son she left behind. When she wasn't physically in Lottie, she was on the phone with her siblings and cousins. Telephone service expanded significantly during WWII and became standard in most American homes by the 1960s.[112] Most of Ora Lee's family was in Louisiana, but she also had in-laws who moved from Shreveport to Detroit. She and her children talked to family members in Louisiana and Detroit regularly about what they were reading in the newspaper and watching on television, popular culture, happenings in their neighborhoods, and whatever else they were interested in at the time.[113] These worlds, that at one time seemed so far apart, continued to get closer together.

Although Ora Lee made a tough decision to leave Louisiana, she was far from heartbroken or isolated from family. She figured out ways to stay close to relatives in Louisiana and had a brother watching over her in Los Angeles. She also took her kids up to San Francisco to see her brother Kevin frequently. The kids were always excited to visit because they knew they would get to eat good seafood.[114] Even though Ora Lee only had two brothers in California, she had a host of in-laws who migrated from the Shreveport area to Los Angeles. In the early 1950s, she had probably only met two of her husband's sisters, but by the mid 1960s, she lived near a host of his brothers, sisters, and cousins who migrated to Los Angeles after run-ins with the law in Louisiana.[115] Black life after WWII changed dramatically because people migrated far and wide, but there was nothing new about black mobility. There was nothing new about the way people organized in secret and in public. And there was nothing new about how people stayed in touch with one another. Despite vast geographic distances, black culture and politics blossomed under these new conditions because people maintained their real and fictive kinship networks and developed together.

There were greater rates of black migration out of Louisiana in the 1960s than any previous decade. Although the statewide black population only decreased by 0.7% from 1960-1970, compared to increasing 22.4% from 1940-1960, blacks in northern and central Louisiana exited in much greater numbers.

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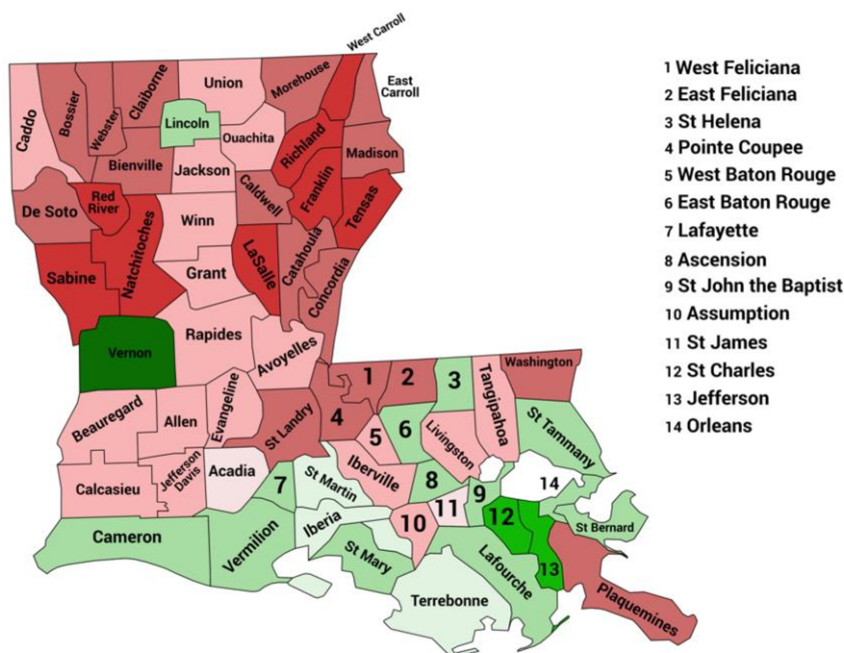
[112] "The Telephone Goes to War, 1930-1950," *Angelo State University,* accessed January 18, 2021, https://www.angelo.edu/community/west-texas-collection/museum-of-telephony/the-telephone-goes-to-war-1930-1950.php

[113] Xavier Buck, interview of Gail Buck, April 13, 2020

[114] Xavier Buck, interview of Gail Buck, April 13, 2020

[115] Xavier Buck, interview of Christopher Jackson, January 6, 2021

% change in black population 1960-1970



Created with mapchart.net

Black population from 1960-1970, Census Bureau, *Social Explorer*, edited by Xavier Buck

All but one parish north of Alexandria experienced a decrease in their black population. The only stronghold that saw growth was Lincoln parish, where black farmers bought land in the nineteenth century, managed to hold onto it into the twentieth century, and founded Grambling State University. In central Louisiana, Vernon parish saw the most growth in the entire state largely because of its army base. Fort Polk shipped more soldiers to Vietnam than any other base in the country.[116] Vernon parish's tremendous growth was noteworthy, as it was the only parish in central Louisiana that saw any growth. Black populations in Shreveport, Monroe, Alexandria, and Lake Charles all decreased while Lafayette, Baton Rouge, and New Orleans saw much slower growth than previous decades. Black migrants still tended to come from rural parishes, but there was growing momentum for blacks to migrate out of Louisiana cities as well.

Ora Lee lived in Alexandria, rural East Feliciana parish, and Point Coupee parish before she migrated to Los Angeles. In contrast, her husband lived and sharecropped on a plantation in De Soto parish most of his life alongside his parents and siblings. With the exception of his oldest sister, Annie, who moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma for ten years prior to moving to Los Angeles in 1953, his family left sharecropping in De Soto parish directly for urban life in Los Angeles.[117]

The Great Flood of 1927 pushed many people out of rural areas and into cities, while the Great Depression forced many people back into rural places. The oil boom and defense industry

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[116] Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton, "A Soldier's Place in History," Southwest Archeological Center, National Park Service (2004)

[117] "Home Going Celebration for Annie B. Lester," March 6, 1999, Los Angeles, CA

facilitated mass movement into Louisiana cities, but it also helped people move out of the state. Black people who were excluded from the oil industry often moved away and the defense industry attracted people to every corner of the country. Yet, the 1960s in Louisiana were particularly different. Louisiana was one of the few states in the South whose black population increased from 1940-1960. Neighboring Arkansas and Mississippi decreased by -19.4% and -14.8% respectively. The only southern state that saw more growth than Louisiana was Texas, a state with a booming oil industry and opportunities to purchase land. Even a state like Georgia, with a major metropolitan city in Atlanta, only grew by 3.5% compared to Louisiana's 22.4%. From 1960-1970, Mississippi and Arkansas' black population continued to decline, but Texas and Oklahoma's increased. As mentioned earlier, Louisiana grew ever so slightly. In some ways, Louisiana looked a lot like other states in the Deep South blacks were fleeing, but in other ways, it was a westward destination like Texas and Oklahoma. Its oil industry placed it in a unique position to accept black migrants from other places, especially in the southern half of the state, but its unwillingness to let go of white economic monopoly and Jim Crow expelled just as many black people. While some black Louisianans migrated to nearby Texas and Oklahoma, many more took the trek to California.

In 1964, my Grandpa Grover's brother, James Lester, became the last person on that side of the family to leave De Soto parish after he was attacked for attempting to purchase land. My cousin Chris recalled:

> "He left Louisiana after getting attacked by some police and random white men who tried to kill him while he was walking home at night from his hang out spot. He was drunk, which they knew. Supposedly he was being watched and had at least a three-mile walk. He was going to purchase land attached to Frierson Plantation but was attacked. After the attack, he ran home with the weapon that they tried to use on him but instead he used it on them. My grandma hid it under the house and he went and hid in the fields a day or so. The police came that night looking for him. They went through the whole house threating my grandma that she bet not be hiding him. By next nightfall my Uncle Clarence and Uncle Isaac drove him nonstop to L.A. They considered Detroit but felt it was too close. Plus, his parents were already in L.A., and he could stay with Auntie Annie. My uncles returned to get my grandma and all the kids and that's how they ended up in L.A."[118]

Black migrants left extremely violent situations and dealt with awful realities in various ways. Many people kept their head down to survive, but it didn't exempt them from organizing in secret to purchase land with friends and family or prepare to flee a hostile labor environment. In many instances, black people, like James Lester, murdered whites, both in self-defense and for personal reasons. They knew the consequence of defending themselves was death, but they did it anyways and used the pathways opened from the Great Migration to join other refugee communities in cities like Los Angeles and Oakland. Even though most blacks stayed in the South, the Great Migration opened up new places for blacks to move to when there were no other options, limited options, or simply because people wanted something different. James Lester wasn't the only black man a white man tried to kill, and he wasn't the first black man to defend himself. Leaving Louisiana was an act of self-defense. The family's swift response to protect one another and secretly migrate James to Los Angeles was representative of a well-organized people prepared to move at any moment and which existed in the northern part of the state for decades. Louisiana was a hotbed for black organizing and migration to Los Angeles in particular. Remaking their lives in Los Angeles gave many an opportunity to express what they had learned growing up in a state they called home but could not make amends.

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[118] Xavier Buck, interview of Christopher Jackson, January 6, 2021

Black out-migration was much more intense in northern and central Louisiana than in southern Louisiana, an aspect of the Great Migration that has often been overshadowed by the belief that “they all came from New Orleans.”[119] Because the religious, social, and political genealogy of creoles from New Orleans is easier to identify across Great Migration pathways, there are far more studies on small creole communities in Houston, Los Angeles, and Chicago, than black rural protestants from central and north Louisiana. In studies on migration to California, many scholars point to New Orleans as a popular point of departure, when the majority of migrants hailed from other parts of the state. Considering that New Orleans grew significantly from 1940-1960, many of the migrants who moved there, and may have moved to California thereafter, were also from northern parts of the state. An Orleanian creole corridor may have lined a street in Los Angeles, but the neighborhoods were filled with black migrants from Shreveport, Monroe, and Alexandria, as well as rural parts of south Arkansas, East Texas, southeast Oklahoma, and the Mississippi Delta. The Greater Louisiana Area exported more migrants to California than any other region and they did so in the period from 1945 – 1970. This migration was particularly intense both out of Louisiana and into California during the 1960s, which is why there was such a strong relationship between black political activity in both places. Blacks who migrated from this particular part of Louisiana to California had unique experiences that shaped their expectations of government in California. Moving en masse out of Louisiana in the 1940s rather than in the 1910s and 1920s produced black communities in Los Angeles who were ready to acquire land, expected government to aid them, would defend themselves with guns, and were exhausted from being excluded from the free market. They brought an urgency, or economic militancy, with them that would drastically change the political economies in California.

[119] Faustina Marie DuCros, “And they all came from New Orleans’: Louisiana Migrants in Los Angeles—Interpretation of Race, Place, and Identity,” Dissertation submitted to University of California Los Angeles, 2013

Chapter 4: Organizing the Watts Uprising

William Nickerson, Jr. (1879 – 1945) was born near Shreveport, Louisiana but raised on a farm in Coldspring, Texas. His father purchased the one-hundred-acre farm just outside of Houston after saving money from "marketing venison which he hunted at night and farm products gained by his day labor."[120] Both of Nickerson's parents were the children of their former slave masters in Louisiana, however they did not carry any wealth from their genealogical ties, just their light skin. Even though Nickerson's family had white family ties and owned acres of land, the greatest thing he inherited was his parent's hustle and motivation for building wealth. Nickerson became a very successful individual and his story is characteristic of people who migrated to California in the first half of the twentieth century and formed a black elite class. The black Los Angeles that he would help to build changed in the 1940s because, I argue, a mass of black migrants from Greater Louisiana moved west with new expectations of government, large kinship and social networks that thrived in urban spaces, and fresh organizing strategies. By looking into Nickerson's life, we can see how these two worlds interacted leading up to his death in 1945.

Nickerson's parents stressed education and often walked miles to purchase their only child some books, and later on, his parents sent him to Bishop College in Marshall, Texas, just west of Shreveport, to study history.[121] After he graduated, he taught history for six years, before moving to Houston and starting a new career with the Southern Mutual Benefit Association (SMBA), a white-owned insurance company. SMBA was interested in soliciting black dollars in Houston and Dallas for the first time and Nickerson was convinced that life insurance would uplift the black community and bring him personal wealth. He was a successful agent, but after SMBA changed ownership, they felt that Nickerson and his other black associates had done enough to make inroads in the black community and was ready to change directions. In response, Nickerson burned bridges with SMBA and helped start the first black insurance company in Texas, the American Mutual Benefit Association (AMBA), in 1908. The skills he learned starting AMBA were instrumental to founding another company in Los Angeles later in his life.

Forming the AMBA had its troubles early on, but Nickerson quickly learned more about insurance law and gained a footing in the industry. They already had to figure out the details of starting an insurance business, but they also had to deal with white insurance companies trying to drown them before they even started. From the onset, a white insurance company tried to sue them for having a similar name, and to avoid repercussions, Nickerson drafted policyholders into a fraternal lodge, protecting them from a lawsuit because of their status as sellers of fraternal insurance. Although they avoided a lawsuit, Nickerson soon learned that fraternal insurance didn't provide the securities he believed the black community needed. He approached the board of directors and advocated for AMBA to sell whole life, rather than fraternal, insurance, much to their dismay.[122]

Around the same time that this disagreement was going on, a series of violent events were occurring in black communities. Nickerson felt very strongly about the Longview and Houston Riots in 1919 and the Tulsa Riots in 1921, where white people attacked and burned black communities and killed hundreds of people. These issues came even closer to his heart

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[120] "Wm. Nickerson sr. Passes Following Brief Illness," *California Eagle*, April 17, 1941

[121] Some accounts say he studied economics.

[122] John N. Ingham and Lynne B. Feldman, *African-American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 60.

when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of his house. With his disagreements with AMBA in the background and white violence in the forefront in the early 1920s, he decided to move his family to California whether the AMBA was able to successfully branch out to the West Coast or not.[123] Nickerson's dismay over violence in the southwest led to new financial endeavors in Los Angeles.

In 1922, Caldwell Jones, an AMBA insurance agent, knocked on George A. Beavers door in Los Angeles. Beavers listened to Jones' sales pitch on fraternal insurance but was unconvinced because of Jones' over-accentuation of race pride rather than logistics. With unwavering persistence, Jones came back a few days later with another sales agent, Norman Houston, for a lengthier discussion. Although Houston was more convincing, Beavers still was not sold on buying their insurance. So, Houston brought in William Nickerson, Jr. After talking to Nickerson, Beavers not only paid the premium for an insurance policy, but he became an agent for the AMBA. Beavers had been an elevator operator for the German-American Bank, an ironworker during WWI, a board member on veteran employment, and was heavily involved in his church, but he had no experience selling insurance. Nickerson took Beavers under his wing while he took classes at University of California Los Angeles extension school and sought special instruction from a professor at the University of Southern California.

But shortly after Beavers started working for the AMBA, Nickerson reasserted his vision to sell whole life insurance in black communities. Beavers explained Nickerson's premise:

> "At the time we felt there was a great need for a life insurance company for our people in particular, because they were denied so many benefits from the operations of the life insurance business by other companies. In other words, they could get only substandard policies, and they couldn't get any employment, no loans on their property. In other words, they couldn't enjoy the full benefits of the business that their premiums helped to build…One of the motivating factors in building Golden State Mutual was not only to provide opportunities for better life insurance to our people, but also opportunities for employment, opportunities for mortgage loans, these are the other benefits that they did not receive at the time from other companies."[124]

However, the AMBA did not share Nickerson's dream and their California charter was not renewed. Out of this lack of support, Nickerson and the agents who worked for him in Los Angeles decided to start their own insurance company in California. With little knowledge of California law and even less money, Nickerson and his team devised a plan for starting the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company in 1924. At the time there were no black lawyers admitted to the California Bar and legal help from white attorneys was too expensive. [125] Although Nickerson had experience founding AMBA, he did not know California law and neither did his associates. In order to learn more about starting an insurance business in California, Nickerson went to a bookstore and purchased several law books.

The next step was raising money, a practice which took exceptional salesmanship. Essentially, they were asking people to purchase stock in a company that did not exist. If it succeeded, the investors would get a large return, but there was also a considerable risk involved in investing in something without a portfolio. Fortunately, Beavers and Houston knew a lot of people and had already established their credibility. Houston was from San Jose and was integral

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[123] Kim Nickerson, "Nickerson, a pioneer of black business in Los Angeles," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 14, 2008

[124] Interview with George A. Beavers, tape III, side one, UCLA Center for Oral History Research

[125] Thomas L. Griffith, Jr. was the first black lawyer admitted to the Los Angeles County Bar Association. He was admitted to the California Bar in 1931, seven years after Golden State Mutual was founded. See "Pioneering Black Lawyer, Judge Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, published March 7, 1986

in convincing investors from northern California that Golden State Mutual would branch out to their community once it gained a foothold in Los Angeles. Beavers was a co-founder of the People's Independent Church, a very prestigious institution in Los Angeles, and had connections with various churches throughout the city. Golden State Mutual raised startup capital from black physicians, undertakers, and prominent figures because of their kinship and social networks.

After raising enough money, the state of California granted Golden State Mutual their license to operate. Within days of operation, they established their credibility as a superior life insurance company by responding to death in twenty-five minutes. With business booming, they quickly expanded across California, into Oakland, Pasadena, Bakersfield, San Diego, Fresno, El Centro, and Sacramento. Even into the Great Depression, they continued issuing dividends to their shareholders and by the end of the 1930s they had over $6 million in policies and assets.[126]

By WWII, they branched out into Illinois and Texas and continued to blossom. Most banks across the United States considered black or mixed-race neighborhoods high risk and refused to issue loans for mortgages, businesses, and building improvements. Racial covenants, or stipulations in one's deed that prevented them from selling their home to black and other non-white ethnic groups, weren't struck down until *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948. Even once they were outlawed, banks continued to redline black and brown neighborhoods, effectively limiting the amount of capital in their communities, and helping to form ghettos.[127] Part of Golden State Mutual's success was that they filled a void that black communities needed to obtain economic freedom—access to capital.

However, in 1945, the entrepreneurial giant, William Nickerson, Jr., passed away, leaving the city of Angels to mourn a black savior. By the time of his death, "the sum of $900,000 had been loaned on mortgage loans, $554,000 war bonds had been bought and $21,000,000 life insurance was in force with the company…Not satisfied with these accomplishments [Nickerson] announced plans for building a new home office on a principal boulevard within the next five years."[128] Unfortunately, he never realized the next phase of his plans, but he left Golden State Mutual in an incredible financial position and with a strong team to continue their work. Golden State Mutual continued to prosper, issuing life insurance policies until their closure in 2009.[129]

While Nickerson's death didn't lead to the demise of the company he founded, it was symbolic of the changing political economy of Los Angeles. In the first half of the twentieth century, a small number of black individuals obtained a noteworthy amount of financial and political success in California. It was an era when black Hollywood gained more prominence and entertainers bought large homes formerly occupied by Los Angeles' white oil barons in West Adams.[130] It was a time when blacks owned private beaches in Santa Monica and Manhattan Beach, both on Los Angeles' coast, and established Val Verde, a black-owned vacation resort just north of the city.[131] Black entrepreneurs started hotels and bought homes in white

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[126] "Paul R. Williams landmark in West Adams becomes L.A.'s Historic Cultural Monument No. 1000," West Adams Heritage Association, June 1, 2011, accessed February 18, 2021

[127] Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017)

[128] Leon W. Steward, "A Layman's View," *California Eagle*, November 22, 1945

[129] Pat Munson, "Golden State Mutual seized by Regulators," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, October 8, 2009

[130] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004)

[131] Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites during the Jim Crow Era* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2020)

neighborhoods, staying largely under the radar. Community ties across class were relatively strong in the black community and there was a sense that the future was bright.[132]

California had plenty of anti-black discrimination, but it was rarely as violent as in the Deep South. Often times issues were solved in court with small settlements. In the following example, in 1936, a black man received a $500 settlement for being discriminated against at a hotel.

"This case arose in McCloud, Calif., where Piluso, a Negro, had been the secretary of a lumber company and had been staying at the only hotel in the town. Spencer, who had been a superior of Piluso's had him discharged but Piluso did not move out of the hotel or the city. Spencer, an influential person in the community, then prevailed upon the proprietor of the hotel to discriminate against Piluso by raising prices and finally placing his belongings in the street. Piluso was awarded $500.00 and the court upheld, when the defendant sought to make a distinction in regard to hotels, permanent and transient guests."[133]

Black Californians were often ostracized by white business and community leaders trying to enforce a color line with little legal backing. Because California law didn't back racism in the same way Jim Crow did, at times, white people attempted to take matters into their own hands.

"The last case, Hutson v The Owl Drug Company, 79 Calif. Appellate 390 (Sept. 1926), concerned refusal of an employee of the Owl Drug to serve a Negress in the company store at 5th & Broadway, in Los Angeles. After one employee had refused service, the plaintiff, after a ten-minute wait, was served by another employee. When the first employee saw this, he became so angry that he committed assault upon the customer, after first throwing her food in her lap and on her person. Plaintiff sued for the discrimination under Sections 51 and 52 and for the assault and battery, but the case was merely tried on the theory of discrimination. Plaintiff was awarded a judgement in the sum of $500.00, which judgement was sustained on appeal. This case laid down no new points of law but is cited to show discrimination."[134]

There were innumerable moments when blacks were assaulted, but this weighed relatively lightly next to the thousands of blacks lynched in the Deep South in the same period. In California, the color line seemed most evident when the black middle class attempted to buy property outside of Negro districts. Racial covenants prohibited them from buying property in white neighborhoods of the same class.

"There is one case, Title Guarantee & Trust Co. v Garrett 42 Cal. App. 152 (July 1919) that stands paramount in California legal history. In this case, the Defendant, Dr. Garrott, a rather well-to-do Negro, bought some property in an outlying residential development. The property had been originally owned by the Title Guarantee & Trust Co. who had sold it to a Mrs. K. who had sold it to Dr. Garrott. When the property was sold, there was a clause in the sales contract that if it was ever sold to any member not of the Caucasian race the property would revert to the company. When the property was sold to Dr. Garrott, the company sued in order to reclaim it. The court ruled that the land was sold carrying restriction as to sale or lease, and that this was not tenable as this is not inalienable right attaching itself to land. The effect of this decision was to give Negroes the right to own but not to occupy land. This decision is irreconcilable with the old English Common Law that claimed that ownership of property gave the owner the right to use property as he saw fit as long as he remained within the confines of law."[135]

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[132] Marne L. Campbell, *Making Black Los Angeles: Class, Gender, and Community, 1850-1917* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016)
[133] Edward A. Burch, "This paper was submitted for consideration in a class in race relations at the University of Southern California in the Graduate School, Social Work Division, in June, 1936," 5
[134] Edward A. Burch, "This paper was submitted for consideration in a class in race relations at the University of Southern California in the Graduate School, Social Work Division, in June, 1936," 8
[135] Edward A. Burch, "This paper was submitted for consideration in a class in race relations at the University of Southern California in the Graduate School, Social Work Division, in June, 1936," 10

Racial covenants protected all-white neighborhoods, but this 1919 case gave blacks the legal right to own property in white neighborhoods as long as they didn't occupy it.

Yet, the impact of the court decision spurred the development of middle-class black suburbs. Black elites weren't allowed to occupy West Adams, but over time, they bought several properties and moved in when they had enough right to the land to avoid legal tribulations. Many of the legal cases won in California in the first half of the twentieth century compensated individuals who experienced discrimination and helped the black middle class move into white neighborhoods, but there were still several underlying issues in the broader black Angelino communities. The black middle class bought into the idea that they could build a black utopia, or, at the very least, make a lot of money, but especially by the Great Depression, the black masses experienced great economic limitations.

A 1930 study of black women in Los Angeles showed that only 41% of them were employed and they were overwhelmingly working as servants, private laundresses, dressmakers, and housekeepers. Even though there wasn't a formal color line in California, black representation in non-service positions was often seen as bad for white business.

In the same study, the author "interviewed the heads of the personnel departments of two of the large Los Angeles department stores, and found about the same condition in each. They employ a few colored girls as maids, janitresses, etc. They felt that it would definitely out down trade to employ colored salesgirls. When I mentioned the possibility of using Negroes as stock girls and in other positions where they did not meet the public, they replied that it had just never been done, and they didn't know how it would work out for colored and white girls to work together."[136] Black women, like those in the above example, faced racial and gendered discrimination as whites limited their job opportunities to sanitation and in white homes.

However, there were some exceptions when black men and women obtained membership in unions and their auxiliary groups. These included the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids and the Dining Car Cooks and Waiters Union. For example, when black maids were relieved of their jobs so that white maids could take their place, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters stepped in to negotiate with their supervisor. When women weren't organizing through unions, they were organizing in their churches. In the early 1940s, five hundred women marched to the United States Employment Department to protest for better jobs. [137] This and many similar protests were sponsored by the People's Independent Church, the same institution that supported Golden State Mutual in their early years.

Some companies were more willing to hire and solicit blacks than others, but many were forced to add them to their payrolls because of the "Don't buy where you can't work" movement where they boycotted white businesses that wouldn't hire them. One noticeable company was Safeway, a grocery chain that had no stores in black areas prior to the 1930s, but by 1940, had six in black Los Angeles. Both middle- and working-class movements were gaining momentum in black Los Angeles prior to WWII. As the black middle class collectively pursued freedom through the court of law and property ownership, the black working class collectively fought for

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[136] Helen E. Bruce, "Student Thesis: Occupations for Negro Women in Los Angeles," Occidental College (May 28, 1933), 9

[137] Exploratory Survey Racial Tension Areas, Memorandum to Charles S. Johnson from Floyd C. Covington, 1943, Los Angeles Urban League Records, Box 1, folder 34, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library

economic means—better wages, employment pipelines, and property ownership—through labor unions, churches, group economics, and eventually boycotts.

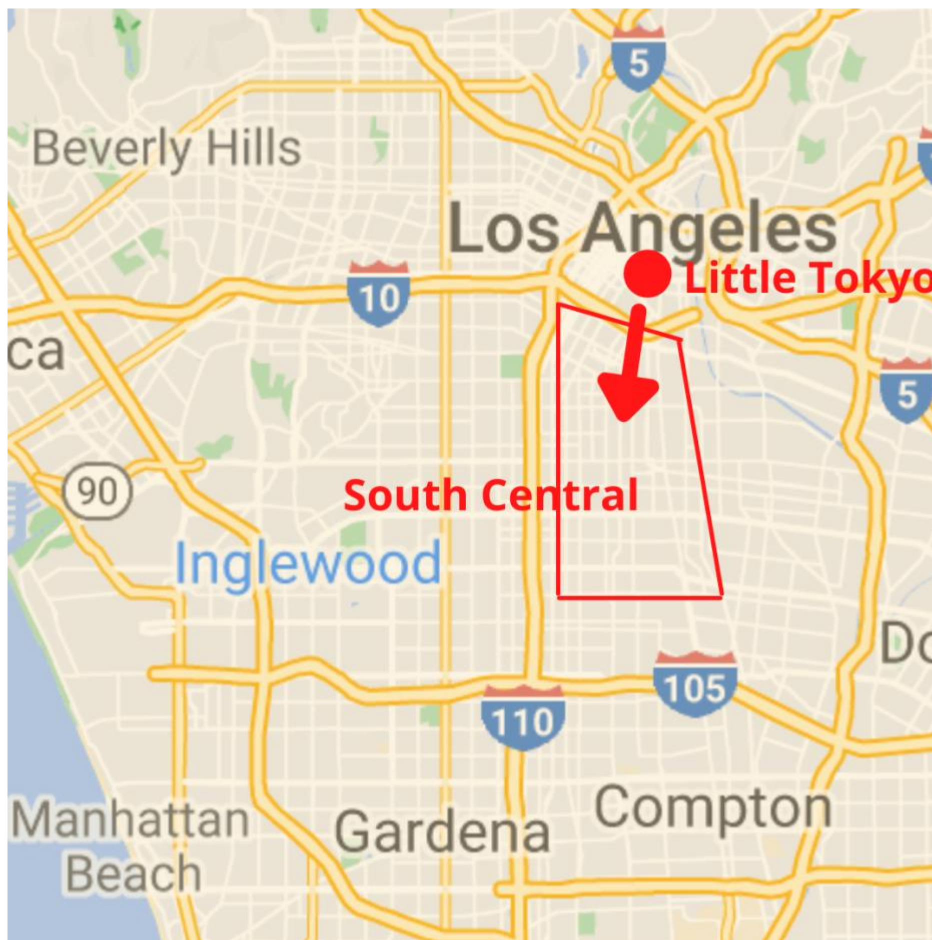
Pre-WWII Los Angeles was anchored by a few major black institutions. The churches were the bedrock of the community. William Nickerson, Jr. and George A. Beavers pitched their idea for Golden State Mutual in front of the People's Independent Church and the congregants provided them seed money. They most likely pitched their idea at several churches, especially the most established ones like First African Methodist Episcopal and Second Baptist. After they convinced their first investors to take a chance, they submitted advertisements in the *California Eagle*, the largest black newspaper in the West and another major institution, to increase their consumer base. They published frequent updates on the state of their business, their projections, and conferences attended to build trust within the communities they served.

Then they tapped into social and political organizations. Most likely, friends from their memberships in Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, the NAACP, and the Urban League supported their business in its early stages. If they had been from different walks of life, they may have tapped into masonic lodges or labor unions. When they needed more information to grow their business, they attended Los Angeles' top universities, USC and UCLA, because those institutions never had formal policies of discrimination and always permitted black students, albeit with some difficulty. These are the kind of institutions that webbed together black Los Angeles despite class differences. As new migrants moved to the city, many of these institutions would continue serving the black community, but others would lose some significance. New institutions would be founded in the image of Greater Louisiana (Louisiana, east Texas, southern Arkansas, Mississippi Delta, and southeast Oklahoma) and the particular set of issues rising in the southern section of Los Angeles.

Suburbia is the New Black

A decade after William Nickerson, Jr. passed, many in the black community were still searching for ways to commemorate him. During WWII, the federal government built public housing to support the influx of migrants pouring into cities for defense industry jobs. One of those public housing projects was named Nickerson Gardens, after the late William Nickerson, Jr., finishing construction in Watts in 1955. Nickerson Gardens was designed by the most famous black architect in the nation, Paul Williams, who was a friend of Nickerson and also designed Golden State Mutual's famous headquarters. Housing 100% black residents, at some point, it was seen as a positive step in signifying that Watts was now a black neighborhood. However, after defense industry jobs dwindled and deindustrialization intensified, black Angelinos experienced poverty at higher rates than ever before, and public housing projects that were once intended to be temporary housing, became permanent settlements for multigenerational families of color. Nickerson Gardens was envisioned as a site for black placemaking, but over time became one of the most notorious public housing projects in the country.

Nickerson's Los Angeles was losing its shine, but it still remained a place of refuge for blacks fleeing the South like Nickerson had done decades before. As discussed in the previous chapter, black migrants, mostly from the Greater Louisiana area, poured into Los Angeles at a higher rate in the 1950s and 1960s than any previous decade. In the 1940s the working class was crowding into Little Tokyo and Central Avenue, but by the 1950s they were flooding south into South Central.



Map demonstrating migration from Little Tokyo to South Central

Longstanding black elites continued moving into West Adams, which was renamed Sugar Hill by black Hollywood stars, after the wealthy black neighborhood made popular during the Harlem Renaissance. A burgeoning black middle-class of migrants forced themselves into the formerly white suburbs of Compton and Willowbrook where there were very few blacks prior to the 1950s. While Nickerson Gardens' namesake reflected on a glorious pastime, the reality was that by the 1960s, any black neighborhood in the city could have been called Little Louisiana.[138]

Blacks Louisianans worked endless hours for little pay, scraped together enough money between friends and family to purchase property, all too often only to be lynched and robbed of their land when there was a glimpse of economic freedom. Many black migrants experienced this pain and carried these burdens with them to California. Migrating West was in part an act of self-defense and a risk aimed at obtaining economic independence.

Unfortunately, California's racial problems were worsening as black migration intensified. Racial discrimination in the building of public housing, the persistence of racial covenants, and redlining created a housing shortage in California's black communities and helped to transform them into ghettos.[139] Macroeconomic forces gutted urban job markets,

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[138] See chapter 2

[139] Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Edited by Darnell Hunt and Ana-

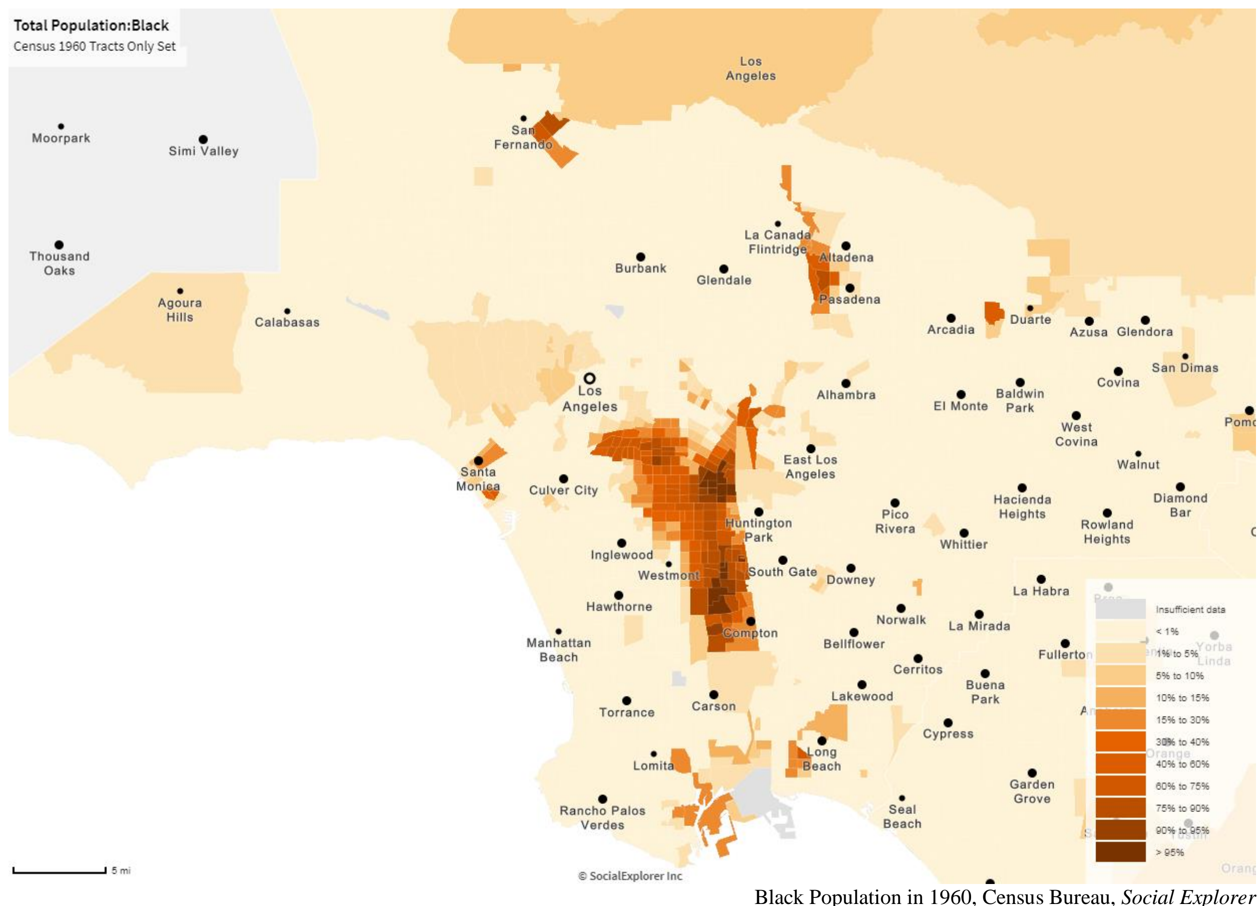
offshored jobs to third world countries, and created racial inequality in urban cities across the country.[140] Overcrowded black communities were plagued by police brutality, health disparities, government and corporate disinvestment, and misguided urban renewal efforts. Even though black communities were intentionally damaged, black migrants still managed to physically occupy and own the core of the city of Los Angeles—South Central.

Freeway projects, from the 1950s to 1970s, purposely cut through black communities, not just out of retaliation against "rural Negroes," but because the part of Los Angeles that black people occupied ruptured visible white control over Los Angeles. White residents in Beverly Hills and beach cities had to travel through black neighborhoods to get to Orange County or other southeastern county suburbs like Compton, Lakewood (California's Levittown), Cerritos, Bellflower, Downey, and Norwalk. Without freeways, white residents could not even imagine living on opposite sides of Los Angeles without thinking of the black and expanding stronghold in the center of the city. When white people formed new communities on the outskirts of Los Angeles, they were reminded of every racial covenant that was struck down and how quickly black people took control of the urban core. Most white people could not even travel to downtown, where most city and county services were, without entering their old neighborhoods that were inundated with black bodies. Constructing freeways for white suburbanites through South Central Los Angeles was a state-sanctioned attack against the black community and reflected the increasing racial consciousness of white residents.[141]

Christina Ramón, *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010)

[140] Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, 2005); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003)

[141] Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014)



Black Population in 1960, Census Bureau, *Social Explorer*

Not only did blacks reside in the core of the city, but black communities were growing quickly in pockets across the county in Santa Monica-Venice, San Fernando, Pasadena-Monrovia, and Long Beach-Wilmington. In 1930, there were only 46,425 black people in the county; by 1940 there were 75,210.[142] But from 1950 to 1960, 243,665 black people migrated to Los Angeles County, meaning about 53% of black Angelenos were new migrants to the county in 1960.[143] Over the next decade, 308,379 more black people migrated to the county, meaning about 40.1% of black Angelenos were new migrants who arrived between 1960 - 1970.[144] Even though migration in the West was more intense after WWII rather than prior, there has been little consideration of how these particular black migrants approached government and property after moving in particular from Greater Louisiana to the urban West.

Louisiana Knowledge

As discussed in chapter three, there were a series of lessons learned from growing up black in Greater Louisiana. For one, black migrants from Louisiana especially understood the power of landownership and the consequences of not having it. Lincoln parish, where black landownership continued, was the only county in north Louisiana whose black population continued to grow despite a mass exodus in the region. The farming cooperatives, founded in the

[142] 1930 and 1940 census, total population: black, *Social Explorer*
[143] 1950 and 1960 census, total population: black, *Social Explorer*
[144] 1960 and 1970 census, total population: black, *Social Explorer*

nineteenth century, created the foundation for economic freedom for at least the next one hundred years. After establishing their economic base, in 1901 they founded Grambling State University, an educational institution that supported their agricultural efforts. Group economics and education were the bedrock of Lincoln parish and proved to be a successful model for economic independence.

Some areas, like Monroe, had less land ownership but access to quality jobs. Black migrants across Greater Louisiana knew their jobs needed to pay well, but they also needed union, company, or government protection from white backlash. Without labor unions, blacks would have had little success working in the oil industry in Monroe and as longshoremen in New Orleans.[145]

The Baptist, Methodist Episcopalians, and masonic lodges were integral to accumulating wealth. It was very difficult for a mass of poor people to accumulate money on their own, but as a collective they were able to purchase property by giving money to church denominations and masonic lodges. These institutions purchased communal land and buildings with matched donations from philanthropic whites, which helped black dollars go farther. These communal properties then became the bedrock for social and political gatherings, enforcing the philosophy that economic freedom would come before political freedom, even if not by choice.

Black Louisianans also developed an understanding of how the government could help or hurt their chances at economic prosperity. As discussed in chapter two, the Great Flood of 1927 was a heart-wrenching memory for every Louisianan who lived through it, but it was even more painful for black people who were trapped in Red Cross relief camps with few provisions and forced to work on the levees at gunpoint. The federal government could easily sustain and even exacerbate existing racial disparities. But, at various levels, the government could also alleviate these racial disparities. Louisiana Governor Huey Long's populist policies and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs offered alternative ways that government could help people. From federally-financed farming cooperatives to Long's Share Our Wealth plan, government intervention could benefit the black community as long as elected officials supported policies that helped everyone living in poverty, without regard to race.

In a postwar Philadelphia study, Lisa Levenstein argued that black women used public institutions to alleviate some of the ills of poverty. Many of these women had jobs and leaned on churches for support, but because their resources were limited, they accepted the financial sustenance welfare agencies provided. "Women's problems differed from men's because women usually held the primary responsibility for raising children, encountered both race and sex discrimination in housing and employment, were vulnerable to domestic violence, and were more likely than men to need medical attention before old age. Informal community networks, churches, and private social service agencies lacked sufficient resources to address these problems, leading thousands of women … to turn to public institutions for assistance."[146]

Understanding how welfare policies could soften poverty was one thing, but black Louisianans witnessed governments pay for quality agricultural land intended for blacks to cultivate right outside of Shreveport. They saw how the nation's first bus boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953 resulted in a black-owned company receiving a federal contract. As they cheered on the success they had with the federal government, they bemoaned the perils of living under Jim

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[145] Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991)

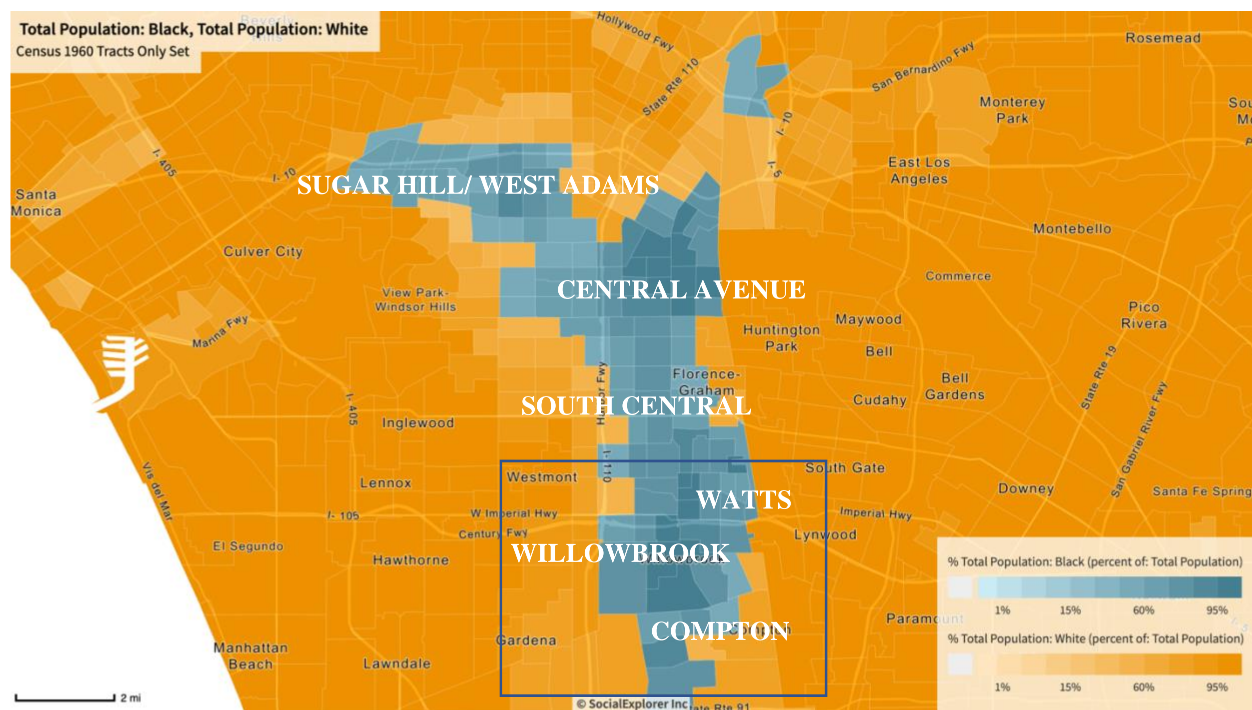
[146] Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 8

Crow where the city of Monroe had wiped them off the voter rolls, Shreveport's courts facilitated violence, and Alexandria refused to acknowledge the number of blacks killed in the Lee Street Riots. If they learned anything it was that the federal government could provide an upper hand, but local government could most directly undermine the immediate long-term impact of such help.

When black Louisianans moved to California, they sought home and commercial ownership as well as local control over their municipalities. Many people, especially those from the Shreveport area, had been dispossessed of their land and coerced out of the region. Purchasing property was not just an act of racial uplift, but an act of liberation antithetical to Jim Crow, the only power structure they knew. Los Angeles may have had the highest black homeownership rate in the1950s, but those statistics don't show the mass of landless Louisianans and others from the South who moved into housing projects in Watts and Willowbrook and never participated in that act of liberation.

Nickerson Gardens Housing Project was not a symbol of race pride for the residents living there, but for the long-standing black community hoping to accommodate the influx of black migrants. Instead, Nickerson Gardens represented a large landless black population, primarily from Greater Louisiana, experiencing job discrimination, government negligence, and poverty. Despite deteriorating conditions in these projects, they became a center of black life because black migrants consolidated their vast kinship and social networks within dense urban spaces. They had strong institutional and kinship networks in Louisiana even though they were spread across vast rural territories, but when they moved to Los Angeles, these networks grew tighter because it was easier to communicate in dense spaces. These networks maintained the memory of lessons learned in Louisiana, helped to interpret new experiences with the private and public sectors in California, and fueled black institutional development.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the black population in Watts, Willowbrook, and Compton exploded. Watts was a neighborhood in the city of Los Angeles, Willowbrook was in unincorporated Los Angeles County, and Compton was its own municipality. This region provides three different case studies in black experiences with California governments. The shared experiences between the political economy of Greater Louisiana and that of Watts-Willowbrook-Compton help to explain the roots of the Watts Uprising of 1965.



Black Population in 1960, *Social Explorer*, edited by Xavier Buck

Los Angeles' Infrastructure

From 1929-1936, the U.S. government forced millions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans to repatriate to Mexico regardless of their citizenship and in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment that guaranteed their citizenship if born in the United States. Even after 1936, Mexican immigration was discouraged, and railroad and defense companies sought laborers elsewhere. The Southern Pacific Railroad Company recruited southern black laborers and reinvigorated black migration to California.[147] Although there was an abundance of jobs, local black leaders predicted that they would be fleeting and that there was not enough housing in Negro districts to absorb the hundreds of black migrants arriving at the train stations daily. Public housing projects were built to accommodate wartime urban populations, but almost all of them were constructed in white-only neighborhoods, confining thousands of new black migrants to overcrowded market rate residencies. It was not uncommon for eight to ten people to live in one room or to create makeshift housing in backyards and garages.[148]

Not long after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the federal government rounded up Japanese citizens and held them in internment camps from 1942-1946. With Japanese dwellings and businesses left vacant, blacks poured into neighboring Little Tokyo in downtown Los Angeles. They renamed it Bronzeville, after the working-class black neighborhood in Chicago, and expanded the footprint of dilapidated and overcrowded housing.[149] Over two times as many people now lived in Little Tokyo than previously.

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[147] Carey McWilliams "Report on Importation of Negro Labor to California," State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Immigration and Housing, August 10, 1942
[148] Floyd C. Covington letter to Charles S. Johnson, April 6, 1943, Los Angeles Urban League Records, Box 1, folder 34, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library
[149] Hillary Jenks, "Bronzeville, Little Tokyo, and the Unstable Geography of Race in Post-World War II Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 2 (Summer 2011)

Unfortunately, black migrants all too often obtained their job and housing opportunities because the government discriminated against other minorities.

Because racial tensions were high, Mayor Fletcher Bowron appointed several black leaders to the Official Interracial Committee in 1943. Appointees included Floyd C. Covington of the Urban League, Norman O. Houston of Golden State Mutual, Thomas L. Griffith, Jr. of the NAACP, Judge Edwin Jefferson, and Revels Cayton of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Even though Mexican, Japanese, and black issues overlapped, the committee was put together "to deal with the immediate problems cutting across the areas of police protection, housing and transportation" in the black community.[150] The mayor's most pressing concern was probably suppressing riots instigated by alleged "juvenile delinquency" and white police violence in black and Latino neighborhoods.

About a year before the committee was put together, José Gallardo Díaz was found nearly dead beside a swimming hole, called the "Sleepy Lagoon," just south of East Los Angeles. An ambulance rushed him to the hospital, but he was pronounced dead shortly after he arrived. While his cause of death was uncertain and there was little evidence, the Los Angeles Police Department rushed to arrest seventeen Mexican American youths and held them without bail on murder charges. They were incarcerated for two years before their convictions were reversed on appeal in 1944.[151] Black and Latino communities overlapped near downtown, and during the time these young men were incarcerated, young communities of color were on edge. Black and Latino youths attended the same schools, dealt with the same police, and embraced each other's clothing, music and culture, setting a foundation for them to work together.[152] In June 1943, there were several altercations in San Jose, Oakland, San Francisco, Delano, and Los Angeles between white U.S. servicemen and Latino youths, who wore flamboyant and oversized clothing called zoot suits.

With tensions already high from the Sleepy Lagoon Trial, two hundred white sailors drove into the Mexican American neighborhood of East Los Angeles and beat young zoot suiters with clubs, stripped them of their clothes, and burned their clothes. As media coverage increased, thousands of white servicemen joined the riots and attacked any Mexican American man they found in bars, movie theaters, and on the street. Violence spilled over into the Negro district of Central Avenue, where black zoot suiters were also attacked. The same LAPD who had swiftly arrested seventeen Latino youths in the Sleepy Lagoon Trial was given orders not to arrest any of the rioters. Yet, when the violence was quelled, they arrested over five hundred Latino civilians.[153]

Just a few months after the Zoot Suit Riots, Mayor Bowron called black leaders into the Official Interracial Committee to figure out how to deal with racial tensions that also significantly affected Latino and Japanese citizens. Although black leaders could have been racial brokers, they largely advocated for their own communities. Urban League director Floyd Covington worked with the deputy chief of police to redesign police training for all communities

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[150] Letter to Charles S. Johnson from Floyd C. Covington, September 9, 1943, Los Angeles Urban League Records, Box 1, folder 34, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library

[151] Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee Records, 1944, Collection 107, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library

[152] Edited by Josh Kun and Laura Pulido, *Black and Brown in Los Angeles: Beyond Conflict and Coalition* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2014)

[153] Stuart Cosgrove, "The Zoot-Suit and Style Warfare". *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 18 (1984): 77–91; Douglas Henry Daniels, "Los Angeles Zoot: Race 'Riot,' the Pachuco, and Black Music Culture." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 87 (2002): 98-118

of color, but when he attached his supporting documents, he only outlined black history and emphasized the plights of job discrimination on black economic advancement and subsequent crime. The report did not mention the Sleepy Lagoon Trial or Japanese internment, but instead, Covington discussed how overcrowding and poverty generally affected all communities of color.[154]

Local black leaders may have had good intentions, but they were appointed to a toothless committee by a Republican mayor who was an outspoken proponent of Japanese internment and only spoke out on the Zoot Suit Riots once the Mexican Consul contacted the U.S. State Department.[155] When he finally responded, he backed the actions of the police that the Official Interracial Committee was supposed to change. Mayor Bowron proclaimed, "There are too many citizens in this community, some of them good-intentioned and a few whose intentions I question, who raise a hue and cry of racial discrimination or prejudice against a minority group every time the Los Angeles police make arrests of members of gangs or groups working in unison. They all look alike to us, regardless of color and length of their coats. The police are going to do the job and I propose to back up the police."[156]

When black leaders worried about the impact of black migration on blacks' liminal social position, they ignored the larger issue at hand. The black establishment was busy collecting data, publishing reports, and working with racist white politicians, hoping to use the levers of government to alleviate poverty and end job discrimination. Nevertheless, thousands of black migrants moving to the city already knew that they needed control over, rather than accommodation with, local government. The demands of local leaders, working through the courts and in committees, did not adequately address migrant expectations.

Willowbrook: Political Weakness and Interracial Cooperation

Blacks inundated Little Tokyo in numbers far greater than its capacity and because more established black leaders failed to mobilize quickly, new organizations and leaders began to take their place. The Little Tokyo Committee organized black residents, many who had just migrated to the city, to advocate for more housing. They went directly to Governor Earl Warren and convinced him to push harder for more public housing intended for black residents. Black public housing had been proposed in the past, but white residents repeatedly picketed their development near their neighborhoods. The state of California, the county of Los Angeles, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) worked together to establish black public housing just outside the Los Angeles city limits in the unincorporated neighborhood of Willowbrook.

Nestled in between the newer black stronghold of Watts to the north and the highly desired white suburb of Compton to the South, Willowbrook was still searching for its own identity. Whites wanted it to be more like Compton and possibly annexed by them in the future while blacks saw it as a suburban extension of Watts yet to be cultivated. These competing white and black visions for Willowbrook grew out of where each group resided. Whites lived near the southern Compton border and blacks and Latinos lived near the northern Watts border. With about two thousand blacks living in northern Willowbrook in 1940, they were already petitioning

[154] Floyd Covington, "Historical Background of Negro Survey," Field Report—Trends of Race Relations, Los Angeles, CA, 1943, Los Angeles Urban League Records, Box 1, folder 34, UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Library
[155] Page Smith, *Democracy on Trial: The Japanese American Evacuation and Relocation in World War II* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995)
[156] "Not a Race Issue, Mayor Says," *New York Times*, June 10, 1943

the county to make improvements, such as creating a water district and installing streetlights and sewers.[157] They considered annexing themselves to the city of Los Angeles like Watts had done in 1926, but white residents were trying to annex the southern part of Willowbrook to Compton, so they could avoid integration.

White residents of Willowbrook and Compton petitioned Governor Earl Warren to stop the construction of black public housing in their area while the Little Tokyo Committee advocated for the exact opposite. White men and women threatened the governor with a race war and other violence if the governor allowed the project to move forward. One white woman in Compton wrote a letter to the governor saying:

> "Mrs. Randolph says that there was a meeting of the white people in the vicinity at which vigilantism and a revival of the Ku Klux Klan was discussed. She told me that she had influenced the people to let her try to work the situation out before doing anything which they would regret. She reiterated that she is not opposed to Negroes or to their having adequate housing but that her interest is in the prevention of a situation which might lead to race riots."[158]

Similar threats were made by numerous residents of Compton and Willowbrook. One white woman of Willowbrook petitioned the governor to enforce a color line because, as an unincorporated area, it did not have a municipal government to rally behind like in the cities of Los Angeles or Compton. She argued that "Certainly there are a lot of white defense workers who could live in those three hundred units; and there is plenty of vacant lots to build such projects on north of Imperial Highway, or in Watts, their rightful territory."[159]

This woman and many others from her community tried to enforce an informal color line even though the planned development was only half a mile further south than they desired. She continued, "We are on a restricted street where we couldn't sell to colored people and with a defense project for colored people a block away, and already there is over thirty per cent colored children in our Jr. High School. What will it be like with three hundred or more coming in the next school term? We will be forced to move or send our own children out of our own district." White residents couldn't fathom genuine integration and feared that black neighbors would drive their property values down and taint their children's education.

Despite all the commotion, white residents learned that living in an unincorporated area significantly limited their political power. The Palm Lane Housing Project was built for black residents at 120th street and Wilmington Avenue in 1945, paving the way for greater black migration into the territory.[160] That same year two housing tracts, the Avalon and Willowbrook Subdivisions, were built for blacks adjacent to Palm Lanes.[161] Black migrants also had little political power in unincorporated Willowbrook, but because black Los Angeles was bursting at the seams, they embraced the opportunity and carved out suburban lifestyles near Palm Lanes Housing Project. Within a decade they created new institutions that mobilized county resources in ways white residents were never able to. White residents, who could afford to, moved out of

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[157] "Citizens Seek Improvements in Willowbrook," *California Eagle*, March 21, 1940

[158] Letter to Governor Warren from Helen R. MacGregor, January 7, 1933, Earl Warren Papers, California State Archives

[159] Letter to Governor Warren from Mrs. V.M. Bagby, February 16, 1944, Earl Warren Papers, California State Archives

[160] David Kaplan and Tom Zimmerman, Historic American Landscapes Survey: Martin Luther King, Jr. Medical Center Campus, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (2000), 7

[161] "Survey of County Offices and Services in Willowbrook Plaza," *California Eagle*, April 28, 1949

Willowbrook, but blacks weren't waiting for them. Black contractors and real estate agents built housing from scratch in Willowbrook because much of the area was still undeveloped.

In 1946, Velma Grant, a black woman who was "convinced an untapped market existed for quality, newly-built, single-family, private homes available to middle-class African Americans" put up her first homes for sale in Willowbrook.[162] She secured a $2.29M loan from Bank of America, purchased fifty acres of land, commissioned the famous Paul Williams to design the homes, and named them the Carver Manor, after the very famous late Black educator and scientist George Washington Carver. Unlike the cookie cutter tract homes being developed in suburbs around the country, Paul Williams designed each home with a unique architectural feature.

Residence, Stanford Avenue, Los Angeles, CA Shades of LA Archives, *Los Angeles Public Library*

As noted in the promotional literature for the development, "The architect designed each house with an off-set and broken roof line. Williams and Grant stressed the importance of quality construction. The home exteriors were stucco construction and the interiors featured plaster walls, hardwood floors and double tile sinks. Acknowledging the importance of the car to an emerging middle-class, each home included an attached single garage. All front lawns were landscaped."[163]

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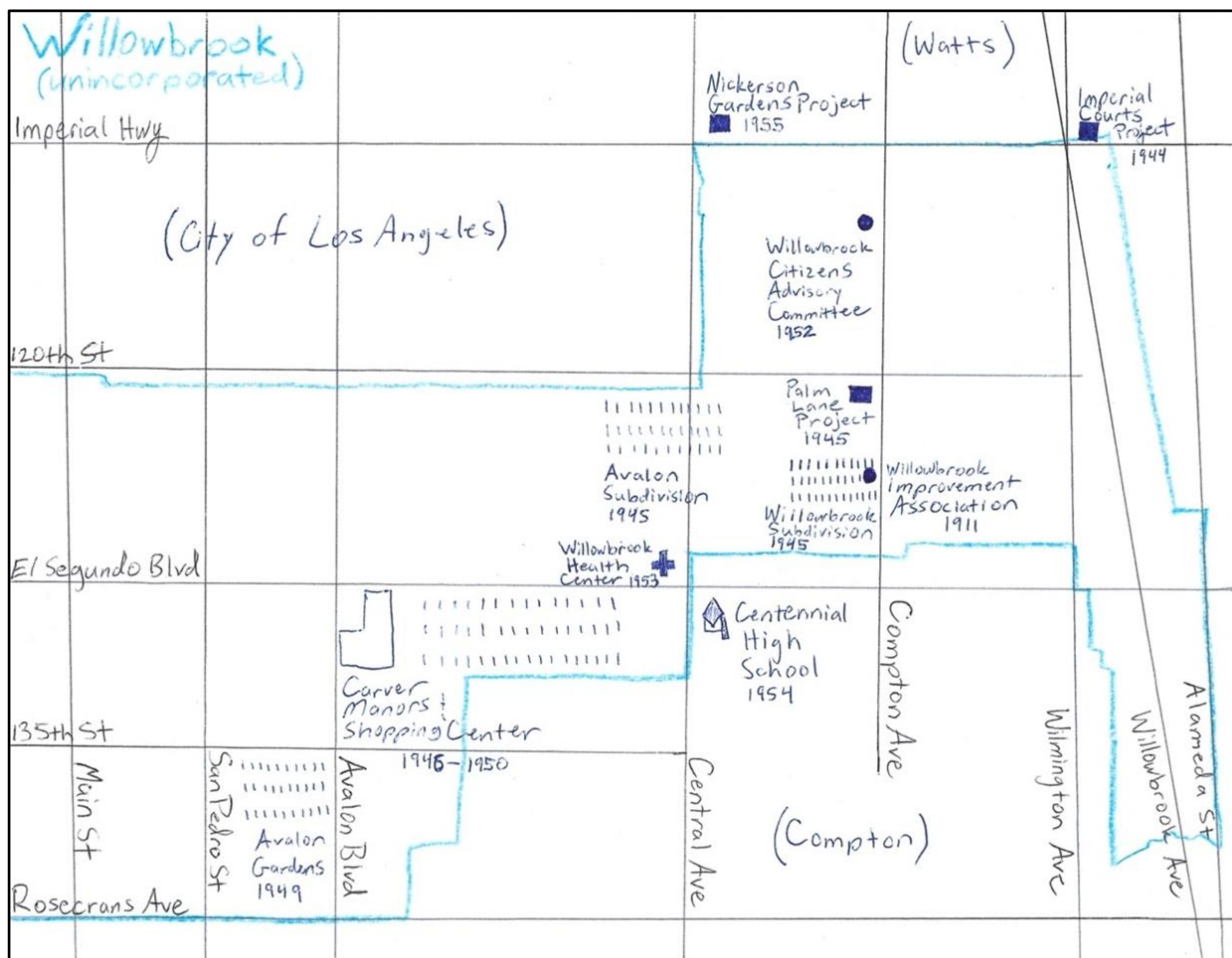
[162] "Carver Manor, Los Angeles, CA," *Paul Williams Project*, accessed February 25, 2021, https://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/gallery/1940s-houses/; *American Builder* (November 1949)
[163] "Carver Manor, Los Angeles, CA," *Paul Williams Project*, accessed February 25, 2021, https://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/gallery/1940s-houses/

Blacks had been confined to the oldest and often the worst housing in Los Angeles and cheaply made public housing. For the first time, however, they were offered new quality housing intended specifically for them. The first set of Carver Manor homes were sold for $11,400 and 110 of them were sold within days. Because of demand, Grant expanded by building a shopping center and 95 additional lots.[164] The homes and shopping center were built off of El Segundo and Avalon Boulevards, just two miles southwest of the Palm Lane Housing Projects.



Map of Willowbrook, 1945 – 1954

As Willowbrook grew blacker into the late 1940s, the question of annexation or incorporation was raised again. White residents petitioned to annex most of Willowbrook to Compton. While they included Carver Manor in their proposal, they excluded the Palm Lane Housing Project and its adjacent black housing tracts. Black residents quickly rejected the proposal. Even though Carver Manor was a black middle-class enclave, Palm Lane Projects anchored black Willowbrook, and was a meeting space for political activity. There was a great deal of class cohesion within the black community in the area, including with residents of Watts.

Instead of annexation, black leaders from the Progressive Citizens of America, a postwar democratic-socialist political organization, argued for Willowbrook to incorporate into their own

[164] *Time* (July 25, 1949)

city and make improvements through their own civic sphere.[165] As the black progressive front gained momentum, black youth founded the Southeast Inter-Racial Council, which met at Palm Lane and Imperial Courts Projects in Watts to advocate for quality high schools. At the same time, black adults integrated the Willowbrook Improvement Association to find common ground with white residents around improving the area.[166] Their first successful task together was paving a creek where people were dumping their trash and other waste.[167]

Ultimately, if Willowbrook had been annexed, taxes would have increased significantly and there were not enough businesses in the territory to support their own incorporation.[168] Willowbrook residents compromised by operating primarily through the Willowbrook Improvement Association rather than being annexed or incorporated. Into the 1950s, black residents formed the Willowbrook Citizens Advisory Committee, which worked directly with county departments to establish new facilities in their area, particularly the Willowbrook Health Center and the Willowbrook Community Center.[169]

Compton: The Gunpowder Behind the Creeping Fire

When a reporter at the *California Eagle* asked white real estate agent Martha Pearl Judy about blacks moving into Compton, she responded, "Negroes moving into Compton? Well, I wouldn't call it a flood. I'd call it more a creeping fire."[170] Many whites could not afford to leave Willowbrook or else they would have likely moved into Compton years prior to integration. Most whites were working class, had not lived in the area for more than one generation, and were split fifty-fifty between homeowners and renters.[171] Willowbrook integrated swiftly because it was an unincorporated area, but Compton would prove to be more difficult. Compton was an incorporated city where middle class whites controlled the political and economic spheres and successfully resisted several black and integrated public housing proposals in the 1940s. But in 1948, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down racial covenants in *Shelley v. Kramer*, providing blacks the legal backing to move into Compton and other white enclaves around the nation.

In Willowbrook the improvement association was eventually used to collaborate across racial lines, but the Compton Crest Improvement Association did the exact opposite. Led by Joe Williams, a member of the Long Beach local United Automobile Workers, the Compton Crest Improvement Association picketed black newcomers' homes through the night, cut their window screens, and threw rocks through their windows. Police didn't stop any of the picketers until two in the morning. Black UAW members petitioned the union to oust Williams, but even with a statement from the union condemning his actions, there was little they could do to stop him.[172]

When the UAW couldn't help, the *California Eagle* published a series of articles disproving white claims that blacks didn't keep up with their homes and trying to persuade the public that black neighbors could be a good thing. In these articles they also showed that blacks paid more for their homes than their white counterparts, attempting to create middle-class

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[165] "Willowbrook News," *California Eagle*, January 1, 1948
[166] "Southeast Interracial Group Discusses High School Plans," *California Eagle*, April 28, 1949; "Willowbrook Organization Meeting Set," *California Eagle*, April 28, 1949
[167] "Willowbrook Improvement Association Adopts Laws," *California Eagle*, March 31, 1949
[168] "Survey of County Offices and Services in Willowbrook Plaza," *California Eagle*, April 28, 1949
[169] "Willowbrook In Health Meeting Reports Plans," *California Eagle*, April 30, 1953
[170] Bob Ellis, "Compton Residents Agree: Negroes Can't Be Kept Out," *California Eagle*, June 18, 1953
[171] Employed Civilian Population 14 and Over, Census Tract 527, Los Angeles County, CA, 1940 Census, *Social Explorer*
[172] "Compton Member of U.A.W. Faces Union Charges," *California Eagle*, June 4, 1953

cohesion across race. At the end of the day, none of these tactics actually worked and black families figured out their own strategies to enhance their quality of life, such as in the schools.

Prior to 1953, Compton High School and Compton College were housed on the same campus, and while the high school was mostly white, the college had many more black students because their attendance wasn't based on residential jurisdictions. Black athletes won several medals for Compton College in the late 1940s, and there were several black Greek-letter organizations operating on campus.[173] The same year that Compton Crest Improvement Association picketed black residences, Compton High School was separated from the college.

The following year, in 1954, Centennial High School was built on Compton's northern border with Willowbrook as a virtually all-black school with a handful of Latinos, whites, and Japanese. The students and some of the teachers were black but all the administrators and staff were white.[174] Centennial was built to slow the number of black students entering Compton High School, but whites in Compton didn't stop there. After witnessing blacks move into Willowbrook, whites started pushing east in preparation for integration in Compton. They incorporated their eastern neighbors of Lynwood and Paramount in 1950 and 1953, respectively, as new white suburbs. Then they tried to limit blacks to West Compton while they pushed into East Compton and other neighboring suburbs. In 1957, they established Manuel Dominguez High School as an all-white school on the border of East Compton and Paramount. White people fled Compton because they couldn't maintain their homogeneity without racial covenants and the financial state of the city was declining even before blacks moved in.[175]

Even though whites were retreating, black newcomers weren't taking any chances. Many of them armed themselves, protected their property and families, and prepared for the worst. When Texas natives Alford and Luquella Jackson moved to West Compton their home was picketed by Joe Williams and his posse through the night.

Compton Housing Row Flares

EXTRA!

Compton home-owners Tuesday afternoon began picketing new residents at 2318 Reeves street in a grim effort to keep Negroes from living in the area. Pickets are shown in first two pictures.

Third picture shows some of the men who were directing the pickets. At the left, with crutches, is Joe Williams, shop steward at Douglas Long Beach, member of the United Automobile Workers CIO, also president of the Compton Crest Improvement Association.

At right is Jackson family, ready to protect their rights. Mrs. Luquella Jackson, center, with gun. Her daughter Jacqueline, is at her left. Mrs. Mabel Jackson, sister-in-law, is at right, with her children, Nellie and Jimmy Earl.

(Photos by Irving C. Smith)

GUARD HOMES AS PICKETS MARCH

California Eagle, May 14, 1953

[173] "Compton College Notes," *California Eagle*, March 31, 1949

[174] Centennial High School Yearbook, 1956, *Ancestry.com*

[175] Emily E. Straus, "Separate and Unequal," in *Death of a Suburban Dream: Race and Schools in Compton, California* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014)

Mrs. Luquella, as she was known, kept a shotgun near her at all times, and when threats intensified, she and her husband looked to shoot back. The *California Eagle* reported:

> "Alfred Jackson unloaded his furniture, a .45 Colt in his pocket. Mrs. Jackson put Jacqueline to bed, a .45 Colt in her cotton dress pocket. On the lawn, Negro neighbor William Whittaker (shoes, screens, and windows had been torn when he moved in) stood huddled in an overcoat. Under his coat was a rifle…The six night duty police cars in Compton raced into Reeve street. The people were ordered to go home. The Jackson group insisted on police protection for the Jacksons and Whittakers. The police stated they did not have enough cars to station anyone on Reeve street…The police threatened to arrest the Negroes and everyone else who remained in the area."[176]

Not only were the threats very real in Compton, but blacks were prepared to deal with violence at levels experienced in the Deep South. Just like many blacks were armed in the South, blacks in Compton held onto their guns in California and responded to threats with armed self-defense. After publishing articles on Joe Williams, asking the labor union to repudiate him, and asking the police for protection from his posse, the only thing the Jacksons could do was prepare to shoot. The Jacksons and many other black families bought homes in Compton by any means necessary.

Watts: The Center of Black Life

The Watts Uprising of 1965 left 34 people dead, more than 1,000 injured, 3,950 arrested, and $40M in property damage.[177] Shortly after the revolt, the governor commissioned a study to understand the roots of the "riots" and offer solutions, but in the McCone Report, they interviewed elected officials, for the most part, rather than community members.[178] The report argued that high unemployment, poor schools, police brutality, and inferior living conditions led to the Watts Uprising, all of which were part of the story.

Many scholars found the McCone Report's analysis limited and used their data to further understand the roots of the uprising. After Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 and urban riots spread across the nation, scholarship on Watts increased dramatically. In 1968, a sociologist at UCLA, H. Edward Ransford, published an article arguing that blacks in Watts believed that violence was a "justifiable means of correcting racial injustices" because they were racially isolated and highly dissatisfied with their treatment as a race. Ransford believed that urban uprisings were "extreme political behavior" caused by groups of people who were not "tied to community institutions" and were aware of their "lack of control over critical matters." [179] Ransford's argument has been adopted by scholars for decades and continues to be used to understand black urban revolts into the twenty-first century.

After an 18-year-old and unarmed black man, Michael Brown, was killed by Ferguson, Missouri police in 2014, the city witnessed days of unrest. The author of the widely-read and influential work *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein, published an article historicizing the event and building continuity with urban riots in the 1960s. He wrote, "Every policy and practice segregating St. Louis over the last century was duplicated in almost every metropolis nationwide.

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[176] "Full Compton Story Told in Eagle Series," *California Eagle*, May 14, 1953

[177] McCone Revisited: A Focus on Solutions to Continuing Problems in South Central Los Angeles, Report on a Public Hearing Jointly Sponsored by the Los Angeles County and City Human Relations Commissions, January 1985

[178] Watts Riots records, California Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, Box 1-5, USC Libraries Special Collections

[179] H. Edward Ransford, "Isolation, Powerlessness, and Violence: A Study of Attitudes and Participation in the Watts Riot," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 73, no. 5 (March 1968): 581 - 582

Yet this story of racial isolation and disadvantage, enforced by federal, state, and local policies, many of which are no longer practiced, is central to an appreciation of what occurred in Ferguson in August 2014."[180] Segregation, racial covenants, and redlining, without a doubt, played a role in urban uprisings in the 1960s and have shaped our contemporary society. But the theory of racial isolation tells us very little about black intercommunity politics that have utilized legal, institution-building, and violent tactics simultaneously for generations. The act of violence is not a response to isolation, but rather one tool for liberation that was more efficacious when black southerners moved to urban spaces in the north and west.

When whites attacked black communities in Tulsa, Longview, Port Arthur, and Houston from 1919-1921 or Alexandria, Beaumont, and Los Angeles in the early 1940s, no one did a study on why white people felt this was a "justifiable means of correcting" the racial matrix of white supremacy. Yet, when blacks rebel, or meet violence with violence, the public assumes there must be a reason a group of people would want to defend themselves.

Unlike the media, government, and scholars who have painted Watts as isolated, fragmented, and hopeless, I argue that it was a socially vibrant place where black southerners consolidated their networks into dense urban spaces and mobilized city resources quicker than whites had ever done in the area. The Watts Uprising was not a plea for help in the wake of poverty and racial isolation, but an act of self-defense in a series of actions taken since leaving the Deep South. The Watts Uprising was not extreme political behavior but an accumulation of violent acts in the South and West.

And, frankly, the United States government is fortunate that black people, after all they have been through since taken from the shores of Africa, enslaved for centuries, and denied American liberties promised in the Declaration of Independence, have not burned the entire nation to the ground. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to showing that blacks in Watts *were* tied to community institutions, built many of their own, and found ways to bring city resources into their community.

The Imperial Courts Project was built in Watts in 1944, but after white resistance to the Palm Lane Project in Willowbrook in 1945 and the lack of political will to establish black public housing outside of black areas, HUD, the city, and the county settled on founding more public housing projects in Watts. In 1955, Nickerson Gardens was built blocks away from Imperial Courts. The Jordan Downs Project was built on Watts' northern border. Now there were four large public housing projects within three miles of each other in Watts and Willowbrook.

However, although Watts was dense, it wasn't as bad as Little Tokyo or parts of Central Avenue. Even though they were at Los Angeles' southern periphery, they were incorporated into the city, as opposed to Willowbrook, and could petition city and county authorities. In 1955, bus service was extended into Watts and Willowbrook, meaning there was now public transportation through South Central and into downtown. When the line opened, the *California Eagle* reported, "The new service will operate from 6 a.m. until 9 p.m. seven days a week at 30 minute intervals…The extended service will serve an area of approximately 3000 residents and will enable persons in the Willowbrook area to ride directly into the Watts district, or to transfer to connecting lines running into Los Angeles or Huntington Park."[181] Blacks living in Willowbrook were a short ride from city resources in downtown and a much shorter ride from Watts. Freeways were largely constructed for white suburban constituents, but largely because Black residents

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[180] Richard Rothstein, "The Making of Ferguson: Public Policies at the Root of its Troubles," *Economic Policy Institute* (October 2014)
[181] "Extended Bus Service Set for Watts," *California Eagle*, April 7, 1955

pressured them to do so, the city did extend some public utilities into their southern periphery as blacks moved to those areas in greater numbers.

In addition to the bus lines, blacks organized the Watts Community Health Council (WCHC) and the Compton Avenue Childcare Center (CACC). There were disparate health outcomes in Watts, but the people weren't isolated because the WCHC brought the Los Angeles City Health Department and private doctors to the area regularly to work in their community.[182] While this didn't make up for the lack of hospitals in the area, they organized themselves and mobilized city resources. In 1958, the county paved three miles of residential streets and improved curbs, gutters, and sidewalks.[183] By 1959, new state legislation provided funds for Watts residents to build a new library branch in their neighborhood. [184]

Watts was much more isolated when it was incorporated in 1926. At that time, it was known as Mud Town because nothing was paved, and a few drops of rain would soften the soil. It was an integrated neighborhood with many Italians, Mexicans, and blacks, but they found it difficult to mobilize city resources. It was known as a rough neighborhood that was coming up. By the time of the 1950s and 1960s, government was investing in Watts through public housing, extending bus lines, paving streets, extending health services, and investing in a library.

Black residents of Watts mobilized city resources in ways that were unfathomable just a decade before. Part of the reason that was possible is because blacks tapped into their kinship and social networks developed over decades in the South and carried into the West, making it easy to organize quickly. The other part is because blacks were bulldozing their way into decision-making positions in city departments. For example, George Beavers, co-founder of Golden State Mutual, headed the Housing Authority from 1946-1961.

Watts and Willowbrook's housing projects were dense, making it easier for people who once connected over vast geographic distances to connect politically, economically, and socially. Masonic lodges, YMCAs and YWCAs, Greek-letter organizations, and churches thrived under these conditions. For example, Greek-letter organizations played in basketball tournaments every year and brought the community together. As reported by the *California Eagle*, these games were really one of the highlights of the year.

"The big red Kappa basketball team will be out to defend its championship when the interfrat series gets underway Saturday, March 16 at the Jefferson High School Gym. This year Jackie White, ex-Harlem Globetrotter, will coach the Kappas and he's faced with the problem of replacing such goodies as Willie Naulls, Morris Taft and Leo Brandon. However, according to our operative who managed to smuggle his way into one of the Kappa's secret workouts held in air-tight secrecy in the Jordan Downs project. White will field a snappy crew built around such stars as Dallas Perkins, Tony Perkins, Leo Hill and a flock of newcomers. White, according to report, will stress more defense than any other Kappa team has featured during the years. Most of the series teams will be stronger this year. Alphas appear about the weakest member of the league, according to operator X."[185]

Black Los Angeles was relatively cohesive, joining Central Avenue and Watts-Willowbrook, homeowners and public housing residents, and organizational members and nonmembers. There was a disconnect between the older black establishment and newcomers, but the number of blacks that migrated to Los Angeles in the 1950s and 1960s was generally good

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[182] "New Chairman for Child Health Project in Watts," *California Eagle*, January 6, 1955
[183] "Street Project in Watts Half Done," *California Eagle*, October 16, 1958
[184] "Watts Gets New Library," *California Eagle*, July 31, 1958
[185] "Kappa Cage Team Holding Secret Workouts in Watts," *California Eagle*, February 28, 1957

for strengthening networks, building political and economic power, and reducing isolation even in the city's periphery.

Housing was a hot issue in the black community, but as racial covenants were struck down, blacks moved into newer spaces, and more public housing was built. Concurrently, police brutality and healthcare became the community's dominant concerns. For those who were living in Los Angeles in the 1940s, they remembered when police allowed white servicemen to attack Latinos and blacks indiscriminately during the Zoot Suit Riots. Many blacks arriving in the 1950s and 1960s had confronted white violence in Greater Louisiana and had little tolerance for white anti-Black violence, especially by the police.

A revealing and cascading series of police killings and rapes were published in the *California Eagle* in the 1950s and 1960s. Those experiences and the subsequent murmurs undoubtedly shaped black political consciousness in Los Angeles.

"Police Shoot Down 2 Men in 4 Days," *California Eagle*, December 11, 1958

Anger over police killings was running high in South Los Angeles, especially after Tuesday's shooting of the mentally disturbed veteran. A number of protests were phoned into the *Eagle* by residents of the area. Members of the Johnson family were especially bitter and were at a loss to understand why the police entered the house without first waiting for them to return.

It didn't help that Los Angeles General Hospital, in Boyle Heights adjacent to downtown, was the only large medical institution in the black community. When police shot black victims, many of them were carried across South Central to the hospital and housed in their prisoner department until they passed.

The intersection between police killings and healthcare was a sore spot in the black community. In the next example non-black offenders threatened a group of black boys and girls with a knife and raped a young girl.

"Student, 14, Raped by Teen Gang," *California Eagle*, September 1, 1960

At 32nd and Trinity, someone yelled, "All black boys out!" and the girl's brother and two others were pushed from the truck. The girl tried to jump out too, but those inside pulled her back and then assaulted her…They let her out at 43rd and Long Beach, holding a knife to her back and threatening to kill her if she told what had happened.

There was an especially large number of teenage girls raped by white and other non-black men and who never received police protection. These incidences were never publicized by the NAACP or tried in a court of law. The black community was left to their own devices to protect themselves—for many, once again like in the South.

"Judge Directs Not Guilty Verdict in Handcuff Case," *California Eagle*, December 8, 1960

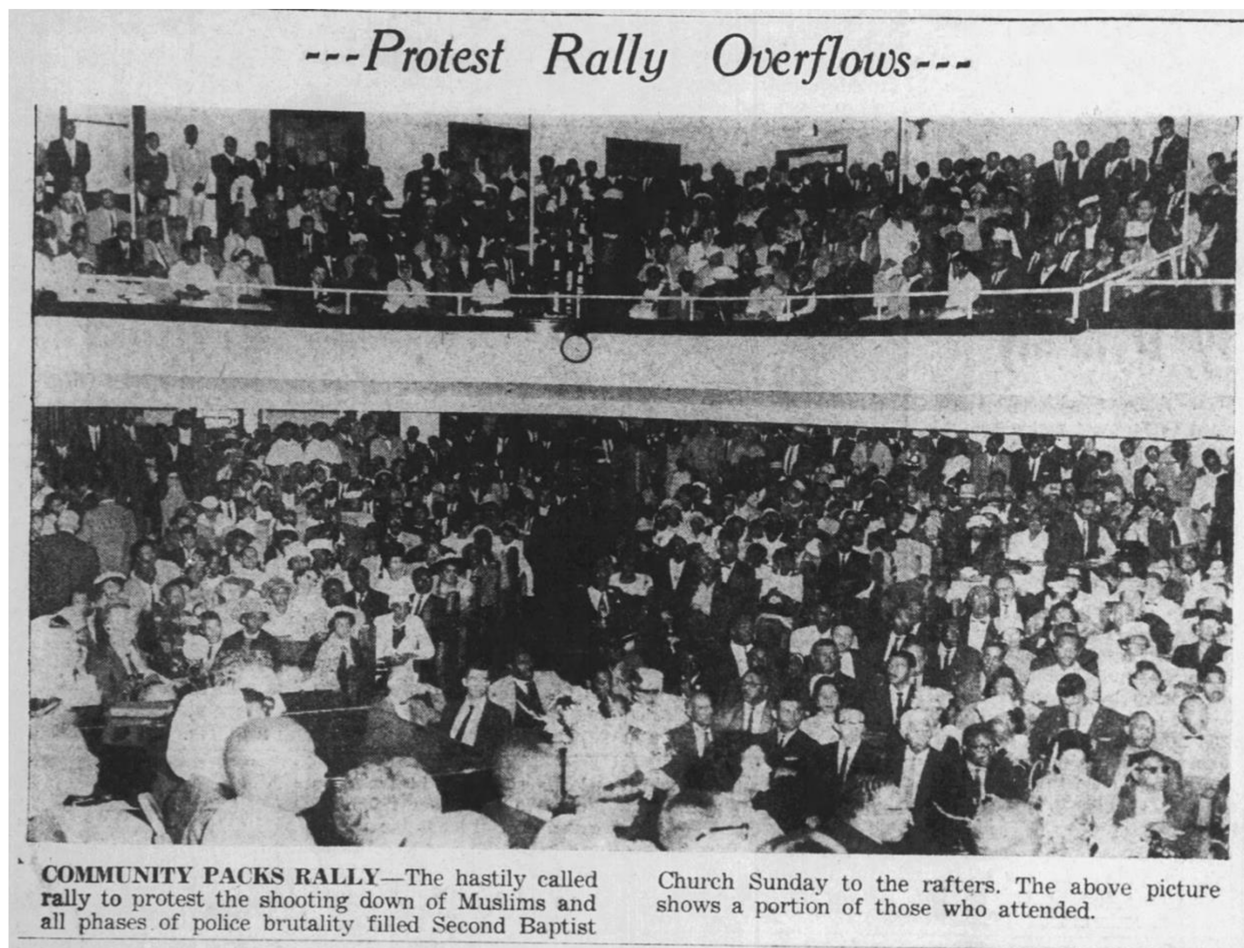
The arrest was made after a police car stopped outside Scott's house at 51st and Morgan Avenue and asked the young men if they had seen a car speeding down Compton Avenue. They replied in the negative and Grant sauntered across the street. For some reason, Officer Sierra called him back and began abusing him, calling him a "black so-and-so" and threating to book him on suspicion of burglary or robbery. Sierra handcuffed Grant and then, according to witnesses, began to beat and kick him. People who were attracted to the scene yelled at the officer, who released his hold. Grant took advantage of his momentary freedom and ran. His mother, Mrs. Ethel Grant, of 1230 E. 78th street, first learned what had happened when an officer reportedly told her, "We're going to issue a warrant for his arrest and shoot him at sight." She said she was also told that the police were holding her other son, Jerome, and his friend Scott until Grant gave himself up. Grant got in touch with the NAACP and through Atty. Moten

surrendered himself to the police. By this time the robbery or burglary suspicion charges were dropped, but police said he was wanted "for questioning." Bail of $5000 was suggested. When the case came up for a preliminary hearing, the suggested bail had been dropped to $500 and the charge had been changed to one of "petty theft." The "theft" involved stealing the handcuffs which Grant had around his wrists at the time he made his getaway."

Black men were brutalized by Los Angeles police officers day in and day out, but they weren't the only ones experiencing anguish. Community members watched and sometimes interfered with arrests. Police often approached the parents of the youth they were arresting, and their addresses were published in the paper. Many of these people called in and contributed to stories of police abuse and violence, often reported in the *California Eagle*. Thousands of people read the stories in the papers and commented on how they felt, how it related to their own experiences, and what they wished would happen in response. Black men were bruised, beaten, and killed by police, but the entire black community took part in the suffering. By 1960, the black community already had a fire in their belly because of this suffering.

Yet, a flurry of black migrants from Greater Louisiana, many of whom were dispossessed of their land and fleeing altercations of self-defense, urgently pushed into Los Angeles. Their southern experiences enflamed an already hot community in California. In 1962, police raided a Nation of Islam Mosque, paralyzed one William Rogers, killed one Ronald Stokes, and injured five others—all of them unarmed. Many point to this atrocity as a flagship event leading up to the Watts Uprising and the ideological development of Malcolm X.[186] Hundreds of people gathered at Second Baptist Church, where twenty-five black ministers called on the mayor of Los Angeles to intervene, but to no avail.

[186] Frederick Knight, "Police Shooting of Seven Members of the Nation of Islam," *The Journal of Negro History*, vol. 79, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 182-196


---Protest Rally Overflows---

COMMUNITY PACKS RALLY—The hastily called rally to protest the shooting down of Muslims and all phases of police brutality filled Second Baptist Church Sunday to the rafters. The above picture shows a portion of those who attended.

Protest at Second Baptist Church following police killings at a Los Angeles Nation of Islam Mosque, *California Eagle*, May 17, 1962

Instead, Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty proclaimed that blacks were "hostile to police without reason" and Police Chief William H. Parker announced he was "doubling police patrols in the Negro community."[187] In 1963, the *California Eagle* was already reporting that race riots were nearly instigated in Watts. In one incident they wrote, "Some excitable members of the crowd jumped to the conclusion that the wounded Negro had been shot without cause. They shouted invectives at the police. Stones and bottles flew. Only police calmness prevented an ugly incident, perhaps more bloodshed. Some of the police officers were Negroes."[188] Clashes between blacks and the police were so frequent that nearly any police interaction could have led to violence. Police repeatedly brutalized blacks, and, in many cases, blacks were shooting back in self-defense.

Many point to the Watts Uprising of 1965 as a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights and Black Power Eras, but the insurrection could have occurred at any moment, as early as in the 1950s. The organizing wing of revolution, mainly black institution-building and resource mobilization had already begun, and as will be discussed in the following chapter, continued into the 1960s. They did not organize an army or paramilitary group, but there were several black street gangs that went head on with police sometimes out of anger and other times to protect their

[187] "The Road to Understanding," *California Eagle*, May 17, 1962
[188] "Respect for Police Officers," *California Eagle*, September 19, 1963

community. In other instances, violence was a community act that was more or less organized but could happen instantly because of strong social networks. Black migrants moved to the area in greater numbers in the 1960s than ever before, fueling a fire with their own particular experiences that was already burning in Los Angeles. The next chapter will show that these migrants, most of them from Greater Louisiana, created strong kinship networks between Los Angeles and Oakland and helped to facilitate a conversation about what organizing rage looked like and how they would use the political and economic tools they had developed in the South.

Chapter 5: The Huey P. Newton and Ted Watkins Debate

In September 1966, a little over one year after the Watts Uprising, Hunters Point, a predominantly black neighborhood in San Francisco, looked towards rebellion after police killed sixteen-year-old Mathew Johnson during a traffic stop. When Johnson ran from the car with his hands raised, the officer shot at him four times before a bullet pierced his heart. The officer alleged that the first three shots were warnings but, according to eyewitnesses, all of them were aimed at Johnson. Shortly after the shooting, the community responded in two ways—in one incident the windows of a drugstore were broken into; and in another, community members gathered at the Bayview Community Center to organize. Several black men formed a Peace Patrol at the community center, aimed at preventing riots and negotiating with the mayor to funnel city resources into their neighborhood. However, their meeting with the mayor was cut short when it was reported that more violence had broken out in Hunters Point.

The Peace Patrol asked the mayor to close off 3rd street to police because it ran through Hunters Point's business district and their presence would inevitably cause more chaos. The Peace Patrol wanted to work directly with their community, but the mayor refused to close off the street. Instead, police officers drove down 3rd street as black people flung rocks at them, eventually hitting one officer and providing them enough cause to call in reinforcements. A flurry of officers cleared residents off the streets and marched towards the Bayview Community Center, an intergenerational meeting space and the place where the Peace Patrol had just organized. When an officer yelled that someone had a gun in the community center, officers shot into the building without hesitation for eight continuous minutes. But when they raided the building, they didn't find any guns or Molotov cocktails, but two hundred children on the floor fearing for their lives. Six clearly marked peace patrollers and one other person were wounded outside the building when police indiscriminately fired hundreds of shots into the community center.[189]

The property damage in Hunters Point was relatively minimal compared to other cities of the same size. Yet, the Hunters Point Uprising showed how the state of California planned to respond to black revolts. The state was willing to kill any black person, young or old, if it prevented property damage and maintained law and order. Following days of unrest in Hunters Point, California Governor Pat Brown proclaimed, "We cannot have revolution in this country. I can assure the people of my state that I will do everything within my power to see that law and order is observed and that the rights of person and property are carefully protected. And I'll tell you this, we're going to meet force with force."[190] Two years later, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and in response, urban rebellions spread to cities across the country. California officials were still on edge, afraid that another "Watts" could happen in virtually any black community in the state. They poured millions of dollars into studies on the conditions of black communities and haphazardly financed government services. Little change occurred in Hunters Point following their uprising probably because it didn't develop into another "Watts." But across the Bay Bridge in Oakland, federal and state officials firmly believed that Oakland was ripe for a rebellion and they proactively looked to prevent unrest.

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[189] "Hunters Point – Cops Shout Into Community Center Sheltering 200 Children," *The Movement*, vol. 2, no. 9, October 1966

[190] "Governor Pat Brown on Bayview Hunters Point Social Uprising," KPIX Eyewitness News, September 1966, Bay Area Television Archive

This chapter explores the ways black leaders organized rage, or the fervor behind daily struggles and uprisings, in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. Blacks in California debated what the role of government should be in building black institutions, considering the governor and municipal officials had waged war against "revolution." Co-founder of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, Huey P. Newton, believed government should provide basic necessities, and until they did so, black people had to work to build an independent colony within the Mother Country. Founder of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, Ted Watkins, believed in working with every level of government, no matter how conservative or racist, as long as there was black community control over the development of black institutions. Newton believed blacks needed political before economic control, while Watkins believed economics were more important. Newton wanted to be an independent colony immediately, but Watkins wanted to use government money and land to become economically independent over time. The Watkins model was more pragmatic because it embraced traditional southern organizing strategies, helping to bring multigenerational community members into the fold, and though it built black economic power, it didn't overthrow the white power structure. In contrast, Newton's model was perceived as a threat to the power structure, led to underfunded institutions that lasted only as long as the Black Panther Party did, and were undermined by the FBI and police departments.

After analyzing these two models, I argue that, at some level, the U.S. government had to play a role in either donating land or millions of dollars to build strong and longstanding black institutions. By no means was the government perfect—it fluctuated depending on who was in office and eventually cut funding. But without the government, there was not enough capital generating in the black community to build the futures they imagined and when in opposition to the government, they had the military power to tear black organizations apart.

Oakland's Not for Burning

When evaluating Hunters Point and Oakland, most government officials came to the same conclusion as H. Edward Ransford, discussed in the previous chapter. In that view, racial isolation was the psychological underpinning behind acts of mass violence in black communities. In 1965, Amory Bradford, a former Wall Street lawyer, chairman of the New York City Publishers Association, and adamant anti-labor proponent, was appointed by the U.S. Commerce Department to set up a $23 million employment program in Oakland.[191] Bradford also believed that racial isolation led to urban rebellions and in his seminal work, *Oakland's Not for Burning*, he argued that by including blacks in the process of government intervention (i.e. subsidized job training programs and employment), they would see themselves as a part of, rather than outside, the power structure they had been isolated from.[192]

Ransford interviewed community members on their economic vision for Oakland. His interviewees told him, straight up, that they were discriminated against in employment all the time, that another "Watts" was inevitable in Oakland if the government did not act immediately, and that they were not interested in any lengthy studies that would lead to little progress. Previously, the federal government had poured $40 million into the city of Oakland in attempts to solve the ills of the urban ghetto and very little had changed, probably because none of that

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[191] Robert D. McFadden, "Amory Bradford, 85, Times General Manager," *The New York Times*, September 6, 1998

[192] Amory Bradford, *Oakland's Not for Burning* (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968), 4-11

money actually went to the people who needed it.[193] But the black community's response was not just rhetorical—they offered real solutions. For one, they wanted fair employment laws to be enforced in order to end job discrimination. Two, they wanted job training programs that led to construction jobs in the billion-dollar Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) projects. Three, they wanted access to government loans so they could expand their businesses. And four, something needed to be done about the disproportionately high number of police records that inhibited them from employment.[194]

Black communities across the country threatened another "Watts" as a tactic for mobilizing government resources—a way to force the government to intervene. Ransford wrote, "During the summer, there were many rumors in the Oakland ghetto that Molotov cocktails were being manufactured in empty garages; that arms caches had been discovered; and that new tactics based on a study of Watts were being taught to young Negro militants, stressing the folly of burning their own homes and shops in the ghetto, and urging that their protest would be more effective if they burned City Hall, the business district, and the homes of the Whites on the hillside."[195] When reports of rioting in East Oakland were publicized, federal government officials immediately reached out to Ranford in hopes that he would coordinate a defense and diffusion strategy. He wrote, "From experience in wildcat strikes, which were frequent in the New York newspaper industry, and from reading about the Watts and Harlem riots, I knew that one of the greatest dangers in any such fast moving crisis is the way rumors spread, become accepted fact, and lead to action far different from that required by the real situation."

Several revolts had almost developed in Los Angeles in the years leading up to the Watts Uprising in ways similar to Oakland and Hunters Point. As discussed in chapter four, the entire community participated in police altercations and rumors spread information quickly across established social networks. However, these rumors, notably those which white outsiders only heard parts of, were also used to strike fear in the government and force them to meet black communities' demands. A rebellion was very possible in Oakland, even though it never happened, and either way, many still used the possibility of it as a political tactic.

About two weeks after the Hunters Point Uprising, two young black men from Greater Louisiana, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, started the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in Oakland, a town just a bridge away from San Francisco. The Black Panther Party was originally a small grassroots organization that used legally armed patrols to directly confront abusive police. Blacks in Watts had organized similar community patrols in the aftermath of the uprising, but the Black Panther Party was one of the few who were armed and loaded when they did their patrols.

Huey Newton borrowed some of ideas from the Revolutionary Action Movement, Frantz Fanon, and Mao Zedong to develop their theoretical framework. He believed black communities in the United States constituted colonies similar to third world countries and police departments were the state's occupying force.[196] Within the colony, the Black Panther Party provided a number of services which governments had failed to provide to black communities, such as free

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[193] Amory Bradford, *Oakland's Not for Burning* (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968), 40-45; Bradford argues that most of these funds were wasted because the business and government establishment looked to maintain order rather than listen to community members in the ghetto and mobilize resources in their favor.

[194] Amory Bradford, *Oakland's Not for Burning* (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968), 17-19

[195] Amory Bradford, *Oakland's Not for Burning* (New York, NY: David McKay Company, Inc., 1968), 188-189

[196] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, "The Correct Handling of a Revolution," in *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2013, 2016)

medical clinics, free ambulances, free breakfast for schoolchildren, and free clothing.[197] They educated and armed the "brothers on the block" to protect the community from the police and to deliver the services to a colony that would need to thrive in its quest for independence. Theoretically they believed they were a colony, but it didn't stop them from participating in local politics. The Black Panther Party ushered in a generation of black politicians in the Bay Area and other cities by running their campaigns, galvanizing the community, and shaping their political imagination. The Black Panther Party emulated the utopia Newton imagined could exist after revolution by delivering needed services and helping shape the political sphere. They modeled the form of government they sought to create.

Huey P. Newton's Southern Upbringing

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale both migrated to Oakland when they were young, but they still had a southern upbringing. Newton's parents lived in the northeast corner of Greater Louisiana, in rural parts of Arkansas, before settling in Monroe, Louisiana for job opportunities. The youngest of seven children, Newton was part of a tight-knit family who carried their southern traditions with them to California. When he was three years old his family moved to Oakland in search of defense industry jobs, and he admitted he personally remembered very little from his time in Louisiana. But his family kept the memories of the South alive and Newton was indoctrinated in southern culture and history even as he grew up on the streets of Oakland. Newton wrote, "Everything I know about that time I learned from the family."[198]

His mother probably taught him the most important value—how to deal with tribulations. This characteristic was not distinct to the South or their family, but it was a necessary trait to get through the Louisiana they grew up in. His family lived in a constant state of economic hardship and one way they dealt with that was through humor. Newton wrote, "My mother's sense of humor affected all of us. It was pervasive, an attitude toward life that led us to insight, affection, humor, and understanding with each other. She helped us to see the light side in even the most difficult situations. This lightness and balance have carried me through some difficult days. Often, when others expect to find me depressed by difficult circumstances, and especially by the extreme condition of prison, they see that I look at things in another way. Not that I am happy with the suffering; I simply refuse to be defeated by it."

There were cultural values that southern migrants brought to California—a spirit that carried them through hardships across geographic spaces. These values, like humor, are rarely discussed in a conversation on politics, but in order for so many people to endure great atrocities in the South and the West, and still have faith that they could build an alternative future, lightheartedness, a space for laughter and joy, thrived. Oftentimes political action looks like public protest, fervent preachers, and marches, but love is the reason people worked so hard to maintain social and kinship networks across vast geographic spaces, continued to build new institutions, and even burned down the infrastructure that confined them to deteriorating conditions. It was love that brought the community together when a police officer murdered any black person. When police shot someone, it reverberated through the entire community because taking any black life, even one that was not kin, was like taking a family member.

Newton's father worked several jobs and despite living in poverty, prided himself on never letting his wife work outside the home. Many black women in the South were subjected to

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[197] David Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008)

[198] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1973, 2009), 12

sexual violence working in white homes, and if their husband could make enough money, he provided her a lot of security and protection.[199] Newton's father didn't make quite enough money to lift them from poverty, but keeping his wife home was more important to him, so he worked several jobs a day. Newton wrote, "During those years in Louisiana he worked in a gravel pit, a carbon plant, in sugar-cane mills, and sawmills. He eventually became a railroad brakeman for the Union Saw Mill Company. This pattern did not change when we moved to Oakland. As a youngster, I well remember my father leaving one job in the afternoon, coming home for a while, then going to the other."[200] In addition to these jobs, Newton's father was a Baptist minister in Monroe and later in Oakland.

Newton's household was typical of those in Greater Louisiana. His family moved around for job opportunities largely influenced by industrial changes in the state. He was part of a large family, but because the children were younger when they migrated to Oakland, they moved as a unit rather than in different directions. Despite moving across the country, his father continued working with the Baptists, the largest black denomination in Louisiana. Most importantly, his family retained the historical memory of their southern experiences—both personal and political—by talking and laughing about them in their Oakland home. Even though he was only three years old when he moved to Oakland, Newton's Louisiana name preceded him as an origin story.

"My parents named me after Huey Pierce Long, the former Governor of Louisiana, assassinated seven years before I came along. Even though he could not vote, my father had a keen interest in politics and followed the campaigns carefully. Governor Long had impressed him by his ability to talk one philosophy while carrying out programs that moved Louisiana in exactly the opposite direction. My father says he was up front, 'looking right into his mouth,' when Huey P. Long made a speech about how Black men in the hospitals, 'out of their minds and half naked,' had to be cared for by white nurses. This was, of course, unacceptable to southern whites, and therefore a number of Black nurses were recruited to work in Louisiana hospitals. This was a major breakthrough in employment opportunities for Black professionals. Huey Long used this tactic to bring other beneficial programs to Blacks: free books in the schools, free commodities for the poor, public road- and bridge-construction projects that gave Blacks employment. While most whites were blinded by Long's outwardly racist philosophy, many Blacks found their lives significantly improved. My father believed that Huey P. Long had been a great man, and he wanted to name a son after him."[201]

"Huey P. Newton" was not just a name but a place and politics that his family arose from. Newton grew up in a household that knew the government could end employment discrimination even if they maintained some of the vestiges of racial caste. They knew the government could work with the black community to build infrastructure, like BART, and provide thousands of jobs to black workers. At one time Oakland had plenty of jobs available, but when the number of local jobs decreased owing in part to postwar demobilization and suburbanization, Oakland had one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. Into the 1960s, major industrial plants, like General Motors, moved out of urban cores and into neighboring white suburbs, effectively taking jobs out of black communities.[202]

Even though blacks could vote in California, a right they weren't afforded in Louisiana, California state and local governments protected white business interests, property, and jobs,

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[199] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2010)
[200] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1973, 2009), 10
[201] Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1973, 2009), 11-12
[202] Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003)

while simultaneously acquiring black-owned land through eminent domain and emboldening job discrimination. By 1970 black unemployment in the West was twice the national average while black unemployment rates in the South were below the national average. Blacks in the South tended to work in part-time and service positions, but blacks in the West also had limited job opportunities.[203] Huey P. Newton often criticized the city of Oakland's government for actively contributing to the development of the black ghetto, but his comments were made in the shadow of his family's experiences and expectations shaped by living in Louisiana.

HUEY and (left to right) his sister MYRTLE, his mother, Mrs. ARMELIA NEWTON, attorney LUKE ELLIS, Huey's wife GWEN and his brother WALTER were all smiles after all charges in the Kathleen Smith case were dropped against the Black Panther Party leader.

Source: Bill Jennings via Facebook

The Possibilities of Socialism

In 1967, about a year after the Black Panther Party was founded, Huey Newton published a series of essays in their newspaper explaining his political philosophy. He believed that because black people were forced to build the United States as slaves, they may be forced to tear it down in their quest for liberation. When he reflected on the uprisings, mainly in Harlem (1964), Watts (1965), and Hunters Point (1966), he said they were protopolitical acts yet to

[203] Paul M. Schwab, "Unemployment by region and in 10 largest States," *Monthly Labor Review*, vol. 93, no. 1 (January 1970): 3-12

develop into organized warfare and he was much more critical than celebratory of them. However, the Watts Uprising, although less organized than Newton would have desired, did tear down parts of the southeastern section of Los Angeles and was followed up with several organized campaigns to rebuild it by and for black people. But the Hunters Point Uprising and a series of small revolts in Oakland did not have the same impact. In one of his essays Newton noted, "Divided, confused, fighting among ourselves, we are still in the elementary stage of throwing rocks, sticks, empty wine bottles and beer cans at racist police who lie in wait for a chance to murder unarmed Black people. The racist police have worked out a system for suppressing these spontaneous rebellions that flare up from the anger, frustration, and desperation of the masses of Black people. We can no longer afford the dubious luxury of the terrible casualties wantonly inflicted upon us by the police during these rebellions."[204]

Newton's critique was pointed towards the smaller scale reactions to police brutality that did little to boost black political and economic power. If he was to write specifically about the Hunters Point Uprising, he would imply that the people who vandalized businesses are the people who needed to organize into armed militias. The Peace Patrol was commendable but had virtually no power as police bombarded the community center where they were founded. After the governor proclaimed the state would "meet force with force" he declared war on black communities, and to Newton, there were no other options but to build an organized army to defend themselves.

When Newton said the black community needed to organize themselves, he meant it in a very particular way. While many used the Watts Uprising to squeeze into political positions and funnel federal and state dollars into local infrastructure, Newton offered an alternative. For one, organizing meant the people would provide for themselves because the government, or the "oppressor," had already proved it would not act to free the black masses from poverty. He argued "the oppressor has no rights that the oppressed is bound to respect" and firmly believed that they had to "pick up the gun" to fight the war against the occupying force, which was the police.[205] Armed self-defense made more than enough sense in an area where the police had just fired hundreds of rounds into a community center with two hundred children inside, but it was not a new idea to black America.

Blacks in Monroe, Louisiana were known for using guns to put white people in their place and white elites offered them some protection because they were trying to paint Monroe as a progressive city. The Deacons for Defense organized in 1964 in Jonesboro, Louisiana, not too far from Monroe. They were a group of black men who believed in armed self-defense and were known for their skirmishes with the Ku Klux Klan and protecting non-violent protesters.[206] They developed out of a black politics of armed self-defense that existed in northern Louisiana for generations. As discussed in chapter three, there are many stories of blacks killing whites in self-defense, especially around Shreveport, and then fleeing to California. This is why Newton proclaimed that black leaders who promoted nonviolent marches and political positions without real power "have never had the support and following of the downtrodden Black masses who comprise the bulk of the community."[207] To Newton, not only was the urban proletariat

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[204] Huey P. Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense I," June 20, 1967
[205] Huey P. Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense I," June 20, 1967
[206] Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004)
[207] Huey P. Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense II," July 3, 1967

disenchanted with the minimal gains of the Civil Rights Movement, but the rural poor, like his own family, were also disappointed.[208]

For Newton, the purpose of government was to fulfill basic needs like food, shelter, clothing, and security, but all he witnessed were millions of dollars spent on antipoverty programs that did not provide those basic amenities. He argued that "Black leaders endorsed by the power structure have attempted to sell the people the simpleminded theory that politics is holding a political office; being able to move into a $40,000 home; being able to sit near White people in a restaurant (while in fact the Black masses have not been able to pay the rent on a $40.00 rat-infested hovel)."[209]

Early in his career, Newton broke away from the politics of government intervention because he did not believe that a government, broadly defined, that enslaved and exploited black people, created laws that forced them into poverty, and sent police to occupy their colonies, particularly its domestic black colony, would ever provide the basic needs and promote economic mobility for those in its colonies. Even though his father praised Governor Long of Louisiana, Newton imagined a greater and anti-capitalist role for government than just intervention. He wrote, "Each person has a right to live and to provide for himself, by means of employment, and to share in the wealth that he helped to produce. And if man cannot physically work, it is the state's responsibility to formulate a program for providing man with a high standard of living, regardless of his socio-economic standing or skill level."[210]

For Newton, the only way the people could benefit from government would be in a socialist state that eradicated poverty. He imagined a future where government served the universal basic needs of all people, such as income and healthcare. In this view, the black community could in turn work within itself to create economic pathways. The government's role, therefore, was to raise the standard of living so that the people, who would be fully employed, could build a prosperous nation together.

Newton may have had a much larger impact on black political thought had he not been terrorized by the federal government. The FBI and local police departments played a central role in eliminating the political Left, forcing black activists to be more conservative, and dismantling the Black Panther Party through their counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO. They were responsible for planting informants in the Black Panther Party, turning comrades against one another, fabricating stories of criminality, infiltrating black communities with drugs, and forcing political prisoners into solitary confinement for ridiculous time periods, among many other things.[211]

Newton's philosophy, which would have created a black nation within the United States, with its own diplomats, treasury, and army, may have gained more traction if it had the opportunity to. The FBI's counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO, pushed the Black Panther Party further center politically by incarcerating and killing leadership. While the Black Panther Party still critiqued government, state violence, and capitalism, they sought government grants for their survival programs, most notably the Oakland Community School, under the leadership of Elaine Brown. While Huey Newton was away in Cuba, Elaine Brown dramatically

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[208] Black politics in Louisiana are discussed in further detail in chapters 2 and 3

[209] Huey P. Newton, "In Defense of Self-Defense II," July 3, 1967

[210] Huey P. Newton, "I Cannot Be Intimidated," in Judson L. Jeffries, *Huey P. Newton: The Radical Theorist* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 48

[211] Huey P. Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (New York, NY: Harlem River Press, 1996)

increased the black electorate in Oakland and brokered deals with political heavyweights like Governor Jerry Brown to redevelop city center in downtown Oakland and provide jobs to the black community.[212] When Newton returned, Brown and her political capital left after a disagreement over whether the Black Panther Party was modeling a socialist government and sustaining the revolution. Although Brown's vision for government partnerships brought jobs to Oakland, it didn't disrupt the power structure. Yet, her ideas were more popular among black communities because they brought tangible change in a short amount of time. Instead of creating a new nation, the most lasting economic ideas from the Black Power Era were community control over local government-contracted projects and continued government intervention to bolster black businesses and end employment discrimination.

These were virtually the same ideas produced in the South in the 1930s and 1940s and retailored in migrant black communities in places like Los Angeles and Oakland in the 1950s and 1960s. Black socialists were compromised by the federal government and instead of trying to overthrow it, the black community looked to government to finance black-controlled institution building. In the face of state violence, many black people changed the meaning of revolution from overthrowing government to controlling the local application of it by taking leadership positions within it and transforming it into a more socialist state that could protect and bolster black economic development.

Black Capitalism in Watts

Blacks in Oakland, like those across the country, were interpreting the Watts Uprising and trying to figure out what it meant for their neighborhoods, while black leaders in Watts immediately mobilized government resources and started to construct a new black society—one that didn't require people to adopt a new theoretical framework. One of the most important figures in Los Angeles was Ted Watkins who founded the Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC) just months before the Watts Uprising.

Watkins was born in 1923 in Meridian, Mississippi, a town near the Alabama border, and the only locale outside of Greater Louisiana discussed thus far. When he was a young man, he got into an altercation with a white Western Union mail carrier and broke one of his ribs. Rumors circulated within the local community that the white Western Union workers were planning to lynch Watkins the following day. Under his family's recommendation, he fled to New Orleans and then Los Angeles by train and started a new life. When Watkins arrived in Los Angeles, he landed a job at the Ford Motor Company and quickly gained standing in the United Automobile Workers union (UAW), eventually becoming their sole Watts representative. He was an organizer at heart, first with the union and then with Watts public housing tenants.[213] Watkins brought his own style, know-how, and experiences with him from Meridian, but he was also living in a community dominated by migrants from Greater Louisiana. He clearly found a lot in common with other migrants, especially as someone who fled the South and worked in the automobile industry. Whether or not he was accustomed to their political culture, he grew up in it as a young man in California and quickly became one of the lead organizers in Los Angeles. He was a people person and was good at getting everyone, young and old, involved in his projects.

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[212] Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 383-386

[213] Mary Brown, "A Practical Man Documentary," *Ford Foundation*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDmYEVxb4wI

The WLCAC was formed a year after President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act, which initiated the War on Poverty and set aside federal funds for local projects aimed at job creation and ending poverty. Ted Watkins saw the War on Poverty as an opportunity to funnel federal dollars into black community-controlled endeavors in Watts and became responsible for virtually every government-sponsored project in the Watts-Willowbrook area.[214] He imagined a self-reliant community, initially financed by the federal government, that owned and cultivated property in Watts and Willowbrook. These types of programs had been executed by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s when they financed farming cooperatives in the Deep South for the purpose of creating self-reliant and land-owning communities. As discussed in chapter two, when the federal government helped black farmers purchase land, provided necessary equipment, and financed it until it was sustainable, they effectively helped to create a resilient and independent black community with economic power that reverberated across east Texas and northern Louisiana. Their success resonated with black communities across the South and folded into the black political imagination. Watkins sought to create a similar program, but with greater community control and in an urban area.

First, he obtained a $2 million loan from the UAW to purchase vacant lots in Watts that were razed during the uprising. WLCAC used the loan to build a poultry ranch, a senior citizens park, a credit union, a consumer action program, and recreational parks—all developed and tended to by youth and unemployed adults in Watts. They leased the land underneath the powerlines for one dollar a year to turn it into farmland and they took free water from the fire hydrants to nourish the crops. The "growing grounds" produced collard greens and other produce so the community would have fresh food. They planted trees across Watts and Willowbrook to clean pollutants from the air.[215] Watkins wasn't asking the government for money because he already had financial support from the unions, but instead he asked the Los Angeles (city) Community Redevelopment Agency for land they were unwilling to improve and that he wanted to cultivate for the community.

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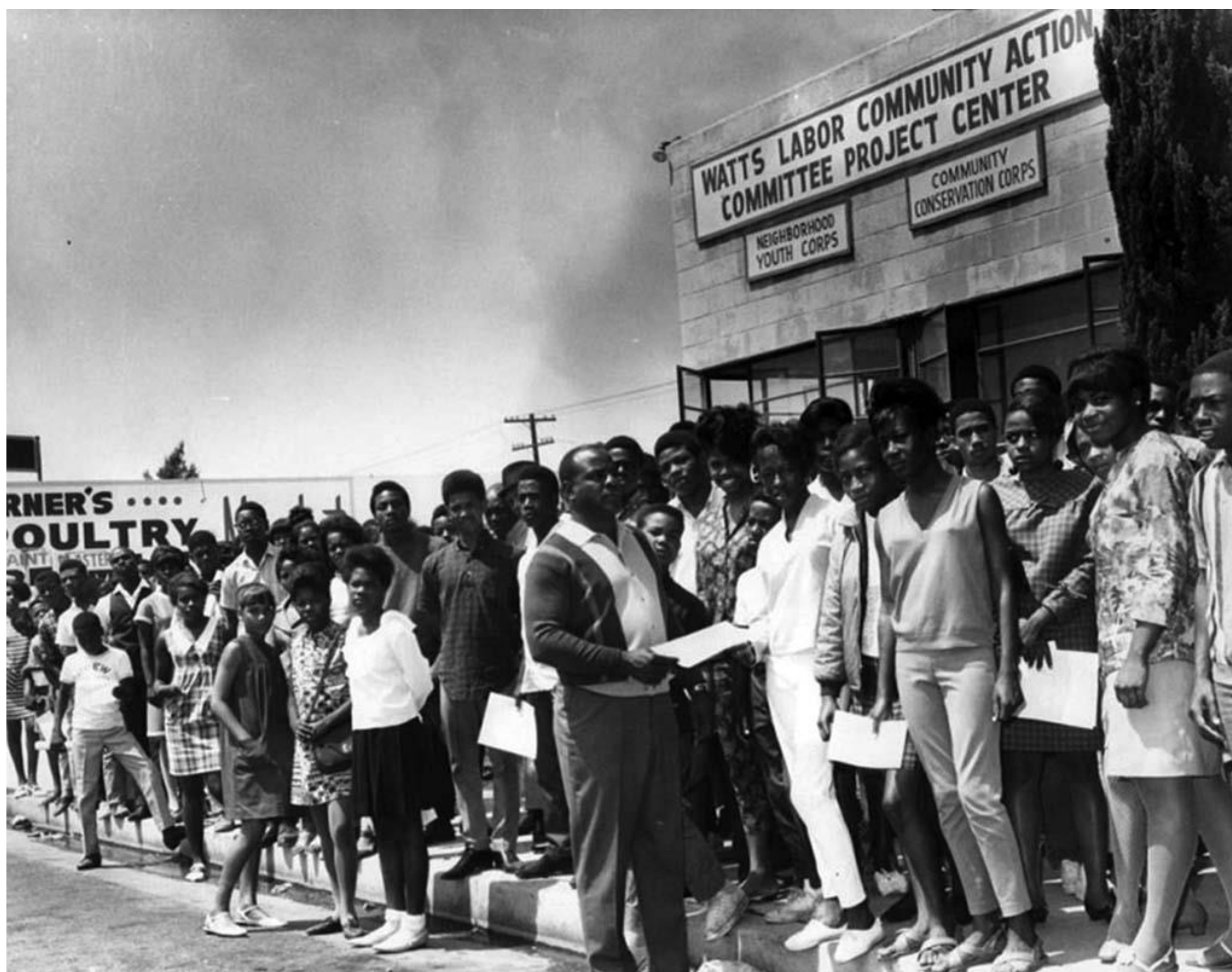
[214] Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty: From Watts to East L.A*. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008)

[215] Mary Brown, "A Practical Man Documentary," *Ford Foundation*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDmYEVxb4wI



Ted Watkins (foreground) and applicants, Watts Labor Community Action Committee Project Center, South Central Los Angeles, 1967[216]

Once there was a strong economic engine in Watts, the WLCAC under Watkins' leadership started to build much needed housing. He tapped into government-sponsored airport and freeway expansion projects that were displacing many Angelinos through eminent domain. Even though environmental, black, and Latino activists protested freeway expansion through their neighborhoods, Watkins used it as an opportunity to obtain houses the city was already planning to remove. In the middle of the night, he transported those donated houses, obtained through eminent domain, onto vacant lots in Watts. Residents leased-to-own three-to-five-bedroom homes and after twenty years, paid only one dollar for the deed. Because the homes needed new foundations when they were transported, the WLCAC developed a construction job training program that their community could learn from and would help them build quality housing.[217]

Watkins believed in government intervention, but every project had to be controlled by the black community. By the early 1970s, the WLCAC owned a major chain of grocery stores in

[216] Los Angeles Public Library Digital Collections (00036548)
[217] Mary Brown, "A Practical Man Documentary," *Ford Foundation*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDmYEVxb4wI

South Central and continued building black businesses.[218] Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty, who by the 1960s had grown anti-communist, anti-civil rights legislation, and anti-busing, believed that he would be "rewarding the rioters" if he funded the WLCAC, but he also feared more destruction in his city.[219] Watkins showed Mayor Yorty what could be done in Watts and how the community would go about it and used that momentum to galvanize white-elected officials like Mayor Yorty to continue pouring money into the area.

In the aftermath of the Watts Uprising, the black community partnered with federal, state and county governments to develop housing, education, and healthcare institutions. The first development in Watts was led by a group of black physicians who fundraised money and worked with the county to bring medical services to Watts-Willowbrook. The Charles Drew Medical Society brokered a deal between county, state, and federal officials to construct Charles Drew Postgraduate Medical School and Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital. The county had already designated the dilapidated Palm Lane Housing Projects in Willowbrook to be torn down, so the Charles Drew Medical Society targeted that property for their medical institutions.

The state planned to construct a freeway through the Palm Lane Projects that would separate Willowbrook from Compton and harden racial barriers, but the WLCAC and its community partners worked with their state senator and assemblyman to reroute the freeway through the center of Lynwood and into Norwalk, two white suburbs.[220] Before this, freeways were typically carefully constructed around white neighborhoods and through black ones, tearing black communities apart through eminent domain. When the Charles Drew Medical Society chose the Palm Lane Projects as their construction site, they worked in collaboration with the WLCAC as well as state and county governments to develop quality healthcare institutions on county-controlled land in Willowbrook.

When the McCone Commission argued that poor healthcare was a significant cause of the Watts Uprising, County Supervisor Kenneth Hahn used this research to convince the Board of Supervisors to approve the establishment of a new county hospital. Supervisor Hahn became a friend of the black community because he invested in infrastructure in black neighborhoods and was the only politician to greet Dr. Matin Luther King, Jr. when he visited Los Angeles in 1961.[221] The Charles Drew Medical Society galvanized white constituents through local newspapers to vote in favor of a proposition that would provide $12.3 million in state funding for these projects. Then, they secured another $21.4 million from the federal government.[222] Although the medical society boasted over two hundred members, many of the physicians needed access to better facilities in black communities. In addition, they wanted to attract medical talent into the area to better meet the medical needs of the community. They partnered with USC and UCLA's medical schools to expand the quality of training at Charles Drew Postgraduate Medical School.[223] They worked collaboratively with every level of government as well as universities to create a new healthcare system in the Watts-Willowbrook area, one where

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[218] "L.A. Black Leadership Conference – Ted Watkins, Watts Labor Action Committee," June 25-27, 1971, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, Stanford University Libraries

[219] Jennifer Auther, "Sam Yorty Dead at 88," *CNN*, June 5, 1998

[220] "L.A. Black Leadership Conference – Ted Watkins, Watts Labor Action Committee," June 25-27, 1971, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, Stanford University Libraries

[221] Richard Simon, "The Politician's Politician: Supervisor: Kenneth Hahn was the master at getting potholes fixed and not missing a photo opportunity. He is retiring after 40 years in office, leaving a legacy of achievement," *Los Angeles Times,* December 6, 1992

[222] Tony Cimarusti, "Reasons hospital is needed," *Daily News-Post*, May 19, 1966

[223] "Watts Hospital Termed 'A Must," *Whittier Star Review*, May 19, 1966

50% of construction workers were black and the institutions were led by black medical doctors. The WLCAC supervised the construction of Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital to make sure the workforce was integrated from every angle. At one point they hired a black man all the way from Oakland to be a crane operator because there were not any qualified blacks in southern California.[224] The Charles Drew Postgraduate Medical School was established in 1966. The Charles Drew Medical Society established the Watts Health Center in 1967. They started construction on Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital in 1968 and finished in 1972.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Hospital, 1972[225]

Once again, blacks successfully brought county resources to unincorporated Willowbrook. It was easier to work with the County Board of Supervisors, an entity with little checks and balances, than with Mayor Sam Yorty's conservative city council. Even though the hospital served all of South Central Los Angeles, it was built at the southern tip of the black community, in Willowbrook, rather than in a central location because the county had complete control over unincorporated areas. Although white constituents had problems mobilizing resources for Willowbrook in the past, blacks found it easier to work with the county than with the city. Plus, the state soon followed an even more conservative path than Mayor Yorty's city of Los Angeles.

In 1966, Ronald Regan, a conservative and fading Hollywood actor and former FBI informant, announced his bid for governor of California. Most of his speech was dedicated to

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[224] "L.A. Black Leadership Conference – Ted Watkins, Watts Labor Action Committee," June 25-27, 1971, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, Stanford University Libraries

[225] "Martin Luther King, Jr. General Hospital, Willowbrook," Paul Revere Williams Project, accessed April 22, 2021, https://www.paulrwilliamsproject.org/gallery/1970s-hospitals/

iterating standard Republican ideals—small government, job programs, limited welfare, and reducing the budget deficit—but he also noted his disapproval of the Watts Uprising that occurred just months before his speech. He referred to California's urban cities as "jungle paths after dark," a derogatory remark that compared blacks to wild animals, and argued that we should "untie the hands of our local law enforcement officers."[226] After he was elected governor in 1967, he unleashed a flurry of state violence against leftist protesters in Berkeley, making a bold statement on how he would handle any urban unrest.[227] Former Governor Pat Brown had sent state troopers to qualm black revolts like the Hunters Point Uprising, but Governor Reagan was willing to shed white blood to maintain law and order. The state government became increasingly difficult to work with through the late 1960s and early 1970s so black leaders in Los Angeles tended to partner more with the county than anyone else. Hence, even though Watts was the epicenter of the uprising, most government-sponsored institutions were built in unincorporated Willowbrook.

Ronald Reagan served as governor of California from 1967 – 1975, the period when most institutions were built in the Watts-Willowbrook area. However, all these projects were initiated prior to him becoming governor, and rather than promote his anti-welfare policies by funding job programs in the black community, he held back state funds. Very few institutions in Watts-Willowbrook were funded by the state or federal government beyond their initial investment. On the federal side, conservative President Richard Nixon, who served from 1969 – 1974, cut funding to subsidized housing, particularly one that was built in Willowbrook.

Ujima Village was a 300 unit mixed-income housing complex built by two black architectural firms, Kinsey, Meeds and Williams and John D. Williams and Associates, and finished in 1972.[228] In contrast to public housing where everyone was lower income, some residents paid market rate and others were subsidized by the government. It was surrounded by large grassy fields, two lakes and, within the complex, a community center and vegetable garden. The mortgage was underwritten by HUD, but it was designed by, developed, and housed blacks. Its name, Ujima Village, meant collective work and responsibility in Swahili and signaled that black people, collectively, were creating the new Watts.[229] But before President Nixon left office, he cut funding to the complex and crippled it for years to come, as part of a series of budget cuts to public housing across the nation. Between Governor Reagan and President Richard Nixon, two elected officials who believed in "law and order" and punishing "rioters," black institutions were undermined left and right. In a period marked by optimism over black community control, many institutions were destabilized as soon as they were erected.

In response to organizations like the Black Panther Party that advocated fundamental political change, President Richard Nixon advocated a conservative, government version of "black capitalism": basically government-sponsored small business and mentorship programs. Nixon sought to "contain" and beat back black socialist movements in the same ways he contained communism in southeast Asia. He kept just enough troops in Vietnam to prevent communist China from influencing their political orientation and he tried to give black America

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[226] Ronald Reagan, "Announcement on Candidacy for California Governor," January 4, 1966

[227] Bill Van Niekerken, "People's Park Bloody Thursday: 50 years later, unearthing never-before-seen photos," *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 15, 2019

[228] Approve a Partial Settlement Agreement with HUD for Sue of Ujima Village Replacement Reserves and Award a Contract to National Demolition Contractors for Demolition of Ujima Village, Housing Authority of the County of Los Angeles, June 19, 2012

[229] Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "Ujima Village, a onetime urban oasis, closes down," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 2009

just enough access to capitalism to prevent them from burning down cities and siding with revolutionaries.[230]

Nixon's black capitalist programs didn't make substantial change in black communities. Furthermore, his black capitalist rhetoric proved divisive. There was plenty of synergy between those seeking economic and/or political independence, but black capitalism often polarized advocates of these ideologies. At the Black Leadership Conference in Los Angeles in 1971, Ted Watkins commented on the issue. He said, "Black capitalism to me is not even a word to be used by blacks because it's a phony word, the word will never have any meaning in this country, as far as I can see, because capitalism means to me the ownership of resources, the manufacture of those resources, and then the control of the markets of those resources and that to me means capitalism."[231]

While Watkins sounded a lot like Huey Newton, in this regard, he differed from him by arguing for private enterprise: the notion that private citizens, rather than government, should own and control the businesses in their community. Watkins was fundamentally pro-capitalist; Newton fundamentally pro-socialist. Newton argued that government needed to transform into a socialist state to provide essential needs, meaning the government would own and control the economic sector, and in turn, create a high standard of living for its citizens. Watkins believed that the government should provide money and/or land and protect labor rights so that private businesses could profit from developing their neighborhoods. Then, black business owners could work together to pay their employees adequate wages equal to or better than those whites were receiving at larger companies.

Watkins was a capitalist, but he did not subscribe to Nixon's Black Capitalism. Rather, he favored economic cooperation supported by the government, which was more common in the South. What was different in 1960s California was the importance of community control over resources once they were delivered by the government.

Black leaders in Los Angeles favored partnering with government to bring resources to their neighborhoods but found out the hard way that governmental support fluctuates and adversaries all too often worked to weaken, in effect, destroy, many of their institutions. Leaders like Huey Newton argued that these governments weren't worth partnering with unless blacks had control over the political, and in turn, economic decisions made by and for their communities.

This dichotomy was similar to the lessons learned in Louisiana. Governments could exacerbate inequality and exhibit state violence, as in the case of the Great Flood of 1927. At the same time governments could drastically change the outlook of economic mobility in poor communities, as in the cases of the farming collectives. But Newton's socialist strategy lacked pragmatism because he was working with communities that had very little capital. Even though black institutions in Watts-Willowbrook were undermined, they would have never existed without millions of investment dollars from some kind of source. Blacks there were pulling from federal, state, and municipal governments, unions, churches, philanthropies, universities, and more to build the bare necessities in their communities.

Prior to accepting government funds, the Black Panther Party turned inwards to build new institutions. They developed dozens of "survival programs" to serve the needs of their

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[230] Robert E. Weems, Jr. and Lewis A. Randolph, "The National Response to Richard M. Nixon's Black Capitalism Initiative: The Success of Domestic Détente," *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 32, no.1 (September 2001): 66-83
[231] "L.A. Black Leadership Conference – Ted Watkins, Watts Labor Action Committee," June 25-27, 1971, Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation Records, Stanford University Libraries

community and were wildly successful as long as their organization and its members could resist FBI terror, a feat that was nearly impossible. Some of the brick-and-mortar institutions they built were the Intercommunal Youth Institute, Community Learning Center, Son of Man Temple, People's Free Medical Research Health Clinics, Sickle-Cell Anemia Research Foundation, and Child Development Center.[232] The Black Panther Party was fundamentally collaborative, but they were very particular about who they worked with. They were able to maintain more control over their institutions but unable to mobilize as much money as in Watts-Willowbrook. They started out with community donations, and then under the leadership of Elaine Brown, applied for grants from nonprofits and philanthropies, many of whom were funded by government, and then eventually sought government grants. The Community Learning Center, which housed the Intercommunal Youth Institute and Son of Man Temple, was sponsored by a local nonprofit. They partnered with private and public hospitals to bolster medical supplies and the number of doctors working in their medical clinics and at the Sickle Cell Foundation. However, these institutions, as well as the Child Development Center, still relied on community donations to keep them running. Led by Ericka Huggins and Donna Howell, the Oakland Community School received several non-profit grants and federal funding for "tobacco use and firearms prevention" in the late 1970s. Even the Black Panther Party, advocates of democratic socialism, leaned into government cooperation into the 1970s to create institutions that could outlast their organization. Black institution building in the 1960s and 1970s was a catch-22 where either you embraced a government in political flux that felt a need to briefly respond to the urgency the Watts Uprising initiated or you built your own colony in search of true independence, but without the means to protect yourself from state repression and without enough money to sustain what was built.

POP! The Sound of Greater Louisiana

In Oakland, the Black Panther Party built their own school in response to the poor education provided by the public-school system, but Angelinos partnered with the school district, county, and state to found both a high school and university that catered to them. Later they would partner with large philanthropies to continue funding their educational programs. The two largest educational partnerships between the state and the people of Watts-Willowbrook were initiated prior to Governor Reagan taking office. California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) was originally going to be established in the more affluent and white Ranchos Palos Verdes, but after the Watts Uprising was moved to Carson, a developing suburb just south of Willowbrook. Moving the university was an unknowingly joint effort between white conservatives and black education proponents. White conservatives believed that black neighborhoods needed better quality schools to alleviate black unemployment, welfare, and crime. Universally black people advocated for better schools. Many wanted the government to play a financial role in black communities becoming more self-reliant. Although many blacks attended USC, UCLA, Los Angeles Technical College, and Compton College, black leaders saw CSUDH as an opportunity to shape a higher education institution from the ground up rather than merely integrating existing ones.[233]

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[232] David Hilliard, *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008)

[233] There were never formal policies excluding blacks from California universities, but many blacks reported discriminatory experiences when attending white schools.

Another move to better education was founding Alain Leroy Locke High School, named after the father of the Harlem Renaissance.[234] The only high schools in Watts-Willowbrook prior to the 1960s were Jordan High School in Watts and Centennial High School in Compton. In 1963, the Catholic archdiocese responded to the need for better education by founding the private and all-male Verbum Dei High School in Watts. They offered the lowest tuition of any Catholic high school in Los Angeles and appointed Father Joseph Frances, the first black principal of a Catholic school in the nation.[235] Although black principals were common in the pre-integrated South, appointing a black principal in California was unconventional because most whites believed blacks could not head the schools they integrated and relegated blacks to teaching and staff positions throughout the 1960s. Even Locke High School, where students loudly proclaimed their blackness, had a white principal until 1973.[236] Shortly after Verbum Dei was started, the state approved $5 million to found Alain Leroy Locke High School in Watts in response to overcrowded schools in South Central.[237] The state was noticeably behind in funding education in black neighborhoods, and CSUDH and Locke High School were their first attempts at rectifying their previous errors. Later in 1974, the A.C. Bilbrew Library in Willowbrook was founded and named after a black woman who hosted Los Angeles' first radio music program in the early 1940s. This was the only institution founded under Reagan and Nixon. It was spearheaded by Supervisor Kenneth Hahn and funded by the county.

Students at Locke High School were embracing the cultural symbols of black power such as afros, African language, and clothing style, but some still held onto mainstream norms. Some of the boys still had short fades and the girls had straight pressed hair, but many students had fully picked afros, too large to wear their graduation caps. In 1970 all the homecoming queen contestants' hair was pressed, but in 1971, three out of five had afros. The men who won most athletic and best dressed sported leather coats like the Black Panther Party, but one guy won both best personality and most popular and he wore a classic 1960s suit with a thin tie and wide lapel. Instead of writing their 1970 yearbook theme in English they wrote "Usiku Za Watoto," Swahili for "children's nights" and they sprinkled the word "Umoja," meaning "to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race," throughout the book.[238] Even as students began to embrace African cultural symbols and natural hair into the 1970s, the greatest black expression was the school's marching band.

Donald Dustin, a white jazz junior high school teacher out of USC, and Frank Harris, a Shreveport native and marching band graduate from Southern University, were hired to lead Locke High School's music program. They had a lot of success recruiting talent from the junior high schools in South Central and performed in several jazz festivals. By 1969, Frank Harris solely led the Locke High School marching band and shaped them into one of the best in the nation by modeling their music and dance style after Southern University's marching band as well as New Orleans' second line bands.

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[234] "The State," *The Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1967

[235] "Verbum Dei's Story – It's Place in History," Verbum Dei High School, accessed March 16, 2021, https://www.verbumdei.us/about-us-home/who-is-vdhs/our-history

[236] Alain Leroy Locke High School Yearbook, 1973, www.ancestry.com

[237] Alain Leroy Locke High School was allocated $5M by the state in 1963, but completed in 1967 for $6M.

[238] Alain Leroy Locke High School Yearbook, 1970, 1971, www.ancestry.com

Alain Leroy Locke High School Saints Marching Band[239]

Harris said, "It definitely had a New Orleans flavor to it…I didn't want just a military march…so when we opened up we'd march in twos on the whole field, and then we'd go into the real fine fast steps…We marched up to 152 steps-per-minute then we'd stop – POP! – then we'd go into our dance routines."[240] The southern Louisiana jazz influence on military style marching band at Locke High School was not only popular, but influenced an entire generation of black R&B and jazz artists, like Patrice Rushen, Gerald Albright, Fred Berry, and Ndugu Chancler, that participated in their music program. Locke High School's marching band went on to win several competitions and was crowned the best in Los Angeles. As conservatives cut funding to black institutions, Locke High School was granted money by the Rockefeller Foundation to continue their programs. They became one of the nation's best music programs because they attracted philanthropic funding sources.

Black Baptists, Methodists, and Freemasons in Louisiana relied heavily on community donations to acquire and develop land and raise millions of dollars. However, they multiplied their assets by tapping into philanthropies willing to match their collected donations.[241] In Los Angeles, Ted Watkins worked with every level of government, but was still weary of its limitations. This is why Watkins leaned on the unions he built relationships with to sponsor WLCAC programs or why Locke High School worked with the Rockefeller Foundation to sustain their best programs. This is also why the Black Panther Party worked with nonprofits to sponsor some of their survival programs. From Los Angeles to the Bay Area, blacks partnered

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[239] Courtesy of Nina L. Brown, seen on Matthew Duersten, "Locke High: The Inner City Music Program that Wowed the Nation," *KCET*, September 28, 2017

[240] Matthew Duersten, interviews with Aman Kufahamu, Reggie Andrews, Frank Harris, Kitty Dustin, discussed in Matthew Duersten, "Locke High: The Inner City Music Program that Wowed the Nation," *KCET*, September 28, 2017

[241] Discussed in chapter 3

with every level of government, higher education institutions, nonprofits, philanthropies, and many more to build community-controlled neighborhoods.

Applying Black Power Practices

Police brutality instigated the Watts and Hunters Point Uprisings as well as the organization of the Black Panther Party. Yet even with so many black strivings from peaceful demonstrations, to rebellions, to armed cop watches, no one ended police brutality, one of the most prominent features of white supremacy, one that continues to haunt black communities to this day. Southern migrants and their descendants radically changed the political economy of California and built institutions to prove it, but they were never liberated from the occupying force. Today the national conversation on police brutality is prevalent due to the popularity and ease of using social media technology. But, unfortunately, as the saying goes: "the more things change, the more they remain the same."

When Sandra Bland left Chicago to start a temporary job at Prairie View A&M University near Houston, she was stopped by police, arrested, and murdered in jail. The nation couldn't help but make comparisons to Chicago's Emmitt Till who was killed in Mississippi and ponder why is the South still so backwards? But within days of each other in 2016, two black men were shot at point blank by police and video footage spread to every television and phone around the country. The murder of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge and Philando Castile in Minneapolis changed the question from why is the South still so backwards to why is *America* purposely killing black people? This murder exercise was replicated in 2020 when a Minneapolis police officer drove his knee into George Floyd's neck and stole his final breaths from his body. That same summer, police officers in Louisville raided Breonna Taylor's home by mistake and killed her in her own house. The nation had a refresher on the horrible reality of police brutality in the Northeast, Midwest, West, and South. Regardless of where families moved during the Great Migration, police murder black people in every corner of the country. There is no place to escape.

At the start of the 1970s, blacks began migrating back to the South and it has continued to intensify into the twenty-first century. As discussed in chapter 3, violence by itself hasn't shaped black migration patterns. To a greater degree, kinship networks and economies have. Black people are moving back through Great Migration pathways still seeking liberation. Black Californians aren't just moving to the South, but particularly across historical pathways returning to places like Texas and Louisiana.[242] At the dawn of the 1970s, many Black Panthers traveled between California, Texas, and Louisiana to exchange ideas and start new chapters or affiliate organizations in the South. Steve Green of Compton and Malik Rahim of New Orleans were two significant leaders in the organizing of the New Orleans chapter. Green was a Compton Panther but returned to his birthplace of Louisiana specifically to do this work. He teamed up with Rahim and other black activists to launch their headquarters in the Desire Public Housing Projects where they focused on delivering survival program services and protecting the community from the police with armed self-defense.[243]

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[242] "African American Migration Patterns: Based on Top Ranked States of Birth," Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series, accessed April 19, 2021, https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/culture/migration-map

[243] Paul Delaney, "Blacks in New Orleans Say They Are Sheltering Panther Leader Wounded in Police Raid," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1970; Derrick W.A. Martin, "From the Desire to Mark Essex: The Catalysts of Militarization For the New Orleans Police Department," *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations* (2016)

After helping found the New Orleans chapter in 1970, Rahim spent time in Los Angeles and San Francisco, where he worked on prisoner rights and affordable housing issues. In the late 1990s he returned to New Orleans to build organizations that continued the legacy of the survival programs and called for the release of political prisoners.[244] Black Panthers left California to organize chapters or affiliates in Dallas, Houston, New Orleans, and Atlanta from 1970-1972, when return migration to the South began picking up momentum.[245] But it wasn't just an organizational mission—people were going back home to the places they or their parents were from to finish the work they started when they left the South. While many Black Panthers returned for political reasons, most people who traveled back south along these pathways had economic reasons to do so. Older populations have returned to their places of birth in more rural parts of the South, but younger populations have headed for metropolitan cities like Dallas and Houston.[246]

As blacks continue to move across the U.S., the black liberation struggle has taken new forms, most evident in the movement to eradicate police brutality. At one time, leaving for California was often an act of self-defense in a series of actions leading up to armed confrontation and urban uprisings. But since the Great Migration began, there is a growing sentiment that there is nowhere else to go and there are very few options for achieving liberation through geographic shifts. Many black communities continue to partner with governments and other mainstream institutions to bring resources into their neighborhoods. In some cities, especially Oakland and Los Angeles, survival program-inspired initiatives are carried out by nonprofits. Others have selected to emulate the one-dimensional image of armed Black Panthers by forming black paramilitary groups in southern states where open and carry is still legal.

It is important to have a cohesive understanding of how black politics and government have interacted over the past century. When blacks were violently coerced into Red Cross relief camps to build levees after the Great Flood of 1927, many came to understand how the federal government exacerbated inequality curated by state and local governments and powerful white landowners. But by the mid-1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long designed populist programs that overrode exclusionary local policy and created brighter economic futures for black people. Their policies weren't exempt from racism, but they were radically different than any previous elected official in their jurisdictions.

It was in this same decade that blacks continued to move from town to town, weaving their politics through urban and rural areas in the South. Even though government played a significant role in their lives, kinship networks and socio-political organizations, like the Freemasons and Eastern Stars, and churches like the Baptists and Methodist Episcopalians, were the building blocks of their political economy. For a mass of people who lacked personal wealth, these institutions became the vehicles for collective economic mobility.

As the cotton industry plummeted and petrochemical plants sprouted from the oil and defense industries, blacks moved away from plantations and into cities in southern Louisiana. Either serving in the military or in search of quality jobs, black families moved around Louisiana and east Texas and onwards to Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and the Bay Area. Some have said that black migration was catastrophic to the black family, but buttressed by the evidence, I argue

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[244] Oral History Interview with Malik Rahim, May 23, 2006, Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)

[245] VerSean Truell, "Coming Out of Exodus: Atlanta and the Black Panther Party 1970-1973," *Morgan State University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2016)

[246] Katherine J. Curtis, "U.S. Return Migration and the Decline in Southern Black Disadvantage, 1970-2000," *Social Science Quarterly*, vol. 99, no. 3 (September 2018): 1214-1232

that black families went out of their way to maintain their kinship networks, which were aptly prepared to exist across vast geographic distances. Both in the 1950s and 1960s, black migration from Greater Louisiana to California was particularly intense.

While some blacks found job opportunities in Louisiana because of the oil boom in the 1940s, a great number of blacks, mostly from northern Louisiana, were excluded from employment at petrochemical plants and violently dispossessed of their land. There were several stories captured in oral histories where blacks directly confronted and killed whites, but then fled for California to protect themselves and their families. Considering how legal institutions and whites worked in tandem to violently expel blacks from northern Louisiana, any black person who responded violently to protect their person, family, job, or property was acting in self-defense. Fleeing was the second act of self-defense in a series of actions that were continued in California, eventually percolating into the Watts Uprising and institution building in Los Angeles.

In the Jim Crow Deep South, blacks built their own institutions, advocated for equal government services and contracts, and consistently engaged in armed self-defense to beat back white terror. In California, all these strategies were employed simultaneously, but blacks accumulated more political power over their local government and were effectively able to bring resources to their neighborhoods. In Louisiana, blacks primarily focused on working with the federal and state governments because wealthy whites and corporations wielded a considerable amount of power over local conditions. But whites in California didn't have the same land monopoly as in southern states and blacks activated city and county resources to improve land in their communities. As they integrated suburbs like Compton, blacks defended their homes from white vigilantes with guns. They found that the police wouldn't provide any protection, even though they had the legal right to occupy property in white neighborhoods after the 1948 *Shelley v. Kramer* decision that ended racial covenants in housing. Blacks in the South often fled their homes after they harmed a white person. Many saw places like California as the end of the road. To reiterate: blacks often couldn't defend themselves from whites without repercussion, so they defended themselves collectively.

The Watts Uprising of 1965 was the third act of self-defense. Tired of being unprotected, brutalized, and killed by police and impatient with the speed of government resources flowing into their neighborhoods, black people destroyed parts of the southeastern section of Los Angeles, with $40 million in property damage. Burning Watts and its surrounding areas was a liberating activity for many, a significant number of whom had been dispossessed of their land in Louisiana.

Los Angeles had the highest black homeownership rate in the country by 1950, and for people coming out of Greater Louisiana, buying property was an act of liberation. Unfortunately, many blacks did not participate in those freedoms and were funneled into makeshift housing near downtown Los Angeles before being pushed into poorly funded public housing in Watts. Four public housing projects anchored Watts-Willowbrook, and they served as centers for black life that were antithetical to the liberation brought on through property ownership. Burning Watts was an act of self-defense against infrastructure that denied blacks land liberation as much as it was a response to police brutality and murders.

In the wake of the Watts Uprising, black leaders throughout the nation, especially in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, debated how blacks would build an alternative future. The fourth act of self-defense was to build a self-reliant community financially strong enough to fend off structural inequality. How they would do that depended on what they imagined the government's

role to be. Huey P. Newton of the Black Panther Party argued for a socialist government that provided the basic necessities for a high standard of living. Until that could happen, he advocated for an independent black colony that controlled its political and economic sphere and distributed resources funded by nonprofits and community donations. Newton did not believe the same government that created the ghetto could turn around and liberate the people.

In contrast, Ted Watkins of the Watts Labor Community Action Committee, partnered with every level of government, unions, and higher education institutions as long as the community controlled the project. He used money from several sources so long as it supported black home and business ownership controlled by the community. He acquired land from the county that was razed by the Watts Uprising, moved houses uprooted during airport and freeway expansion to Watts, and started a series of businesses in his community that employed youth and adults who were excluded from the job market. He performed this work under the tenure of outwardly racist elected officials at the city, state, and federal levels, but wasn't deterred by their unequal policies.

Newton promoted an anti-colonial framework in his quest for a socialist state, but Watkins advocated for a capitalism where the black community owned the businesses and their supply chain. He never said that the workers should own the means of production, but instead argued for corporate responsibility. He believed government could play a role in elevating black businesses, much like they did for white ones, to a place where they could pay their workers quality wages.

Black political thought as it developed in the Great Migration ecosystem created the foundation for black organizing strategies today. Generations later black people are tapping into their kinship networks and traveling though the same pathways that brought them out of the South. There is also still a national conversation on how black communities should work with government and to what level, particularly considering federal, state, and local governments colluded to dismantle black and leftist organizations. Additionally, these same governments helped create black ghettos. Today these same governments, though filled with different people and ideologies, are primarily responsible for subsidizing white developers to build in black and brown ghettos they created and displace working class residents.[247] These governments are shaping the political economies blacks can participate in and continue to offer support to alleviate poverty but not to structurally better black futures.

Unaffordability in California and the denial of liberties black migrants once sought here have directly contributed to black migration back to the South. However, the military strength of the federal government down to police departments has made it extremely unlikely that there will be armed revolution in the United States. When Michael Brown was killed by the police in Ferguson, Missouri and an uprising ensued in 2014, the police responded to protestors with military tanks and other military-grade artillery passed down from the War on Terror.[248] The world saw the dichotomy between policing black and white protest when white supremacists raided the U.S. capitol in 2021 and not a single shot was fired. There is still a war being waged on black people in the United States and as conflicting as it feels to work with governments, it is nearly impossible to defend ourselves from a powerful state looking to shed black blood.

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[247] Jessica Trounstine, *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018)

[248] Arthur Rizer and Joseph Hartman, "How the War on Terror has Militarized the Police," *The Atlantic*, November 7, 2011

I offer this study of black economic strivings and their interactions with government as a lesson for building contemporary movements. There is still an economic militancy in black communities suffering from gentrification, especially for the thousands of black people sleeping on California's streets as a result of it. As of 2020, one-third of Los Angeles' black population is experiencing homelessness.[249] Despite all the health and educational institutions built by leaders like Ted Watkins in the 1960s and 1970s, it is apparent that black communities are slipping away. In our current condition, what does self-defense look like? How can we find new ways of incorporating government into our everyday lives that doesn't simply placate our greater demands for independence? What role should philanthropies play and how much of a voice should we give them in our affairs? Black leaders have been asking these questions for generations and it is time for economic militancy to become a central component in our quest for radically different futures.

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[249] Report and Recommendations of the Ad Hoc Committee on Black People Experiencing Homelessness, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, December 2018

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