



# Race, Class, and Political Activism: Black, Chicana/o, and Japanese- American Leftists in Southern California, 1968–1978

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This paper explores the third-world left in Los Angeles, from 1968–1978. In it I examine the political ideology and foci of one organization for each of the major racial/ethnic groups of the time: African Americans (Black Panther Party), Chicanas/os (El Centro de Accion Social y Autonomo [CASA]), and Japanese Americans (East Wind). In addition to reclaiming this relatively unknown history, I seek to explain the differences in the various organizations by analyzing them within the context of differential racialization. I argue that the distinct nature of each organization is at least partly due to the particular racial position of each racial/ethnic group within the local racial order.

## Introduction

Among left activists, the challenge of balancing race and class in organizing efforts is a long-standing issue. While most progressive organizations seek to promote both antiracist and anticapitalist politics, the histories of these two movements in the US have often been estranged and contradictory. This is due to structural factors, including the ruling class's practice of using racial/ethnic differences to divide workers (Saxton 1971), as well as the fact that at times white workers have embraced racist ideas in order to distinguish themselves from workers of color (Ignatiev 1995). Indeed, if we consider the degree to which racial ideology and discourse permeate our social and economic structures, then the barriers to building a multiracial left should come as no surprise. Nonetheless, the need to address both racism and class oppression is essential to contemporary organizing efforts, especially given the growing complexity of our racial and class structures. New political strategies are needed in order to foster a truly democratic and inclusive movement that poses a real alternative to global corporatism.

Organizing around race and class is hardly new—but *how* to build explicitly antiracist organizations rooted in either class or anticapitalist politics is quite challenging, as it requires, first, that activists articulate how racism and class relations intersect to create a particular

social formation, and second, that this theory be implemented on the ground. Examining how past activists have addressed these issues could offer numerous insights. This paper examines one chapter of left history in order to illuminate how leftists of color articulated and acted upon the relationship between race and class. Specifically, I explore black, Chicano/a, and Japanese-American leftists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s. By presenting three different organizations—the Black Panther Party, El Centro de Accion Social Autonomo (CASA), and East Wind—I offer a comparative analysis of how different racial/ethnic groups have addressed these concerns.

In the process I make two arguments regarding race, class, and activism. First, I argue that class position is mediated by race to such a degree that it fundamentally shapes the character of one's oppression. Although race and class are distinct, our class experiences are always racialized and our racial experiences are always classed. Second, I demonstrate that different racial/ethnic groups experience racism in distinct kinds of ways, which lead to various forms of domination, subordination, and exploitation, as well as specific forms of resistance. Not only has the white left underappreciated the power of racism, but too often people of color are treated as a homogenous group, without sufficient attention to the diversity of racism and its many expressions. In short, I argue that any serious organizing strategy must acknowledge the highly specific and differential articulations of race and class.

In the first section of the paper, I discuss race, class, and left activism. Second, I introduce Los Angeles as it was circa 1970. Third, I present a brief sketch of each organization. I conclude with summary remarks and consider the significance of such histories.

## **Race, Class, and Left Activism**

There are numerous reasons why leftists struggle with how to articulate the relationship between race and class in their organizations, practice, and ideology. These tensions and uncertainties have contributed not only to at times problematic policy, but also to the highly uneven participation of people of color. Key to understanding race and class relations in the US is the fact that for the most part, people of color have historically been the most marginalized and exploited. This is not to deny the immiseration of whites, whether as slaves, indentured servants, or landless tenants. Rather, it is to assert that race has historically been used as an ideological tool to justify the subordination and denigration of people of color to the benefit of whites.

For leftists, several significant points stem from this fact. First, early on, leftists—communists in particular—understood the immoral nature of racism and sought to challenge it. Second, they also understood that people of color in many parts of the US constituted the most

marginalized—and hence, potentially revolutionary—parts of the working class. And finally, they were acutely aware that racism was used to separate white and nonwhite workers and thus prevent class solidarity. Leftists have sought to address these contradictions in a variety of ways, through both community and multiracial labor organizing (Kelley 1990). A good starting point to consider race and left activism is the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), which has had a troubled history in dealing with these issues. On the one hand, Party members have struggled over the role of “race” (or nationality), resulting in rich and lengthy debates, including the “Negro question” (Haywood 1978). In addition, the CPUSA has at times done an impressive job of supporting communities of color, as in the trials of the Scottsboro Boys and the Sleepy Lagoon murder case.<sup>1</sup> At other times, however, the CPUSA has turned its back on people of color, as in the Japanese-American internment—despite the fact that more than a few Japanese-Americans were Party members (Healey and Isserman 1993:86; Yoneda 1983:105).

Such contradictions underscore two key problems among the white left, both of which have contributed to leftists of color forming their own organizations. First, many whites have hesitated to put racism on an equal footing with class and have relegated it to a secondary status. For example, the CPUSA considered the antiracist and nationalist struggles of US racial minorities, as well as the larger anticolonial revolutions of the 1960s, as either “false consciousness” or reformist (Healey and Isserman 1993:208). Not surprisingly, many leftists of color disagreed. A second problem has been the racism of the white left itself. The white left has not been immune to the racism that pervades US society. In addition to the pain of discrimination, the reality was that many leftists of color desired to be in more diverse and comfortable settings. In short, the inability to grasp the significance of racial and national oppression, the general racism of left activists, and the desire of people of color to organize amongst themselves led to a proliferation of single-ethnic and multinational left formations outside the purview of the CPUSA.

Though there is a long history of organizing by leftists of color (García 1994; Kelley 1990; Yoneda 1983), the third-world left of the late 1960s and 1970s was perhaps its most consolidated expression. Inspired by anticolonial revolutions, the US third-world left was an outgrowth of the black, Chicana/o, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and Asian American power movements, all of which were antiracist and fairly nationalist. As these movements evolved, however, a small number of activists desired a more materialist politics. Given their political histories, these activists were unwilling to privilege race *or* class, and they developed ideologies that reflected how the two intersected to create unique historical experiences. The insistence on

addressing both race and class equally is a primary distinction between white and third-world left organizations.

### **Differential Racialization and Racial Orders**

I have thus far drawn a pronounced line between whites and people of color. There are, however, important distinctions *among* people of color. As previously suggested, there are multiple forms of racism that result in unique historical experiences. In turn, specific forms of oppression and exploitation result in particular types of racial and revolutionary politics. One key to understanding these variations is “differential racialization”. Differential racialization refers to the specific racial meanings attached to various groups and the particular ways in which racism is lived out. As a material/discursive formation, race is produced by both discursive and economic structures and practices. While racial differences cannot be reduced to class distinctions (Omi and Winant 1994), there is a dialectic between the two. Economic positions are informed by the racial meanings attached to various groups, as well as by the needs of capital, the nature of resistance, and the presence of other racially-subordinated populations. Conversely, racial meanings are influenced by the economic characteristics of a racial/ethnic group, or at least segments of it. So, for instance, although both Asian Americans and African Americans are subject to racism, they are constituted in racially distinct ways, which contributes to differing economic patterns. These, in turn, produce unique experiences of racism.

Differential racialization is key to analyzing racial orders. A “racial order” refers to a particular configuration of racial/ethnic positions, with some groups occupying more privileged/subordinated locations than others. I am not advocating a unilinear set of positions, but rather a racial landscape with fluid niches based on both economic processes and ideological meanings. Racial orders do not require close interrogation as long as a black-white racial model prevails, as typically whites are dominant and blacks subordinate. Such simplistic models, however, overlook the fact that racial orders can vary over time and space. For instance, nonblack minority groups have at times attracted tremendous racial animosity, as in the Chinese exclusion (Saxton 1971), or the genocide of American Indians (Almaguer 1994; Churchill 1997). Thus, if we wish to grasp the racial complexity of a place like Los Angeles, the bipolar racial construct is clearly inadequate: Though it may be true that all people of color are subordinate to whites, all people of color are not interchangeable. We have distinct experiences based on our histories, immigration and/or economic incorporation, current economic status, and the imaginings of dominant whites. While it is accepted that whiteness and blackness are produced in relation to each other (Ignatiev 1995), Kim (1999) has argued that in the case

of complex racial orders, this dialectic must be expanded to include additional racial/ethnic groups. Specifically, she argues that the racial position of Asian Americans is a result not only of their relationship to whites (as the universal dominant), but also to blacks (as the universal subordinate). This is central to understanding intermediary racial/ethnic groups, like Chicanas/os and Asian Americans (Almaguer 1994). One example of how this works was seen in the Watts Riots. At that time, Chicanas/os were seen as a “problem minority,” but because the civil unrest was primarily a black event, it served to render Chicanas/os as less problematic in the eyes of white Angelenos (Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riot 1965:5), and thus served to enhance their position relative to blacks.

### **Southern California, 1968–1978**

My discussion of Southern California begins with the World War II era. Changes triggered by immigration and the military buildup dramatically transformed the region and provide the context to the subsequent racial order. To get a sense of how dramatic the changes were, consider that between 1940 and 1970 the region’s population grew from 3 to 12 million people (Preston 1971:5). In addition to Los Angeles’s historic racial diversity, the influx of new arrivals, enhanced employment opportunities, and the changing nature of racism all led to changes in the racial/ethnic order. At least four specific changes can be identified: First, post-WWII immigration included a sizable black population, which significantly altered Los Angeles’s racial composition (Collins 1980). Second, due to their wartime experiences, black and Chicano soldiers returned with a new sense of empowerment and commitment to fight for equality at home (Leonard 1992). Third, Japanese Americans returned from internment a traumatized and impoverished community, elements of which maintained a low profile in order to avoid hostile attention (Kashima 1980; see Nakanishi 1993). Fourth, the rapidly expanding Fordist economy provided many, including Chicanas/os and blacks, an entry into the formal economy (Laslett 1996; Leonard 1992).

Whites’ privileged position in the racial order was evident in their economic prosperity, political leadership, domination of cultural and educational institutions, and in the extent to which southern California became equated with the “American dream.” The white population’s well-being was bolstered not only through legal segregation and the denial of nonwhites’ civil rights, but also through preferential policies and practices (Lipsitz 1998; Pulido 2000). Though whites occupied the top position of the racial order, various communities of color fared differently in Los Angeles (Davis 1992; McWilliams [1946] 1983). Figure 1 shows the geography of racial/ethnic groups in Los Angeles county in 1970, which I will now discuss in more detail.

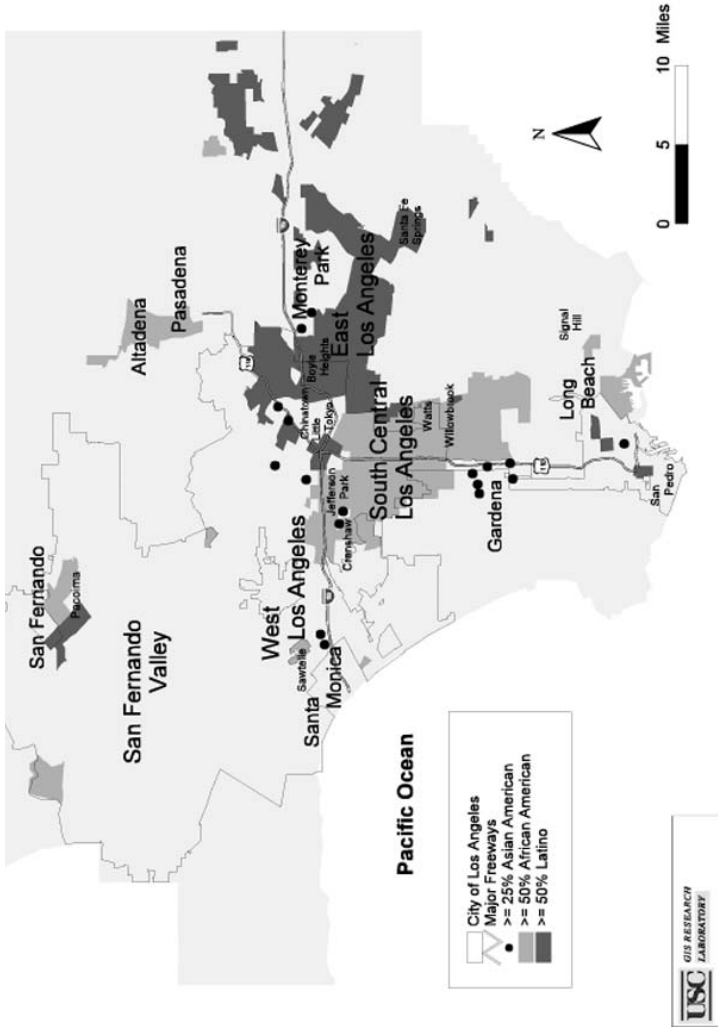
## **Black Los Angeles**

The history of black Los Angeles has been a mixed one. While the early part of the century was dubbed a “golden age,” blacks faced increased racism, violence, and segregation in the 1920s, resulting in the creation of a black ghetto in south Los Angeles (Collins 1980; De Graff 1970). During WWII, blacks were able to enter the manufacturing economy for the first time (although Federal intervention was required, see Laslett 1996:56). Opportunities diminished, however, upon the conclusion of the War, as employers replaced blacks with whites. Nonetheless, by 1970, the public sector and manufacturing were the leading sources of black employment in Los Angeles County. Ironically, while south Los Angeles was home to the region’s greatest concentration of durable manufacturing (Soja 1989:ch. 8), including the auto industry, blacks were relegated to the less well-paid light-manufacturing sector (Laslett 1996:64).

During the 1960s, African Americans loomed large in the imagination of southern Californians. This was due not only to the visibility of the civil rights and black power movements, but also to the fact that, proportionally, blacks had a greater numerical presence than today in the region. Despite the general prosperity of the time, few blacks shared in this wealth. While some middle-class blacks had begun moving west towards Crenshaw and Baldwin Hills by 1970 (Allen and Turner 1997:81), low-income blacks remaining in south Los Angeles suffered from 11% unemployment, more than double the regional average (Department of Industrial Relations 1966:17; see also Institute of Industrial Relations 1965).<sup>2</sup> In addition, blacks in that community experienced a declining rate of labor force participation, a relative drop in income, and a 25% poverty rate (Department of Industrial Relations 1966:17, 18, 21). These figures mask considerable variation, however. In Watts, for instance, the poverty rate was an incredible 41%, while it was “only” 20% in Willowbrook (Department of Industrial Relations 1966:21). Such economic conditions, plus the white population’s hostility towards desegregation (Weeks 1963) and the historic conflict between the police and black communities (Tyler 1983), suggest African Americans’ position at the bottom of the racial order. Moreover, they anticipate the Watts rebellion (Horne 1995), and a generation of youth who had lost faith in the civil rights paradigm.

## **Chicana/o Los Angeles**

Chicanas/os, who have historically resided in East Los Angeles, present a distinct economic picture, as they were more firmly and evenly attached to industrial employment than were blacks. WWII offered unparalleled opportunities for Chicanas/os, allowing them to shift out of agriculture and into manufacturing, so that by 1970 Latinos constituted 20.8% of all manufacturing workers (Scott 1996:222), and



**Figure 1:** The distribution of ethnic groups in Los Angeles County, 1970. Source: Philip J Etherington, Anne Marie Kooistra, and Edward De Young, Los Angeles County Union Census Tract Data Series, 1940–1990, Version 1.01. Created with the support of the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation (Los Angeles, University of Southern California, 2000)

were overrepresented in both durable and nondurable manufacturing (Laslett 1996:65). A comparison between east and south Los Angeles is instructive. Thirty-seven percent of men in East Los Angeles were employed as operatives and kindred workers, whereas only 30% of men in south Los Angeles were. The numbers are more dramatic for women: 40% of women in East Los Angeles were employed as operatives, but only 26% of women in South Los Angeles were. Black women were more likely to work as domestics (17%) than were women in East Los Angeles (2%) (Department of Industrial Relations 1966: 19, 31). Although East Los Angeles had a lower unemployment rate (7.7%) than did South Los Angeles, it had a more uniform poverty rate (23.6%) (Department of Industrial Relations 1966:29, 32). These differences suggest that Chicanas/os occupied a somewhat different economic position than blacks: While blacks—particularly those in South Los Angeles—suffered from structural worklessness, Chicanas/os served as low-wage labor and had a slightly higher position in the racial order.

As Almaguer (1994) has argued, Chicanas/os have historically occupied an intermediary racial position based on class position and phenotype. The fact that Chicanas/os are racially marked in numerous ways and that “passing” is a common—if problematic—practice (Moraga 1983) precludes any easy characterization of Chicanas/os’ racial position. In addition to physical appearance, residential patterns also became an important axis of difference. Chicanas/os became highly differentiated depending upon where they grew up (*barrio* versus suburb), appearance (*indio* versus *güero*),<sup>3</sup> and economic status. However, *all* Chicanas/os suffered from cultural denigration. The disparagement of all things Mexican was a function of racist attitudes not only toward Mexico, a third-world and largely indigenous nation, but also the distinctly working-class nature of *Mexicano* culture, resulting in contempt for Chicana/o music, family structure, language, religion, and material culture.<sup>4</sup> Hence, it is hardly surprising that many Chicanas/os embraced cultural nationalism in an attempt to reclaim their pride and identity (Muñoz 1989).

### **Nikkei Los Angeles<sup>5</sup>**

Japanese Americans represent yet a third experience. Though Japanese Americans have historically suffered egregious forms of racism—including immigration, employment, property, and housing exclusions—by 1968 whites saw them in a new light (Peterson 1966; Varon 1967). White racism was expressed through the “model minority” construct. Precisely because they were firmly subordinate, both economically and socially, while at the same time they had achieved *some* level of prosperity, Japanese Americans, who occupied an intermediary racial position, were rendered models for other people of color. This situation cannot be understood outside of the internment and its aftermath.



In February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order #9066, which led to the wholesale internment of West Coast Japanese Americans. Within a matter of weeks, 37,000 Nikkei Angelenos were forced into “relocation centers” and held captive until January 1945. The aftermath of this event is still being felt. Before WWII, the Japanese-American community was characterized by high rates of residential and employment discrimination (Moddell 1977). Employment exclusions and an agricultural background led to high rates of self-employment, particularly in the produce market, truck farming, and gardening (Kurashige 2000:ch. 2), which typically paid more than working-class jobs. During internment, however, Japanese Americans suffered enormous social and economic losses (Japanese-American Historical Society of Southern California 1998). Upon their return, they sought to recreate their old enclaves, focusing on Boyle Heights, Sawtelle, and the Jefferson area (Allen and Turner 1997:127). Indicative of their racial subordination, Japanese Americans could only live in black and brown spaces. As the Nikkei rebuilt their lives and communities, they gravitated once again towards self-employment (Light and Roach 1996:199), which was most pronounced in highly racialized occupations, such as gardening.

While Japanese Americans responded to the internment in numerous ways, several patterns can be identified. First, there was a general silence regarding the trauma (Kashima 1980). In order to prevent a recurrence, many sought to assimilate while drawing minimal attention to themselves. This contributed to the beginnings of regional dispersal and exacerbated the decline of community institutions and support (Boyle Heights Research Team 1975; Kurashige 2000). These changes set the stage for subsequent social problems, including drug abuse and gang activity (Boyle Heights Research Team 1975; Nakano 1973). Finally, whites interpreted the behavior of “silent Orientals” as acceptance and quiescence and encouraged other people of color to emulate it. There was no recognition on the part of whites that such behavior was a response to white racism or the degree to which Japanese Americans had internalized the pain of discrimination. This dynamic would be a key ingredient contributing to the political activism of Japanese-American radicals.

### **Race and Revolutionary Politics**

George Katsiaficas (1987) has identified 1967–1970 as a “world-historical movement,” as people across the globe mobilized. In the US, several factors contributed to this counterhegemonic upsurge. First, many African Americans were frustrated by the limited gains of the civil rights movement. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., many were ready to adopt a more radical politics. Second, resistance to the Vietnam War politicized thousands and contributed

to a larger culture of struggle. This oppositional culture brought diverse groups together and inspired other movements. Finally, many youth of color were inspired by the revolutionary movements sweeping the third world. Sympathizing with colonized and racially subordinate populations, Asians, blacks, Latinas/os, and American Indians in the US identified as part of the third world. No longer content to seek acceptance from white “Amerika,” youth of color demanded that they be respected on their own terms. Moreover, through political study some decided that capitalism—US imperialism, in particular—was the source of the world’s problems.

Thus, over time, the civil rights movement was eclipsed by a more radical politics. With this, the geography of political activism shifted from the South to large urban centers, including San Francisco, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Southern California was home to a large number of leftist formations, some of which were multiracial, while others were composed of a single racial/ethnic group. Table 1 offers a partial list of such organizations. To a certain extent, the third-world left evolved from more antiracist and nationalist organizations. It climaxed in the early 1970s, but had collapsed by 1978, due to pressures from within and without, including infighting (Johnson 1998), sectarianism, individual burnout, and political repression

**Table 1:** Southern California Third World Left Organizations, 1968–1978

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August Twenty-Ninth Movement (ATM)
Black Panther Party for Self-Defense
El Centro de Accion Social Autonomo (CASA)
California Communist League
Che Lumumba Club—Communist Party, USA
Communist Workers Party
Communist Labor Party
East Wind
Fan Di
Garbagemen
La Colectiva
Labor Committee of La Raza Unida Party
League of Revolutionary Struggle
Line of March
October League
Revolutionary Communist Party
Revolutionary Union
Socialist Workers Party
Storefront
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)
Venceremos Brigade
Workers’ Viewpoint Organization

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*Note:* All organizations were explicitly Marxist-Leninist and/or Maoist, and at least half the membership was nonwhite.

(Churchill and Vander Wall 1988; Escobar 1993; Tyler 1983). Despite its brevity, however, the third-world left accomplished a great deal and fundamentally changed the nature of racial politics in the US.

## **The Southern California Chapter of the Black Panther Party**

### *The Black Panther Party*

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale. Combining elements of nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, Marxism-Leninism, and Maoism, the BPP, stressing both community service and self-defense, became the premier revolutionary organization of its time (Foner 1995; Jones 1998). Asserting the need for self-defense and rejecting both cultural nationalist and civil-rights paradigms, the BPP linked the plight of poor blacks (and other oppressed people) to global capitalism. As Table 2 shows, the Party's Ten-Point Program reflects three primary foci: political autonomy, material well-being, and opposition to state terror and control. As a largely working-class population that was racially subordinate, the BPP, borrowing from Marxist theory, conceptualized African Americans as a black nation (Woodward 1999; Freeman 2000). Focusing on the lumpenproletariat, its goal was to liberate the black nation, which could only be achieved by creating solidarity with other oppressed peoples and sympathetic whites. While

**Table 2:** The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Program (29 March 1972)

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- 1) We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our black and oppressed communities.
  - 2) We want full employment of our people.
  - 3) We want an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our black and oppressed communities.
  - 4) We want decent housing, fit for the shelter of human beings.
  - 5) We want decent education for our people that exposes [the] true nature of this decadent American Society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.
  - 6) We want completely free health care for all black and oppressed people.
  - 7) We want an immediate end to police brutality and murder of black people, other people of color, [and] all oppressed people inside the United States.
  - 8) We want an immediate end to all wars of aggression.
  - 9) We want freedom for all Blacks and Oppressed people now held in the U.S. Federal, State, County, City and Military Prisons and Jails. We want trials by a jury of peers for all persons charged with so-called crimes under the laws of this country.
  - 10) We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, peace, and people's community control of modern technology.
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Source: Newton (1996:123).

there is a growing literature on the BPP, little has been written on the southern California chapter, despite its distinctive nature (Tyler 1983).

### *The Southern California Chapter*

The Southern California chapter of the BPP was established in 1968 when Alprentice “Bunchy” Carter, a former member of the Slauson gang, was released from prison and returned to Los Angeles (Brown 1992:122–124; Davis 1974:163). Carter essentially transformed a vast and diverse army of gangs into one of the strongest chapters of the BPP (Brown 1992; Freeman 1999; Freeman 2000).

The Southern California chapter, which stretched from Bakersfield to San Diego, was unique in several ways. First, it became a testing ground for new ideas and strategies, partly because of the diversity of its black population. Los Angeles attracted blacks from the South, the Midwest, and the North, thus reflecting important regional differences (Freeman 1999). The chapter developed new programs, including dances (Freeman 1999), and was in the vanguard of promoting female leadership (Zinzun 2000). Second, the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), led by Chief William Parker, was notoriously repressive (McDermott 2000; Tyler 1983). Parker, a rabid anticommunist, felt that not only was the civil-rights movement a subterfuge for communists, but civil disobedience must not be tolerated.

Parker saw the Black community as the weakest link in the American social and political chain ... He also said that the Black community was more criminal ... He redeployed police on this basis and the arrest statistics for Blacks skyrocketed and justified his tactics and doctrine. This situation snowballed into a highly structured pattern of self-fulfilling prophecy and complexity that neither Parker nor the Black community could extricate themselves from. (Tyler 1983:9)

The relationship between the LAPD and black Angelenos deteriorated further in the wake of the 1965 Watts uprising. Despite the growing repression of the LAPD (Horne 1995; Tyler 1983), many blacks felt empowered, as they realized that the police could be challenged. As one former Panther explained, “[I]t was like a slave realizing he could be free” (Freeman 2000). The question was *how* to sustain that level of opposition to the police. The BPP was the answer.

The third reason the southern California chapter was unique was that it had a slightly different composition and orientation relative to other chapters. Not only was it characterized by a large “underground” force (Umoja 1999:136), but its membership—more so than that of other chapters—was drawn from the lumpenproletariat. The chapter became intensely associated with the self-defense goals of the Party, which were more closely held by the lumpenproletariat than by student or middle-class members, as the former were more likely to

incur police harassment. Membership in the chapter came from three primary sources: gangs, black activists, and self-defense cadre, blacks who had begun arming themselves as a form of self-defense previous to the establishment of the BPP, building on an African-American tradition of self-defense (Nelson 1971; Shoats 1999). The BPP was essentially the political formation the cadre had been waiting for. In addition, Geronimo Pratt, a former Panther with military experience (Olsen 2000), played a central role in the southern California chapter, providing self-defense and military training. As a result of Pratt's leadership, as well as the gang conversion initiated by Carter, the chapter's membership was biased towards the lumpenproletariat and their concerns (Freeman 1999, 2000).

The Panthers' focus on self-defense cannot be understood outside of the black community's relationship to the police and their position in the racial order. While police harassment of blacks—particularly black men—is legendary, according to the BPP, the problem was not simply racist cops. As one former Panther pointed out, lynching was no longer a viable form of controlling blacks by the late 1940s. Thus, beginning in the 1950s, police assume the function of “lynching” blacks through harassment, imprisonment, and murder. Police did so because one of the jobs of the local state is to ensure the well-being of whites, which requires controlling blacks—a despised racial/ethnic groups—through terror. This was considered necessary, because, racially, blacks posed a threat to the consolidation of white hegemony, and, economically, blacks suffered disproportionately from structural worklessness, causing the local state to discipline black communities in order to ensure their cooperation (Freeman 1999). Without such compliance, the system's ability to reproduce itself is threatened. The result of this constant surveillance and harassment was a deep anger in the black community, to the point where some could no longer accept such conditions, even if it meant death. When Carter announced the establishment of the southern California chapter, the emphasis on self-defense was clear:

I ... came here to let you know that it is the position of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense that we are the vanguard of the revolution in the United States ... And the vanguard party is declaring all-out-war on the pig ... nobody will speak about Black Power or revolution unless he's ... willing to pick up the gun, ready to die for the people.

We can no longer allow the pig's armed forces to come into our communities and kill our young men and disrespect our sisters and rob us of our lives. The pig can no longer attack and suppress our people, or send his occupying army to maraud and maim our communities, without suffering grave consequences. (In Brown 1992:124–25)

Although many associate the Panthers with guns and violence, its service programs were of equal significance (Abron 1998). The Southern California chapter offered a breakfast program, food handouts, a school, prison transport, and published a newspaper. These “survival programs” as they were called, served several purposes. First, they enabled the Panthers to provide necessary assistance to the community. Second, and relatedly, they generated community support. And third, they highlighted the contradictions of the state, which was crucial to the politicization of the black population: Although the state *could* have provided a breakfast program, it did not. This was considered yet another example of the state’s disregard for black, poor, and oppressed people, and building upon the teachings of Malcolm X, it underscored the need for black self-organization (Freeman 2000; Zinzun 2000).

The BPP’s vision was so compelling that it helped to unite the left locally, nationally, and even internationally (Clemens and Jones 1999). It was emulated by groups like the Brown Berets and the Red Guard, but it also helped consolidate the local left, as seen, for example, in the Panther’s relationship to the Peace and Freedom Party.

However, regardless of the innovative nature of the Southern California chapter, it was not able to withstand the police onslaught. One member (Freeman 1999) speculated that approximately half of all BPP murders occurred in southern California, a number far out of proportion to its membership. Ultimately, the police, with the assistance of the FBI, was successful in destroying the Southern California chapter well before the demise of the larger organization (Churchill and Vander Wall 1988; Newton 1996). In addition to infighting and very real class tensions within the party, the majority of the leadership was eventually imprisoned, murdered, or recalled to Oakland, leaving the Southern California chapter to disintegrate.

### **El Centro de Accion Social Autonomo (CASA)**

CASA represents a very different expression of left politics. While such distinctions reflect the differential racialization of Chicanas/os, they are also a function of political history. The BPP developed approximately six years before CASA, and one of its legacies was the creation of more political space, which facilitated the development of revolutionary organizations. Thus, it is not surprising that CASA, founded in 1972, was explicitly Marxist-Leninist.

CASA evolved from La Hermandad Mexicana Nacional (the Mexican Brotherhood), which Bert Corona and Soledad “Chole” Alatorre brought to Los Angeles in 1968 in order to provide services to immigrant workers and to promote labor organizing (García 1994: ch. 14).<sup>6</sup> Corona subsequently restructured the organization by creating a series of independent centers (CASAs), united under

La Hermandad. Approximately ten CASAs developed, stretching from Chicago to Texas to Seattle to Los Angeles.

La Hermandad and the Chicano movement—or *el movimiento*—were both in full swing in the late 1960s, although with somewhat different constituencies and goals. La Hermandad was rooted primarily in immigrant communities with ties to labor and Chicana/o civil rights groups. In contrast, *el movimiento* centered largely on young people—especially students—and was far more ideological (Chávez 1994; Gomez Quiñonez 1990; Gutierrez 1993; Muñoz 1989). Chicana/o youth were struggling with questions of identity, equality, and opposition to the Vietnam War, much of which was expressed through cultural nationalism and the need for self-determination. Indeed, many in the Chicana/o movement, including the prime minister of the Brown Berets, eschewed Marxism as an irrelevant, white ideology that detracted from Chicanas/os' concerns (Montes 2000). Nonetheless, a small group of student activists was attracted to CASA, precisely because of its work with Mexicana/o workers.

The thing that clicked for me from the very beginning, my parents being immigrants, was the class analysis. They came from Mexico. All they did was cross the border, they were still workers, and they were really getting screwed. [CASA wasn't into] just the Chicano thing, nor denying that we are Chicanos. It didn't appeal to me some of the other left organizations that said "we are all workers" ... [we need to] pay attention to the fact that some workers are Chicanos. (Durazo 2000)

Student involvement dramatically changed the organization, particularly when the Committee to Free Los Tres, an East Los Angeles group, joined CASA.<sup>7</sup> The political cultures and goals of the two organizations clashed and generational tensions arose (Chávez 1997; Gutiérrez 1984:12). Corona and Alatorre had essentially created a mass dues-paying service organization with a labor-organizing component predicated on reformist politics. The younger generation, however, saw itself as a vanguard and hoped to use the service centers to create a mass movement. Conflict grew until eventually the older generation resigned in 1974 (García 1994; Gutiérrez 1984:13). While CASA never succeeded in creating a mass worker movement, it had a major influence on immigration debates, it served as a left wing to the more nationalist Chicana/o movement, and it trained some of today's most influential Chicana/o labor and progressive leaders.

CASA worked on labor, immigration, and identity issues. Given Chicanas/os' historic role as low-wage workers, the labor focus is not surprising, while the concern with identity reflected their subordinated social status at a time when oppressed groups were challenging what it meant to be a "minority." For Chicanas/os, this process included

reclaiming a denigrated racial and cultural identity. One activist cogently summarized the connection between racial and cultural subordination and how Chicanas/os often responded to it:

[My mother] felt that it was even going to be more necessary for us to speak without an accent because we were so dark. She felt that if we had been lighter, then maybe Spanish would have been [ok]. In fact, she used to tell me that it was not uncommon for Mexican women in the 1940s and 1950s to pray for light-skinned babies. (Santillan 1990:6)

Clearly, there was a deeply internalized racism that had to be challenged. However, identity was more than just appearance and cultural heritage, it also centered on economic and political subjectivity: If activists sought to build an emancipatory political project, how was Chicana/o subjectivity to be understood? Were Chicanas/os a racially subordinate group? A conquered nation? Or part of the international working class? CASA responded to this question with the concept of “*sin fronteras*” (without borders). In contrast, most movement activists had adopted a Chicana/o identity and the concept of *Aztlán*,<sup>8</sup> both of which were predicated on the Mexican-American experience. CASA, however, challenged the assumption that Chicanas/os were distinct from Mexicans, arguing instead that Mexicans and Mexican Americans were part of one international working class, *sin fronteras* (Gutiérrez 1984:14–15).

CASA’s ideology of “*sin fronteras*” encapsulated their nationalistic and class-oriented vision by espousing a working-class connection with every person with Mexican roots regardless of birth country. Agreeing with cultural nationalism’s emphasis on ethnicity, culture, and language, they added a class analysis. They saw racism and capitalism as having a profound impact on the lives of their people and believed their organization to be a genuine revolutionary mass organization functioning under the principals of democratic centralism, guided by the theory of Marxism Leninism, and lighted by the revolutionary spirit of our most courageous and anti-imperialist people. (Chávez 1997:42)

Given CASA’s concern with labor, immigration inevitably emerged as a priority (Figure 2). Besides its centrality to Chicanas/os, immigration became a national issue during the 1970s, as seen in various pieces of legislation (CASA ndb). CASA assumed the lead in arguing for the rights of immigrant workers and helped establish the National Coalition for Fair Immigration Laws and Practices (Gutiérrez 1984:11). It sought to change the terms of the debate through conferences, marches, rallies, and political dialogue with activists and politicians alike. Moreover, it spearheaded the effort to push organized labor,



## LIST OF CASA'S DEMANDS CONCERNING IMMIGRATION

# Unconditional Amnesty!



**Resistencia y Unidad - Nuestro Pueblo Vencerá!**

## WE DEMAND

**UNCONDITIONAL AMNESTY** - The total recognition of democratic rights undocumented people; an end to the constant persecution of our people; full access to services, bilingual and bicultural education; the right to be with our families; the right to a fair process.

**STOP DEPORTATIONS** - An end to the deportation raids that create panic in communities and work places, divide our families, break organizing campaigns, and force people to sidestep badly needed social services. An end to the conspiracy between the U.S. government and La Migra in planning factory raids.

**JOBS FOR ALL - RIGHT TO ORGANIZE** - Employment is a basic right and government must assure socially useful jobs for all workers, without separating a section of the working class for persecution nor deny them the right to organize.

**END THE BRACERO PROGRAM** - We must demand an end to bracero-type programs and modern day slave labor systems. It denies workers the right to organize, to decent wages and working conditions. It is used to break organizing campaigns. It does not benefit workers - the only profiteers are the bosses.

**MIGRA - OUT OF THE FACTORIES** - The collaboration between La Migra and the U.S. government permits the super-exploitation of Mexican labor. This must stop and full protection must be given workers who are deported under existing labor laws and collective bargaining agreements.

**OVERTURN THE BAKKE DECISION** - The Bakke Decision denies Mexican and other Third World students our rights to higher education by threatening special admission affirmative action programs. Now, gains won through struggles in the 60's face elimination under the smokescreen that they are forms of 'reverse racism'.

**RESPECT THE RIGHTS OF UNDOCUMENTED PEOPLE** - We must protect our human rights and fight to defeat sterilization practices, police brutality and mass deportations. We are workers, we have rights, we create the wealth!



Figure 2: List of CASA's demands concerning immigration. Source: Box 31, Folder 12, CASA Collection

including the United Farm Workers, to begin viewing immigrants as workers instead of enemies.

Despite CASA's impressive work, the organization suffered from police infiltration (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1973; US Department of Justice 1974), and perhaps more importantly, from a series of internal contradictions that contributed to its demise (Chávez 1997; Durazo 2000; Holguin 2000). A primary problem was the nondemocratic nature of the organization and the concentration of power in one particular family, the Rodriguezes. In addition, the organization was deeply sexist, and women occupied a clearly subordinate position (Bass 2000; Chávez 1997; Holguin 2000). As the contradictions mounted, there were a series of mass resignations, including those of prominent leaders, which spelled the end of CASA in 1978.

### **East Wind**

East Wind was a revolutionary nationalist organization heavily influenced by the BPP, but because it was rooted in the Japanese-American community it, was distinct. Like CASA, East Wind evolved from previous existing formations. It emerged in 1972 from several initiatives in the Asian American community, including the Garbagemen, Asian-American Hardcore, Japanese-American Community Services-Asian Involvement (JACS-AI), and the Community Workers Collective (C Masaoka 1999; M Masaoka 1999; Yoshimura 2000). The Garbagemen was the first Asian American left study group to surface in Los Angeles in 1969 (Nakano 1984:6). From it, two tendencies emerged, Storefront and East Wind. Storefront was a multinational organization in which Asian Americans worked with other racial/ethnic groups, especially African Americans. East Wind was somewhat more nationalist and focused primarily on Japanese Americans (Nishida 2000). Geographically, it was rooted in Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights, and the Sawtelle area (see Figure 1).

East Wind focused its energies on community service, and, as with CASA, struggled with identity issues. Guided by revolutionary nationalism, activists saw their primary task as preparing the Nikkei population to work with other racial/ethnic groups in building a united front (Nishida 2000). This required not only lifting the veil of silence that surrounded the community after internment (Kashima 1980; Takezawa 2000), but also encouraging Japanese Americans to recognize and confront issues of racism, poverty, and the need for community services (C Masaoka 1999; Yoshimura 2000). East Wind did not readily embrace a working-class politics. While a Nikkei working class definitely existed, it was relatively small and fragmented. In contrast, a community focus—particularly on the most marginalized—offered a greater set of possibilities. East Wind was well respected for its various campaigns, including its work on redevelopment issues in Little Tokyo,

substance-abuse prevention and treatment, the establishment of the Pioneer Senior Center, the takeover of Resthaven (a mental health facility in Chinatown), and its extensive solidarity work, including sending a large team to Wounded Knee to support the American Indian Movement (Nishida 2000).

East Wind's focus on mental health, drug prevention, and gang intervention merits some elaboration, as it is deeply rooted in the Japanese-American experience, particularly the internment and its subsequent trauma. Until the redress movement of the 1980s (Nakanishi 1993; Maki, Kitano and Berthold 1999), Japanese Americans remained largely silent on this entire episode, resulting in an internalization of pain and anger. This emotional trauma was often transmitted to internees' children: on the one hand, they were being urged to "outwhite the whites," while on the other they were deeply affected by their parents' experiences (Nishio 1982; Takezawa 2000). Because of these conflicting pressures, there were high rates of drug abuse and gang activity among Japanese Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.

We really struggled with denial, particularly among the Nisei. Their thing after the camps was to out-white the whites and don't rock the boat. So many of my generation were doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, and optometrists ... But there was also a minority who became gang-bangers: the Ministers, the Shokasus; those groups were like a hidden part of the community. People wouldn't acknowledge that we had a problem with gangs and drugs. The *Rafu-Shimpo*, the Japanese-American newspaper, reported day in and day out in the obituaries, 15- and 16-year-old kids dying of heart attacks. They had such denial. (Kurose in Wong 1998:77)<sup>9</sup>

Responding to the severity of these problems, several individuals began Asian American Hardcore, an early attempt at grassroots drug and gang intervention (Nishida in Nakamura 1998:74). Hardcore led to several study groups, including a collective, which eventually resulted in East Wind. East Wind served the community, and, similar to CASA, struggled with identity issues. Indeed, identity was key to Japanese-American politicization, as activists repositioned themselves as "people of color" and directly challenged the "model minority" construct. They did this, first, by acknowledging the extent to which white racism shaped their experiences, and second, by cultivating a new identity based on pan-Asianness and revolutionary politics.

Recognizing the oppressive role of racism was not difficult for politically conscious youth. For instance, most Japanese Americans interviewed for this paper had distinct memories of residential discrimination, causing them to identify with African Americans and Chicanas/os. In one case, an activist juxtaposed his incarceration in

the Santa Anita relocation center as a child with the presence of the National Guard in his south central neighborhood during the Watts rebellion—cementing in his mind the repressive nature of the state against people of color (Nishida 2000). Another former member of East Wind recounted how she was verbally assaulted by two white soldiers, who taunted her about having a “slanted cunt” and compared her to prostitutes in Vietnam (Yoshimura 2000). The collective impact of these events convinced Japanese-American activists that they would never be white, despite being a model minority, and thus had to actively resist such an image. Accordingly, they dismantled the model-minority image, which activists realized also oppressed other people of color.

Frightened “yellows” allow the white public to use the “silent oriental” stereotype against the black protest. The presence of twenty million blacks in white America poses an actual physical threat to the white system. Fearful whites tell militant blacks that the acceptable criterion for behavior is exemplified in the quiet, passive Asian American.

The yellow power movement envisages a new role for Asian Americans: it is a rejection of the passive Oriental stereotype and symbolizes the birth of a new Asian: One who will recognize and deal with injustices. The shout of Yellow Power, symbolic of our new direction, is reverberating in the quiet corridors of the Asian community. (Uyematsu 1969:8)

In addition to rejecting the model-minority image, activists created new, militant, and explicitly leftist identities. Miriam Ching Louie (1991) has argued that as Asian Americans became aware of international events, they equated Asia with anti-imperialist and revolutionary politics, which informed their new identities (see also Wei 1993:204–206).

The Asian national liberation movements were highly ideologized. This has nothing to do with anything we did, but was a formative influence on us. Compared to liberation movements in Africa and Latin America at the time, Asian movements were led by Marxist forces who were part of the international communist movement. There was the Chinese Communist Party, the Vietnam Workers Party, the Korean Workers Party. A new communist party was soon formed in the Philippines, and a militant left student movement existed in Japan. Here we were just figuring out what it meant to be Asian. With the reference point to Asia, being Asian in our minds came to be synonymous with being progressive, and being Marxist. (Interview quoted in Louie 1991:8)

Aware of the consequences of the model-minority image for other people of color, East Wind worked closely with blacks, Chicanas/os, and American Indians. This solidarity work was also a function of

demographics. Given the relatively small size of the Japanese-American population (and Asian Americans in general), they had to build coalitions and work with others in order to accomplish their objectives. In contrast, given their population size, as well as their unambiguous status as oppressed third-world peoples, Chicanas/os and blacks did not place the same emphasis on interracial collaboration.<sup>10</sup>

By the late seventies, there was a growing move towards party-building within the left (O'Brien 1977–1978). Small organizations like East Wind realized that although they did important community work, their efforts were too isolated to create a revolution. Thus, a period of consolidation began, as various groups looked for suitable partners with which to merge in order to create viable political parties. East Wind explored commonalities with such organizations as I Wor Kuen, the August Twenty-Ninth Movement (ATM), and the Revolutionary Communist League, and eventually joined the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a multiracial organization. The LRS lasted until 1990, at which time, it, and the remnants of East Wind, dissolved (Gallegos 1999; C Masaoka 1999; M Masaoka 1999).

## Conclusion

I have explored Los Angeles's third-world left in order to underscore the futility of privileging either race or class in left politics. Hopefully, the examples I have chosen demonstrate the extent to which both racism and class structures inform individual and group experiences and thus must be addressed in organizing efforts. In addition, we have seen how different racial/ethnic groups are racialized and classed in distinct ways, and how this leads to various positions within the racial order.<sup>11</sup> These experiences, in turn, directly inform radical politics. In this conclusion, I would like to consider some of the implications of this work.

Some have questioned the overall significance of the third-world left, particularly in comparison to the much larger nationalist and antiracist movements of the time (see Wei 1993). While the third-world left was indeed small, this overlooks its political significance. One of the movement's accomplishments was the expansion of political space and the development of a more materialist politics. Not only did this lead to greater possibilities for interracial solidarity, but also, given the third-world left's more radical politics, facilitated the adoption of important reformist measures. For instance, the appearance of blacks with guns was key to the adoption of affirmative action. Likewise, members of East Wind went on to lead the struggle for redress and reparations, eventually resulting in a formal apology and monetary reparations. Finally, as previously noted, CASA was responsible for shifting the Chicano movement's position on immigrants. Not only is

support of immigrant rights a standard part of contemporary Chicano/Latino politics, but I would argue that CASA sowed the seeds for the labor movement's current embrace of immigrant workers, as many of CASA's members went on to occupy key positions in both labor and politics.

This brings up the larger issue of what members of the third-world left are doing today. Most were passionate about their work and have remained politically active. Activists interviewed had carefully evaluated this period of their lives (most were familiar with self-criticism), and few romanticized it. Most were critical of the violence, sexism, sectarianism, homophobia, and—in some cases—racism that permeated the movement. Equipped with this information, many have sought to contribute to alternative institutions in Los Angeles that do not repeat the same mistakes. Examples include the Community Coalition Against Substance Abuse and Prevention, the Labor/Community Strategy Center, the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (Local 11), the Liberty Hill Foundation, the Coalition Against Police Abuse, and AGENDA. Several scholars (Nicholls 2001; Pastor 2001) have recently argued that Los Angeles has become a leading site of progressive organizing today. I believe this is partly due to this earlier activism. Groups like the BPP, CASA, and East Wind essentially served as a training ground. Not only did they teach activists specific skills and knowledge, but they also provided activists with a large number of contacts and networks that are still functioning—albeit in modified form—today. Political activism—specifically, a place's *history* of activism—is key to shaping the political culture of a place.

How to reconcile race and class in political work remains one of the challenges of the left. During the 1980s and 1990s, the US underwent fundamental political, ideological, and cultural shifts, so that while we have made some progress in addressing overt forms of racial discrimination, there has been no comparable progress on poverty issues or structural racism. Today, we face a situation in Southern California where the poor and working class are increasingly composed of immigrants. Precisely because they are not native-born, many feel that not only is their poverty justifiable, but that racism has little to do with their marginalization, as racial subordination is seemingly reserved for native-born people of color. Yet it is these very contradictions that illustrate the ever-changing nature of the racial order and underscore the need for new articulations of race and class that can serve as a viable political framework for social change.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “The Scottsboro Boys” refers to nine African Americans charged with raping two white women in Alabama. In the Sleepy Lagoon murder, a young Chicano was murdered in Los Angeles, resulting in a witch-hunt of Chicano youth. The CPUSA was instrumental in the formation and maintenance of defense committees in both instances.

<sup>2</sup> I arrived at this figure by averaging the unemployment rates for the seven south Los Angeles communities identified in the report “Negroes and Mexican Americans in South and East Los Angeles: Changes between 1960 and 1965” (Department of Industrial Relations 1966:6–7). The communities included: Watts, Central, Avalon, Florence, Green Meadows, Exposition, and Willowbrook.

<sup>3</sup> *Indio* refers to both an Indian and someone with dark skin. *Güero* refers to someone who is light-skinned.

<sup>4</sup> Consider just two of the comments sent to CASA that were made in reference to Chicanas/os: “Most of you are thieves—rapists—lazy welfare recipients, providing nothing except kids for more welfare. Get out of America!” “You god-damned semi-literate, parasitic animal mentality Mexicans don’t know the meaning of birth control because of your complete domination and blind loyalty to your stupid parasitic Catholic religion which perpetuates your overbreeding, ignorance, poverty, misery, crime, and welfare” (Anonymous nd).

<sup>5</sup> *Nikkei* refers to the Japanese-American population in its entirety. *Issei* is the immigrant generation, *Nisei* are the children of immigrants, and *Sansei* and *Yonsei* are the third and fourth generations, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> *La Hermandad* was actually begun in San Diego in the 1950s. Corona based the Los Angeles chapter on the San Diego model (García 1994:290–291).

<sup>7</sup> The Committee to Free Los Tres was a group of young Chicanas/os who supported three activists unfairly charged in the murder of a police officer in East Los Angeles.

<sup>8</sup> *Aztlán* refers to the mythical homeland of the Aztecs. The concept was reappropriated by Chicana/o activists in the 1960s as part of their identity and a larger cultural nationalist politics (Anaya and Lomeli 1989).

<sup>9</sup> In her film, *When You’re Smiling*, Janice Tanaka (1999) reported 31 such deaths in 1971 among Japanese Americans in Los Angeles (Tanaka 1999).

<sup>10</sup> This is not to imply that CASA and the BPP were not involved in multiracial politics. CASA did allow some whites to join, but it was not without controversy (CASA nda). In contrast, the BPP devoted more energy to actively building coalitions with progressive whites and expressing solidarity with other people of color, especially the Brown Berets.

<sup>11</sup> Although I have focused on communities of color, the emphasis on race and class applies equally to white communities and organizing initiatives. In most cases in the US whites constitute a privileged population, which requires activists to unpack white supremacy and/or privilege. Depending upon local demographics and the regional racial order, however, whites may be highly marginalized, requiring a different analysis and strategy.

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