

Race and Political Economy

During the early years of World War II, William Dickerson became the first African American to complete the training course in aircraft metalworking at Bakersfield Junior College in south-central California. At a time when few African Americans even enrolled in such courses, let alone graduated, Dickerson's confidence and pride were at an all-time high when he subsequently sent his application for employment to the Consolidated Aircraft Company of San Diego. Although the company had secured millions of dollars in wartime federal contracts and advertised that it would hire all youths who had completed appropriate training, its response was a simple and blunt: "No Negroes Accepted." While Dickerson did what he thought necessary to be in a position to contribute to the U.S. war effort and improve his own standard of living, his efforts, according to the investigative report on his case of discrimination by the National Negro Congress (NNC), were rewarded with "all the stinging, insulting impact of a slap in the face."¹

The discouragement and frustration Dickerson must have felt after his rejection reflects the paradoxical place of many African Americans in the U.S. political economy during the early 1940s. On the one hand, most young, able-bodied African Americans, along with their Mexican American counterparts, were expected to support the war effort at home or serve in the armed forces overseas as part of the grand plan to defeat fascism. On the other hand, many of these same individuals were excluded from discourses of patriotism and national belonging because

of their race or ethnicity. African Americans and Mexican Americans were simultaneously viewed as much needed participants in the war effort and as marginal to the national polity.²

The paradoxical position of nonwhites on the home front not only denied them their dignity but also pushed race relations to the forefront of domestic political debate. As U.S. involvement in the conflict overseas intensified, so did discussions about the role of African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans in the war effort and concerns about whether they posed threats to the stability of the home front. Race discrimination in war industry employment and in the policing of nonwhite communities emerged as critical political issues. The wartime political economy hindered the full inclusion of many African Americans and Mexican Americans in the war effort and, as a result, denied them equal membership in U.S. society. Race discrimination and police violence denied dignity to nonwhite Americans and made nonwhite youth in particular an increasingly important focus of home-front politics. Discrimination and police violence revealed the limited access to wartime resources and placed limits on freedom of movement and personal expression. By juxtaposing the wartime experiences of African Americans and Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and New York City, this chapter illustrates the national scope of wartime race relations and the extent of dignity's denial.

Entry into the war increased employment and political opportunities for many African Americans, Mexican Americans, and women.³ While rejections like William Dickerson's were more the norm at the beginning of war, the desperate need for labor led to more success stories in following years. The number of women in the workforce, for example, increased from 12 to 18 million between 1940 and 1945.⁴ In her seminal work on seasonal cannery workers in California, historian Vicki Ruiz details how a number of Mexican American women left for more stable and higher-paying positions in defense industry plants as the war unfolded.⁵ Similarly, African Americans constituted 8 percent of all war workers in 1945, up from 3 percent in 1942, and, while virtually no Mexican Americans were employed in Los Angeles area shipyards in 1941, 17,000 worked there by 1944.⁶ The explosion of wartime manufacturing not only helped lift the nation from the doldrums of the Great Depression but also enabled millions of marginalized and previously underemployed populations to partake in the long-awaited and much needed economic growth by taking jobs and earning wages previously held mainly by white men.

Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor and throughout U.S. involvement in the war, thousands of young African Americans and Mexican Americans also joined the armed forces to help defend U.S. democracy in Europe, the Pacific, and elsewhere.⁷ More than 3 million African Americans registered under the Selective Service Act of 1940, and despite a rejection rate more than twice that for white applicants, approximately 1 million African Americans served during World War II.⁸ Once enlisted in the army or navy, African Americans still faced daily segregation in their units, eating and sleeping arrangements, and occupational assignments. African Americans were still prohibited from joining the Marines.⁹ Mexican Americans did not experience segregation in the military to the extent African Americans did. More than 350,000 served in the armed forces during World War II, many of them engaging in combat on the front lines and earning numerous military honors.¹⁰ Through their active participation in the war effort, whether as factory workers or soldiers, many African Americans, Mexican Americans, and women implicitly made the case for their full inclusion and assimilation into U.S. society.

As historian Gary Gerstle argues, however, “if World War II was a ‘good war,’ it was also a ‘race war.’”¹¹ Citizenship and national belonging were often defined by participation in the war effort, which was in turn routinely restricted, or at least segregated, by race and conflated with whiteness. The demand for more employees and servicemen on the part of corporate employers and government officials did not ease long-standing principles of Jim Crow segregation or enhance socioeconomic mobility for African Americans and Mexican Americans. Like Dickerson, some were still refused war industry jobs outright because of their race or ethnicity. Of the many African Americans and Mexican Americans who did secure employment in the aircraft factories and shipyards of California, the Pacific Northwest, the Atlantic seaboard, the Gulf coast, and elsewhere, most were often relegated to the lowest-paid positions with little hope of promotion. Even though the rhetoric of home-front unity offered African American, Mexican American, and women citizens the chance to demonstrate their patriotism, the boundaries of national identity were also marked in racial and gendered terms. While World War II is often considered a turning point in the integration of nonwhites and women into U.S. society, the period also underscored their status as second-class citizens.

Segregation and systematic discrimination based on race were imposed by local officials, often enthusiastically reinforced by the main-

stream press and general public, and resulted in everyday discrimination in housing, education, and public services against nonwhites. In areas with large numbers of African Americans and Mexican Americans, it was not unusual for them to be barred from restaurants, public swimming pools, parks, theaters, and schools. In many places, nonwhites were allowed to visit public pools or parks only on a certain day of the week. Signs that read, "Tuesday's reserved for Negroes and Mexicans" were not uncommon.¹² In many retail businesses where African Americans and Mexican Americans were allowed, separate-seating arrangements relegated them to balconies or other less desirable sections. Schools were often segregated by locale, language, or race, leaving African American and Mexican American youth with less qualified instructors, inadequate educational supplies, and the worst facilities for learning.¹³ Historian David Montejano points to the similar Jim Crow experiences of Mexican Americans and African Americans in Texas, arguing that "there was no constitutionally sanctioned 'separate but equal' provision for Mexicans as there was for blacks. . . . But in political and sociological terms, blacks and Mexicans were basically seen as different aspects of the same race problem."¹⁴

Although where in a movie theater one could sit or which day of the week one could swim at a local pool may not seem vitally important, such segregation and race discrimination helped police the boundaries of U.S. cultural citizenship.¹⁵ For their African American and Mexican American targets, these policies and attitudes were a dehumanizing experience that underscored their inferior status. While discrimination and segregation translated into a materially measurable loss of opportunity and resources for nonwhites, they also stripped many of the less tangible right to live with dignity.

Focusing on Los Angeles and New York, two of the nation's centers of war production, this chapter investigates how race discrimination and police violence limited the social mobility of African Americans and Mexican Americans, marked their physical and discursive bodies as threats to the stability of the home front, and dehumanized them, often in public view.¹⁶ Despite the increase in the number of war industry jobs for nonwhites following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, employers continued to limit access to jobs for African Americans and Mexican Americans, stunted their upward mobility, and characterized them as inferior workers. Big-city law enforcement viewed them as criminal and dangerous—perceptions that led to increasing use of violence as a method of social and political control. The lives of many nonwhites in



Figure 1. Wartime segregation in a Los Angeles theater, ca. 1942. Alice McGrath Papers, 1490 b2 f11 r8, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

the early 1940s were thus defined in part by the denial of their dignity by forces borne of the wartime political economy.

WARTIME IN THE CITY OF ANGELS

Perhaps more than any other region in the United States, the West experienced an industrial boom during World War II. Driven by such traditional war industries as aircraft construction and shipbuilding, along with the production of large amounts of raw materials including steel, aluminum, and oil, the western economy sustained remarkable growth. During the war years the region attracted upwards of \$40 billion in funds from the federal government, and a lion's share of this money was funneled into California factories producing war materials.¹⁷ New factories and service industries stimulated extensive networks of military and science centers in Los Angeles and San Diego, creating a desperate need for workers all along the Pacific Coast.¹⁸

The prospect of employment increased the flow of migrants into Southern California. California's population grew by nearly 4 million

people in the 1940s, equaling almost half of all migrants from east of the Mississippi River.¹⁹ The growth of ship and aircraft construction industries helped fuel the continuation of the Great Migration, which included more than a quarter of a million African Americans from the Deep South, as well as the immigration of more than 500,000 Mexicans from south of the border.²⁰ In 1940, on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II, Los Angeles was home to 64,000 African Americans and at least 220,000 ethnic Mexicans, of whom more than 65,000 were Mexican immigrants.²¹

Despite the growth of war industries in Southern California, however, many recent arrivals found it difficult to secure employment during the initial war years. Very few African Americans, in particular, worked for the major military contractors when the United States entered the war. In 1941, for example, Douglas Aircraft Corporation employed only 10 African Americans out of more than 30,000 employees, North American Aviation, Inc., employed 8 African Americans out of 12,500 employees, Lockheed-Vega employed 54 black workers out of 48,000 employees, and out of nearly 3,000 employees, Bethlehem Shipbuilding employed only 2 African Americans. Mexican Americans were employed in war industry jobs in larger numbers, as evident in their making up nearly 10 percent of Bethlehem employees.

Although the Mexican American population was nearly four times that of African Americans in the Los Angeles area, Mexican Americans entered the job market at a lower rate. Employer arguments against hiring Mexican Americans included beliefs that “the average Mexican doesn’t seem to be in the market for jobs,” “they [Mexicans] probably expect to get agricultural work, or construction labor,” or “they do not have confidence in themselves or in the Employment Service.”²² The line between Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals was often blurred, as both groups were excluded from the war effort because of their ethnicity, language, or in the case of Mexican nationals, nationality. Both groups were also often considered incapable of adequately performing skilled labor, acquiring the education needed for higher-level jobs, or simply satisfying the cultural expectations of war workers to be suitably “American.” The special committee on Mexican relations of the 1942 Los Angeles County Grand Jury, for example, argued in a letter to the U.S. secretary of war that even U.S.-born Mexican Americans were often suspected of being undocumented noncitizens and, along with their Mexican national counterparts, often denied war industry jobs at the same time they were freely drafted into the armed forces.²³ On the other

hand, as historian Neil Foley has argued, compared to most African American workers, the growing Mexican American middle class was able to more effectively declare a white racial identity, in what would emerge as a common strategy for many Mexican Americans to demand equal citizenship.²⁴

The largest corporations in California denied violating Executive Order 8802, whereby the president prohibited race discrimination in employment. In fact, however, a number of them did rely on racist hiring practices, particularly when it came to African American applicants. North American Aviation, for example, circulated public statements throughout 1941 that African Americans would be hired only as janitors and that it did not want African Americans working for the company who were “too light, too smart or too young.” The owner of Paulsen and Nardon Company of Los Angeles similarly declared that he “would not hire Negroes if he could help it, that he didn’t see any need to employ Negroes when he could get sufficient good white help.” Ironically, however, many of these same companies, including Douglas Aircraft, North American Aviation, Bethlehem Shipbuilding, and Consolidated Aircraft Corporation, claimed there was no evidence of racial bias in their hiring process. The Vultee Aircraft Company in the Los Angeles area went even argued that the fact that the company had never hired an African American did not prove discrimination.²⁵ Historian Josh Sides concludes that “both within and outside the workplace, African Americans encountered disheartening and capricious restrictions that made economic parity with whites virtually impossible.”²⁶ On the whole, the track record for defense corporations in Southern California during the early war years shows that they only reluctantly hired non-white workers and relegated those they did hire to the lowest-paid positions regardless of skill and denied them any opportunity for upward mobility, unionization, or long-term job security.

Given the challenges many African Americans and Mexican Americans faced in securing defense industry jobs in the area, a number of Los Angeles-based organizations pressed for enlarging the role of nonwhites in the war effort. Following the lead of national efforts to desegregate the armed forces and the domestic workplace, including those of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and A. Philip Randolph’s March on Washington, several social reform groups in Los Angeles—among them the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Citizens Committee for Latin American Youth (CCLAY), and an organization of area high school staff and teach-

ers—advocated the hiring of Mexican American and African American youth in defense jobs. Heeding calls by local officials and the general public to help defend the country, many Mexican American and African American community leaders considered employment as a welder, woodworker, sheet metal worker, or riveter in shipbuilding and aircraft construction as prized opportunities to contribute to the war effort. Many groups sponsored programs in “war emergency and defense” devoted to strengthening public morality in wartime, training workers for war industry jobs, and even providing free lodging and food for youth arriving from outside the Los Angeles area in search of employment.²⁷ To meet their goal of integrating African Americans and Mexican Americans into the wartime economy, however, many community-based organizations were forced to recognize that systemic race discrimination continued to exclude many of their constituents from full participation. The Los Angeles council of the National Negro Congress (NNC), for example, argued that the discrimination against African Americans in defense industries was of the same ilk as other Jim Crow policies aimed at limiting the upward mobility of black communities.²⁸ For many African Americans and Mexican Americans, participation in wartime employment was a way to improve one’s socioeconomic position and demonstrate national loyalty by performing normative U.S. identities in a time of crisis.

Those concerned with the plight of nonwhite workers often argued that race discrimination in war industries was counterproductive because it limited the number of able-bodied Americans contributing to the war effort. In a speech in March 1943 Charlotta Bass, owner of the African American newspaper the *California Eagle* and first black member of the Los Angeles County Grand Jury, determined that racial discrimination greatly hampered the manufacture of airplanes and ships in Los Angeles. She emphasized that African American women, in particular, were often discharged from low-level positions at aircraft plants for little or no reason, that employers prevented promotion of qualified black workers, and that in workplaces where the American Federation of Labor (AFL) had a strong presence, most nonwhite workers were refused skilled positions. African American and Mexican American women who did obtain lower-end positions, Bass pointed out, were exploited by poor wages, exclusion from unions, and lack of upward mobility. Bass claimed that these undemocratic practices not only limited production but, ultimately, endangered the lives of men fighting on the front lines.²⁹

Because of increasing labor shortages and thanks to the work of Bass,

the CCLAY, and other like-minded Angelinos, the numbers of African Americans and Mexican Americans employed in war industry jobs rose dramatically as U.S. involvement in the war deepened. By early 1943, the numbers of African American workers in the aircraft construction industry rose to 2,000 employees at Douglas Aircraft, 2,500 at North American Aviation, 1,700 at Lockheed-Vega, and 800 at Vultee and Consolidated. The shipyards also saw the number of African American workers rise by 1943, with 1,200 employed by California Shipping, 400 by Western Pipe and Steel, 300 by Bethlehem, 300 by Consolidated, 200 by Los Angeles Dry Dock, and 150 by Haagson. By 1944, nearly 15 percent of shipyard workers in Los Angeles were Mexican American, including over 1,300 at California Shipping alone.³⁰

While the intensifying labor shortage led to more jobs for African Americans and Mexican Americans, and thus more workplace interaction between the two groups, inequality between them and white workers persisted. Most nonwhite workers were hired for positions requiring the lowest skill, leaving them at the bottom of company payrolls and with fewer benefits than white workers had. Access to higher-paying jobs with better chances of promotion was particularly restricted for African American workers, who did not fare as well as Mexican Americans in securing war industry employment during the war's initial years. African American workers were also denied consistent protection of organized labor. In fact, although the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) began recruiting blacks once the United States entered the war, most unions would not admit African Americans. Some unions, including several made up of Los Angeles shipbuilding workers, advocated "white only" admissions. Others allowed Mexicans, Filipinos, and Chinese, but refused African Americans.³¹

The segregation and racist treatment experienced by African American shipyard workers is chronicled in the brilliant 1940s novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by Chester Himes. Himes's main character in the novel, Bob Jones, arrives in Los Angeles from Cleveland in the fall of 1941 in search of a job. Jones describes his search when he says, "it wasn't being refused employment in the plants so much. When I got here practically the only job a Negro could get was service in the white folks' kitchens. But it wasn't that so much. It was the look on the people's faces when you asked them about a job." Throughout the novel, Jones, who secures a job as a foreman in a shipbuilding plant, describes the daily racial tension between blacks and whites, the refusal of whites to work with blacks, and his own frustration, which eventually leads to his demotion.³²

Residential patterns and policies also segregated most African Americans and Mexican Americans from native-born whites and in close proximity to other nonwhites and immigrants. By the early 1940s, most Mexican Americans were concentrated on the LA's east side, in such areas as Boyle Heights and Belvedere, barrios marked by poverty, poor schooling, and limited growth potential. Although such neighborhoods were home to the majority of the city's Mexican Americans, they were by no means ethnically exclusive. Historian George Sanchez has found that, "in almost every section of Los Angeles where Mexicans lived, they shared neighborhoods with other ethnic groups," including Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Jewish, and African Americans, as well as recent European immigrants.³³

Carey McWilliams, chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing in California, and future chair of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, described one typical Mexican American barrio of nearly a thousand people in Los Angeles. He noted leaking roofs, doors and windows in need of repair, few kitchen sinks, hardly any modern plumbing or flush toilets, and much evidence of overcrowding. According to McWilliams, such conditions were easy to find in Mexican barrios throughout Southern California. Such poor housing, he noted, "narrows the range of employment opportunities; reduces the opportunities for cultural adjustment, both for groups and individuals, and also makes for discrimination. It would be folly indeed to deny that Mexicans are victimized by race-prejudice in Los Angeles County, and, for that matter, in many other areas."³⁴ McWilliams cited living conditions in the Hick's neighborhood in the El Monte area as a case in point. The ethnic Mexican residents there experienced high rates of disease, malnutrition, and infant mortality; lacked refrigeration and indoor plumbing; and averaged less than three rooms total in a dwelling housing almost six people. The entire Hick's camp was found to have only one bathtub, owned by an African American originally from Virginia who was married to a Mexican woman.³⁵

Although different ethnic groups intermingled and shared residential districts, black settlement in Los Angeles was concentrated in a few locations. During the early war years, these areas included a corridor of city blocks stretching south of downtown along Central Avenue and through Little Tokyo, left vacant after the Japanese American internment. The growth of the Central Avenue district, which by 1940 was home to half of the city's black population, stemmed from restrictive covenants and block restrictions enforced during the first decades of the twentieth cen-

tury. By the outbreak of World War II, African Americans made up more than 4 percent of the city's population, and Central Avenue served as the center of black living and business. When thousands of African Americans arrived in Los Angeles looking for employment in war industries, most prior patterns of segregation held firm, and many found it difficult to find homes outside the blocks surrounding Central Avenue or Little Tokyo.³⁶ In both areas, African American residents often occupied small, subdivided single-family apartments designed to maximize tenant occupancy. As more people settled in these areas, many moving in with relatives on arrival in the city, living conditions deteriorated. Historian Josh Sides characterizes the available housing in Little Tokyo—a community designed for roughly 30,000 people that was home to more than 80,000 in the early 1940s—as “grossly substandard, commonly characterized by flimsy partitioning, dangerous overcrowding, and inadequate plumbing and sewer problems.”³⁷

The continued immigration of African Americans and Mexicans into Los Angeles led to the growth of ethnic neighborhoods and multi-ethnic interaction in the workplace, and forced area leaders to deal head-on with segregation and race discrimination. While African American and Mexican American activists pushed for full inclusion in U.S. society (see chapter 2), city authorities were not always so progressive in their thinking about race. Race discrimination in employment worked in tandem with residential segregation to concentrate African American and Mexican American populations in certain sections of the city—and also made it easier for city officials to police nonwhite communities and address any potential problems of crime or disruptive behavior in these areas.

Following U.S. entry into the war in late 1941, tension grew between city law enforcement and nonwhite communities. Historian Edward Escobar argues that the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) was allowed newfound autonomy by city leaders in hiring, training, and performance practices. This professionalization of the LAPD coincided with increasing public fear of the alleged criminality and immorality of nonwhite youth, popular perceptions exacerbated by wartime migration, employment, and settlement patterns. The result was an LAPD crackdown on crime accompanied by verbal and physical abuse against African Americans and Mexican Americans, reflecting a view of nonwhites as dangerous threats to the peace and stability of the U.S. home front. By harassing and arresting nonwhite youth for everything from walking in the wrong (i.e., white) part of town or driving too nice a car, the police rendered the physical bodies of African American and Mexican

American youth important sites on which the boundaries of the national polity were enforced.³⁸

From late 1941 to late 1943, the relationship between the LAPD and Mexican American Los Angeles was hostile and explosive. Harassment of Mexican American youth was evident on city streets; in theaters, restaurants, and nightclubs; and even on playgrounds. Officers of the Hollenbeck police precinct, in particular, were among the most feared in Los Angeles. In a series of incidents beginning in November of 1941, at least five Mexican American boys between the ages of fifteen and nineteen were removed from the Evergreen Playground in East Los Angeles only to be kicked, cursed, and beaten by Hollenbeck officers.³⁹

In another incident involving Hollenbeck officers, in mid-1942, eighteen-year-old Aurora Maldonado was walking with several of her friends to the local market just a few blocks from her East Los Angeles home. As they rounded a corner, Aurora saw her brother Pete approaching on the opposite side of the street. Before they had a chance to meet up with one another, an LAPD patrol car pulled over, stopped Pete, and began to question him. After Pete told the white officer who had gotten out of the car that he was visiting home while on furlough from Camp Berkeley, Texas, where he was stationed in the army, the officer allowed him to continue on his way. Then, according to Aurora, the patrol car left, only to make a U-turn and circle back to stop Pete a second time. This time, a Mexican American officer got out of the car, asked Pete for his furlough papers, and ordered him into the backseat. When Pete asked why, the Mexican American officer began to hit him in the face and stomach. As a gathering crowd from the neighborhood was held back by more police arriving in squad cars, Aurora ran to get her mother. When Mrs. Maldonado arrived and protested her son being beaten and arrested, officers pushed her to the ground. Pete passed out in the backseat, and “the next thing I remember,” he later recounted, “I was in a little room at Hollenbeck Police Station. I was all cut up on my head and blood was coming down my head and back. I could just see black, but couldn’t see nothing real cause my face was so beat up. I just heard the cops calling me “marijuana.” Every time they slapped me they called me “marijuana.” I tried to get up, but every time I got up I fell down. The last blow I remember was when I got hit over the eye. I don’t know from there who hit me.”⁴⁰ Pete Maldonado’s beating at the hands of the LAPD forces us to recognize that the physical bodies of Pete and his mother served as sites on which the police, as agents of the state, exercised their authority.

The beating of Pete Maldonado reflects the chronic tension that existed between the Mexican American community and the LAPD. It also raises important questions about the politics of youth and intra-ethnic class conflict in the early war years. For example, how did the behavior of Mexican American and African American youth become an important part of the debate about the stability of the home front and the fate of the nation at war? Pete's service in the armed forces did little to stem his abuse at the hands of the LAPD. In fact, his army service might have exacerbated the situation. The idea of poor Mexican American youth fighting for U.S. freedom overseas contradicted their characterization as delinquent hoodlums. Just as membership in the armed forces signaled national belonging, a brutal beating at the hands of city police marked nonwhite youth's public performance of their racial identity as threatening to white hegemony. Moreover, while we cannot be certain why the Mexican American officer apparently initiated the violence (perhaps to win his white partner's approval?), his behavior highlights the conflict between working-class Mexican Americans and the LAPD, as well as a deeper, class conflict within the Mexican American community itself.

While young African American and Mexican American men were the most consistent targets of police harassment, young women were not spared. One incident began after Esther Guerrero and Sara Chavez, two teens from Los Angeles, chose the best seats available at their local movie theater and sat down to enjoy the show. Before they could get comfortable, however, they were asked to move by an usher who told them they were sitting in a section where "persons of Mexican extraction" were not allowed. When Chavez and Guerrero refused to move, protesting that no one else was sitting in the area, the manager of the theater was summoned. The confrontation escalated, and police officers were called to remove the young women from their seats. In front of the parents of one of the girls, who were also in the audience and began to argue with management, the police embarrassed and intimidated the girls until they were frightened enough to change their seats rather than be kicked out of the theater.⁴¹

Segments of the Mexican American community responded to such police behavior by demanding equal protection of the laws, a position that was well intentioned but also served to further alienate many working-class nonwhite youth. The Citizens Committee for Latin American Youth (CCLAY) protested the LAPD's treatment of Mexican American boys, who they claimed were all of good character, in a letter to the

Hollenbeck Police Station. “We do not believe that vicious youngsters should be mollicuddled [*sic*],” CCLAY wrote. “It is our position that a police officer should be possessed of an innate sense of proportion to enable him to distinguish between the vicious juvenile and the good juvenile. If the officer places them both in the same category the inevitable result will create disrespect for the law on the part of those upon whom this Citizens Committee is depending to assist the Police Department in its program to curb juvenile delinquency.”⁴² By insisting that police officers be required to distinguish between “vicious” and “good” juveniles, CCLAY exposed the LAPD’s practice of “calling a Mexican a Mexican” regardless of whether any law was broken and irrespective of nationality or class status. At the same time, however, in response to valid concerns about intra-ethnic violence and crime among Mexican Americans, CCLAY did not protest LAPD officers’ aggressive approach toward those nonwhite youth who may have been guilty of such behavior. The CCLAY conformed its indictment of police violence to complement a broader wartime political agenda that stressed assimilation and patriotism and valued “good” Mexican Americans who obeyed police officers despite their often racist and violent practices. Despite forcefully claiming that LAPD abuse was disproportionately directed at Mexican American and African American youth, CCLAY left unexamined the assumption that “bad” nonwhite youth threatened home-front society and subverted the war effort through crime, drugs, and street violence.

Segregation, race discrimination in war industry employment, and police violence in Los Angeles were fueled in part by the long-standing perceptions of city leaders and residents that the region had a “Mexican problem.” Ever since congressional debates over the admission of Mexicans to the United States in the 1920s, the coerced repatriation of more than 500,000 ethnic Mexicans in the early 1930s, and institution of the Bracero program to import Mexican workers during and after the war, Mexicans and Mexican Americans in the city had often been viewed as either an obstacle to progress or people to be exploited for their labor.⁴³ Such negative views of Mexican Americans and Mexicans in particular and nonwhites more generally—exacerbated by growing numbers of African Americans and first-generation U.S.-born children of Mexican immigrants—elicited aggressive attempts to strengthen citywide segregation and discrimination. Throughout the early years of World War II, fear spread among whites that African Americans and Mexican Americans were invading the city, siphoning wartime opportunities from white citizens, and eroding the city’s wartime stability. More than a chronicle

of injustice and inequality, race discrimination in war industry employment, segregation and settlement patterns, and police violence constituted a dehumanizing assault on the dignity of the area's African American and Mexican American populations.

WARTIME IN NEW YORK CITY

In a letter written from Europe during the fall of 1942, Private Sal Thomas, a black soldier from New York City, illustrated the contradiction of fighting for democracy overseas while civil rights were not fully protected on the home front. Noting the similarities between southern whites and "Hitler's Aryan race," Thomas wrote, "I wonder how come those people preach similar doctrines of lust and false superiority and yet are opposed on the battlefield of this war? Is it that the crackers don't want Hitler to tell them how to run their Negroes? I hope the censor will pardon my idiotic babble and realize I am just a simple 'ex-Harlem' fool who probably couldn't last as long as a white man if we were both struck in the heart with a bullet. Ha ha, aren't I a scream?"⁴⁴ Thomas's indictment of U.S. racism from abroad underscores the fact that service in the army or navy did not necessarily curtail discrimination in the military or workplace or in everyday life on the home front.

Although industrial growth in the Northeast did not match that in the U.S. West, New Yorkers expected young African Americans to follow Thomas's lead and toil for the war effort. Early on in the war, the state of New York had more consumer industries than military or other government-funded manufacturers. In 1940 and 1941 New York ranked seventh among states in per-capita value of military contracts. Of the war jobs that were available, the number of African American hires were paltry in 1941: as only 5 percent of war employee trainees were black; one of fifty African Americans who completed training programs were placed by the U.S. Employment Service; and African Americans held only 142 of the more than 29,000 war industry jobs in ten New York factories.⁴⁵ Over 40 percent of New York City's African American population was on some form of government relief, and many still worked on Works Progress Administration jobs. A year later, in 1942, unemployment rates for African Americans in the city were higher than they had been at the end of the Great Depression in 1939. Historian Dominic J. Capeci Jr. argues that "everyone except black people benefited from the immediate prosperity the war brought."⁴⁶

Few war jobs were available to the large numbers of blacks in the

city. Although New York City did not attract as many African American migrants during the war years as other cities did, it had been a popular destination for blacks from around the country throughout the Great Depression. Like the young Malcolm X, who came to New York from the Midwest via Detroit and Boston, nearly 150,000 blacks flocked to New York in the 1930s in search of better economic opportunity. By 1940 more than 450,000 African Americans lived in New York.

As the war unfolded, however, the number of defense-related jobs in New York rose sharply, and so did black employment. In 1942 the city saw a 40 percent increase in the number of industrial jobs available, and in 1943 New York received 12 percent of all navy contracts.⁴⁷ Employment opportunities for African Americans in war production increased dramatically between 1940 and 1944 because of the growing demand for labor, the larger number of defense contracts awarded in the city, the success of the Double V campaign to achieve victory abroad against fascism and at home for civil rights, the national publicity that African American-led protests like the March on Washington attracted, the pressure such activism placed on President Roosevelt to address discrimination, and subsequent local efforts in New York and other urban areas to secure positions in aviation and other war-related businesses. Nevertheless, such jobs remained difficult for African Americans to obtain due to discriminatory hiring practices. When hired, moreover, black workers were largely placed in the most menial positions with little chance for advancement.

Due in part to the size of New York's African American community, efforts to integrate African Americans in New York into national defense operations drew much attention. Politicians and civil rights activists alike participated in conferences, forums, and study groups encouraging African Americans, particularly black youth, to support U.S. victory in the war.⁴⁸ Prior to establishment of the federal Fair Employment Practices Committee, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, known since his response to the Harlem Riot in 1935 as friendly to African American New York, participated with other national leaders on a committee for "Negro Americans in Defense Industries." The New York governor's office also requested state legislation prohibiting discrimination in businesses that affected the public interest and created a governor's committee on discrimination in employment to deal specifically with hiring practices in defense industries. In a 1941 memorandum entitled "American Negro in National Defense Industries," La Guardia argued that the participation of African American residents of the city in the

war effort went hand in hand with democracy.⁴⁹ Similarly, in a memo to “all holders of defense contracts,” Sidney Hillman, director of the Office of Production Management in Washington, D.C., urged the hiring of black workers and “every available source of labor capable of producing defense materials . . . in the present emergency.”⁵⁰

All along the eastern seaboard, African American political leaders argued that supporting the Allied war effort and defeating fascism abroad was the most effective strategy in securing improved civil rights and equality at home. These patriotic sentiments were championed by African American political organizations, many of which emphasized the role of black youth in current struggles for freedom. In its 1942 Fourth of July Declaration for Negro Youth, for instance, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) trumpeted:

Up from the fields of cotton and corn, out of the pits and mills and factories, from the schools, churches, and club rooms, in the armed forces and naval stations, amid the shot and shell of the battle front, Negro Americans will come forth to the celebration of the Fourth of July. On this day we will pledge our strength, our talents, our lives to the cause of Victory in this war against the Hitler-Axis enemies of our country and all mankind. We Negro youth love our country and the high principles of Freedom, Equality, and Opportunity and the dignity of man upon which America was founded.⁵¹

Less than a year later, in April of 1943, Edward Strong, the national secretary of the National Negro Congress stressed that “it is essential to realize that freedom of all people will be determined by the outcome of the world-wide struggle now in progress against fascism.” In his address to the Eastern Seaboard Conference on the Problems of the War and the Negro People, Strong noted that if the reactionary coalition of Hitler, his partners in Tokyo and Rome, and his American colleagues succeeded in vanquishing the Allied powers, an era of darkness unprecedented in human history would ensue. “Consequently,” continued Strong, “the liberation struggle for any oppressed people at this crucial hour in world history must be based upon the self-evident, fundamental and decisive truth that all people who would be free will advance their cause by joining the anti-fascist coalition of the thirty United Nations.”⁵² The conference heralded the four freedoms pronounced by President Roosevelt—freedom of speech and worship, and freedom from want and from fear—and stressed the full use of manpower, protection of democratic rights, and improvement in wartime living standards, including the use of price and rent controls.

Strong, the SNYC, and many other advocates of African American

equality were careful to couch any claims to national belonging and equality in the anti-fascist rhetoric of the wartime United States. The New York City conference that Strong addressed was well attended by representatives from a variety of circles. The labor movement, for example, was represented by members of the National Maritime Union; the Automobile Workers of America; the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine workers; and various segments of the AFL. The audience's diversity led Strong to conclude his speech by saying that all the attendees had come "because they are firmly convinced that such a coalition has been proved to be the soundest strategy in fighting for common aims and in opposing those common enemies who are out to destroy labor, the Negro, the Jew, and the foreign born."⁵³

Despite calls for the employment of African Americans, it remained difficult for African Americans to find work in war production plants. Despite denials to the contrary, most corporate employers on the East Coast, like their western counterparts, commonly discriminated in hiring. Most excluded African Americans from the most skilled positions. In separate letters to Mayor La Guardia, three of the largest aircraft companies in the state of New York—Brewster Aeronautical Corporation, Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation, and Republic Aviation Corporation—claimed that the minimal presence of African Americans in the aviation industry was due only to their late start in the business, not to discrimination.⁵⁴ Responding to pressures from both federal and local governments, some employers did attempt to address their poor records of hiring African Americans. Efforts to diversify employee ranks, however, translated into tokenism at best and a confirmation of racist hiring and workplace behavior at worst. At Republic Aviation, for example, a program to hire more African American employees consisted of training one African American for skilled work and training more only if the "experiment" was successful.⁵⁵

Employers denials of racism and the lack of any systematic policy to encourage the hiring of nonwhites had a dire impact on the lives of African Americans in New York City. As in Los Angeles, enrolling in job training programs and securing employment were often unpleasant and dehumanizing experiences for black applicants. In its pamphlet "Growing up in Harlem," the board of directors of the West Harlem Council of Social Agencies declared the situation particularly acute for young blacks. In many African American communities of New York City, claimed the council, youthful residents faced such limited opportunities for jobs in public utilities, defense plants, and other industrial and

mercantile establishments that many had to rely on at least some form of public assistance.⁵⁶

Throughout the early war years, the mayor's office was flooded with letters from concerned African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Italians, Jews, and other minority constituencies struggling to secure employment.⁵⁷ La Guardia, a leader well known for showing sympathy for the needs of New York's African American community, received an especially large number of complaints from black residents. One typical letter told the story of African American Harrold Lindo, who, despite a college education, ten years' experience as a clerk, and a high score on the entrance exam, was passed over no fewer than twelve times for both junior- and senior-level positions as a typist in the United States Civil Service Commission. Lindo objected not only to open racial discrimination by governmental agencies but also to the lack of any recourse to protest such treatment.⁵⁸ His experience differed little from those of Rebecca Elliot, George Sclier, Pearl Cotton, and countless other individuals seeking defense jobs who wrote letters to the mayor and were often "told very frankly that firms do not desire to employ colored people."⁵⁹ One Harlem resident asserted that the city's African Americans were frustrated that their "sincerest and most earnest efforts to become part of the defense program have met with evasion and even forthright rejection."⁶⁰

By the beginning of America's involvement in the war, most African Americans who had migrated to New York in search of employment were concentrated in predominantly poor neighborhoods. In 1940 some 107,000 African Americans resided in Brooklyn, and another 52,000 in the Bronx and Queens. But Harlem, home to over 60 percent of the city's black population, was the center of African American cultural and political life.⁶¹ Covering nearly four hundred square blocks in northern Manhattan, Harlem ran south to north from 110th to 155th Street and east to west from 3rd Avenue to Amsterdam Avenue. As the city's population grew, so did Harlem, and its geographic boundaries were stretched to include an increasingly diverse population, including Italian, Puerto Rican, and even Irish communities.

Like stable jobs in war industries, quality housing in other areas of New York was difficult to come by because of overt discrimination.⁶² One African American woman, Mercedes Owens endured humiliation in securing an apartment in an uptown neighborhood near 145th Street. After inquiring with several housing agencies about available properties, she was told, among other things, "We don't rent to colored people,

only white.” When Owens complained to housing authorities that she deserved better treatment, one responded, “We don’t have colored people upsetting our houses. You can make any complaints you want to, it don’t mean a thing.” Following her experiences, and in the spirit of the Double V campaign, Owens noted that racial intolerance in New York City, especially where housing was concerned, formed the very essence of Nazi ideology.⁶³ After relating her story to Mayor La Guardia in a lengthy letter, Owens received little sympathy or aid. The mayor’s office responded by highlighting La Guardia’s record against discrimination and noting that there is “no provision of law which prevents the owner of a multiple dwelling from renting apartments to tenants whom he considers desirable.”⁶⁴ Such limited housing options left African Americans concentrated in Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and other largely black neighborhoods throughout the city.⁶⁵ Moreover, despite its predominantly working-class character, Harlem suffered from higher rents and food prices than most other sections of the city.

As in other areas of the country, the use of force by city police in New York helped maintain a racial hierarchy in which white trumped black. Amidst wartime rhetoric demanding a stable and secure home front, city authorities sought to control any semblance of racial unrest. In New York, as in Detroit, Philadelphia, and elsewhere, African Americans faced seemingly routine police violence. By 1942 the New York Police Department (NYPD) increasingly employed methods of aggressive social control, providing further evidence that popular calls for national unity were accompanied by volatile, often violent, race relations on the home front.

Much of the African American community in New York viewed the NYPD as guilty of racist conduct. The black press, including the NAACP’s the *People’s Voice* and the *Amsterdam News*, regularly focused on incidents that illustrated the explosive relationship between the NYPD and African American New York. One case that sparked citywide debate over police brutality involved Wallace Armstrong, a young African American who was killed in Harlem by white police officer Harold Reidman in May of 1942. The mentally unbalanced Armstrong was to have been committed to the mental institute of Bellevue Hospital by his father, who had requested the aid of police in transporting his son. When Armstrong rebelled at the idea of being manhandled by the police, a scuffle ensued. According to eyewitnesses, Reidman beat Armstrong heavily on the head before the youth produced a pocket knife to defend himself. Although Armstrong did not

attempt to use the knife, Reidman drew his pistol and threatened to shoot the young man. Armstrong then stumbled and, in a stupor, began to amble aimlessly down the block, Reidman following with his pistol drawn. After the two traveled several blocks, backup squad cars arrived to find a gathering crowd of angry Harlemites. Armstrong, still bloody and disoriented from the initial assault, was beaten again with nightclubs by at least four officers. When they finally stopped, Officer Reidman stepped back and said he'd "like to shoot this fellow." When another cop answered, "Go ahead and do it," Reidman obliged and fired twice at Armstrong until his body slumped to the pavement. As mounted police officers attempted to disperse the crowd, an ambulance arrived to transport Wallace to Harlem Hospital. He was announced dead on arrival.⁶⁶

The same month Wallace Armstrong was killed, high-profile clashes between African American citizens and white police officers spread from Manhattan to suburban Long Island. Although relations between the NYPD and African Americans had been tense in several Long Island neighborhoods since the 1940 beating of a young black teenager named Tets Park for resisting arrest, the increasing frequency of police beatings and killings pushed the African American residents of Hempstead Town to strike back. The conflict began after two young African American soldiers who had been involved in an argument at a local nightclub were subsequently accosted by white NYPD officers. Witnesses later claimed that the officers' methods were "somewhat drastic and totally uncalled for." According to the bystanders, at least two officers beat one of the soldiers over the head with a pistol and dragged him along the street toward their squad car in order to take him to the police station less than three blocks away. Before the evening was over, black residents of Hempstead Town converged on South Franklin Street where the beating had occurred to throw bricks and rocks at NYPD officers and break patrol car windshields. The NYPD responded to the melee, which lasted for over half an hour.⁶⁷ It is no coincidence that black soldiers were the targets of police violence in this and other instances. African American and other nonwhite servicemen embodied the contradiction of fighting for democracy overseas when such freedoms were not readily available at home, and their physical bodies often became the sites of struggle in which police, the public, and the youth themselves expressed claims to national belonging or sought to patrol its boundaries.

While the Armstrong and Hempstead Town cases might be extreme examples of police brutality, they were not isolated incidents. As U.S.

involvement in the war deepened and calls for home-front unity grew louder, the use of force against black youth by the NYPD seemed to increase. The *People's Voice* valiantly publicized such police violence. The newspaper reported in April 1943, for example, that NYPD officers patrolling Harlem kicked African Americans Cecil Harris, Steve Dubois, and Alonzo Green in the stomach and groin until the youth were wet with their own urine. Arrested, they were spat on by officers at the police station.⁶⁸ In another incident in June of the same year, *The People's Voice* reported, Fred Brown of Harlem was beaten with an iron bar and framed for disorderly conduct by a plain-clothes police officer.⁶⁹ In part because of the efforts of NAACP-sponsored journalism, police violence against black youth in the early war years emerged as a critical issue on the agendas of many African American religious and political leaders who wanted African Americans to be equal participants in the nation's effort to win the war.

Although young men suffered the brunt of police violence, young women were also targeted. In April of 1943, for example, Ethelen Burnett, a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore who had grown up in Harlem, was beaten by a subway policeman without provocation in the men's room of the 207th Street station. Like the Wallace Armstrong and Hempstead Town incidents, the attack on Burnett mobilized the Harlem community to protest the mistreatment of African American youth by law enforcement. Immediately following the Burnett beating, parents organized a mass meeting at the Golden Gate Ballroom to protest police aggression in Harlem. The event included addresses by Councilman Adam Clayton Powell and several other high-profile African American political figures.⁷⁰

The growing use of police force against African American youth in the city further politicized the Harlem community. A collection of more than two hundred black and white New Yorkers, for instance, formed the City-Wide Citizens Committee on Harlem (CCCH) in late 1941. Aimed at improving life in Harlem, the CCCH battled juvenile delinquency and discrimination, fought for child care and employment opportunities, and served as an important political force in the community.

Much of New York's African American population struggled to join the U.S. war machine. The message from city leaders and wartime propaganda was clear that African Americans should be active participants in war production, yet blacks were also increasingly the targets of race discrimination in hiring practices and police violence. *New York Age* columnist Ludlow W. Werner captured the contradictions and frustra-

tions of many African American New Yorkers when he wrote the following lines in May of 1943:

I am an American, but if I live in New York City, I pay higher rents and live in more squalid quarters than other citizens.

I am an American, but if I live in New York, I may not be employed . . . except as porter, elevator operator or in a menial capacity for the most part . . .

I am an American, but if I live in New York City, I may take out membership only in the Negro Y.M.C.A.'s.

I am an American, but if I am a skilled worker, I may not become a member of the A.F. of L. Union except in a few rare instances.

I am an American, but if I am accused of a crime in the North, I am always guilty before I am tried.

I am an American, but if I am accused of a crime in the South, I may not even face trial—I may be lynched. . . .

I am an American, but I am a Negro.⁷¹

THE POLITICS OF RACE IN THE WARTIME UNITED STATES

The volatile race relations in Los Angeles and New York were local manifestations of national patterns of segregation, discrimination, and police violence. Virtually every urban center, including Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, and Houston, experienced similar conditions that resulted in limited participation for nonwhites in the war effort. While New York and Los Angeles exemplified the increasingly tense relationship between employers, police, and nonwhite groups, the role of nonwhites in wartime society emerged as an important issue for the federal government as well.

For its part, the federal government addressed U.S. race relations by monitoring hiring practices in war industries and discouraging race discrimination. Spurred by the national attention focused on racism by A. Philip Randolph's proposed March on Washington and other instances of political activism, perhaps the most important of these efforts was a series of reports by the President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice (FEPC), which found discrimination against prospective African Americans and other nonwhite employees to be common practice. The FEPC was formed to implement Executive Order 8802, which outlawed discrimination in defense industry and federal hiring based on race, creed, color, or national origin. In its initial research and investigative reports, completed in October of 1941, the FEPC announced that race discrimination was indeed widespread in defense industries. The reports

highlighted numerous employer practices that ran afoul of Executive Order 8802, including requiring statements of race or religion on applications, barring nonwhite workers from participating in unions, and hiring nonwhite workers in custodial work in disingenuous attempts to adhere to the federal law.⁷² Moreover, the FEPC claimed employers must do more to reverse discriminatory hiring policies than simply issuing a statement of nondiscriminatory employment.

The results of FEPC efforts were mixed. The committee did contribute to some positive results for nonwhite hiring in war industries. Industrial jobs held by African Americans increased 13 percent between 1940 and 1944, training programs for African American students doubled in the same period, and African Americans made up 8 percent of all war workers by 1944, up from three percent in 1942.⁷³ As historian Alan Winkler argues, however, the FEPC “was never wholly effective” in addressing the problem of race discrimination, at least in part because “it was underfunded and understaffed from the beginning.”⁷⁴ Moreover, while it did recognize the prevalence of discrimination, the FEPC also claimed that the low number of nonwhite employees was due simply to a scarcity of African American and Mexican American applications. Despite its findings, the FEPC ultimately blamed the low numbers of nonwhite citizens in defense industries on African American and Mexican American communities themselves. In a 1942 report, for instance, the committee argued that “Mexicans and Negroes tend to make an unjustifiable issue of any failure to secure jobs.” In a December 1942 conference, over a year after the FEPC found glaring violations of Executive Order 8802, the U.S. Employment Service maintained that “when whites are not successful in securing jobs, they take it as a matter of course, but if Negroes fail, half of them will say it is because they are black.” African Americans and Mexican Americans were further falsely accused of not adequately seeking defense training because they feared traveling to white communities to attend classes.⁷⁵ Of course, it was rarely questioned why so few such classes were available in nonwhite areas of town.

Business and political leaders issued a range of responses to the FEPC findings. Some claimed that to get jobs, nonwhites need only upgrade their training for more skilled positions. Others, like the Georgia state director of vocational training, argued flatly against incorporating African Americans into defense jobs. “The need for these men [African Americans] as workers has not been established,” he claimed. “It would be a waste of public money to train them, and I would hate to be a party

to that waste.” Many African Americans and Mexican Americans believed the FEPC did little more than provide token employment and could have done much more to provide training in more skilled technical fields.⁷⁶ In the end, the resources, power, and foresight behind the FEPC were inadequate to addressing the problems of race discrimination in defense industry employment. Still, while the FEPC was unable to cure the nation’s deep-seated problems of race discrimination, it did, as historian Merl E. Reed suggests, spark debate and open political avenues for civil rights advocates that would widen in the years following World War II.⁷⁷

Despite their limitations, Executive Order 8802 and the FEPC were at least intended to help incorporate nonwhites into the war effort. Another executive order, initiated under the guise of national security, however, directly assaulted the dignity of a specific nonwhite group in the United States. Japanese Americans, not African Americans or Mexican Americans, were the primary target of Executive Order 9066. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, xenophobia and fear of further enemy incursions on U.S. soil grew, resulting in great public animosity toward Japanese Americans living on the West Coast. Concerns that Japanese Americans would work in concert with the Japanese as fifth-column saboteurs spread wildly in the press and among government officials, ultimately leading President Roosevelt to sign the executive order that authorized the incarceration of nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans living in the United States, at least two-thirds of whom were citizens. In the spring of 1942, in what was deemed by U.S. authorities a military necessity because of Pearl Harbor and Japanese military victories throughout Southeast Asia, both Issei (immigrants born in Japan) and Nisei (their U.S.-born, American citizen children), were banned from the West Coast. The U.S. War Relocation Authority directed them to leave their homes, bringing only what they could carry on their backs, and report to assembly centers all along the West Coast.

By the end of the summer, the bank accounts and property assets of Issei, who were barred from becoming U.S. citizens, had been liquidated, and virtually all West Coast Japanese Americans had been shipped by train to internment camps in the interior of the country. Surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards from the U.S. military, these camps were located in remote, desolate areas such as Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Topaz, Utah; Amache, Colorado; Jerome, Arkansas; and Manzanar and Tule Lake, California. Although a few thousand internees were released within a year, most remained incarcerated for several years, with the last

not being released until March 1946.⁷⁸ In addition to being imprisoned against their will and forced to leave real and personal property behind, internees of military age were soon drafted into the U.S. armed forces, a development that led several hundred young Japanese Americans to resist the draft. Ultimately, as legal scholar and historian Eric Muller suggests, the Japanese and Japanese Americans' "crime was their ethnicity, and the government had made them pay for it with their livelihoods, their possessions, their liberty, and their dignity."⁷⁹ The internment of Japanese Americans during World War II represents the starkest of reminders that race relations on the home front were tense, often violent, and were intertwined with ideas of national security and belonging, and involved the dignity of those caught in the middle of such politics.

While African Americans and Mexican Americans did not endure the horrors of internment, they did face formidable obstacles in striving to participate in the war effort and join a unified home front. Finding a place in the wartime United States meant having to deal with race discrimination and police violence—common experiences that were not simply the result of individual decisions and behavior but were, as indicated by the federal government's systematic effort to address such problems, deeply rooted in structural and institutional conditions of the U.S. political economy. More than just the misguided abuse of power by a few overly aggressive police officers or employers, the physical abuse of nonwhite youth and the reluctance to hire them in war industry jobs were part of an unwritten policy among city police departments, corporate America, and the general public to bar African Americans and Mexican Americans from full participation in U.S. society.

CONCLUSION

When the United States entered World War II after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the tension in race relations on the home front became more acute. Despite the eventual increase in the number of nonwhites hired in defense industries, many African Americans and Mexican Americans continued to be pushed to the margins of the war effort and the national polity. In the process, through discrimination and violence, their dignity was denied. The range of African American and Mexican American experiences in Los Angeles and New York illustrates that the contradictions between race, the political economy, and national belonging were national patterns that affected a diverse group of people. Bob Jones, Chester Himes's African American protagonist in *If He Hollers Let Him*

Go, further underscores the racial dimensions of life on the home front when he claims, “I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn’t tell the difference. ‘A yeller-bellied Jap’ coulda meant me too. I could always feel race trouble, serious trouble, never more than two feet off.”⁸⁰

In New York, Los Angeles, and other parts of the country, the explosiveness of race relations and the maltreatment of African American and Mexican American youth provoked a range of political responses. As juvenile delinquency came to be viewed in racial terms and as purported crime waves among young nonwhites came to be viewed as threats to wartime unity, the activities of African American and Mexican American youth were increasingly monitored by their own communities, city police, and powerful politicians. As the racialization of juvenile delinquency intensified, many Americans sought to shape the discourse and perceptions about African American and Mexican American youth in the United States, but only by speaking for them rather listening to them. Chapter 2 turns to civic conversations about race, class, and juvenile delinquency that burgeoned in Los Angeles and New York during World War II.