

Chapter 1

Wichita to Washington

Aldon Morris writes that “as a scholar, Walters led the way in the development of an approach that underscored the similarity of northern and southern racism and how these shared injustices provided the cultural and structural foundations on which a modern black freedom movement would flower.”¹ In his history of the Wichita and related sit-ins in the “Great Plains,” Walters wrote that the almost exclusive focus on the South was “inaccurate and incomplete” because “the effects of the slaveocracy of the rural South extended to the northern cities.”² For Walters, in the context of the Wichita sit-ins, it was important to correctly understand this history because “[t]he northern sit-ins constitute the beginnings of the continuum that resulted in the southern movement.”³ Kansas for several decades after Reconstruction was alluring to African Americans. Kansas’s history as a state begins in the struggle over slavery. The Kansas–Nebraska Act, passed by Congress in 1854, left it to the white settlers in Kansas to decide whether it would be admitted to the union as a slave or nonslave state. Pro-slavery advocates from Missouri and elsewhere fought bloody battles with antislavery settlers from New England and other states to determine the state’s future. The “bleeding of Kansas,” including John Brown’s bloody assaults on the would-be enslavers, foretold the Civil War and resulted in the state’s admission as a free state. This established for some African Americans the idea that Kansas was a kind of Promised Land. It was not. However, as Nell Irvin Painter writes, “the old abolitionist’s temperance Republicans ruled the state and they held out precisely the same welcome to black settlers as to white. This even-handed sense of fair play amounted to an open-armed welcome in comparison to much of the rest of the country.”⁴

To escape the repression and terrorism of the post-Reconstruction South, in the “Kansas Fever Exodus” of 1879, African Americans from Texas,

Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee begin a mass migration to Kansas. This spontaneous, popular migration, which Painter describes as “very possibly the first massive millenarian movement in the country’s history,” was led by the redoubtable Benjamin “Pap” Singleton.⁵ As a result of the publicity about Singleton’s 1879 sojourn, what Painter called “non-millenarian Blacks” began to consider moving to Kansas, but “in contrast to the Kansas fever expedition “they proceeded deliberately and cautiously.”⁶ In the early 1900s, Ronald Walters’s great-grandparents Lewis William Walters and Julia Melissa Rucker joined the non-millenarian migration, moving from Texas to Wichita after a brief stay in Oklahoma.

The Kansas that the Walters moved to in the 1890s was no racial promised land—no place in the country was—but while “no Canaan, it was a far cry from Mississippi and Louisiana. Relative to these states, Kansas was better in the 1880s and still better in the 1890s and early twentieth century. . . . To the degree that the Exodusters aimed to escape the South and the specter of re-enslavement, they succeeded. All in all, the Exodus to Kansas was a qualified but real success.”⁷

A qualified but real success might be used to characterize the Walters’s clan in Wichita. Walters in his application for the U.S. Foreign Service described his family: “my grandparents moved to Wichita in the early 1900s, making them one of the oldest and largest Negro families there.” He went on to note that while the family was not wealthy, its members possessed the “skills of mechanic, radio repairman, etc.” and that the “head of the clan,” his grandfather, was a “teacher and minister.”⁸

Walters’s great-grandparents, Lewis and Julia, had eleven children, all of whom eventually moved to Wichita. His grandfather, Lewis, the teacher and minister, attended Prairie View College in the 1880s. While it is not clear if he graduated, his advanced education for that time gave him status in the community, linking him to the self-help tradition of Booker T. Washington. Walters’s father Gilmar was born in 1921. Around 1937, he married Claudia Maxine Fray (called Maxine), his high school girlfriend. Newby writes that because Maxine attended Saint Augustine Episcopal Church, “it can be assumed her family held high status in the black community.”⁹

The Walters family had relatively high status in Wichita’s black community. First, the family was large; as noted, the patriarch, Lewis, had eleven children, and most of the siblings and their children had several children. In addition, the Walters’s “clan” was among the earliest of the city’s black residents. Newby writes that these two circumstances—the size and longevity—“made the family a prominent name in the black community.”¹⁰ Members of the family were independent businessmen—plumbers and, later, radio and television repairmen. Their customers and clients were mostly African Americans. Thus,

while not among the city's elite, professional class, they were "independent, not relying on whites for their livelihood."¹¹ The family was also a part of Wichita's black church and fraternal life; his grandfather was a member of the Prince Hall Masons and his grandmother of the Order of the Eastern Stars. This independence from whites "was a major source of pride for the Walters family."¹²

Walters's father, Gillmor, was known as a "race man," the Du Bosian archetype committed to uplift of the race. His experiences in World War II, as a Buffalo soldier and with the Tuskegee airmen, cultivated in him a cosmopolitan worldview. A musician, he organized a local union for African American musicians. Walters's mother, who frequently traveled with her husband during his military service, later became a civil rights investigator for the Kansas state government. Growing up in this prominent, race-conscious, and socially active family likely influenced Walters's race consciousness and activism, which is first observed during his high school days.

Walters was born in 1938. The Wichita of Walters's youth was characterized by "rampant" discrimination in public accommodations and the labor market.¹³ By the time that the first of the Walters's clan arrived, "racial tensions were high in Kansas. Rather than the openness that had attracted post-Reconstruction black migration, a vacillation on its policy prohibiting segregation was beginning in the state."¹⁴

Topeka, Kansas, was the lead plaintiff in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* case striking down race segregation in schools. In the definitive study of *Brown*, Richard Kluger reports that Kansas established segregation in its schools at the first meeting of its state legislature.¹⁵ Later, however, it vacillated, limiting segregation to schools in large cities, and then extending it to smaller ones. Between 1876 and 1879, segregation was required in elementary schools in cities of more than 15,000, but integrated education was maintained in high schools. In 1905, however, the state allowed Kansas City to reestablish segregated high schools.¹⁶ A similar ambivalence is observed in the state's laws regarding segregation of public accommodations, transportation, and state universities.

In Wichita, segregation was mandated in the elementary schools in 1915, but the city's high school was integrated because there were not enough blacks to maintain a separate institution (Wichita's black population in 1910 was 2,457—0.7 percent of the total. By 1960, it was 19,861—7.8 percent of the total).¹⁷ Nevertheless, there was segregation within the school; blacks, for example, were not allowed unfettered access to the high school's swimming pool until the 1940s.¹⁸

As early as 1874, the state prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and transportation; the law, however, was indifferently enforced. Although public transportation was desegregated in Wichita, hotels, inns, the-

aters, and places of amusement were generally segregated. There were no signs reading “colored” or “whites only,” but by the 1920s an informal system of segregation was the norm throughout the city. Newby describes segregation in the city in the 1940s and 1950s as “just was”—not that it was acceptable, it “just was.”¹⁹ Newby summarizes: “There were no signs designating ‘white’ and ‘colored’ water fountains, restrooms, or ‘colored upstairs.’ There was no overt segregation. There was no back of the bus or separate railroad cars. Even so, exclusionist policies were ubiquitous. There was an ‘understanding’ that African Americans could be refused service at any and all white establishments. Though restricted to the balcony in movie theaters, there was no crow’s nest, a separate wired-off section of the balcony, as was the case in the Jim Crow South. Again, these were the contradictory race policies in Kansas.”²⁰ Although blacks occasionally protested, in general, the black community and its leadership accommodated the denial of their civil rights.²¹

Walters attended segregated Dunbar Elementary School. Although segregation was imposed, Dunbar became a source of pride with its black principal and teachers introducing students to the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and the achievements of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver. However, “this knowledge of black people and racial pride was lost immediately upon entering the white intermediate school.”²²

Walters enrolled at East High School in 1952. The student body at East of more than three thousand included fewer than one hundred blacks. The color line was “more blurred” at East; according to Newby, “the interactions of blacks and whites were limited,” and being the only black in a class was typical.²³ Blacks compensated for their isolation by congregating on the “The Corner” and sitting together in the cafeteria.²⁴ When Walters attended, there was little within-school segregation at East High; blacks were elected class officers and were high athletic and academic achievers, as extracurricular activities were open equitably to all students. Walters was among the high achievers: head drummer (eventually receiving a set of drum sticks from the famous jazz drummer “Philly” Joe Jones), member of the orchestra, director of the student pep band, and a member of the Hi-Y club and the debate team. These activities allowed him to “negotiate the boundaries between black and white students successfully. His black classmates did not resent his interactions with whites.”²⁵ Newby avers also that “while the stereotypic academic tends to be a nerd, Ron was not a ‘square’ in the vernacular of the day. He was popular on the dance floor. . . . Since his dad Gilmar, was usually the bassist in the band at the club, Ron often had the opportunity to serenade the ladies in the

audience. His voice was well suited for ballads like ‘Tenderly,’ ‘Blue Moon,’ and ‘Night and Day,’ among others.”²⁶

Perhaps Walters highest achievement while at East was election to the assembly of the American Legion’s Boys State. At this mock state government of boys from throughout the state, he served as auditor. He was also co-editor of the newspaper. Of the 150 participants, he was selected as one of the two Kansas delegates to the Boys Nation Assembly in Washington. Walters claims he was elected on the basis of what he called a “fire and brimstone” speech he gave in support of school integration, which would have been shortly after the *Brown* decision.²⁷ As a member of the Kansas delegation, he was able to shake hands with President Dwight Eisenhower, a native Kansan, who personally greeted each Kansas delegate. This was Walters’s first visit to the city that would become his base of operations for most of his life.

After he graduated from high school in 1955, he enrolled at Wichita State University. At this time, he apparently also enlisted in the army reserves. Not much is known about Walters’s military service, partly because he rarely mentioned it and never listed it on his vita. Even in his application for Foreign Service, where military service might have been a plus, he does not mention his military service, although he discusses, among other things, his family, his extracurricular activities in high school and at Wichita State and Fisk, the Dockum sit-ins, his meeting Thurgood Marshall, and Boys State. The only reference to his service I found in his papers is a January 1965 Department of Army “Certificate Training Certification, PV-2 Ronald Walters,” noting his completion of infantry training, 3rd Training Regiment, Fort Jackson, South Carolina. On his military service, Newby suggests several reasons for his enlistment. First, his father was a military officer and may have encouraged his service. Second, the military was a source of financial support. Third, joining the part-time reserves was a way to avoid the draft. As Newby puts it, “The reserve was largely a white boy’s way to avoid the draft.”²⁸

At Wichita State, Walters became “head dog of the line that went over in 1957,” and the first Polemarch of the Delta Upsilon chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi.²⁹ As leader of the chapter, Walters urged the brothers to break with the tradition of partying and “bid whist” and participate in community betterment and protest, including the Dockum sit-ins. In this he was following the injunction of Howard University Professor Rayford Logan, who as director of the education and policy committee of Alpha Phi Alpha had long tried to push black fraternities toward political engagement and activism.³⁰

Walters might have remained in Wichita to complete his undergraduate studies except for an incident with a racist professor at Wichita State. As Newby

tells the story, Walters received an F on a paper in a political science class. When he challenged the grade, the professor allegedly told him the paper was really outstanding, but he “knew no colored boy could write a paper of that quality.”³¹ After Walters assembled his notes and references and demonstrated to the professor that he had actually written the paper, the professor gave him a “C.” When Walters asked if the paper was outstanding, why he did not get an “A,” the professor replied, “he had already raised the grade two levels and he was not going to raise it anymore.”³² At the end of the semester, Walters transferred to Fisk.

Before leaving for Fisk, however, Walters participated in the Dockum sit-ins, which fifty years later he described “as the event that brought me into the struggle.”³³ As president of the NAACP Youth Council from 1958 to 1960, Walters in 1958 led what is now recognized as the first modern student lunch counter sit-in—nearly two years before the more famous Greensboro sit-ins that began sustained student engagement in the Civil Rights Movement and the formation of the SNCC. His leadership of the Dockum protests eventually gained him the moniker “father of the sit-in movement.”

For more than three weeks beginning July 19, 1958, students from the NAACP Youth Council and others sat in at the lunch counter of the Dockum drug store. According to Gretchen Eick, the Dockum sit-in “was spawned during a late night conversation that Ron and Carol Hahn had with the NAACP’s western regional director, Franklin Williams, two years earlier.”³⁴ Although the sit-ins were encouraged by the NAACP’s regional director and the adult leadership of the local NAACP chapter, it was opposed by the national NAACP in New York, which tended to oppose direct action protest, whether by students or Martin Luther King, Jr.³⁵ Two days before the sit-ins began, the Wichita NAACP leadership telegraphed the national office informing it of the plan. The NAACP director of youth wired back his opposition, declaring “These are not NAACP tactics.”³⁶ Later, in a telephone conversation, Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary, and Gloster Current, the director of branches, restated the opposition of the national office.³⁷ “As a result,” Morris writes, “the breach between Wichita’s local NAACP and the national NAACP remained palpable for years following the sit-ins.”³⁸ Morris further contends, “The NAACP favoring legalism, frowned on protests, and it was a hierarchical organization that could discipline local chapters that departed from the legal approach.”³⁹ As an example of the breach, at a 1959 NAACP conference, Walters met Thurgood Marshall, the legendary NAACP litigator who was a hero to Walters. When he introduced himself, Marshall curtly responded, “Yes, I know who you are. You are the boy from Wichita who’s causing all the trouble.”⁴⁰ In 2006, nearly

fifty years later, the NAACP gave Walters an award for his “courage and commitment in organizing the sit-ins of the Dockum Drugstore in 1958.”

Unlike the sit-ins that followed in Greensboro, the students in Wichita lacked a modern model for their actions. While they were aware of the CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) sit-ins of the 1940s, “there were no immediate or direct models to the Wichita situation . . . the Wichita protest truly pioneered the use of the lunch counter sit-ins in the modern period.”⁴¹

On August 11, the Dockum management capitulated and desegregated their lunch counters (Walters was away on army reserve training the weekend of the capitulation). This was more than a Wichita victory because the management applied the policy of nondiscrimination in lunch counter service to all its affiliated stores throughout the region. In addition, the Dockum sit-in immediately sparked similar protests in Oklahoma, Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, and West Virginia. Walters traveled to Oklahoma City to assist its NAACP Youth Council in organizing its sit-ins.⁴²

Morris emphasizes that the Wichita student movement was not *sui generis*. Rather, “It fitted squarely within the black protest tradition and Wichita’s activist adults served as the conduit linking them with that tradition.”⁴³ He also emphasizes that while Walters was a “central player” in the leadership team that guided the movement, the movement was led by a team and not a single leader. He further emphasizes that this leadership team included women: “[M]en and women jointly shared leadership.”⁴⁴ Morris concludes: “[M]ature movements are generally led by leadership teams rather than ‘great charismatic Moses’” and “To acknowledge that Walters’s leadership unfolded within a team does not detract from the quality of his individual leadership. To the contrary, when Walters’s leadership is so situated we come to understand his personal leadership gifts, the least of which was having the confidence to co-lead with other strong and competent personalities.”⁴⁵

After the successful Dockum sit-ins, Walters engaged in protests against discrimination in other public places in Wichita, which eventually resulted in his dismissal from employment with the Wichita city government. His participation in the sit-ins, however, also resulted, in part, in the award of a “race relations fellowship” to attend Fisk.⁴⁶

At Fisk, Walters developed his interest in Africa, and thrived academically, graduating in 1963 cum laude. Active in campus affairs, he served on the student council, as president of the campus chapter of the Kappa’s, as co-captain of the debating team, and as part of “one of the school’s most treasured traditions, the Jubilee Singers.”⁴⁷ However, he was not involved in the Nashville movement, although John Lewis was a classmate at nearby American Baptist

College, and he was acquainted with other movement leaders, including James Bevel and Diane Nash. Newby writes that two things “kept him on the sidelines when it came to the Nashville sit-ins.”⁴⁸ First, in addition to his involvement in multiple campus activities, he was working full time as an inhalation therapist at a local hospital. Second, the movement’s religiosity was an inhibiting factor. Newby writes that “much of Ron’s childhood was spent under the thumb of the religious fundamentalism of his great-grandmother . . . [and] he was at this time rejecting fundamentalism, even when it was about civil rights.”⁴⁹ Yet, his absence from the Nashville movement remains curious; in spite of his full-time employment, he had time for many other time-consuming activities, such as the debate club and Jubilee Singers. And, at Wichita State, he encouraged his Kappa brothers to become involved in the sit-ins, and while perhaps turned off by religious fundamentalism while in Wichita, he had joined the more mainline St. Paul’s AME church. Finally, although the Nashville movement was certainly influenced by religion, and some of its leaders, notably Lewis and Bevel, were preachers, there were secularists in the Nashville movement that Walters might have associated with.⁵⁰ Thus it remains something of a puzzle that the leader of the first modern student sit-in protest did not become engaged with the cutting-edge Nashville movement while living and studying at one its two forward base camps (the other was at Howard).

While developing his interest in Africa at Fisk, Walters had another experience with a racist professor, which he believes may have prevented him from becoming a member of Phi Beta Kappa. After he expressed interest in writing his senior thesis on African history, he was told by a white professor, who ironically held the John Hope Franklin Chair, “I didn’t know Africa had a history.”⁵¹ This professor was also the faculty advisor for Phi Beta Kappa. Walters believed their antagonistic relationship may have been a factor in his failure to achieve membership in the prestigious honor society.⁵²

Reflecting on his interest in Africa and a growing intellectual maturity in his senior year at Fisk he wrote “The Blacks,” a Pan Africanist essay on the status of the relationship between Africans and blacks in the United States. Arguing that “Black Nationalism” refers to a “mood” rather than skin color, he found “many similarities between the cultures of Africa and America.”⁵³ These similarities, however, masked a fundamental tension between the blacks because he saw the African blacks as seeking “the evolution of a society based upon a rich cultural heritage, moving away from the tribalism which has divided Africa toward Pan Africanism.”⁵⁴ But among the American blacks he observed “tendencies . . . toward grasping for American ideals and not the inner-directedness of the group.” He, Walters wrote, is “no longer concerned with building ‘Negro culture’ but assimilating himself into the larger ‘stream

of culture . . . American.”⁵⁵ In some ways, what he called “this confusion that surrounds the ‘Negro undefined’” in his 1963 student essay is observed thirty years later in his masterwork, *Pan Africanism in the African Diaspora*, published in 1993.

“The Blacks” won first prize in the *Reader’s Digest*—United Negro College Fund 1963 creative writing contest.⁵⁶ In addition to a cash award of \$300, the prize included a trip to New York City, where he had the opportunity to meet black writers such as the Americans Langston Hughes and John A. Williams and the South African Bloke Modisane. Walters attempted to have the essay published in *Negro Digest*, successfully acquiring a release from *Reader’s Digest*, but in the end the editors declined, suggesting that the dialogue could be made more “vivid” and “colorful.”⁵⁷

Before leaving for American University, Walters returned to Wichita and found himself engaged in a final bit of protest about racial conditions in the city. The principal of the city’s segregated Dunbar Elementary School was a legendary figure in black Wichita. Newby describes the long-serving principal, James Anderson, as a “native Wichitan” with a master’s degree from Columbia Teacher’s College and a “true leader in the black community and . . . highly regarded throughout the black community.”⁵⁸ In 1963, the city’s Optimist Club gave Anderson an award. In accepting the award, Anderson said, “In building Wichita there has been no bigotry, no hate, no selfishness but unselfishness. Wichita has been blessed with fine leadership in the integration movement and public schools” and “housing is available.”⁵⁹ Walters was outraged when he heard about Anderson’s remarks and, despite Anderson’s status, blasted him in the local paper. While noting that he had been away from the city attending college for the last three years, he mocked Anderson: “Housing is available? Where? Negroes the ghetto over could answer this question emphatically.”⁶⁰ Then he wrote, “Either these statements were made by someone who is obviously unaware of the ‘Revolution of Rising Expectations’ among the black peoples of this country and indeed the world or they were made by an Uncle Tom of the worst kind who in his traditional way would transmit to city leaders and others that we are content with second class citizenship.”⁶¹ This sharp attack on one of Wichita’s most revered black leaders foreshadows Walters sometimes withering critiques of black leadership, even while he was operating as an integral part of the black establishment.

At the same time as his developing interest in Africa, Walters was developing an interest in becoming a U.S. diplomat, with anticipated service in Africa. In April of 1963, he applied to the State Department for an internship and was appointed a year later.⁶² He was employed at the Department as an intern and junior civil servant from the summer of 1964 to the summer of 1966. During

his service in the Department, he was active in multiple programs, serving as chair of its extracurricular committee and as a member of the White House Seminar Committee. In the latter capacity, he had the opportunity to meet President John Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, undersecretary of State George Ball, and Edward R. Murrow, the legendary CBS journalist and head of the United States Information Agency.

If one judges by his undated application to the Foreign Service, Walters was sincerely committed at this time to serving as a U.S. diplomat in Africa. At the time, Eddie Williams, who was later to become President of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, was director of the State Department's equal employment opportunity program, with a mission to recruit minority diplomats, and he encouraged Walters to submit a Foreign Service application.⁶³ In his application, Walters was fulsome: "This is a difficult and challenging time to serve in the Foreign Service. America has global responsibilities . . . therefore it needs dedicated and effective international representatives and it is for this task that in 1962 I began preparing myself."⁶⁴ Reflecting on his wish to serve in Africa, he noted the need for people with "some knowledge of geographic regions" and his studies of Africa and his receipt of a Foreign Service Language Fellowship to study Swahili. He concluded: "Finally, I hope my presence adds credibility to the fact that America, in spite of some difficulties, is a racially harmonious country."⁶⁵

It is unlikely that Walters fully embraced all that he wrote here, but was writing what was necessary to gain acceptance into the service. His application was well received; on November 23, 1963, he received a letter from Raymond Cory, executive director of the Bureau of African Affairs, complimenting the quality of his application and urging him to take the Foreign Service examination.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, on August 27, 1965, Walters resigned from the State Department (having never taken the examination) to accept a National Defense Education Act (NDEA) fellowship to pursue graduate studies at American University.⁶⁷ In his letter of resignation, he offered no explanation except for his wish to pursue graduate studies. Apparently, however, he had become disillusioned with the Department and U.S. foreign policy toward Africa. Decades later in an interview with "History Makers," he recalled that "[t]he contradiction between State Department policies and the needs of African people were too blatant to ignore . . . [and] the State Department was not receptive to African Americans . . . operating as an "old boys network."⁶⁸ In my interview with his wife Pat, she recalled that he decided he probably did not have the "temperament" to be a diplomat, and that he was beginning to question U.S. foreign policy.

Before he began his graduate work, he married Patricia Turner, his partner and intellectual and political confidante for nearly a half-century. “Pat,” as she was universally called, was born to working-class parents, Wesley Turner and Frances Glasgow, in Columbus, Ohio, in 1939. She and Walters met in 1959 at a YMCA/YWCA conference on race relations at the University of Illinois in Urbana. She was attending as a representative of Philander Smith College, from which she graduated cum laude with a degree in social work in 1961. Walters attended as a representative of the NAACP. They were immediately attracted to each other, partly because of their mutual interest in civil rights. To the amusement of his friend Newby, Walters always said he and Pat spent their first night together “talking civil rights.”⁶⁹

For two years, they engaged in a long-distance relationship, before marrying in 1963. For most of their marriage, Pat was employed as a social worker by Montgomery County at the Maryland Housing Opportunities Commission. But, in a sense, she also worked full time as Walters’s alter-ego, counseling, financing, critiquing, cajoling, and encouraging him in both his activism and scholarship. In the early years, she typed and edited his manuscripts, and in the later years, when the editing and typing was done by others, Pat remained his primary confidante and critic. Appreciating each other’s commitment to the struggle and intellectual independence, from the beginning of their relationship until its end, Pat saw Walters’s work as her own. As their longtime friend Howard sociologist Joyce Ladner wrote, “Pat was indispensable to Ron’s work, for among other things, she typed and edited his manuscripts, and on one occasion I recall her telling me ‘Ron and I have to get to work on this book on Pan Africanism.’”⁷⁰ Her abiding concern for him and the work he was doing, and her commitment to maintaining an environment which made the work possible was the basis for an intellectual and emotional partnership that endured for nearly a half-century, because in the final reckoning she was as dedicated to the liberation of peoples of African descent as he was. Walters sometimes jokingly called himself a “bigamist,” married to both Pat and his work, averring he could not have one without the other.

Walters and Pat arrived in Washington just in time to attend the historic 1963 March on Washington. Although enrolled at American, Walters took classes in African Studies and Swahili at Howard, thus beginning what would become an enduringly affectionate relationship with the “Capstone” of black higher education. At Howard, he helped to organize the Association of African Studies, becoming its president and editor of its journal, *The Africanist*. At American, he was also a student leader, serving as president of the graduate

student council section for students of international studies and co-founder of its publication, *The Journal of International Studies*. He was also elected to the Phi Sigma Alpha Political Science Honor Society.

His courses and papers at American were divided among international relations theory, African Studies, and nuclear weapons. Among his seminar papers on nuclear weapons were “The Role of Non-Nuclear Weapons Nations in Nuclear Politics,” “Nuclear Proliferation and the Nature of Attitudes,” and “Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons: Liberal Policy.” His first book, *South Africa and the Bomb: Responsibility and Deterrence*, published in 1987, which warned of the dangers of South Africa’s quest to obtain nuclear weapons, was grounded in his graduate seminar papers.

His seminar papers in African Studies include “A Study of Some Bases of the Relationship Between Communist China and African Countries,” “A Study of the Evolution of Types of African States and Their Comparability with Modern Requirements for Development,” and “East Africa: An Era of Progress.” At this time, his thinking on African politics and development was influenced by Joseph Nye’s *Pan Africanism and East African Integration*.⁷¹ But he writes that the “major theoretical motivation for his work was the “systems study of Africa” derived mainly from Morton Kaplan’s 1966 work, *System and Process in International Relations*.⁷²

At this time, Walters’s thinking and writing was anchored in mainstream theoretical and substantive discourses in international relations and African Studies. This, of course, is typical of graduate students struggling to complete requirements for the degree. That is, at this point he had not developed the critical “black perspective” or “black science” that he would later employ in his studies of African and African American politics.

This can be clearly seen in his dissertation. He initially proposed using Kaplan’s systems theory to do a dissertation on East Africa as a “system,” which would have involved field work in Kenya, Uganda, Tanganyika, and Zambia. Through his contacts in the East Africa Bureau of the State Department, he had apparently developed contacts with key officials in each of these places and planned to conduct interviews as part of the field work. This proposal, however, was not approved, apparently because he was unable to secure funding to defray the cost of travel and accommodations in the four East African countries. He then turned to a highly theoretical study of the formation of U.S. foreign policy toward four African colonies or states: Congo, 1960–63; Guinea, 1958–61; Algeria, 1959–61, and South Africa, 1960–65. Using interviews with government officials, knowledge gained from his State Department work, secondary sources, and media accounts, his study was concerned with styles of decision making, “Vertical or Horizontal” in U.S. foreign policy decision

making in strategic and crisis situations versus nonstrategic, noncrisis situations.⁷³ The purpose of the study was not to deal with the substance of U.S. policy in the late Eisenhower, early Kennedy administrations regarding these four places, but rather “to extend the power and range of existing theoretical frameworks” for analysis of policy formulation. The major thesis of the study was that the executive branch had a monopoly or near monopoly in decision making in strategic and crisis situations, while there was more pluralism or engagement by the Congress and the public in noncrisis, nonstrategic situations. Walters concluded: “Although there are no dramatic results from this study with reference to the crisis, non-crisis variables,” still these “findings must be taken into account when the completed picture of the functions of crisis and non-crisis behavior relating to all classes of events in the international system is achieved.”⁷⁴

All in all, a competent workman-like effort to satisfy the requirements for the PhD, this theoretical work makes a modest contribution to the literature of crisis, noncrisis, strategic, and nonstrategic variables in the formation of U.S. foreign policy. However, it is fascinating to look to the future with respect to Walters’s writings on U.S. foreign policy and Africa, where he brought not only a black perspective but a passionate, activist commitment, as in his work with the African Heritage Studies Association, Trans Africa, the African Liberation Support Committee, and Congressman Charles Diggs’ House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa.

This is, as I indicated, usually the case in dissertation research, and this is where Walters left it because as soon as he submitted the dissertation, he abandoned it. That is, unlike many students with their dissertations, he made no effort to convert it into articles or a book. It was forgotten; indeed, he never cited it in his many subsequent articles on U.S. foreign policy and Africa. This may be partly because as he was finishing the dissertation his intellectual motivations and writing were already focusing on Black Studies and development of black epistemological and theoretical perspectives in the study of African peoples.

Ironically, the dissertation was not directed by an international relations specialist. Marion Irish, a specialist in southern politics, was the major advisor. Walters writes that he had a “very special relationship” with Irish, who came to American as he was selecting his dissertation topic.⁷⁵ They came together because as a southern political scientist “she knew a great deal about what was happening in civil rights, such as Emmett Till, Dr. King’s writings and other things that were consistent with the movement.”⁷⁶ Consistency with the movement appears to have been more important in the coming together of Irish and Walters than knowledge or expertise in international relations theory

or the theoretical intricacies of vertical and horizontal decision making in U.S. foreign policy.

Walters's proclivity toward protest continued at American University. For example, in January 1967, he wrote a letter to the university provost protesting "hostile" and "rude" treatment by staff in the registrar's office, eliciting a response from the provost that he would "look into the matter as soon as possible."⁷⁷

But perhaps the most interesting example of this protest proclivity while at American was the essay "Damn You Uncle Tom." This essay of several pages, though undated, was clearly written while he was living in Washington attending graduate school. In the essay, he recounts his recent move into an integrated apartment complex, when one day he opened the door to pick up the newspaper and overheard a conversation between the "old Negro janitor" and a white woman tenant. The janitor was saying, "You know the man who owns this place owns that all-colored building across the street. I wonder why these niggers don't try to get in there. I been working over here for six years and we built a nice place for them and now they are trying to take over."⁷⁸ Walters writes that he stopped quickly, "looked from Thomas the janitor to the white woman, and headed toward the elevator: "Disgust welled up inside me. Riding down the elevator I could think of only one thing, damn you Uncle Tom! I had enough of them. I would dispose of this one . . . but somehow I must make him understand why he must not be allowed to continue this shameless debauchery of his Negroness. I must capture the soul of the Uncle Tom in order to effect his demise."⁷⁹ Therefore, he wrote what he called his "incantation" on "tomology." Ruminating on the "painful history" of Uncle Tom, "who use to dance to the tune of the white master every time the music was made," he writes that tomming today by Negroes who have "Made it" still gives black people pain:

You've made it, by God you have made it! You are smart: you've been to the best schools. You're in demand. You've got the good jobs. But, you have no soul. One wonders, since you are obviously the counterpart of the white middle class, whether or not the white man has soul. . . . You live a life of schizophrenia . . . because you are haunted by the patent knowledge of the black being that possesses you. . . . This means that you must be more conservative than the conservative; you must sell out when the time comes to be a Negro and a man. . . . You must run to the suburbs . . . and in your getting away you are unaware that you take the ghetto with

you because you will always be black because the ghetto is more than anything else a state of mind.⁸⁰

In a final riposte, Walters wrote that if he could have his way, “I would castrate you, tear out your eyes, pull off your arms, crush your legs . . . because you debase the ability of the Negro by constant betrayal and cause the world to misunderstand our title to freedom and equality.”⁸¹

This incarnation by the young Walters is indicative of a growing militancy of mind. It is not clear, but this essay was probably written prior to the advent of Black Power in 1966; still, it captures the militant spirit and incendiary rhetoric of the movement that would shape Walters’s political and intellectual odyssey. The essay, apparently written on the spur of the moment after the encounter with the janitor, captured the intellectual, cultural, and political climate of the coming Black Power era. It is unclear if Walters attempted to have the essay published, but it is the kind of material Hoyt Fuller was starting to publish in *Negro Digest/Black World*.

In December 1967, Walters received a letter from Robert Gregg, chair of the political science department at Syracuse University, asking him to apply for a position in African Studies, although he was still working on the dissertation. He responded enthusiastically in January 1968. In April, he received (with the concurrence of Stephen Bailey, Dean of the liberal arts college) a letter from Gregg and Donald Meiklejohn, director of public affairs, offering him a three-year contract as assistant professor of political science and public affairs at a starting salary of \$9,500. The rank and salary was contingent on completion of the PhD by the fall; otherwise the appointment would be as lecturer at a salary of \$9,000.⁸² It is unclear how Walters, an obscure PhD candidate, came to the attention of the Syracuse faculty or what led it to make this rather generous offer to the neophyte scholar.

Walters spent only a year at Syracuse before he was recruited to become the founding chair of Brandeis’s Black Studies department. But during this year his focus began to shift from international relations, Africa, and U.S. foreign policy toward domestic black politics and the emerging Black Studies discipline. While he was teaching undergraduate classes in political science and public affairs (his request to teach a graduate seminar on U.S. foreign policy was denied), he came to the attention of African American faculty and students, who in his first semester on campus launched protests in support of the establishment of a Black Studies program;⁸³ but at the same time he was being recruited by Brandeis, and at the end of his first year he left Syracuse. I consider his work at Brandeis in chapter 4, but it is worth noting here the

significance of two major research universities' willingness to appoint an inexperienced PhD candidate to their faculties at reasonably good compensation, and in the Brandeis case, to head one of its academic units. In the late 1960s this was not unusual. As a result of nationwide black student protests, predominantly white universities were seeking to hire black faculty in the traditional disciplines, but especially in the emerging Black Studies departments. In 1968, the number of African Americans holding a PhD was miniscule—thus the need to rely on advanced graduate students (whose numbers also were rather small). With respect to Black Studies, specifically—as I discuss in detail in chapter 3—the few established black scholars with a doctorate were reluctant to possibly jeopardize their careers by associating with the controversial programs in Black Studies. Thus, the task of building the discipline fell to young, neophyte scholars like Walters.

Walters began this work in building Black Studies by working on a series of epistemological and theoretical papers while at Syracuse. In the university magazine *Events* he wrote an article, published in 1969, making the case for the new discipline's existence because of the “black perspective,” in which problems would be studied based on their “effect upon the goals and lifestyles of the Black Community.”⁸⁴ This meant, he wrote, that “from the standpoint of this kind of scholarship, potentially, Black people will be the most accurate analyzers of that experience and, indeed, the credibility of all Black Studies programs which will be developed should be judged by the extent to which they take into account this difference in viewpoint.”⁸⁵ Here in his initial foray into the Black Studies debates Walters stakes out two clear, controversial positions: (1) Black Studies should be rooted in a black perspective and (2) the programs should be staffed by blacks as the “most accurate analyzers” of the black experience.

Walters's Black Studies work was not limited to scholarly essays or to the university; in his year in Syracuse, he advised the Black Student Union on strategies to establish a Black Studies program and became an advisor to the United Black Brothers, a militant Black Power–oriented community group. He was also selected vice chair of the Syracuse Coalition for Quality Education, a community group devoted to improving education in the black community. Arguing that the Syracuse school curriculum “reflected the values of largely white Anglo-Saxon America,” Walters contended it needed to be reformed to reveal that “we live in a racist society” and to improve the self-image and learning of black children through a curriculum that would emphasize that their “human worth is equal to any peoples in the world.”⁸⁶ This reformed curriculum would also benefit white children, he argued, by providing them with “a new concept of the Black community which will be viable. The old concepts . . . were not viable and hence largely irrelevant to the progress of

the black community.”⁸⁷ Here Walters anticipates the debates about Afrocentrism in elementary and secondary education that would roil the education establishment in the 1980s and 1990s.

As I will show in more detail in chapter 3, the Black Power Movement had its first impact on the campuses of colleges and universities. Young African American students eagerly embraced the ideas of Black Power as articulated by Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks in 1966 (and earlier by Malcolm X), and began to institutionalize it on predominantly white campuses by establishing autonomous, racially exclusive Black Student Unions or other associations of African American students. These organizations immediately began lobbying and protesting to establish policies and programs to recruit and financially support more black students; this was usually manifested in various Educational Opportunity Programs (EOPs). They also protested and lobbied for the employment of black faculty and the creation of programs in Black Studies. The more publicized of these efforts occurred on predominantly white campuses—San Francisco State; Cornell; University of California, Berkeley—but the struggle to transform—blacken the university—began at Howard, the most prestigious and well-endowed of the historically black colleges and universities.

The idea of knowledge as a base of Black Power was articulated by Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles Hamilton in their 1967 manifesto *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, where they declared it was “absolutely essential that black people know their history, that they know their roots, and that they develop an awareness of cultural heritage.”⁸⁸ Here, Carmichael and Hamilton were channeling the views of Malcolm X, who by the late 1960s was an iconic figure for activist black students.⁸⁹ In a 1967 paper, Hamilton, then a professor of political science at Columbia, made the first systematic case for transforming traditional “Negro” colleges into “black” institutions.⁹⁰ In this essay, he listed criteria for creating or identifying a “black” college, which included, among other things, rejection of white middle-class ethos and their replacement by a distinctive black ethos; assistance provided to the black community; and development of curriculum grounded in African civilizations.⁹¹ More generally, Hamilton proposed a militant version of black higher education as an adjunct to the Black Power movement—a black college “that would deliberately inoculate a sense of racial *pride* and *anger* and concern in black students. . . . We need militant leadership . . . a black college which would use its accumulated knowledge and economic resources to bring about desired change and [dispense with] irrelevant PhDs . . . and recruit freedom fighters and graduate freedom fighters.”⁹² Students and a few professors at Howard in 1966 sought to advance Hamilton’s ideas, and variations of these ideas about black higher education were pursued by Walters throughout his academic career.