The Economic History & Urban Geography of Race Relations in Detroit: Movement of Capital, White Resistance and Immobility of Black Labor

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Detroit's intertwined history of deindustrialization and racial segregation is often explored separately. In The Origins of the Urban Crises (1996), Thomas Sugrue examines post-WWII job losses and housing discrimination without elucidating why and how the city came to experience the abrupt flight of capital in that period. Conversely, Murray and Schwartz's Wrecked (2019) details the catalysts for Detroit's deindustrialization but neglects its impact on the African-American community. This paper aims to bridge these perspectives by utilizing various secondary sources and archival evidence to analyze how concurrent discrimination and economic decline have maintained the persistent segregation between Detroit and its suburbs.

Keywords: deindustrialization, racial segregation, capital flight, Detroit economic history, urban geography

INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC FOUNDATION OF CONFLICT AND COMPETITION

Grounding Detroit's rise and fall in a political-economic framework for labor-capital conflict as well as competition among workers provides an understanding of how the immobility of black workers is a crucial economic-historical determinant for persistent disparities in the metropolitan. Shaikh (2016) explains that "mobility of capital is inherent" in the very existence of capitalism, whereby capital "that is tied up in labor, plant, equipment, and inventories is fixated and must be used up or sold off before it can adopt a new incarnation." Shaikh further explains that competition is the "central regulating mechanism of capitalism," especially since it "pits capital against capital, capital against labor, and labor against labor" (Shaikh, 2016, 259-60). In volume three of *Capital*, Marx also explains that the ratio of total unpaid labor to the total paid wages emerges as a uniform, general rate of exploitation as a direct outcome of free labor mobility and competition among workers (Marx, 1981, 275). As such, capitalism features the tendential property of equalizing such exploitation rates across sectors—something so important that Marx refers to it as an 'economic law' in capitalist economies (Cogliano, 2023).

In post-war Detroit, however, the assumption of freely mobile labor and capital has the important qualification in that flight of capital from Detroit city center came at the same time that white workers—occupationally and spatially speaking—did not face legally sanctioned immobility that black workers did. The post-1950s period saw the UAW aggressively integrate workers along with the passage of non-discrimination legislation (codified and expanded by further court actions into the 1980s). However, this was too late since many auto-manufacturing jobs had already left for the suburbs and beyond (Sugrue, 1996,

Ch. 5). Through a detailed account of de jure mechanisms for immobility facing black labor, this paper shows how the seeds for longstanding racial-spatial inequality between Detroit and its white-majority suburbs were sowed. An economic-historical accounting of the movement of capital with simultaneous confinement of racialized workers further opens up grounds for political economic research of race relations in the American cities of the Rustbelt.

Historical accounting in this way shows how the movement of capital in conjunction with widespread discrimination has behaved as an intervening factor in the underlying tendency in capitalism toward free mobility of capital and labor. An assessment of such a qualifier stands to deepen understanding of the ways pervasive segregation and inequality in today's post-industrial urban American North can be traced back to immobility imposed exclusively on workers of color throughout the twentieth century. As such, this allows for an examination of why major employment and housing non-discrimination legislation and court decisions of the latter half of the twentieth century failed to lessen racial inequality in urban America. Moreover, it helps appreciate the need for reparations and other federal policies specifically targeted toward the urban African American population that has suffered in the postbellum American North and not just in the South.

CONFLICT BETWEEN CAPITAL & LABOR

To understand how the economic geography of Detroit, its suburbs, and the Midwest have historically been shaped by the movement of capital across space, a historical survey of reasons for the geographic concentration of production in Detroit city must be appreciated. This is crucial to understand why and how production eventually began deconcentrating. This section examines the spatial concentration of production at both Ford and General Motors in the leadup to WWII and the close relationship with part suppliers that both firms enjoyed in the period. This section further explains how such concentration of production became leverage for militant labor to exploit before and during the war, which provided the impetus for plants and part-makers to disperse in the years following the war. The movement of capital out and away from Detroit city is also detailed in this section.

Geographic Concentration at Ford

As the assembly line manufacturing was introduced, Ford Motor Company sought to fully integrate all production processes in one massive Highland Park plant employing over 60,000 employees by the middle of the 1920s (Kuhn, 1986, 272-78). The facility was fully capable of making its own tires, assembling upholstery by processing its textiles in-house, and even building batteries on the plant premises. The plant was made to integrate all aspects of production in such a way that "raw materials come in at one side, a complete motorcar comes out the other" (Ford, 1926, 94-107; Sorensen, 1956, 145). In the period spanning from 1919 to 1929 when demand for cars outstripped supply, all car manufacturers competed to maintain market share by supplying more cars to meet demand rather than raise prices. This created the problem where at one point, acquiring "steel and following up orders and deliveries produced headaches in many of [Ford's] manufacturing divisions" (Sorensen, 1956, 165). This meant that "increasing demand was apparent to anyone—all-steel bodies, furniture, refrigerators, stoves, freight cars, home utensils; someone had to cut loose and put up more steel mills." As such, "If others would not provide enough steel for [Ford's] needs," then Ford would go about doing it for itself (Ibid).

However, competition by GM over quality and advanced car design never allowed for steel production to become part of any of Ford's plants. GM's innovations during the pre-Depression period forced the entire car industry to adjust rapidly and become reliant on outside part makers since many of styling/design changes could not be fully implemented in singular large-scale assembly plants. For instance, an industry-wide switch over to synthetic leather (in response to the rising cost of leather supplies in the face of high demand) essentially made Ford's own leather tanning operations obsolete and forced Ford to purchase synthetic upholstery from part makers (Ford, 1926, 64-66). The need to produce fully closed auto-bodies meant higher reliance on complex glass production that could not cost-effectively be carried out onsite—forcing Ford to purchase glass from outside producers (Ford, 1926, 44-45; Sorensen, 1956, 163-64).

Much of the reason Ford switched production to Model A and abandoning Model T altogether was because GM had introduced a more elegant and lighter body style that Ford tried emulating with the design of Model A. Early in the manufacture of Model A, it is documented that over half of each unit was produced by auto supplier Briggs Manufacturing, a kind of relationship that continued between Ford and suppliers well into the Great Depression, especially with the introduction of V-8 engine (Abernathy, 1978, 141-43; Kuhn, 1986, 274-75; Sorensen, 1956, 246-48). For example, inflated tube tires replaced rubber tires by the mid-1920s, forcing Ford's rubber tire facility to become obsolete and increasing reliance on outside suppliers. However, Ford writes "If those who sell to us will not manufacture at the prices which, upon investigation, we believe to be right, then we make the article ourselves…although we have no present intention of going into the tire business. [But] the price of rubber may be forced inordinately high," creating conditions for Ford to enter the rubber manufacturing (Ford, 1926, 41-42). Competitive pressures forced a synergistic relationship between Ford and part suppliers, which led both Ford and its suppliers to remain geographically concentrated in Detroit.

In the face of worker militancy, some of the tire production was brought back into the massive River Rouge complex; especially as workers at Goodrich, Goodyear, and Firestone carried out strike actions and slowdowns at all tire-making plants in Detroit simultaneously (Sorensen, 1956, 198). Ford responded by inviting engineers from Firestone to help construct a new tire plant inside of the Rouge complex to be able to meet 50 percent of Ford's needs (Sorensen, 1956, 199, 212). Competition was so intense, that the imperative to cut costs and remain competitive pulled rubber and glass production from other parts of the country to be relocated near Ford's plants in Detroit to meet demand for parts uninterruptedly and fast. For instance, as consumer demand for fully closed cars soared in the 1920s, Ford purchased the entire Allegheny Glass Company; shut its operations in Glassmere, Pennsylvania, and relocated operations into a newly built 10,000,000 square foot facility that would smelt glass "in an endless strip, something the experts of the glass industry declared impossible," which Ford accomplished, and "instead of costing from 30 cents to $1.50, [Ford's] glass was made for 20 cents a square foot" (Sorensen, 1956, 164-65).

General Motor's Concentrated Production

Like Ford, General Motors contributed considerably to concentrated production in Detroit during and before the Great Depression primarily by purchasing multiple assemblers and part suppliers simultaneously (Cray, 1980, 72-85; Pound, 1934, 111-92). By 1921, GM held seventy-five plants in about 40 cities—most of them in either the Detroit area or northern Indiana (Pound, 1934; Rubenstein, 1992, Ch. 3, 4). General Motors engaged in the acquisition of part suppliers. They moved them geographically near assembly operations in Detroit more often than Ford, of which Westin-Mott axle corporation, AC Sparks Plugs, and Hyatt Roller Bearings are among the most prominent examples (Pound, 1934, 489-90; Rubenstein, 1992, 109). Geographical concentration continued into the depression despite the firm facing demand contraction of about 50 percent: a pattern attributed by GM executive (Alfred P. Sloan) to the reality that "A dependable supply of parts might well make the difference between success and failure" during the tough years of depression. To reduce uncertainty related to distance, "It was natural, therefore, for the industry to correlate all its manufacturing within a rather narrow geographical area. It was a practical urge, but underneath it was a definite economic justification" given the demand slump wrought by the depression (Sloan, 1941, 49).

Spatial concentration was also the chosen method of handling failures in the production process such as the one arising in 1923 when GM produced only about a thousand of the planned ten thousand Chevrolet 490s in their Dayton, OH plant (Beasley, 1947, 127). Management concluded that the distance from Detroit and assembly management expertise contributed heavily to the failure of successful planned production, and by 1924, the entire facility was moved from Dayton to Detroit and for the next fifteen years became the chosen site of production for the GM's luxury line LaSalle (Bayley, 1983, 19-47; Cray, 1980, 244-57; Kuhn, 1986, 88-92). Creativity and styling innovations, which gave GM the unique ability to outcompete competitors over quality, were particularly possible given the geographical proximity of production, as it came to widely be seen by auto experts that the "most successful pioneers either grew up in [Detroit] area or migrated there" (Rubenstein, 1992, 29).

Further evidence for geographical proximity to smoothly coordinate the roles played by designers, part suppliers, and line workers is the acquisition of the Fleetwood Metal Body Company GM's Fisher Body plant and the relocation of all of production from Fleetwood's Pennsylvania location to Detroit. Fleetwood specialized in luxury autobody design, and its relocation meant greater domination of the luxury car market by GM, especially with their ongoing styling changes of Cadillac and LaSalle that became possible with Fleetwood's move (Cray, 1980; Kuhn, 1986, 91-95; Pound, 1934, 290-93). Fleetwood's presence in Detroit played an especially important role in allowing GM to lower the prices of luxury models to maintain domination of the niche luxury market. The coordination that Fleetwood's relocation served particularly well for designers and engineers from across GM to develop low-cost methods of production in short order, so that GM would not have to yield ground to competitors even when facing low demand for luxury cars (Pound, 1934, 293-94; Rubenstein, 1992, 117). However, the challenge to keep supplying consumers with shrinking incomes during the Depression was felt for all of GM's operations—leading to more relocation of production to Detroit in the first half 1930s. In the 1920s, GM acquired a differential gear manufacturer, Brown-Lipe-Chapin, in Syracuse, NY. During the depression, the entire facility was moved to Detroit which allowed for significant reductions in transportation costs and allowed for efficient coordination which would come to outweigh the cost of moving a large plant entirely across multiple state lines (Pound, 1934, 483-84; Rubenstein, 1992, 111).

Relationship With Component Suppliers

Close relationship with part suppliers is a key component of flex that was present in Detroit and sustained geographical concentration of production. From 1909 to 1920, total car production in Detroit rose from 128,000 to 1,905,000 which simultaneously saw nearly 100 new part suppliers enter the U.S. automotive sector and set up operations in Detroit during WWI and after (Seltzer, 1928, 65-101, 240-41). Through political lobbying efforts, patent-sharing agreements were legislated, allowing for innovations to be made freely available and generally reproducible so most innovations would increase rapidly across the industry (Seltzer, 1928, 42-45; Thompson, 1954). Aside from the reduction in patent-related restrictions, the Society for Automotive Engineers (SAE) established standards that further facilitated efficient parts manufacture. For instance, standardization allowed the number of lock washer designs in common use to reduce rapidly from 300 to about 35—and the number of steel tubing variations to go from 1,100 to 150 (Seltzer, 1928, 42-54; Thompson, 1954, 5-14).

Cost reductions resulting from standardization were enormous for the industry by the mid-1920s. A thirty percent fall in costs associated with ball-bearing production standardization alone translated to about $750 million in savings (up to fifteen percent of total vehicle value during the early 1920s) for the industry (Thompson, 1954, 6, 10). However, the widespread adoption of structured and regimented part-making practices often came to clash with the need for assemblers to quickly change the design (to compete over quality) and expect quick innovation on suppliers' part to promptly implement assembly changes. Ford and GM executives found that the "task of changing a detailed part standard within a single firm was infinitely easier than that of getting many companies within the industry to agree upon any single change" (Thompson, 1954, 19). This pressured a mass acquisition as well new constructions of part manufacturers by assemblers—leading to the proportion of in-house produced parts to rise from 45 percent to 74 percent from 1922 to 1926 alone (Seltzer, 1928, 57-59).

Ford directly purchased steel processors given its already vast capital investments in steel inputs—a move that served to significantly reduce costs and allow for innovations leading to the V-8 single-block engine to be cast from a moving forge. The same moving methodology was later extended during the depression to cast the steel crankshaft in the same way and produce crankshafts that are ten pounds lighter and much longer lasting as regarded by industry experts (Barclay, 1936, 36). All in all, innovations in metal processing conducted at Ford's plants using the company's suppliers resulted in a staggering 60 percent reduction in cost associated with steel inputs and more durable sheets donning auto-bodies (Barclay, 1936, 31-36).

Similar to Ford's internalization of steel production during the 1930s, GM had internalized up to 15 major suppliers starting 1920s that comprised much of the drivetrain component supply for the company

(Rubenstein, 1992, 106-18). Additionally, independent firms producing spark plugs, radiators, horns, and other electrical parts were bought. A system of internal coordination was established to streamline operations among the subsidiaries, giving GM the unique character of a multidivisional amalgam (Kuhn, 1986). Even the Japanese keiretsu system did not exhibit such close relationships between downstream assembles and upstream suppliers (Ibid). Similar can be said about the way assemblers absorbed body part supplier Fisher Body to exhibit efficient coordination of simultaneous assembly line procedures imitating Japanese keiretsu (Klein, 1988; Klein et al., 1978; Kuhn, 1986; Langlois & Robertson, 1989; Pound, 1934; Sloan, 1941; Thomas, 1973). With the introduction of hydraulic presses that could compound curves, Fisher flooded the auto industry with cheaply made closed-body designs that Dodge (a new entrant during WWI) rapidly purchased in such high volumes that Fisher stopped providing parts for Model T—forcing the switch to Model A by Ford (Seltzer, 1928, 240). GM immediately acquired a 60 percent share in Fisher's stock but allowed the part maker to supply to competitors. A large stake ensured for GM a continual flow of cheap, high-quality closed auto bodies and kept competitors at bay from entering the auto sector lured by high profits generated by the introduction to closed-body design which Fisher Body spearheaded (Klein, 1988; Klein et al., 1978, 302).

Allowing Fisher to sell to competitors was not seen as a problem by GM's executives. In 1927, the company's chief financial officer commented, "it is the aim of each G.M.C accessories division to outstrip competition both in quality and price." Toward this end, if an outside supplier offers the lowest price for a component, GM divisions would be free to make purchases since cost-cutting was imperative (Raskob, 1927, 131-32). A similar conclusion was drawn by Ford executives who "sought prices on components from outside suppliers to check the company's production costs. In the process, despite the increasing integration of the Rouge, [Ford] came to realize that "going outside" could be profitable" (Hounshell, 1984, 272). The 1920s saw the development of 'tapered integration' where many part suppliers with expansive production sites would exhibit features of flex production and sustain innovation with downstream plants (Ibid). Moreover, the rise of the used-car market during the same period meant that demand for parts exceeded the orders placed by assemblers as used-car dealerships and mechanics from across the country became a growing clientele for the suppliers. By 1926, components sold to clients outside of the 'Big Two' made up to half the total sales, grossing nearly $1 billion in revenue (Flugge, 1929, 160, n.23).

Competition between outside part makers and Big Two held part makers also ensued in the mid-1920s especially over the ability to provide parts for multiple model years and makes in the shortest amount of time (Flugge, 1929, 160-63). Suppliers engaged in competition to supply to multiple purchasers while handling the need to quickly innovate alongside assemblers who, out of their own need to compete over quality, would rely on suppliers to provide appropriately updated components. For instance, both GM and Ford during the 1920s sought to make clutches less stiff especially for women to find their cars comfortable to drive. The development of single-plate clutches and investments in manufacturing techniques by part makers allowed for mass production of clutches at low enough prices to include them in low-priced vehicles (Heldt, 1933, 548). By the early 1930s, 75 percent of new cars with clutches included clutch technology produced by outside suppliers (Ibid).

Geographical Concentration as Leverage for Militant Labor Action

During the Depression, the automotive industry became the site of major labor struggles for higher wages and better working conditions. Specifically, the highly concentrated geographical location of assemblers and suppliers (spurred by competition) served as immense leverage for militant unions to exploit (Romo & Schwartz, 1990; Storper & Walker, 1989). Concentrated production in Detroit allowed workers to socialize amongst each other in clubs, churches, pubs, and sporting events since they lived near one another and often went to work in the same factories as one another (Fine, 1969, 25). Although many of these efforts were sponsored by companies like GM in hopes of fostering a sense of comradery among workers that would lead to loyalty for firms, social engagement led to the unintended consequence of fostering worker solidarity that ended up being the bond that came to facilitate union organizing (Kraus, 1947, 6).

Spatially concentrated production also created for sit-down strikes to be the preferred strike action by militant unionists in Detroit since workers refusing to produce at a part supplier would cripple all downstream production and cause massive loss of profits for the entire automotive sector (Brecher, 1999; Silver, 2003). The most high profile of such actions was the Flint sit-down stoppage that successfully choked up to 75 percent of all of GM's production in 1936 by stalling supplies to two major assemblers for a period that seemed indefinite (Kraus, 1947, 79). A communist UAW organizer, Henry Kraus describes that the "union's strategy held that the chief burden of the strike must be borne by Flint's Fisher One and by Cleveland-Fisher, with the former taking the lead." In fact, the "entire blueprint of the union's organizing schedule depended upon this type of careful selection, for its forces were terribly limited and the power it opposed so commanding" (I. Bernstein, 2010).

Once the Cleveland-Fisher assembly plant (a key node in GM's production apparatus) followed suit with a coordinated strike, the entire fate of the American automotive sector's survival became the forefront of national news coverage and spurred the Roosevelt Administration to take heed of rising industrial worker militancy (See *New York Times* daily coverage of strike activity starting from December 30, 1936). By February 1937, GM delivered a paltry 1,500 new vehicles compared to the 50,000 cars produced just in December 1936. GM was forced to recognize UAW in its premises and agree to enter bargaining regularly—a staggering win for the CIO-UAW which increased its membership from eighty thousand in February 1937 to a colossal four hundred thousand by October of the same year (Fine, 1969, 327). Immediately following the seminal strike in Flint, 1937 saw a total of 4,740 industrial strikes nationally; 477 of which were carried out in the automotive industry in the sit-down fashion to strategically leverage the geographical concentration of production (Fine, 1969; Kraus, 1947, 331). From 1938 to 1940, a total of 12,000 strikes were carried out across the United States, with Detroit being at the epicenter of the most militant of such actions that marked the beginning of industrial unionism across a multitude of sectors at the onset of WWII (Fine, 1969; Glaberman, 1980, 36; Silver, 2003).

Union victories did not go unmet from management's antagonism and confrontation—particularly with Ford's refusal to recognize the UAW and its willingness to use violence to thwart union presence in its plants and subsidiary part manufacturing sites (Bennett, 1951, 138-45; Galenson, 1960, 178-84). By 1941 though, Ford agreed to full contract negotiation with UAW at the insistence of the Roosevelt administration, refused to grant war production contracts to Ford until it recognized UAW at its sites (Ibid). Despite the Roosevelt administration increasing war production and hoping to lessen the crescendo of organized activity, 1941 ended up being a record year for strikes involving 8.4 percent of all workers in the U.S.—up from 7.2 percent in the previous peak year of 1937 (Murray & Schwartz, 2019 quoting Monthly Review, 1946). In December of 1941, however, the Roosevelt Administration successfully negotiated a no-strike agreement for the duration of WWII that UAW along with CIO and AFL all agreed on—with the power to settle labor disputes handed to the National War Labor Board for the time (Lichtenstein, 1980, 83).

The period of U.S. involvement in WWII saw widespread use of another militant action in the arsenal of workers that (despite union leadership disapproving) came into use given its effectiveness in granting power and leverage to workers—wildcat strikes. Nationally, 1943 saw a 33 percent rise in wildcat strikes compared to the previous year, where the average size of strikes rose by 200 percent: contributing to a 300 percent rise in total loss of work hours. This was followed by another 33 percent rise in strikes in 1944—putting the total count to 4,956 actions nationwide (Scott & Homans, 1947, Monthly Labor Review 1946). Although 1945 saw a lull in such strikes (totaling 4,750), the strikes were nevertheless longer and bigger compared to previous years contributing to a loss of about 38 million work days—a staggering 40 percent rise from the previous peak year of 1937 when strikes (both legal and illegal) lead to a loss of 28 million workdays (Brooks, 1971, 204; Monthly Labor Review 1946, 720).

In the automotive sector, which led the national trends in strikes, 27 percent of all autoworkers in Detroit participated in wildcat strikes, including five major stoppages at Chrysler plants. 1944 saw strike action involving at least 50 percent of all autoworkers—with some of the highest count of strikes taking place at Chevy Gear and Axle (6,500 stoppages) and a huge wave of strikes shuttering Ford's River Rouge complex, as well as grounding all production at Chrysler's Highland Park plant to a complete halt (Glaberman, 1980, 51-60, 98-119; Lichtenstein, 1980, 133-25; Pries, 1972, 228). The peak in wildcat strikes for the auto sector

occurred from December 1944 to February 1945, when a total of 126 stoppages involved 75 percent of all U.S. autoworkers (Ibid). It should be noted that the tsunami of unauthorized strikes did not halt after the end of the war, with 85 percent of all strikes in the auto sector between 1946 and 1950 being wildcat (Zetka, 1994, 45).

Rising wages and greater control over working conditions championed by organized labor meant a huge influx of workers into Detroit and Flint during the 1930s from other parts of the U.S. (mostly South) as well as the entrance of women to work in auto production; particularly during WWII (Lichtenstein, 1982, 112). Total employment rose by 3.3 million from 1942 to 1947 in the automotive industry, however total union membership increased by 4.4 million in the sector, despite the pledge to not strike during WWII (Mayer, 2004). Class solidarity and consciousness were instilled among new workers who learned to deploy their knowledge of the structural advantages to workers afforded by spatially concentrated production and continued with organizing well into the 1960s (Meyer & Whittier, 1994, 277-98; Morris, 1981; Spilerman, 1976, 771-93).

Rise of Dispersed (Geographically Unconcentrated) Production

Murray and Schwartz (2019) point to three trends in the automotive industry emerging in response to the strike actions of the 1940s. To counteract the wave of militancy, the auto sector made departures from flex production by introducing three important changes—the rise of parallel parts production, the increase of stockpiles, and the rise of dispersed production away from Detroit and southeast Michigan (Murray & Schwartz, 2017, 154-55). Insulation from coordinated and strategic strike activity was attained principally by creating physical distance between workers so that solidaristic strike action would not spread across neighboring plants like wildfire to cripple production for a whole company. Stockpiles at downstream plants would also help disrupt the structural advantage at the disposal of unions by allowing downstream production to carry on even if stoppages upstream stalled the delivery of needed components. Finally, parallel parts production allowed for the manufacture of a single part to take place at multiple locations so that striking at one location would not grind downstream production to a halt due to the lack of availability of parts. Specifically, "even if the union mobilized enough workers to shut an entire plant down, the companies now had the option of ramping up production at one of the parallel plants producing the same parts" (Ibid).

Such changes marked the abandonment of just-in-time delivery in the U.S. auto sector as geographic separation of suppliers from assemblers made the system difficult to maintain—particularly with the reintroduction of large stockpiles at downstream sites which also made machine flexibility less needed since its very role had been to facilitate flex production. Machine flexibility was crucial for flex production since it allowed upstream producers to quickly switch production of parts to quickly fill orders by downstream assemblers—who themselves were under pressure to respond to market conditions quickly by handling the assembly of multiple models in a single shift through use of flex machine equipment that allows for such production modality (Murray & Schwartz, 2019, 156). Finally, close and long-term relationships as well as the acquisition of part makers by car companies also came to a close, and a new era ushered in where "automakers began exploiting competition between suppliers to reduce costs" (Ibid).

Adoption of Dispersed/Parallel Production at General Motors

Internal documents obtained from GM show that the decision to build a new axle plant in Buffalo, New York rather than the Detroit area in 1937 was specifically to "get away from labor-torn Flint" and to get a hold of "more sources of supply; that, of course, lessened the impact of a strike at a particular plant" (Kuhn, 1986, 148-49). Although geographical dispersion was on the minds of GM management along with the most militant union organizing at its premises, full implementation of dispersed production was stalled during WWII, thirteen out of eighteen new component plants by GM were built totally outside of the southeast Michigan region (Rubenstein, 1992, 109-20). Multiple plants making the same parts were strategically built outside of Detroit and particularly distant from one another to break the union's ability to coordinate a stoppage or slowdown (Ibid). Drivetrain and chassis fabrication would come to be conducted (in conjunction with Michigan) at locations as far as Indiana, Ohio, upstate New York, and even

Connecticut and New Jersey. Production of electrical components and engines also followed a similar pattern. An assembly plant in Norwood, Ohio was built two and half hours away from a principal components production site in neighboring Indiana, about half-hour drive from smaller part suppliers in Ohio (Kuhn, 1986, 148-49).

Parts manufacturing plants built in upstate New York were each about six hours away from any main assemblers—and were regarded by management as moves away from "home" sites such as Detroit and Flint that were also sites of increasing labor militancy (Ibid). Of all the new plants built in 1939, only one was built in Flint, whereas a total of seventeen new plants by GM in the same year were located away from the city, with an average distance of 322 miles from Detroit/Flint (Rubenstein, 1992, 109-20). Following the slowdown of dispersal during WWII, and particularly propelled by wildcat strikes, GM intensified implementation of the parallel production modality starting with a major change in its engine production. Engine manufacturing would be shifted out of its respective car divisions that would traditionally make all of that division's engines in a "mother" plant (located in Flint, Lansing, or Pontiac, MI) to free-standing plants specializing in just one engine size (Murray & Schwartz, 2019, 159). This meant that a strike in Flint could only shut down production of Buick and Chevy models that used engines of a very particular size, but not all production of the models (Ibid).

Plants producing only single-size engines also lessened the need for flex machinery as parts for varying sizes were not needed, which Murray and Schwartz argue, "created a self-reinforcing loop that necessitated full abandonment of the flexible system." "without flexible machines and parts, stockpiles were needed to keep upstream stations busy, justifying a policy that GM was following anyway as an anti-labor strategy" (Murray & Schwartz, 2019, 159). It should be noted that inflexible machinery may have paved the path to automation given the cost-effective nature of producing just one engine size for extensively long production runs (Ibid). The post-war shift to parallel production also saw the mass expansion of engine production sites as well as the inclusion of plants that were at least 300 miles apart from each other. Intensification of dispersal continued when well into the 1960s with most electrical part production having almost entirely been moved to the U.S. South (Kuhn, 1986, 148; Rubenstein, 1992, 122).

Adoption of Dispersed Production at Ford and Chrysler

Ford and Chrysler also adopted dispersed production following in the footsteps of GM, albeit slowly and less rapidly. Before WWII, Chrysler held only one major component plant outside of Detroit, while Ford held two large suppliers feeding into the giant River Rouge complex (Murray & Schwartz, 2019, 160). Throughout the 1950s and '60s, eight out of fifteen new Ford component plants were built in Ohio, while the rest were constructed in the suburbs (Rubenstein, 1992, 102-04). Moreover, the average distance between the Rouge complex and new plants in the period was 136 miles, while the average distance between any two new plants producing the same parts was about 106 miles (ibid). Chrysler, on the other hand, was the slowest to adopt dispersed production in the face of labor militancy, mostly due to heavy dependence on independent part suppliers and the lack of resources to implement parallel production as fast as GM and Ford (Murray & Schwartz, 2019, 161).

However, by the 1960s, Chrysler had opened an engine plant 23 miles away from Detroit, an aluminum casting facility 244 miles away from the city, and a new foundry in Indiana that was 287 miles away from Detroit (Rubenstein, 1992). Abernathy (1978) shows that the average number of new plants feeding into main assembly facilities went from three for 1934-1936 to around eleven for 1970-1972 (Abernathy, 1978, 108). Dispersal of production away from Detroit, by all automakers, was responsible for a loss of 134,000 auto manufacturing jobs in Detroit from the war to 1962—during which time the city also lost 10 percent of its total population (Sugrue, 1996). Most importantly, the same period has also been regarded to have shifted from "just-in-time" delivery to a "just-in-case" system of inventory stockpile. That is, decentralized production once again made for downstream plants to start maintaining large stockpiles of inventory so that "just-in-time" was replaced by what industry experts began referring to as a "just-in-case" system where inventory acts as a hedge of sorts against interruptions in long productions runs (Abernathy et al., 1983, 75).

OCCUPATIONAL & SPATIAL IMMOBILITY OF BLACK LABOR

In the context of decentralizing industrial production, Detroit's African American population faced pervasive discrimination in the city's urban labor market as well as being able to access housing without serious constraints. This section firstly details the ways that occupational segregation was rampant in each of the major industries in Detroit during and after the war. Secondly, this section details the simultaneous occurrence of housing discrimination in Detroit and the suburbs in the face of persistent decentralizing of auto manufacturing in the two decades following the war.

Occupational Segregation in Detroit's Urban Labor Market

Throughout the automotive industry's dominance as the foremost employment sector in Detroit city, evidence shows that discrimination leading to stark segmentation in the local labor market became pervasive. From the period spanning 1940 to 1970, the number of black men working in semiskilled potions such as machine operators grew substantially from nearly one in three in 1940 to about half in 1950 (Sugrue, 1996, Appendix: Table B.1). Simultaneously, as a result of automation, the percentage of black men working in menial jobs fell substantially (Sugrue, 1996, Ch. 5), while the proportion in managerial occupations remained stagnant from 1940 to 1970 (Sugrue, 1996, Appendix: Table B.1). Moreover, both black men and women lost the share of employment in the service sector in the same period, whereas black women's share of semiskilled operative work had only been high during the years of wartime production (Ibid: Table B.2). Well into the 60s, black representation changed very little in skilled crafts, managerial, proprietor as well official and sales worker positions. Black women saw a rise in representation in professionalized positions by the sixties, largely due to black women entering the teaching profession as the number of black students in public schools increased dramatically by the 1960s (Sugrue, 1996, Ch. 4).

Among major employers in the city, such as steel and automakers; skilled, as well as semiskilled, and unskilled workers mostly worked on the same factory floor—where black workers were highly segmented into low-paying work. Gordon et al. (1982) show that the industrial labor market throughout the United States in the mid-twentieth century was divided into the "primary sector" of firms boding high capital intensity, and firms that can be characterized as part of the "secondary sector" with relatively small-scaled manufacturers exhibiting low capital intensity (Gordon et al., 1982). Employers in the primary sector dominated the urban labor market of Detroit during and immediately after WWII, which meant that the preferential treatment of white workers was an outcome of explicit internal firm considerations regarding workers' race (Doeringer, 1971; Gordon et al., 1982; Jencks & Peterson, 1991; Reich, 2017; Spence, 1973). To reduce costs associated with hiring and training new workers, employers would use race as a proxy for characteristics that they thought were indicators of worker productivity (Ibid). During wartime production, employers were also willing to use segmentation as a way to exploit the surplus labor of black workers as internal migrants from the U.S. South came pouring in for work. Low-paying dangerous work was readily reserved for African Americans who, up until the advent of war production, were systematically excluded from such work altogether (Gordon et al., 1982). Segmentation was further reinforced on the part of management fearing that white workers would strike (perceiving black workers as competition) if widespread discriminatory pay and hiring practices were rescinded (Doeringer, 1971; Gordon et al., 1982; Jencks & Peterson, 1991; Reich, 2017; Spence, 1973).

Screening by race on job ads was a legal way to discriminate in hiring until state statute outlawed such practices in 1955. A 1946 report by the Michigan State Employment Service (MSES) found that up to 35.1 percent of job ads submitted as listings to the state's employment agencies had explicitly discriminatory requirements—which grew rapidly after WWII to 44.7 percent in 1947, and 65 percent by 1948 (*Detroit Focus*, 1951). This was the pervasive practice when looking to fill unskilled work, despite such work being open to African Americans historically in manufacturing. For instance, by 1948, up to three-fourths of listed positions were closed to registered black workers—despite the agency (MSES) reporting that close to 68 percent of all unemployed registered workers in Detroit were nonwhite (*Memorandum from the Michigan Committee on Civil Rights to the Governor's Committee on Civil Rights*, 1948). Racist screening language in job ads among private employment agencies was also rampant, where smaller firms were among the

most likely to use language such as "colored," "white," "American," and "protestant" to signal their preference for hire (Licht, 1992, 125-26, 136-39; *Racial Discrimination in Employment and Proposed Fair Employment Measures, A Report to the Common Council*, 1951).

Starting in the 1920s, the automotive industry became the largest employer in Detroit city., and by the 1940s it was the largest employer of African Americans in the city—rising from 4 percent at the start of WWII, to almost 15 percent by the end of the war; and remaining constant at 16 percent by 1960s. By the late 1940s, collective bargaining efforts produced rising wages and benefits as well as seniority rules that would come to form the bedrock of stability and security for autoworkers (*1950 Census of Population*, 1953; *1960 Census of Population*, 1962; *Employment of Negroes in Detroit*, n.d.; *Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights Held in Detroit, Michigan, December 14–15, 1960*, n.d.; Fraser & Gerstle, 1989, 145; Meier & Rudwick, 1979; Weaver, 1946). However, for black workers, the gains resulting in seniority rules did not necessarily result in stability: given that the treatment of black workers throughout the auto industry varied widely (Sugrue, 1996, 197). A 1960 report commissioned by the United States Commission on Civil Rights shows that in Detroit, despite the proportion of black workers in auto manufacturing being higher than in other industries, plant-by-plant representation of black workers varied widely. For instance, the total number of black workers at all Chrysler plants in the city ranged from a paltry few to a full 50 percent in some plants. At GM, this range encompassed numbers as low as 6 workers at one plant; to over 60 percent at others (Sugrue, 1996, Appendix: Table 4.1).

The variation was an outcome of deliberately racist hiring practices that company official was allowed to practice at their discretion—something that top-level GM executives have been documented to have openly admitted to in correspondence with one another (Northrup, 1968, 11, 20). A Chrysler executive has even been documented to have stated "We are not employing Negroes; we may employ a few when the situation becomes desperate enough" (*Edward M. Turner to John C. Dancy*, 1954). This was practiced, in part, because of perceived reprisal by white (particularly male) workers resulting from integration efforts at predominantly white plants (Hill, 1960; Milkman, 1987, 118-27; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1943). For this reason, large individual plants would come to be regarded for maintaining a distinct racial makeup—in a way that served as their identity. GM's Fisher Body plant became "well known for their 'lily-white' policy" in 1940, and by 1960, the plant remained predominantly white.

On the other hand, Chevy's Spring and Bumper, Dodge Main, and Forge plants were predominantly black in 1960, as in 1940 (Bailer, 1943; Sugrue, 1996, Appendix: Table 4.1). Furthermore, physically demanding and dangerous occupations (work predominantly performed by black workers in the segregated labor force) have been documented to have a high turnover relative to higher-paying skilled work in the years following the war (Geschwender, 1977, 39; Maloney & Whatley, 1995; *Memo to Nat Weinberg from Ralph Showalter*, 1948). This meant that given the availability of a large urban black labor pool in the city after WWII, and less than amicable working conditions experienced by black workers in the segregated auto labor force, many employers were always doubtful about black workers' level of dedication to work(ibid).

In the years following the war, immediately upon hire, black workers were likely to be assigned to the most dangerous and physically demanding work (Beynon, 1938; Clive, 1979, 175, 179-84; Geschwender, 1977, 39; Gregory, 1995; Jones, 1992, 205-65; Kornhauser, 1952, 46-47; Nelson, 1993; *Report on Survey on Race Relations*, 1943; Widick, 1976, 54). The UAW took an inconsistent role in protecting black workers in the same period. At the national level, the union presented itself as vehemently in support of civil rights—although, in practice, it allowed for rampant discrimination to continue in certain respects as opposed to others (Boyle, 1995, 8-12; Korstad & Lichtenstein, 1988; *William Oliver to Frederick Bibber*, n.d.). For instance, skilled trade was almost entirely replete with over-discriminatory practices and in total accounted for around 15 percent of the entire auto workforce of Detroit in the decades following the war (Ibid).

Although the union successfully fought for the establishment of labor-management joint committees to root out discrimination in hiring, the union simultaneously negotiated seniority rules that made the length of service the primary basis for hiring, layoff, and promotion decisions (Bailer, 1944; Chinoy & Riesman, 2012, 463-75; Gersuny & Kaufman, 1985; Milkman, 1987, 99-127; Montgomery, 1979, 140-43; Schatz, 1983). As such, white male workers maintained clear advantages in high-paying skilled trade work despite

attempts to introduce anti-discrimination (Babson, 1986, 144-45; *Daily Worker*, 1944; *Ford Facts*, 1951; *Leslie S. Perry to Roy Wilkins*, 1944; *Problems of Women Workers in the Auto Industry*, 1963; Milkman, 1987, 104-12, 130-44; Stevenson, n.d., 287-88). By 1954, only 24 out of more than seven thousand skilled workers at Chrysler, and only 67 out of about eleven thousand skilled workers at General Motors were black (*Survey: Salaried Employment of Negroes in the Automobile Industry*, 1963). At Ford, only after a vociferous push by civil rights groups opened certain non-factory jobs to a few black workers such as valet, porters, guards, messengers, and low-paid clerks (Ibid).

Among large manufacturing employers in Detroit, the auto industry was not the only one that maintained discriminatory practices. Steel production was another heavy industry that saw a rise in the proportion of black workers in the years after the war. Michigan became the fifth-largest steel producer at the onset of the war, where the proportion of black workers rose from 4.2 percent in 1940 to around 18 percent in 1950—staying at that percentage through 1960 (Rowan, 1968, 18, 40-44). Most steel production was concentrated in the Detroit area in the period, and almost no black workers were employed as higher-paying skilled trade and crafts workers (Ibid). Detroit's chemical industry and brewing plants exhibited an almost identical pattern of segmentation—higher paid work was almost always dominated by whites, and among the lowest skilled demanding work was assigned to black workers (Dickerson, 1986; Norrell, 1986; Quay & Denison, 1969, 27; Rowan, 1968, 57-73; *The Cotillion News*, 1955; *Vocational Services Monthly Report*, 1950; Zieger, 1991, 135-57).

Among Detroit's small part-making proprietors such as machine and metal fabrication firms, only about 750 out of 44,000 in 1950 were black—a number that rose to just over 1,600 out of 68,000 by 1960 (*Detroit Metropolitan Area Employment and Income by Age, Sex, Color and Residence, 1960*, n.d.). Employers in these firms sought a largely homogenous workforce maintained through a network of friends and family members in the vocation, so much so that a course instructor of tool and die-making trades commented, that, even with commensurate skills, "colored men are not wanted in the field"—as that would be seen as a breach on the established network of friends and family that dominated the line of work (Gordon et al., 1982; Holland, 1989; *James A. Oliver to William T. Patrick*, 1962). Moreover, only in instances of a labor shortage during the fifties would, as observed by the secretary of the Automotive Tool and Die Manufacturers Association "some employers be liberal enough to accept Negro youth in the tool and die industry" (*Francis Kornegay to Chester Cahn*, 1951).

Detroit's service sector and construction industry were also replete with similar patterns of discrimination and occupational segregation. In retail sales, positions involving public contact that were open to black workers were scant (Sugrue, 1996, Appendix B). In 1963, just over three hundred workers out of a total of over seven thousand retail workers in the city were black; out of which, only 20 salespeople and the rest held jobs like janitors, porters, cleaners, and shoe-shiners (*1950 Census of Population*, 1953; *Detroit News*, 1962; Isenberg, n.d., 391-476; McFate et al., 1995, 466-73). In building trades, discrimination was arguably the most deep-rooted in all of Detroit's big industries (Sugrue, pg. 223). New home construction in the suburbs grew rapidly, especially as large-scale home financing was underwritten by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (part of the Federal Housing Administration). This also led to a massive shortage of construction workers—yet very few black workers were ever hired despite the shortage (*Advisory Committee on Housing, Minutes*, 1946). As in the case of machine tool-making trades, adequate training and experience never guaranteed employment for black workers in construction (*Detroit Tribune*, 1951; *Racial Discrimination in Employment and Proposed Fair Employment Measures, A Report to the Common Council*, 1951; Ferman, 1968, 300). This is despite many black internal migrants from the U.S. South having substantial experience in construction and even specialized skills in masonry and carpentry (Ibid).

According to Urban League, practically all unions in Detroit's building trades were closed to black workers as late as 1968, causing black workers in the trades to form their own union, known as the Laborers Union (*Francis Kornegay to J.A. Thomas*, 1946; *NAACP Study Concerning Apprenticeship*, n.d.; *Summary Report: Apprenticeship and Training Opportunities for Negro Youths in Selected Urban League Cities*, 1961). Almost all of the work that was open to blacks was in the casual labor market where a few black workers would often be picked out from an ever-growing surplus of workers to work as low-paid assistants

(*Memo from Ernest L. Brown to Francis Kornegay*, 1963). Casual labor meant that the work was foremost vulnerable to fluctuation in labor demand, as hiring was on a day-to-day basis rather than contracts covered by union protection. 1960, the overwhelming occupational segregation was the background for black construction workers earning a median of $3,530 (about the poverty line) to the median earned by whites of $5,758 (*Earnings of the Experienced Labor Force By Sex, Color, and Industry, Detroit Metropolitan Area*, 1963).

Rise of De Jure Redlining Practices & Other Mechanisms of Immobility

At the outset of WWII, most of Detroit's black population was concentrated in Detroit's lower east side and a three-mile-long section that extended from the downtown to the center of the city known as the Paradise Valley—home to the majority of the city's black population in 1940. The section was described as "a mixture of everything imaginable—including overcrowding, delinquency, and disease" (Current, 1946; White, 1953). Federal Housing Authority (FHA) officials would come to classify two-thirds of Paradise Valley's housing stock as substandard. This classification by FHA in 1940 was reserved for living spaces lacking a bath/toilet, running water, and basic heating and lighting. Overcrowded low-rent rental units were also part of the classification and Paradise Valley had a large number of them at the outset of the war (Lee, 1968, 93; *Real Property Survey of Detroit, Michigan*, 1939).

Up to a quarter of Detroit's black population resided in enclaves outside of sections like the Paradise Valley. These neighborhoods were commonly regarded as "colonies" by federal home loan appraisers in the 1940s where the newest arriving migrant workers from the U.S. South found shelter and access to resources to eventually build or purchase homes in those sections of the city (Bodnar et al., 1982, 275; Glasco, 1989; Grossman, 1989, 139; Hirsch, 2021, 6; Philpott, 1978, 181-83; Taylor, 1993). The biggest black-majority neighborhood outside of Paradise Valley was on the city's west side and had initially been settled by upwardly mobile black workers in the 1920s, but despite exhibiting homes that were substantially different in quality compared to other majority black sections of the city the Federal Home Loan Bank System marked as "D" ("red") to signify as wholly unsuitable for federal financing in the form of loans or subsidies (Dancy, 1966, 58-59; *Summary of Economic, Real Estate, and Mortgage Survey and Security Area Descriptions of Greater Detroit, Michigan*, 1939; Washington & Detroit, 2018; Zunz, 1982, 393-98). The main difference between Paradise Valley homes and West Side dwellings was that up to 37 percent of residents of the West Side were homeowners (with some parcels boasting upwards of 50 percent homeownership), compared to only 10 percent in Paradise Valley. Moreover, more than 60 percent of dwellings in Paradise Valley were considered substandard at the outset of the war compared to just 17 percent of homes on the West Side (*Real Property Survey of Detroit, Michigan*, 1939). However, none of these differences were significant enough for FHA officials to grant different ratings to the two sections of the city.

Supply of housing fell short in the years immediately following the end of the war, especially given that the total city population grew by 220,000 from 1940 to 1950, 150,000 of whom were black ("Housing," 1946; "The Housing Mess," 1947; "The Week's Events: The Great Housing Shortage," 1945). Of the estimated ten thousand housing units of housing that were needed to accommodate the new black population, only 1,895 were built in the 1940s (*The Current Racial Situation in Detroit*, 1945). Moreover, of the 545,000 housing units available in Detroit in 1947, only about 47,000 were available to black applicants, and of the 186,000 single-family homes available in the period, just about 1,500 were available for black families (*Analysis of Certain Racial Aspects of the Present Detroit Slum Clearance, Redevelopment and Public Housing Program*, 1951; *The Housing of Negro Veteran: Their Housing Plans and Living Arrangements in 32 Areas*, 1948). In 1950, the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Committee chair commented that "Vast amounts of new housing on the periphery of the city are being marketed to white buyers," and that such "conditions result in a situation where properties in older neighborhoods tend to command a higher price from Negro buyers than from white" (Schermer, 1951).

Arguably the biggest purveyor of prejudice in housing access was the legally sanctioned discriminatory imprimatur developed by FHA's Home Loan Bank Board in partnership with area real estate brokers and lenders (Jackson, 1980; Mohl, 1988; *Summary of Economic, Real Estate, and Mortgage Survey and*

Security Area Descriptions of Greater Detroit, Michigan, 1939). The agency created maps that intentionally divided the entire Detroit metropolitan into sections that rank ordered neighborhoods from A (green or most desirable) through to D (red or least desirable) based on aspects including age of structures, living conditions, amenities, and neighborhood infrastructure. Most importantly, the single most crucial criterion for funding access set by the agency was race-ethnic and economic homogeneity, along with the presence or absence of "a low grade population" in the neighborhood. According to the ranking, both residents and developers living in areas ranked as "C" or "D" were precluded from any financing to buy or build new homes (Ibid).

Furthermore, neighborhoods with even a scant proportion of black residents were rated "D" for being "hazardous" and colored red on the Security Maps maintained by the HOLC. Another insidious aspect of redlining was that a "D" rating was also attached to neighborhoods if "an undesirable population" was found to be "shifting" or making "infiltration" into an otherwise high-ranked neighborhood (*The "Underclass" Debate*, 2018, 118-57; Feild, 1939). Properties covered under restrictive covenants were particularly likely to receive and maintain "A" ratings by HOLC officials. Such covenants were clauses written into property deeds that expected homeowners and landlords to maintain "desirable residential characteristics" which meant the preservation of social homogeneity and prevention of sale and occupancy to specified racial, ethnic, and religious groups (Stach, 1988; Weiss, 1987, 68-72).

In the 1940s, over 80 percent of residential property outside the central business district was covered under race-based restriction. Language specifying the exclusion of black residents was added in every single new subdivision built in the city between 1940 and 1947. Such language often specifies that a development "shall not be used or occupied by any person or persons except those of Caucasian race" (Vose, 1959, 125-26). Realtors enforced the creation and enforcement of neighborhood covenants where realtors were expected to consciously avoid buying and selling property in a "community most likely to have trouble, or better yet, one in which a Negro family is already resident" (Abrams, 1955, 182-85; Long & Johnson, 1947, 67-69). Builders receiving FHA funding and subsidies would openly boast of having a "highly restricted and carefully controlled community…where as a member of an association of residents you can pass judgment upon who shall be you neighbor and the type and value of the home he builds" (Ibid). Despite the Supreme Court having challenged the legality of race-specific covenants in 1948 (*Shelly v. Kraemer*), builders still found it almost impossible to get backing to construct homes for nonwhite occupants since real estate agents in neighborhoods protected by covenants would very often refuse to sell homes to nonwhites in fear of white reprisal (Capeci, 1984, 34-35).

Whites also resisted the building of low-rent housing near their neighborhoods out of fear that the city's black residents would come to be housed in close proximity. Attempts to change zoning rules to allow the construction of apartment complexes were resisted by neighborhood associations even if they were planned to be built near commercial and industrial-use land (Abrams, 1955, 99-101). To whites, change to zoning to allow building such property would "open the way for 'ill fame' houses" and that "multiple homes in single residence areas threaten…additional blight," especially since they seemed to "have the idea that multiple rental housing brings in minority groups" (ibid). An intense battle with the city government led to a virtual freeze on the building of low-income homes and apartments by 1951—a trend that would continue through the decade despite periods of severe housing shortages for all residents (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989, 156-58). In the face of such shortages, only white workers could move freely to areas outside the city or move out of Michigan altogether (*Detroit News*, 1945).

Rampant discrimination in housing access began during WWII when internal migration brought African Americans from the South in large numbers. Of more than fourteen thousand applications for public housing by black applicants, only about seventeen hundred were approved throughout the war (*Housing the Negroes Is a War Measure: A Few Facts on the Present Situation*, 1945). From 1947 to 1952, over thirty-seven thousand black families along with nearly fifty-seven thousand white families applied for public housing—of which only 24 percent of black applicants were approved, to the 41 percent of white applicants that were approved (William, 1951). By the mid-1950s, a total of 9,908 whites were put up in public housing, while only 1,226 African Americans were accommodated (Ibid). Furthermore, New Deal programs aimed toward providing public housing assistance ended up exacerbating discrimination in the

provisioning of housing due to the deleterious impacts of FHA's redlining practices. That is, the stability of (white) homeownership inside city boundaries was elevated in importance to increase the supply of publicly supported housing (Fraser & Gerstle, 1989). This is because commitments toward constructing public housing came simultaneously with direct government support and subsidies promoting homeownership by the FHA's HOLC (Harriss, 1951, 9). Historians have argued that the stability of homeownership was a much bigger priority for the Roosevelt Administration who saw it as crucial for promoting harmony, security, and self-defense during the depression and war (Tobey et al., 1990). Given the widespread utilization of assistance for private homeownership made available by New Deal efforts, Detroit city made public housing a secondary priority despite high demand for its provisions (Hirsch, 2021, 269).

Throughout the 1940s and 50s, the majority of public housing was constructed on the outskirts of Detroit city, under the assumption that the availability of such accommodation would disproportionately serve the city's black population—and as such, might become a vehicle for residential integration (Sugrue, 1996, 163). A major flashpoint that became among the first points of contention over the location of public housing was the construction of the Sojourner Truth housing project. The project, as announced in 1941, was a joint endeavor between Detroit city and the federal government to address the massive housing shortage in the wake of wartime migration of southern black workers attracted by wartime production. Despite the chosen location already having a large concentration of black residents, surrounding white residents revolted and interpreted the decision of the Federal government as though it was a "refusal to insure any more mortgages" to white applicants in the area (Abrams, 1955, 95; Capeci, 1984, 75-99, 80; Clive, 1979, 145-50).

Upon the first black families having moved into the housing in 1942, a race riot broke out resulting in scores of people getting injured or arrested, with 109 people being standing trial—only three of whom were white (*Analysis and Recommendations Regarding the Racial Occupancy Policy and Practice of the Detroit Housing Commission*, 1952; Capeci, 1984, 88; Jenkins, 1951). After the event had captured widespread attention, city officials affirmed publicly that all public housing under the aegis and support of the Roosevelt Administration would be approved only if doing so would "not change the racial pattern of a neighborhood" (Ibid). The event of Sojourner Truth set the tone for how the city and federal officials would locate public housing for the decades to come, and most importantly, set the precedence for white resistance to public housing in the suburbs. Opposition to public housing in Detroit's suburbs was even more vociferous, especially by mayors who saw such efforts leading to demographic changes that they hoped to avoid at all costs (*To Edward Connor*, 1944). A federal official charged with convincing suburban authorities to allow the building of public housing noted that even a suburb as important as Dearborn (home of Ford Motor Company) was expected to "undoubtedly attempt to make things as miserable as possible for the people who live in the [low-income] houses which are built" (*Daily Worker*, 1944). Even in the face of intense wartime housing shortage, the mayor of Dearborn declared that "Housing the Negroes is Detroit's problem" and that "When you remove garbage from your backyard, you don't dump it in your neighbor's" (*Dearborn Meeting, 12/18/44*, 1944).

Despite multiple attempts by the Roosevelt Administration to allow the building of public housing during WWII, the city refused—and set the precedence for other inner-ring suburbs in the period to do the same for years to come (*Detroit News*, 1945; *Detroit Times*, 1945; *Report on Conversation with Ford Motor Company Engineer*, 1944; "Resolution Passed By Dearborn City Council," 1944). Whites increasingly began to see public housing as a way to provide "Negro housing" in the wake of the mass migration of black workers during the war, and ran several high-profile campaigns in the city and the suburbs during and after the war. After a concerted, successful effort to defeat public housing in Detroit's southwest neighborhood of Oakwood, multiple attempts to erect public housing were handily defeated as opposition to its building became the highest priority for city and suburban elected officials looking to respond to white constituents' anxieties and fear (*Brightmoor Journal*, 1949; *City Plan Commission Minutes*, n.d.; *Detroit Free Press*, 1949; *Detroit Free Press*, 1950; *Detroit News*, 1949; *Detroit Times*, 1950; *"HI" NEIGHBOR*, 1949; *Interview with Joseph Coles*, 1970; *Orville Tenaglia to Cobo*, 1950; *The City Administration's Housing Program: An Analysis*, 1950; *West Side Coordinators Meeting, Wednesday, November 16, 1949*,

n.d.). From 1950 to about 1960, no new public housing was constructed outside of already segregated majority neighborhoods in the inner-city (*Detroit Housing Commission Material Describing Low Rent Housing Program of the City*, 1966; *Does Detroit Have a Housing Problem?*, 1951; Hirsch, 2021, 13).

Retaliation, Blockbusting and White Flight in the Wake of Legal Remediation

Attempts to desegregate Detroit through the legal mandate were also met with intense resistance. The most Seminole case came in 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments on Sipes, alongside three other covenant cases, including Shelley v. Kraemer, which eventually became the namesake of the court's decision. Led by Thurgood Marshall, a team of lawyers argued against racially restrictive covenants, presenting evidence of their impact on black housing opportunities and constitutional arguments against state-sanctioned racial discrimination. The court unanimously ruled that the state could not enforce restrictive covenants, including those in question in Sipes. This decision was met with elation among Detroit's black population, as it promised to break down racial barriers in housing by the highest court in the land (*Michigan Chronicle*, 1948; *Shelley v. Kraemer, 334 U.S. 1 (1948)*, n.d.; Tushnet, 1994, 81-98).

Immediately after the decision, black residents in Detroit began moving beyond the traditional confines of the city's inner core, expanding to the east and northwest. The number of census tracts with a significant black population grew, and housing conditions for black residents improved between 1948 and 1960. Specifically, the number of census tracts with 500 or more black residents grew from 56 in 1940 to 73 in 1950, which rose to 166 in 1960 (Sugrue, 1996, Map 7.1). In terms of home conditions, black occupancy in homes regarded as substandard (lacking running water, and indoor toilets) declined from close to 30 percent to nearly 10 percent from 1950 to 1960. Moreover, the percentage of black occupants in overcrowded living spaces also declined from 25.3 to 17.5 (Frieden, 1964, 24, 26, Tables 2.4, 2.5).

Real estate agents took this as an opportunity to engage in a profiteering scheme known as 'blockbusting' whereby the desire to own homes in white-majority sections of Detroit by African Americans was exploited by brokers who simultaneously stoked fears and anxieties of white residents to be able to profit (*Detroit Free Press*, 1963; *Michigan Chronicle*, 1962). To elicit white residents' anxieties, brokers would engage in tactics such as selling a house to a black family in an all-white neighborhood and hiring a black woman to stroll a baby through the neighborhood to signal oncoming neighborhood integration and demographic shifts. Such tactics were devised in the immediate aftermath of *Sipes* when the "uneasy, tenuous and emotional climate under which many of these white families lived" would make "them easy prey for avaricious speculators in real property" (*Hearings Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights Held in Detroit, Michigan, December 14–15, 1960*, 1961; *Major Areas of Civil Rights Violations in Detroit*, 1955; Price, 1957). Other tactics to stoke fears would include incendiary leafleting and making phone calls to inform white residents that "Negroes are 'taking over' this area" for which they "had best sell while there is still a chance of obtaining a good price" (Orser, 1994; *Preparing Neighborhoods for Change*, 1956; Price, 1957). Realtors acquired homes from anxious white sellers at prices below the market rate, and to sweeten the deal, they often provided full cash payments to these sellers. Subsequently, they advertised in African-American newspapers, extending an opportunity for residents living in overcrowded and substandard inner-city housing to escape these conditions (*Detroit News*, 1962; William, 1951). This meant that only families possessing the financial resources to manage substantial initial and ongoing payments could afford to purchase the homes vacated by anxious white sellers (Ibid).

The *Sipes* decision and the perturbing of white fears of integration through blockbusting schemes became the backdrop for the rise of the homeowners' movement to defend homogenous white neighborhoods inside Detroit city borders. Close to two hundred neighborhood associations were formed between 1943 to 1965 dedicated to the "protection" and "improvement" of environs according to the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Committee (*A Study of Interracial Housing Incidents*, 1949; *Improvement Associations of Detroit, List From Zoning Board of Appeals*, 1955; *Interview with Joseph Coles*, 1970; *Michigan Chronicle*, 1948; Vose, 1959). Although such associations never openly declared themselves as segregationist in their mission, they became the foremost vehicles for the defense of homogeneity in white-majority neighborhoods in response to the changing legal and political landscape of post-war Detroit. For instance, Roman catholic neighborhood associations (representing upwards of 65 percent of Detroit

residents during the 1950s), would come to be openly urged by church leaders to protect against "invasions" from black residents in the neighborhoods where parish schools and other church institutions were located (Capeci, 1984, 77-78, 89-90; *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration and Analysis by Counties, States, and Regions*, n.d.; Hartman, 1974, 187; Lenski, 1961).

Emergency meetings would be called up frequently by associations so that "ALL interested in maintaining Property Values" could "have first hand information on the colored situation" in their neighborhoods. Meetings would be called up with announcements provocatively calling on white residents to "protect the Area from undesirable elements:" specifically the "influx of colored people" (*Action!*, 1948; *OPEN MEETING...for Owners and Tenants*, 1945; Peck, 1950). A survey conducted during the period found that just about 18 percent of white Detroiters viewed integration favorably, with a full 54 percent finding it unfavorable. Furthermore, 27 percent of whites found "Negroes moving into white neighborhoods" to be particularly deleterious for race relations in the city, with 22 percent expressing concern that the "Negro has too many rights and privileges; too much power; too much intermingling." (Kornhauser, 1952, 95).

Well into the 1960s, the city was marred with incidents of violent crime. It would accelerate especially during times of economic downturn when whites' fear and anger became particularly animated to defend the homogeneity of neighborhoods (*A Study of Interracial Housing Incidents*, 1949; J. G. Feild, 1967). Whites also increasingly felt that leaving for the suburbs would be better before the worst of violence broke out in the city (Ibid). Three homeowner's associations represented the most fiercely defended white sections of Detroit: the Northeast Side, the Courville District, and the Wyoming Corridor (Sugrue, 1996, Map 9.1). These were 'defended' neighborhoods in that residents openly made clear that they were willing to use violence if African Americans attempted to purchase homes in the neighborhoods. For instance, members of the Northeast Side association drew an invisible dividing line along the three main thoroughfares encapsulating the neighborhood. White residents would frequently use violence and intimidation tactics such as burning houses and throwing bricks into the windows of homes newly occupied by black residents (*Commission on Community Relations Minutes*, 1957; *Michigan Chronicle*, 1955; *Pittsburgh Courier (Detroit Edition)*, 1953). Other neighborhoods such as the Wyoming Corridor, the De Witt-Clinton, Ruritan Park, and States-Lawn associations all were documented as using similar tactics to intimidate black entrants throughout the 1960's (Peck, 1950, 1-3; *Report on Ruritan Park Civic Association Meeting*, 1956).

Well before the advent of white flight following the 1967 race riots, a huge number of whites had already left for the suburbs by droves. The legacy of pervasive redlining along with other legally sanctioned discriminatory practices such as real estate steering and restrictive zoning laws prevented African Americans from buying homes in the suburbs during the same period (Jackson, 1985, 190-218; Stach, 1988). As such, suburban communities in the post-war period were also 'defended' and overtly exclusionary of black entrants. Following the war, inner-ring suburbs such as Madison Heights, Warren, Ecorse, Taylor, and Lincoln Park saw rapid home development speared by heavy subsidization through FHA and VA subsidies. Furthermore, up-and-coming middle-class suburbs such as Livonia, Dearborn Heights, and Royal Oak maintained restrictive covenants that are documented to be extralegal even from the standpoint of *Shelley v. Kraemer*, but were adopted to maintain race and socioeconomic homogeneity (Cosseboom, 1972; Darden, 1987, 16-21, 29-44, 77-86, 96-106).

Suburban exclusivity and uniformity did not solely result from individual housing choices. The preservation of these characteristics was heavily reliant on government support at both the federal and local levels. Particularly influential were the underwriting policies of the Federal Housing Administration and Home Owners' Loan Corporation, which methodically excluded African Americans. Cementing the imperceptible barriers that separated the city from the suburbs and different suburban areas from each other were the rigid municipal boundaries (Dimond, 1985, 51-56). Each suburban area maintained its distinct school district, recreational programs, libraries, and public services funded by local taxes. Suburban governments safeguarded their independence zealously, frequently rejecting participation in metropolitan government initiatives. Outlying towns also enforced stringent zoning regulations, which prohibited the conversion of single-family homes into apartments, tightly restricted multi-family housing, and specified lot sizes. Suburban residents dwelled in communities with firmly established boundaries, actively protected

by local governments, a contrast to their urban counterparts who had to delineate and defend their fragile borders (Ibid).

CONCLUSION

Today, Detroit stands out among major metropolitans of similar size for exhibiting exceedingly high levels of racialized inequality that also makes it among the most segregated metropolitans in the US (Farley et al., 2000, Ch. 7). Since the race riots of 1967, race-based inequality in the metropolitan has only increased despite multiple efforts statutorily, through court decisions, and concerted workplace integration drives by unions to curb its rise. In 2020, 78 percent of the city's population was black, and less than 11 percent was non-Hispanic white—a sharp contrast to the six-county metropolitan's share of the white-alone population stands at 66 percent to the share of the black population of just 21 percent (Bureau, n.d.). Just a little over fifty years ago in 1970, the share of the white population in Detroit city was about 56 percent white and 44 percent black. 1967 saw a turning point in the city's demographics: as late as 1960, 71 percent of the city was white; down from 84 percent in 1950 (Ibid).

By 2019, The median household income in Detroit city was $33,970 to the metropolitan's median of $63,470—a nearly $29,000 difference (*Walter P. Reuther Library*, n.d.)(Detroit Future City, 2021). For African Americans, median hourly incomes for whites with and without a four-year degree were $19.61 and $33.73, respectively—to $14.71 and $25.82, respectively. In terms of educational attainment, up to 40 percent of whites in the area held a bachelor's or more, to the 13 percent by African Americans. Moreover, the average home value of black-owned homes in all of Detroit metropolitan was $76, 090 to the $122,180 of white-owned homes (bid).

Congress had passed major legislation outlawing employment discrimination through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and housing discrimination through the Fair Housing Act of 1968. UAW and other unions with large numbers of African Americans began aggressively integrating workers in the 1960s (*Walter P. Reuther Library*, n.d.). However, much of the production had left Detroit city by the time such efforts would bear fruit in reducing inequality. For instance, by 1971, 80 percent of all plants owned by GM in Michigan were located in Detroit—up from 69 percent in 1940. In 1976, about 74 percent of all plants owned by Chrysler in the U.S. were outside of city boundaries, up from 37 percent in 1940. Moreover, in 1979 a full 100 percent of plants owned by Ford in the U.S. were outside of Detroit—up from 42 percent in 1940 (Moody & Service, 2018).

Legally speaking, an extensive economic history of Detroit and its suburbs shows that capital moved away from the city soon after the unions championed the greatest gains of which the establishment of the federal labor relations framework in the 1930s foremost exemplar. Furthermore, as soon as the civil rights movement made enormous gains in outlawing racial discrimination, white residents of the city left the city in droves in what is now known as the white flight. Both of these trends are important to trace to understand why inequality persists so stubbornly in not just Detroit, but other cities of the Rustbelt.

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