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The Origins of the Urban Crisis

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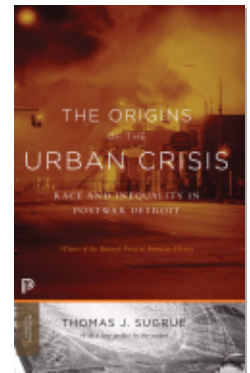
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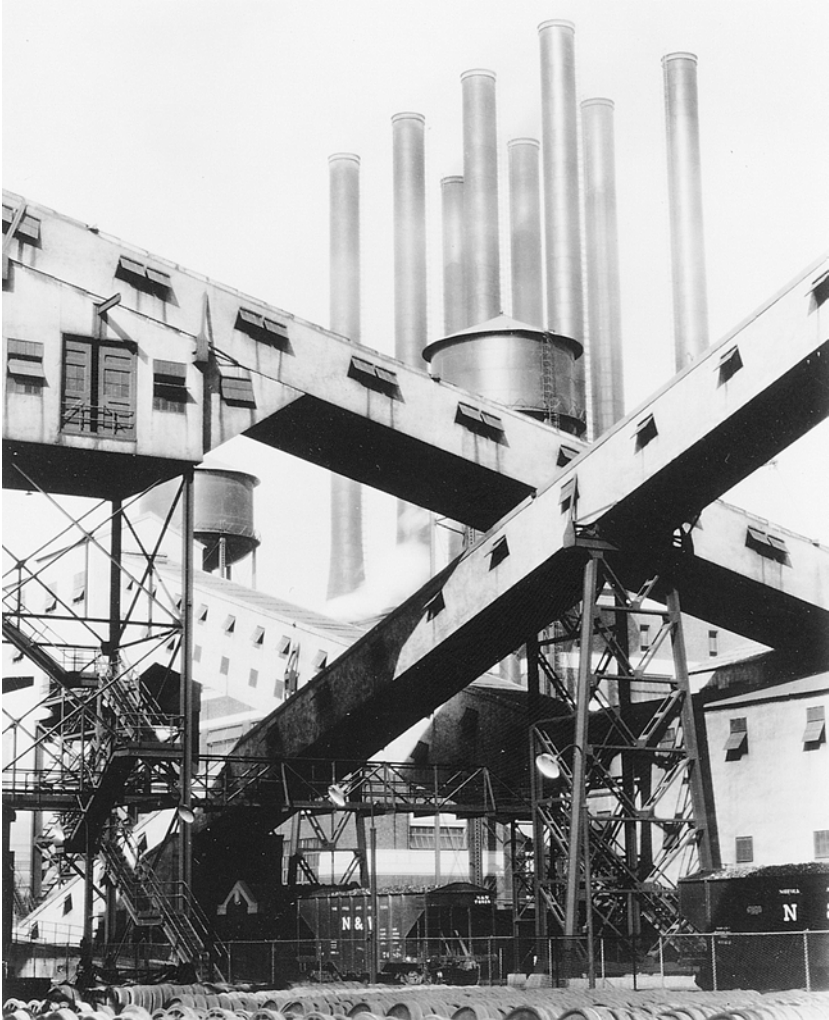


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Part One _____

ARSENAL



1.1. The enormous Ford River Rouge plant, one of the largest industrial complexes in the world, was a symbol of Detroit's industrial might. In 1927, photographer Charles Sheeler captured the might of the Rouge in his view of "Criss-Crossed Conveyors." At the end of world War II, over eighty-five thousand workers were employed in the sprawling complex. The River Rouge plant was also Detroit's major employer of African Americans in the wartime era.

“Arsenal of Democracy”

IN 1927, Charles Sheeler photographed the Ford Motor Company’s enormous River Rouge plant. His most famous print depicts two starkly angular conveyor belts that transported coal into the power plant. In the background piercing the sky are eight tall, narrow smokestacks. Sheeler’s striking image revealed the might of Detroit’s industry, and did so by portraying only one small section of an industrial complex that consisted of nineteen separate buildings covering more than two square miles. The Rouge included a man-made harbor for Great Lakes coal and iron barges, the largest foundry in the world, and ninety-two miles of railroad track. In 1933, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera captured the monumentality of automobile production at the Rouge. His frescoes at the Detroit Institute of Arts depict workers dwarfed by furnaces belching fire, engaged in seemingly mortal combat with machinery so overwhelming that it called forth herculean labors.¹ These powerful images of Detroit conveyed the sense that the city was the very essence of American industry.

Mid-twentieth-century Detroit embodied the melding of human labor and technology that together had made the United States the apotheosis of world capitalism. Visitors flocked to the Motor City to marvel at its industrial sites. Crowded into the observation areas at auto plants, they stood rapt as the twentieth century’s premier consumer object, the automobile, rolled off the assembly lines by the dozens an hour. The scene was a drama of might and violence, of human ingenuity and sheer physical labor, punctuated by the noise of pounding machinery, the sight of hundreds of workers moving rhythmically to the pulse of the line, the quiet but never unnoticed hovering of foremen and inspectors, the interplay of mechanical power and the brawn of human arms and backs, the seemingly endless rush of workers through the gates at shift change time. Detroit’s brooding horizon of factories and its masses of industrial laborers became icons of modernity.

Sheeler’s photographs and Rivera’s murals depicted one part of Detroit: its role as a center of mass production. Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors had their headquarters in the Detroit area. The outlines of dozens of major automobile plants punctuated the low skyline of Detroit. Some, like Dodge Main in Hamtramck, nearly as large as the Rouge, loomed on the horizon; others, like the Packard plant on East Grand Boulevard, spread out over several long city blocks. But throughout the city were many less imposing

but still significant enterprises. Also prominent on the city's landscape were a score of large plants where car parts were built: several stamping plants that produced car bumpers and chassis frames, a number of engine plants, one of the largest tire manufactories in the country, and four independent car body manufacturers.²

Thousands of relatively inconspicuous factories lined Detroit's major thoroughfares, most employing a few hundred workers, too ordinary in their design and function to attract the attention of artists like Sheeler and Rivera, but no less essential to the city's economy. "Around the work-stained skirts of the town," noted a reporter in 1955, sprawl "miles of one-cylinder tool-and-die shops." The production of a car involved the assembly of thousands of small parts, the building of hundreds of machine tools, the stamping of dies, the forging of metal, the casting of tubes and coils and springs, the molding of plastics, and the manufacture of paints, glass, fabrics, bearings, electronics, and wire. To supply machinery and parts to the automobile industry, a myriad of small manufacturing operations thrived around the city.³

To focus merely on the automobile-related factories would miss whole sectors of Detroit's industrial economy. Over 40 percent of the city's industrial jobs were in nonautomotive plants. Some were descended from nineteenth-century enterprises: stove making, brewing, furniture building. Also in Detroit were chemical companies, aircraft part fabricators, oil refineries, salt mines, steel mills, garment manufacturers, food processing plants, the largest pharmaceutical manufacturer in the world, and a major producer of adding machines and typewriters.

Early twentieth-century Detroit was, in the words of historian Olivier Zunz, a "total industrial landscape." Factories, shops, and neighborhoods blurred together indistinguishably, enmeshed in a relentless grid of streets and a complex web of train lines. To the casual observer, the design of Detroit seemed anarchic. The city's sprawling form and its vast array of manufacturing plants made little sense. But Detroit's industrial geography had a logic that defied common observation. Rail lines formed the threads that tied the city's industries together. Automobile manufacturing and railroad transportation were inseparably bound in a symbiotic relationship. Every major automobile factory had its own rail yard. Plants were, in the eyes of one observer, "ringed round with . . . snarls and tangles of railroad tracks." Trains brought raw materials and parts to the auto plants and carried the finished products to distributors throughout the country.⁴

The Detroit River was another essential element in the city's industrial geography. The fast-flowing channel that marked the southern and eastern boundaries of the city passed by Detroit's steel mills and chemical plants. Its waters provided egress to the Great Lakes and easy access to coal and ore, which were prohibitively expensive to transport by land. Chemical and steel

manufacturers also depended on water for their cooling systems, and on the river as a ready place to discharge industrial wastes.

In the age of the truck and automobile, roads were a vital conduit linking Detroit’s numerous industries to each other. Five wide arterial avenues—Michigan, Jefferson, Gratiot, Woodward, and Grand River—the remnants of Pierre L’Enfant’s neoclassical, early national plan for the city—allowed for speedy transit in and out of the city center. A network of surface streets, laid out by nineteenth-century planners in an enormous checkerboard, proved tremendously convenient for the speedy transport of car parts, machine tools, and casts and dies from the small plants where they were built to the larger plants that put them to use in car production. Suppliers and machine tool companies, and other smaller operations, fanned out throughout the city, generally within short range of auto plants, but not confined to the riverside or to railroad rights-of-way.⁵

In the early 1940s, Detroit was at its industrial zenith, leading the nation in economic escape from the Great Depression. Between 1940 and 1947, manufacturing employment in Detroit increased by 40 percent, a rate surpassed only by Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. Demand for heavy industrial goods skyrocketed during World War II, and Detroit’s industrialists positioned themselves to take advantage of the defense boom. Detroit’s automobile manufacturers, led by Ford, quickly converted their assembly lines to the mass production of military hardware, airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles, making metropolitan Detroit one of the birthplaces of the military-industrial complex. Observers christened the city “Detroit the Dynamic,” the “arsenal of democracy” for a war-torn world. Almost overnight, Detroit had gone from one of the most depressed urban areas in the country to a boomtown, a magnet that attracted workers from all over the United States. The demand for manufacturing labor seemed boundless. Thousands of newcomers flooded the city, coming from places as diverse as rural Appalachia, depressed farm counties in central Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana, and the declining Black Belt regions of the Deep South. The rapid expansion of wartime production drastically reduced unemployment in the city. Between 1940 and 1943, the number of unemployed workers in Detroit fell from 135,000 to a mere 4,000.⁶

The workers who toiled in Detroit’s factories forged some of the nation’s most powerful trade unions. The end of the Great Depression and the onset of World War II marked the triumph of industrial unionism in Detroit. In the late 1930s, the United Automobile Workers battled the major automobile manufacturers in a series of sitdown strikes, pickets, and protests. The UAW brought together industrial workers from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds—Lithuanians, Hungarians, Poles, Jews, Scottish, Irish, Mexicans, Canadians, Lebanese, Palestinians, Italians, Germans, and many more. It overcame initial resistance from African Americans whose



1.2. In the 1940s, Detroit's booming defense and automobile industries made the city a blue-collar mecca, magnet to tens of thousands of migrants who found relatively secure, well-paying jobs. At shift change time, shown here, workers rushed out of their plants, heading to their homes in Detroit's innumerable working-class neighborhoods.

church and community leaders were suspicious of trade union activity and from southern white migrants who often worshipped in staunchly antiunion storefront churches and belonged to organizations like the Black Legion and the Ku Klux Klan. The UAW and other industrial unions succeeded in obtaining relatively high wages and benefits, and some job security, for a sizable fraction of Detroit's manufacturing workers. Still, especially in the 1940s, the shop floor was a battleground of contesting visions of unionism. White rank-and-file members protested the upgrading of black workers, unions split into left-led and centrist factions, and union leaders alternated between militance and accommodation with employers.⁷

At the end of the workday, Detroit's laborers rushed to their cars and to the trolleys and buses of the Detroit Street Railway, clogging the streets that led to the innumerable blue-collar neighborhoods of the city. Surrounding



1.3. Detroit's West Side was home to tens of thousands of blue-collar workers whose single-family detached homes made Detroit a low-rise city.

the smoky factories of Detroit and spreading out for miles and miles on the horizon in every direction was a sea of frame and brick houses. “The protoplasmic cells of Detroit,” observed traveler Edmund Wilson, “are . . . drab yellow or redbrick houses, sometimes with black rock-candy columns or a dash of crass Romanesque.” Lining the streets of the city’s “Polak and Negro sections” were “little dull one-story frame houses.” However “small, square, [and] ugly” they might appear to an outsider, two-thirds of all residential structures in the city were single-family homes and another one-fifth were two-family homes. The city’s skyline was unassuming, for outside of downtown with its Art Deco skyscrapers and the industrial areas with their multistory factories and belching smokestacks, Detroit had virtually no tall buildings. Unlike its east coast counterparts, Detroit lacked both tenements and high-rise apartments. Only 1.3 percent of the city’s residential structures were apartment buildings. A quintessential twentieth-century city in its amorphous sprawl, Detroit lacked the density of older cities in large part because of the vast amount of open land available within the city’s bound-

aries as late as mid-twentieth century. In most parts of the city, the highest visible buildings were church steeples, most of them monuments to the religious fervor and diligence of Catholic immigrants.⁸

Detroit in the 1940s was also a city rife with social tensions. By the outbreak of World War II, the geography of Detroit had come to be defined in terms of white and black. This racial division of the metropolis came in the wake of the dissolution of ethnic communities. By the 1920s, the city's tightly knit ethnic clusters had begun to disperse, and fewer and fewer white neighborhoods were ethnically homogeneous. Important and highly visible immigrant enclaves like Polish Hamtramck and Hungarian Delray continued to exist throughout the twentieth century, but a dwindling number of Detroit residents found themselves living in communities defined by ethnicity. Beginning in the 1920s—and certainly by the 1940s—class and race became more important than ethnicity as a guide to the city's residential geography. Residents of Detroit's white neighborhoods abandoned their ethnic affiliations and found a new identity in their whiteness.⁹

There were many white Detroiters. The Detroit of automobile company executives, bankers, lawyers, and doctors could be found in neighborhoods like Boston-Edison, where cathedral-like stands of elm trees towered over staid boulevards lined with ten- to twenty-room mansions, and Palmer Woods and Rosedale Park, whose curvilinear streets passed through a romantic landscape of mock-French châteaux, Tudor-style mansions, formal Georgian estates, and stately New England-style colonials. The Detroit of clerks, engineers, accountants, and midlevel white-collar workers consisted of more modest neighborhoods in the northwest and far northeast sections of the city, like West Outer Drive, Russell Woods, and Chalmers Park, where many lived in substantial three- and four-bedroom brick homes, small-scale versions of the architecture of Palmer Woods.¹⁰

The majority of white Detroiters lived in the lesser homes of the city's innumerable blue-collar neighborhoods. Small bungalows, most of frame construction, some of brick, crowded together on twenty-five-by-one-hundred-foot lots that allowed just enough room for small vegetable gardens or flower patches. Many, like Oakwood in southwest Detroit, were huddled in the shadow of Detroit's plants, offering their residents easy access to jobs. Increasingly, in the age of the automobile, blue-collar workers built neighborhoods far from the soot of older industrial sections of the city. Areas like Brightmoor on the far West Side, Courville on the Northeast Side, or De Witt-Clinton on the Northwest Side attracted workers who wanted a little green space and did not mind commuting to their jobs. Typical was Brightmoor, an area of one-story "white frame houses, built largely on wooden piles," cheaply built "without adornment of any kind, and strictly utilitarian."¹¹ Whatever the condition of their houses, many working-class Detroiters had deep attachments to their neighborhoods and the houses they

TABLE 1.1
Detroit's Population, 1910–1970

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i>Black Population</i>	<i>Percent Black</i>
1910	465,766	5,741	1.2
1920	993,675	40,838	4.1
1930	1,568,662	120,066	7.7
1940	1,623,452	149,119	9.2
1950	1,849,568	300,506	16.2
1960	1,670,144	482,229	28.9
1970	1,511,482	660,428	44.5

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1910–1970 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, various years).

had built there. “It’s a pretty city,” recalled auto worker Mike Kerwin, comparing Detroit favorably to his hometown of Chicago. “Almost every street had trees all up and down.” Detroit was, above all, a city of homes.¹²

Black Detroit in 1940 was large and rapidly growing. Like other major northern urban centers in the twentieth century, Detroit had a sizable black ghetto that had emerged in the midst of the World War I–era Great Migration of blacks from the South to the urban North. Detroit’s reputation as a city of unsurpassed economic opportunity, combined with wrenching changes in the southern economy, attracted thousands of new migrants northward to the Motor City. Migrants came with the hope that the booming northern city would be free of the harsh segregation that had perpetuated Jim Crow on the docks, in the mines, and in the warehouses of the South. Some observers called Detroit “the northernmost southern city” or “the largest southern city in the United States,” but it was, after all, a place where blacks could vote, ride side by side with whites on streetcars and buses, and share the same drinking fountains and bathrooms.¹³ In the wake of waves of migration, Detroit’s black population expanded dramatically over the course of the twentieth century (Table 1.1). Fewer than 10 percent of Detroit’s population at the outbreak of World War II, African Americans comprised more than a quarter of the city’s residents by 1960.

Detroit’s racial boundaries had their origins in the Great Migration of blacks to the city between 1916 and 1929. As early as the mid-nineteenth century, blacks had settled primarily on Detroit’s East Side, many in the small “Black Bottom” neighborhood just east of downtown. But blacks and recent immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shared the same streets; seldom did blacks find themselves concentrated in predominantly black neighborhoods. The Great Migration changed the racial geography of Detroit markedly. From the 1920s through the 1940s, the majority of Detroit’s black population was confined to a densely populated,

sixty-square-block section of the city's Lower East Side which migrants named, perhaps with more than a tinge of irony, Paradise Valley. Black churches, clubs, and stores concentrated in areas where the new migrants settled. Small pockets of several hundred to several thousand blacks lay scattered throughout the city, on Grand River and Tireman on Detroit's West Side, on the northern boundary of heavily Polish Hamtramck, and in the Eight Mile–Wyoming area in northwest Detroit.¹⁴ These areas, especially Paradise Valley, received the enormous number of black workers who came to the city during the Second World War. In the 1940s, the black sections of the city that were already crowded in the 1920s and 1930s burst over with new migrants.

White neighborhoods, especially enclaves of working-class homeowners, interpreted the influx of blacks as a threat and began to defend themselves against the newcomers, first by refusing to sell to blacks, then by using force and threats of violence against those who attempted to escape the black sections of the city, and finally by establishing restrictive covenants to assure the homogeneity of neighborhoods. In the 1920s, white Detroiters began to define their communities in terms of racial homogeneity, and to make apparent to blacks the high cost of penetrating those communities. In 1925, Ossian Sweet, a prominent African American doctor, was tried for murder after shooting into a crowd of several hundred angry whites who surrounded his newly purchased house in a white neighborhood. Even though Sweet was acquitted, the incident demonstrated the risk of violating the sanctity of racial boundaries. Other whites, especially those with the means to relocate, simply fled what they considered to be the inevitable black invasion.¹⁵

A visitor to Detroit in 1940 could have walked or driven for miles in large sections of the city and seen only white faces. At the outbreak of World War II, nearly 90 percent of Detroit's white population would have had to move from one census tract to another for there to have been an equal distribution of blacks and whites over the city's nearly 140-square-mile area.¹⁶ But if a large number of white Detroiters lived nowhere near blacks, a growing number of blacks and whites met in the workplace. The war was a remarkable moment of opportunity for black workers. Through the first four decades of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of Detroit's blacks—like blacks throughout the United States—were employed in the service sector, women in domestic work, men in hotel, restaurant, and maintenance work. In the 1940s, industrial work began to eclipse service employment. The niche that blacks held in hotel and restaurant work declined steadily throughout the early twentieth century. Changes in the organization of department stores in the 1940s eliminated many stock handling and maintenance jobs held by black men. Most importantly, the number of blacks working in domestic service waned during the Great Depression. The introduction of labor-saving appliances resulted in a reduction in jobs for

household servants. The shrinking number of white households that continued to seek domestics, grounds and maintenance workers, and chauffeurs were less likely to hire blacks. A survey of orders for domestic workers with the Michigan State Employment Service during the 1940s found a growing number of households requested white help, perhaps in reaction to the negative perceptions of African American migrants and the hostile climate of race relations in the city.¹⁷

Few blacks lamented the decline of personal service jobs. They were, after all, remnants of black employment patterns that dated back to the era of slavery. They paid little, seldom offered fringe benefits, and were exempted from the Social Security program. The decline in demand for domestics corresponded to a rebellion against domestic work by younger black women in Detroit (and in other parts of the country as well). As social worker Geraldine Bledsoe pointed out, younger black women in Detroit in the 1930s and 1940s shared "a deep resentment against household employment." Fewer and fewer looked for domestic work, and those employed as domestics were "constantly trying to escape to other fields" where they would have more control over their time. Moreover, the rapid growth in factory and clerical work opened up new opportunities for former personal service workers. The gains were perhaps greatest for those who were attracted to relatively high-paying manufacturing jobs that lured them away from the service sector.¹⁸

Before World War II, only a handful of Detroit's major manufacturers had employed African Americans. Ford, Briggs, and Dodge—major auto manufacturers—opened their doors to a small number of African American workers beginning in the World War I era. Detroit's most welcoming employer was Ford, which recruited an elite corps of black male workers through carefully cultivated contacts with leading black ministers. By 1940, nearly 12 percent of Ford workers were African American. Henry Ford's idiosyncratic paternalism toward black migrants, combined with the company's interest in finding workers willing to accept the dirtiest and most grueling jobs, led the Ford Motor Company to turn toward black migrants. Half of all blacks in the automobile industry nationwide were Ford employees; nearly all of these workers were concentrated in the Ford River Rouge plant.¹⁹ Wherever they were employed, most blacks worked in service jobs, especially on plant janitorial and maintenance crews, or in hot, dangerous jobs in foundries or furnace rooms.

Black auto workers before the 1940s were a blue-collar elite. Most found jobs with the recommendation of their churches or, in some cases, the Urban League. In the 1930s, Ford hired two respected black leaders, Donald Marshall and Willis Ward, to serve as liaisons to black Detroit, exploiting their networks in the black community to recruit for Ford. Black churches were an especially fruitful recruiting ground. Ford officials donated money

to several major black churches in Detroit, occasionally attended their services, and fostered close relationships with leading clergy. One of Ford's most important contacts was Saint Matthew's Protestant Episcopal Church. On the brink of World War II, the Reverend F Ricksford Meyers, pastor of Saint Matthew's, corresponded regularly with Ford Motor Company officials and met with Timken-Detroit Axle Company officials to request work for his parishioners, continuing a long relationship with the automobile industry that began in 1923. By recruiting in the churches, Ford reaped the benefits of positive public relations, but more importantly, church recruitment allowed the company to draw from a black labor aristocracy. By using ministers to prescreen potential employees, Ford ensured that it brought in mature, reliable, long-term workers.²⁰

World War II represented a turning point in black employment prospects. In 1941 and 1942, firms with predominantly white work forces gradually opened their doors to blacks. Three factors contributed to the opening of industrial jobs to black men and women during the 1940s. First, and most important, was the tight labor market. Detroit firms could barely meet the high demand for labor during the massive wartime defense buildup and the postwar economic boom. A chronic shortage of labor forced manufacturers to hire blacks and women for jobs that had been restricted to white men, although "the vast majority of these jobs," as a 1945 study noted, "were in labor and service classifications." Still, blacks who migrated to Detroit in this period could expect to find jobs that had been closed to them in the South, and wages that far surpassed those in the even the best-paid southern industries.²¹

Second, unions and civil rights organizations played a central role in changing the terms on which blacks were hired. Beginning in the last years of the Great Depression, industrial unions, led by the UAW, opened many locals to black membership, lobbied for civil rights protection, and supported the hiring of black workers. The leadership of the UAW also made a tremendous push for inclusion of blacks in the workplace during World War II, despite opposition from rank-and-file workers and corporate managers.²² Auto employers had most frequently used black labor as part of a classic divide-and-conquer strategy in the workplace: in times of industrial tumult, the auto companies hired blacks as strikebreakers. The pattern broke in the early 1940s, when the UAW forged an alliance with black churches and reform organizations, especially the NAACP.²³ The success of interracial unionism in the automobile industry hindered employers' strategies of fragmenting the work force by race to curb union militancy.

During the war, moreover, the NAACP and other, shorter-lived civil rights and labor organizations, like the National Negro Congress and the Civil Rights Congress, played an important role in highlighting the issue of employment discrimination. Agitation for workplace equality in Detroit was

part of a national wartime campaign for racial justice. Civil rights organizations used newspaper articles and advertisements, employer outreach programs, and workplace education campaigns, to pressure employers to hire black workers and to persuade a skeptical white public that hiring blacks was a wartime necessity and a moral duty. Double victory meant the vanquishing of Nazism abroad and racism at home. With great effectiveness, black activists used pickets and boycotts to bring discriminatory practices to the public eye. Protestors preyed on companies' fears of negative publicity, by suggesting that discrimination was unpatriotic and hindered the war effort. And they put pressure on government officials to use the strong arm of the law to combat discrimination in defense industries.²⁴

The most powerful weapon in the wartime battle for racial equality in the workplace was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 8802, mandating nondiscrimination in war industries and creating the President's Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC). Roosevelt hoped that the FEPC would diffuse the growing black protest movement, with little cost to the federal government.²⁵ The FEPC had few enforcement powers, but used its investigations to challenge recalcitrant employers and racist workers. Not uniformly activist in its support for black workers, the FEPC responded to pressure from Detroit's NAACP and UAW, and conducted investigations at Detroit plants. The FEPC forced reluctant employers to hire and upgrade blacks, and wary white employees to accept new black coworkers. It curbed some of employers' discriminatory excesses, although some employers disregarded federal directives, and the government enforced them selectively at best. Perhaps most importantly, the alliance between blacks and government—despite its fragility—raised expectations and spurred thousands more blacks and whites to civil rights activism.²⁶

The cumulative effect of economic forces, activism, and government assistance was that blacks made significant gains in Detroit's industrial economy during the war. The biggest gains came in former auto plants: most had black workers. The smallest came in tool and die, machine, and metal fabricating firms. Only 11 of 44 firms surveyed by the UAW in late 1942 had black workers, and only one had more than eight black workers. As late as 1942, 119 of 197 Detroit manufacturers surveyed had no black employees. But the shortage of labor in Detroit was so great by 1943 that companies by necessity opened doors for blacks that had previously been shut. A 1944 report found that "a 44% advance in wartime employment brought with it an advance of 103% in the total number of Negroes employed." As Chrysler worker James Boggs recalled, "You could get a job anywhere you went." Even if Boggs exaggerated somewhat, his comment reflected the enormous optimism that wartime employment gains generated among Detroit's blacks. During the period of critical labor shortage, black workers no longer had to rely on the recommendations of ministers and influential community members to find

work. The proportion of black men working as factory operatives rose from 29 percent in 1940 to 45 percent in 1950.²⁷

Wartime opportunities diverged greatly by sex as well as race. The war effort drew women into defense industries to replace men who had joined the military. A growing number of women became their households' primary breadwinners during the war, and relied on defense employment to support their families. Employers channeled women into jobs like riveting and wiring, where their presumed "nimbleness" would be an asset. Women were almost entirely closed out of employment in industries whose jobs could not be easily redefined as traditionally female, such as steel, machine tool making, chemicals, and construction. The result was that the war employment experience for women in Detroit was decidedly mixed. Women got jobs that had been denied them before the war, but still found themselves in sex-typed work, almost always paid less than their male counterparts. Because of unresolved conflicts between child care, housework, and paid labor, women's work tended to be less stable than men's. Female war workers had higher rates of absenteeism and quit their jobs more frequently than men.²⁸

Black women gained the least from war employment. Many firms hired white women first, and black women only in response to protest and pressure. Detroit civil rights activists angrily protested companies' failure to hire black women. In 1942, bus loads of black picketers targeted Ford for its unwillingness to hire black women at its Willow Run aircraft plant. But even after they were hired in defense industries, black women faced an uphill battle. White male workers often harassed their women co-workers and reacted even more vehemently to the double affront to their racial and gender privileges when firms hired black women to work beside them. At Packard, whites walked out on a hate strike in 1943 when three black women were placed as drill operators. As a result of resistance to black women at all levels from the boardroom to the assembly line, their entrance into war work was hard fought. In January 1943, fifty leading war production plants in Detroit had women workers, but only nineteen hired black women. Wartime necessity eventually opened new opportunities for black women in Detroit's factories. Although a majority remained "employed in such capacities as janitresses and matrons," the number of black women operatives doubled in the 1940s. Nearly one-fifth of black women had factory jobs by 1950.²⁹

In the crucible of war, resentment between blacks and whites simmered. Detroit's public spaces, from city parks to schools, became the scenes of countless minor skirmishes. In 1943, a British traveler to the city wrote that "obnoxious to everyone is the crowding, in public places, on the street, in transport, in parks, lifts, shops, and places of amusement." Blacks and whites, often in close proximity for the first time, jostled and brawled. Mundane interracial encounters were laden with uncertainty. Anxious whites

accused blacks of forming a "bump club," whose members, they believed, deliberately pushed and shoved white pedestrians and bus riders.³⁰

Such incidents were symptoms of far greater racial animosities that played out in the two most hotly contested arenas of Detroit life: workplaces and neighborhoods. In the midst of a severe wartime housing shortage, the city's rapidly growing black population sought decent homes beyond the borders of the black ghetto. Violence flared on the streets of areas like the near Northeast Side, where whites fought to prevent black occupancy in the Sojourner Truth housing project and blacks gathered to protest and to fight back. Between 1941 and 1944, workers at dozens of Detroit-area plants engaged in wildcat strikes over the hiring and upgrading of black workers to jobs formerly restricted to whites.³¹

Wartime racial tensions came to a violent climax in June 1943. Detroit was one among many booming cities across the United States that were seething with racial conflict. During the war, race riots broke out in Harlem, Mobile, and Brownsville, Texas; whites attacked Mexican and African American zoot-suiters in Los Angeles and Chicago; hate strikes shut down workplaces in Chicago, Baltimore, and Philadelphia; and countless minor clashes between blacks and whites occurred on the overcrowded streets, parks, streetcars, and buses of virtually every major city in the country. The situation in Detroit was especially tense. "Detroit is Dynamite," read a banner headline in *Life* magazine in 1942. "It can either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S."³²

It was in this context of wartime strife that Detroit experienced one of the worst riots in twentieth-century America. The trouble began when nearly one hundred thousand Detroiters gathered on Belle Isle, Detroit's largest park, on a hot summer Sunday. Brawls between young blacks and whites broke out throughout the afternoon, and fights erupted on the bridge connecting Belle Isle to southeast Detroit in the evening. In the climate of racial animosity and mistrust bred by the disruptions of World War II, the brawls were but a symptom of deeper tensions. Rumors of race war galvanized whites and blacks alike, who took to the streets near Belle Isle and in the downtown area, and launched fierce attacks against passersby, streetcars, and property. Blacks in Paradise Valley looted white-owned stores. The following day more than ten thousand angry whites swept through Paradise Valley, and rampaged along nearby thoroughfares. Many Detroit police openly sympathized with the white rioters, and were especially brutal with blacks; 17 blacks were shot to death by the police, no whites were. Over the course of three days, 34 people were killed, 25 of them blacks. 675 suffered serious injuries, and 1,893 were arrested before federal troops subdued the disorder.³³

Yet however serious were Detroit's problems, black newcomers continued to arrive in the wartime and postwar eras with high expectations. Dur-

ing World War II and the immediate postwar years, African Americans continued to flood into the city, lured by the prospect of stable, secure employment and by the high wages and seemingly endless supply of jobs in Detroit's preeminent industry, automobile production. In the 1940s and 1950s, the rapidly growing metropolitan area offered significant opportunities for work in its burgeoning manufacturing, construction, and retail sectors. The migration continued unabated in the 1950s, as a new generation of blacks, displaced by the mechanization of southern agriculture, moved to the city that many of their relatives and friends called home. Black migrants fled poverty rates that soared as high as 80 percent in the rural black belt. They also sought freedom from a political climate that grew harsher as Jim Crow desperately fought for survival. Whether attracted to the opportunities of the Motor City, or pushed from the tiny farm plots where they had toiled for generations, southern blacks looked to Detroit as a land of hope, a "New Caanan."³⁴

Like sojourners in an unknown land, they did not know exactly what fate would befall them in the postwar city. They remained hopeful because they lived in a political and social world that was in tremendous flux. The 1940s were an optimistic time for Detroiters, both black and white. The city's tremendous economic growth seemed a portent of still better things to come. That the period of "reconversion" from military to civilian production was so mild and short-lived quelled many lingering uncertainties about the city's future. "Detroit's adjustment to peacetime production," boasted state officials, "was accomplished with the same efficiency that brought it fame as an arsenal of democracy." In the immediate aftermath of the war, "Detroit's production machine really rolled into high gear"; and by 1948 auto production rates were higher than in any year except for 1929. The postwar boom in civilian production ensured that unemployment in the city remained at wartime lows. Employers complained that jobs were going begging and economists lamented the city's "critical labor shortage." If Detroit had an economic golden age, the decade of the 1940s seems as likely a candidate as any.³⁵

The immediate postwar years also brought a period of guarded optimism about race relations in the city and nationwide. In the wake of the 1943 riot, city officials created the Mayor's Interracial Committee to address the grievances of black city residents and to cool racial tensions. Its apparent successes inspired other cities around the country to form similar organizations.³⁶ Detroit's chapter of the NAACP grew to be the largest in the nation, and allied itself closely with the powerful United Automobile Workers to combat discrimination in the workplace. The wartime rhetoric of racial equality, pluralism, and rights added to the hope that significant change was possible—that a combination of civil rights legislation, education and dialogue between whites and blacks, and an overall climate of

prosperity would calm racial tensions and eventually eliminate racial divisions. But the raw memories of the hate strikes and the riot gave Detroiters pause. Throughout the 1940s, the underlying causes of racial inequality in Detroit—housing and employment—remained unaddressed. The city’s neighborhoods and shop floors continued to be contested terrain. Detroit’s blue-collar workers, blacks and whites, politicians, unions, corporate managers, real estate brokers, and homeowners joined in a struggle over their competing agendas, often in conflict with each other. The city’s future was up for grabs.³⁷



2.1. This streetscape of frame houses built in the late nineteenth century was described by an Office of War Information photographer as a “typical Negro neighborhood.” During the housing shortage of World War II and afterward, these already old and crowded dwellings were often subdivided into temporary apartments to accommodate additional families and boarders.