RACE, PUBLIC TRANSIT, AND AUTOMOBILITY IN WORLD WAR II DETROIT

BY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the decline of public transportation and rise of automobile use in the United States from the perspectives of social and environmental history. Through a case study of Detroit, the dissertation argues that World War II reinforced a culture of driving and set the stage for mass abandonment of public transportation in the post-war era. Even as wartime resource shortages exposed the vulnerabilities of car-centered societies, riders’ experiences on public transit and whites’ increasingly strong associations of streetcars and buses with black bodies worked against efforts to create long-term alternatives to private car use.

Understanding the significance of World War II in shaping Americans’ mobility requires exploration of wartime transformations in everyday travel, as well as how government agencies and private corporations depicted these changes. The first part of this dissertation explores the effects of wartime resource shortages on Detroit’s public transit system. As buses and streetcars became extremely overcrowded, and service unreliable, racial tensions on board mounted. Public transit vehicles became common sites of racial conflicts. The second part of the dissertation examines automobility in the war and immediate postwar era. Government propaganda and private advertisements portrayed driving as fundamental to the American way of life and upheld the white male driver as a symbol of freedom for which the United States was fighting. At the same time, federal programs to limit rubber and gasoline use promoted driving as patriotic and essential to the war effort.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On July 6, 1943, Mrs. B. Hyde, a 59-year-old white resident of Detroit, Michigan, wrote to Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr. to protest conditions on the city’s public transit vehicles. Penning her letter during World War II, in the immediate aftermath of a race riot in which 34 people had died, Hyde was disturbed by recent changes that she had noticed taking place in Detroit. “One gets in a [street]car- a colored man or colored woman in every seat,” Hyde recounted to the Mayor. “We[’d] rather stand then sit with them, not only we folk but plenty more. I have lived in Detroit 38 years in my home 34 and the last few years we have seen this sort of thing grown worse and worse,” she continued. “Folk that have their own car don’t have to contend with this sort of thing.”

As Hyde’s letter implied, the experience of riding Detroit’s streetcars and buses had changed dramatically by the middle of World War II. A shortage of resources led the U.S. government to restrict driving during the war, and this in turn created a surge in public transit ridership. At the same time, Detroit and other cities became centers for war production, attracting black and white migrants from across the midwestern and southern U.S. As a result, public vehicles became more crowded and African Americans constituted an increasing percentage of riders.

Claiming to speak “for plenty more” whites, Hyde was alarmed to discover that when she wanted to sit on a streetcar it was now difficult to avoid sharing a seat with an African American passenger. Hyde longed for her own automobile, ironically

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1 Mrs. B. Hyde to Mayor Jeffries, 7/6/1943, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (3), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
envisioning car ownership as the solution to her growing frustration on streetcars at the very time that gasoline rationing and the cessation of automobile production curtailed Americans’ driving during World War II. As her letter attested, wartime policies that restricted automobile use had important ramifications for public transit systems as well.

Two decades before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and the emergence of what scholars refer to as the “mainstream environmental movement” that brought about sweeping legislation in the early 1970s, World War II raised awareness about the problem of limited resources and sparked questions about how to adapt. Americans organized innovative campaigns to use fewer resources and alter their behaviors to be less wasteful in light of shortages—from rubber and heating oil to sugar and coffee. Perhaps even more significantly, in the popular imagination, excessive use of limited resources came to be seen as wasteful and selfish, and was even associated with helping the enemy, as depicted in the propaganda poster “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler.”

But Americans’ celebrated awareness that reducing their consumer resource footprint was key to winning the war did not stop consumerism from exploding in the post-war years. Paradoxically, after World War II millions of Americans ceased riding public transit and turned to automobiles as their primary means of transport. The era in which unnecessary driving came under fire as unpatriotic gave way to an

era of rapid decline in public transit use and a surge in auto-centric urban planning. This dissertation seeks to explain why.

By examining the issue of public transit’s decline from the perspectives of social and environmental history, we see the importance that a shortage of resources played in reconfiguring transportation options during World War II, and in shaping Americans’ attitudes toward public transit and private automobiles.

Often environmental historians focus on a top-down approach to the past, centering primarily on political developments and legislation. By seeing what happened in daily rides on public transit, World War II emerges as a turning point in which Americans could have embraced taking public transportation as patriotic and environmentally responsible. Instead, racial tensions on board divided passengers against one another, and turned many away from public transit in the postwar era.

Thus a racial analysis is key to understanding how a unique set of conditions in World War II led to both the stigmatization of buses and streetcars and the valorization of the personal car in the popular imagination.

As this dissertation argues, World War II reinforced a culture of driving in the United States and set the stage for mass abandonment of public transportation in the post-war era. Instead of thinking of World War II as the “heyday” of mass transit in the United States—based on the surge in number of riders—I contend that World War II undermined the viability of public transportation. Even as resource shortages exposed the vulnerabilities of car-centered societies, riders’ experiences on public transit and whites’ increasingly strong associations of streetcars and
buses with black bodies worked against efforts to create long-term alternatives to private car use.

The Arsenal of Democracy

World War II brought tremendous change to Detroit, as it did to the rest of the United States. The “Motor City” was the nation’s center of automobile manufacturing. During the war, it became known as the “Arsenal of Democracy,” when automobile plants received government contracts to produce supplies for the military. Detroit became one of the most significant areas for war production in the country and consequently from 1941 to 1945 the city experienced exceptional population growth, accompanied by substantial demographic changes.

At the beginning of World War II, before U.S. entry, approximately 1.6 million people lived in Detroit, and the city’s black population comprised only nine percent, or about 150,000 people. After automobile manufacturers in the city converted to war production in the spring of 1942, migrants from all over the Midwest and the South came to Detroit to take defense jobs, with nearly half a million migrants arriving in Detroit by mid-1943 and roughly 2,100 black migrants arriving every month.

Social upheaval and anxiety accompanied these rapid changes in Detroit. Perceived competition for resources brought blacks and whites into conflict with each other. Urban and labor historians have well documented Detroit’s racial

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conflicts in the realms of housing and jobs during World War II. As the city’s population increased rapidly to fill the new defense jobs, there was an extreme housing shortage for all newcomers to the city, including blacks and whites. Residential areas continued to be strictly racially segregated during the war, with white covenants and backlash forcing blacks to live in circumscribed neighborhoods. Most of the city’s black population lived in Paradise Valley, east of Woodward Avenue, an area that could not adequately house all who were forced to live there. Housing for whites was also insufficient, and thus in the few instances that public housing became available during the war, there was intense conflict over whether it would be designated as white or black. Early in 1942, federal and local officials vacillated between designating a new public housing project for white or black occupants. Ultimately designated for black tenants, the Sojourner Truth Homes became the site of widespread violence when hundreds of whites in the area attacked the new occupants as they attempted to move in.

Workplaces also became major sites of conflict between blacks and whites. As August Meier and Elliott Rudwick argued in *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, World War II was “a watershed that did much to establish new job opportunities for

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7 See Capeci, Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit*, for a detailed account.
blacks. Nowhere, probably, was this more true than in Detroit.” As the war progressed, black activists achieved considerable success in convincing companies to hire and promote black workers. By the middle of the war, leaders such as Gloster Current and Horace White in the NAACP worked in tandem with the UAW leadership to have blacks hired in previously all-white departments and make sure that management honored black workers’ seniority. The percentage of blacks in Detroit’s factories nearly tripled during the war, from 5.5% in May 1942 to 15% three years later. Even though most black workers still had unskilled jobs at the end of the war, many were promoted to higher-paying jobs on the assembly line.

National organizing by A. Philip Randolph forced President Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Commission in June 1941, yet many companies afterwards still refused to hire black workers or hired a very small number of blacks only for unskilled jobs such as janitors. Black workers with seniority routinely saw new white workers fill positions above them. For the entirety of the war, white workers sporadically launched hate strikes in which they walked off their jobs when black workers were promoted to work in the same department as whites. These hate strikes ranged from a few dozen workers to 39,000 in the Packard walkout in late 1944. White workers who participated in these strikes attempted to prevent black workers from advancing into more skilled jobs.

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9 Ibid., 214.
employment, as well as to prevent work settings in which whites and blacks worked side by side.

Despite blacks’ substantial wartime gains, black and white Detroiters very commonly had separate places of employment or worked in different departments. Many companies still did not have any black employees, and those that did routinely gave them the most menial jobs in separate sections removed from white workers.\(^\text{13}\) Blacks and whites generally patronized segregated businesses, lived in segregated neighborhoods, and attended segregated schools. Thus, in practice most aspects of daily life were divided into black and white spheres. Whites employed a series of strategies to prevent mixing with blacks in their workplaces and neighborhoods, organizing walkouts to stop production in plants and violently preventing blacks from moving into neighborhoods inhabited by whites.

Contact between blacks and whites in public spaces, such as on the sidewalk, in parks, and on the streetcar, proved more difficult to reduce or regulate. Although some white Detroiters after the June 1943 riot advocated for segregation of public facilities, Detroit’s buses and streetcars remained consistent sites of contact between blacks and whites. As greater numbers of blacks came to Detroit during the war to work in its factories, black riders became a more visible presence on the city’s transit vehicles. In addition, because fewer black workers owned or had access

to cars than did white workers, blacks were over-represented in public transit ridership.

Several factors combined to make Detroit’s streetcars and buses more crowded during World War II than at any previous point in the city’s history. The influx of migrants to war industries in Detroit, reduction of available automobiles because civilian car production ceased, and restrictions on wartime driving all coalesced to significantly increase ridership on streetcars and buses. But there were insufficient manpower and material resources to meet the increased demand, and instead more passengers crowded onto vehicles, especially at the beginning and end of work shifts. Overcrowding continued, even after the Detroit Street Railways (DSR) orchestrated a staggered hours program for factories and schools to avoid concentrated demand on public vehicles at the beginning and end of the workday.

Supplies of rubber in particular were critically low from the moment that the U.S. entered the war. This rubber shortage led the U.S. government to ration tires and gasoline, lower speed limits, and conduct a massive propaganda campaign to discourage “wasteful” driving in order to reduce tire use. But at the same time it prevented transit companies from acquiring many new buses. Due to this combination of factors, thousands more Detroiters used the public transit system than had before the war began. From overcrowding to long delays waiting for a bus with room to pick up passengers, Detroiters had many reasons to find the Detroit Street Railways’ wartime service irritating and stressful.

In the confined interiors of streetcars and buses, physical contact—not just proximity—was common. Holding onto a handrail or the back of a seat, trying to get
through a crowd of people to exit, squeezing into a seat between other passengers, and pulling the line to request a stop were all routine occurrences during which bodies might come into contact. In these spaces of frequent interracial interaction in an otherwise largely segregated city, Detroiter produced racial knowledge (to use David Theo Goldberg’s phrase) based on their encounters with one another. Everyday interactions across the racial divide provided information to fill the void. On public transit, blacks and whites, men, women, and children of all classes gained experiences to form, confirm, and refute their ideas about each other.

*Theoretical Underpinnings and Historiographical Interventions*

This dissertation probes the ways that blacks and whites interacted in the space of Detroit’s public transit vehicles in World War II. This space was unusual not only because of the frequency with which men, women, and children of different racial and economic backgrounds came into close physical contact, but also because of the lack of structure to interactions in these confined spaces. Unlike in the Jim Crow south, when Detroiter entered streetcars and buses, there was no structurally imposed hierarchy to boarding or seating. Here George Lipsitz’s notion of the “racialization of space”—that there is “a racial dimension” to “the lived experience of space”—is crucial to understanding the significance of everyday interactions on streetcars and buses. I contend that many white Detroiter began to see public transit vehicles during the war as “racialized spaces” in which they were likely to encounter blacks. As the interiors of these vehicles became black spaces in the white

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imagination, many whites’ discomfort in riding buses and streetcars grew, along with their desire to avoid these vehicles as soon as possible.

Robin Kelley has contended that the area inside a bus functioned as a theatrical site of battle, a place where blacks challenged white supremacy and Jim Crow segregation through subtle acts of annoyance to whites. I draw on this concept, viewing buses as “theaters” and the interactions on Detroit’s city vehicles as “performances” to illuminate the symbolism of even the briefest interactions on board. Decisions about whether to move aside as another passenger attempted to pass, for example, were fraught with symbolic importance. Through standing still or slightly moving to one side, passengers’ actions addressed questions of social hierarchy, deference, and standards of comportment. In refusing to conform to societal expectations, black passengers and operators alike often used nonverbal methods to challenge whites. These physical actions allowed the actor to avoid explicitly challenging white authority while simultaneously feeding white anxiety that blacks were stepping beyond “their place.”

For many working- and middle-class white Detroiterst it became possible to stop using public transit after gasoline and rubber rationing were lifted at the end of the war and when car companies reconverted and resumed car production over the next two years. At the same time, as Gunnar Myrdal and Charles S. Johnson each

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demonstrated for affluent blacks in the south in the 1940s, black Detroitors who could afford to buy their own cars sought escape from the demeaning encounters they routinely faced on public transit in which white passengers took pains to avoid sitting next to or standing near black passengers.17

This project intervenes in the fields of urban history, race relations, and the history of Detroit through looking at daily, fleeting conflicts over public space to gain greater insight into how ideas of race and racial difference shaped ordinary Detroitors. Studying only the spectacular episodes of violence and hate, so well documented in Detroit’s history, begins to give us a picture of racial turmoil in Detroit during World War II. But such an approach leaves many questions about the lived experience of Detroitors. This dissertation reveals the complicated and ambiguous daily relations between blacks and whites in public spaces, in which individuals challenged and enforced racial norms. It also demonstrates that racial prejudice spread and was reinforced through routine, seemingly unremarkable incidents.

The racialization of public transit and mass rejection of using streetcars and buses in the postwar era dramatically constrained possibilities for addressing the environmental consequences of automobile use. This work builds upon the burgeoning field of urban environmental history and works that examine the wide-

ranging consequences of increased reliance on automobiles, from air pollution to oil dependence.\textsuperscript{18} It brings a social history perspective to the study of the environment and insists that the daily experiences of ordinary people are essential to understanding environmental change, to the growth and development of cities, and to the successes and limitations of environmental initiatives.

If we look at the war as it unfolded, rather than begin with the outcomes of the war and read back into the past, World War II emerges as the first key moment in which the notion of the automobile as the superior form of mobility was challenged. However, this challenge came not from those who disliked the automobile and its widespread consequences, but from the material problem of an extreme shortage of rubber—necessary to the function of automobiles—that accompanied American entry into the war. In examining the challenges and possibilities for mobility that the war presented, I draw upon the work of scholars who have debated whether the war opened up opportunities for various groups to make claims on society or narrowed their abilities to do so by filtering everything through the lens of patriotism. Historians have considered this question with regard to women’s equality and specifically entry into the workplace, African Americans’ claims to equal citizenship, the fate of New Deal politics, the racialization of

immigrants, the relative power of labor and management, and the American consumer, among others.\textsuperscript{19}

World War II was a major environmental opportunity lost. The wartime transportation crisis forced Americans to temporarily change their transportation habits at the same time that it underscored the importance of driving and car ownership to ideas of American citizenship. Amid moves toward more public transit ridership and less reliance on individual cars, referred to at the time as conservation measures, advertisements and war propaganda sent a clear message that these changes were temporary developments done out of necessity. Ads encouraged Americans to reduce their driving today in order to help the war effort and they held out the promise of driving whenever and wherever one wanted as the postwar reward.

Scope of the Dissertation

A case study of Detroit, this work is broadly suggestive of experiences throughout the urban north. Detroit has come to be an exaggerated symbol for much of America in the twentieth century. In the early age of the automobile it became the “Motor City,” during World War II the “Arsenal of Democracy” stood for America’s industrial might, and in the latter part of the twentieth century, racial strife, deindustrialization, de-urbanization, and disinvestment contributed to Detroit’s

\textsuperscript{19}For a concise introduction to these literatures, see Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch, eds., \textit{The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).
most recent reputation as the “death of the American dream.” As Scott Kurashige argues, “Detroit’s fate is not exceptional but paradigmatic.”

Understanding the importance of World War II in shaping Americans’ mobility requires exploration of wartime transformations in everyday travel, as well as how government agencies and private corporations portrayed these changes. The first part of this dissertation explores the effects of wartime resource shortages on Detroit’s public transit system. As buses and streetcars became extremely overcrowded, and service unreliable, racial tensions on board mounted. Chapter Two, “Close Encounters: Contact and Conflict on Public Transit,” examines the causes of extreme crowding on transit vehicles in cities such as Detroit and the daily racial aggressions on board. It demonstrates that these conflicts led to increasing hostility between blacks and whites. I examine public transit riders’ experiences, letters of complaint about overcrowded rides, and the promulgation of rumors among white Detroiters about blacks on public transit to trace a growing resentment of public transportation and the rise of white paranoia over physical contact with blacks on crowded streetcars and buses. I also consider how hiring African American and female conductors and drivers shaped riders’ perceptions of public transit.

A major consequence of these fleeting daily conflicts was that many white Detroiter came to see public vehicles as black spaces. This shift in whites’ perceptions of public transit is best seen through an exploration of white rioters’

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attacks against black streetcar and bus riders during the June, 1943 race riot.

Chapter Three, “Public Transit as Black Space: The 1943 Riot and Calls for Segregation,” looks at streetcars as the site of much white violence during the riot. Although riots are often popularly portrayed as moments of chaotic and spontaneous violence, I demonstrate that white rioters in Detroit carried out acts of violence that reflected their deep anxieties about blacks’ increasing presence, mobility, and social status in the city during World War II. Whites who participated grouped together to remove blacks from streetcars along Detroit’s major avenue and inflict violence on their bodies. After the riot, thinking there was nothing they could do during the war to improve conditions on public transit, city officials sought merely to manage public perceptions of racial conflicts in Detroit rather than find ways to alleviate tensions on board city vehicles.

As public transit ridership during the war became increasingly unpalatable to many, other factors underscored the importance and appeal of driving. Part two of the dissertation examines automobility in the war and immediate postwar era. In Chapter Four, “A Culture of Driving,” I consider wartime depictions of automobile drivers and driving, demonstrating that government propaganda and corporate advertisements portrayed driving as fundamental to the American way of life and upheld the white male driver as a symbol of freedom for which the U.S. was fighting. Newspaper advertisements, posters, and radio broadcasts asked civilians to sacrifice by giving up all unnecessary driving during the war in return for a postwar future in which sacrifice would be a thing of the past. In these portrayals, riding
public transit was an unpleasant wartime necessity, underscoring the desirability of driving and the independence that it provided.

Drivers’ behaviors immediately after the war ended reveal the extent to which the wartime rhetoric of driving as a fundamental right and essential to mobility shaped the postwar era. I conclude with an examination of the Oil Workers International Union strike in September 1945 that interrupted drivers’ ability to purchase gasoline. Only a month after gasoline rationing ended and Detroiters with functional cars were eager to drive them at war’s end, a strike by oil workers shut down gasoline stations in the Detroit area. Irate drivers’ reactions to the gas shortage demonstrated their associations between the ability to drive and American freedom, and their unwillingness to consider alternatives to the private car in the postwar era.
Figures

Figure 1: Detroit, circa 1940
Figure 2: Weimer Pursell, “When You Ride Alone, You Ride with Hitler”
Chapter 2
Close Encounters:
Contact and Conflict on Public Transit

Under the direction of their teacher Ruth Bourns, white sixth-graders at Detroit’s Van Dyke Elementary School in March 1945 responded to the prompt, “Why I do/do not like Negroes.” Of forty-nine responses preserved in the archive of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations, the overwhelming majority express dislike. Most of the students made sweeping generalizations, drawing on widely available portrayals of blacks as dangerous, dirty, smelly, and untidy. Fewer than one-third of the students referred to specific incidents in which they had seen or interacted with African Americans. But of those who wrote about a specific encounter, public transit was the site they most commonly invoked. In de facto segregated cities such as Detroit, public transportation was one of the few spaces in which blacks and whites routinely encountered one another.

Most of the students who wrote about their interactions with blacks on buses and streetcars expressed fear of black bodies or resentment at black conductors’ authority, suggesting that these moments of contact informed their negative opinions about blacks in general. Only one of the forty-nine students wrote of a specific, positive encounter with a “Negro.” Like most of the students, James began his paper with statements about why he disliked Negroes as a group. He wrote, “I don’t like Negroes Because they carry knives and go around and threatn people I don’t like negroes because they are uneducated.” But unlike any of the other

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21 Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Part I, Box 3, File “Community Reports Supplementing Barometer Reports, 1945,” Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
children, he also described why he liked Negroes, using two examples from his experience on public transit. “I like negroes because some are kind like the time my dad was on the bus and he had his arnes full of bundles and then a negroe girl give my dad a seat I also like negroes because some are nice to me like the time the conductor on a street car let me go throu[g]h because I loss my mony and the[n] I met him one tine later and I paid him the mony and he gave me a dime for being honest.” In this remarkable response, the student expressed both negative and positive feelings about African Americans, the latter very specifically rooted in his personal interactions on public transit and the former stereotypes that do not seem to be substantiated by his personal experiences. As this collection of schoolchildren’s papers demonstrates, public transportation was a primary site of contact between black and white Detroiter during World War II and had the potential both to cement and to challenge riders’ perceptions of one another.

Although public transit provided daily opportunities for people of different backgrounds to interact with each other as individuals and to refute negative racial stereotypes, an amalgam of circumstances made rides on Detroit’s buses and streetcars during World War II particularly crowded and stressful. As I argue, under these conditions contact between blacks and whites on public transit exacerbated existing racial tensions instead of undermining them. Passengers routinely interpreted unpleasant interactions on public transit in racialized ways, causing numerous fights and arguments between blacks and whites, and negatively shaping their ideas about one another.
Several historians have made a convincing case for the central role conflicts over housing and jobs have played in shaping Detroit, especially after World War II. Building on this rich scholarship, I show that the space connecting home and work—public transportation—was a primary site of conflict between blacks and whites. Commuting between homes and workplaces that were mostly racially segregated, blacks and whites were in close proximity on the city’s buses and streetcars. By providing a space of regular interracial contact in the city, public transit was a key space in which Detroiters developed, confirmed, refuted, and acted upon ideas of racial difference. Furthermore, unlike in the realms of home ownership or employment, when white transit riders expressed displeasure about their intermingling with blacks, they could not fashion their racial views as economic concerns.

The seemingly mundane interactions between passengers on public transit give us a good sense of how blacks and whites, men and women, war workers, businessmen, shoppers, and schoolchildren interacted with each other on a daily basis. We see how race relations played out in everyday encounters, not just in spectacular clashes over housing and in dramatic moments of racial violence, so

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well documented in Detroit’s history. In examining interactions on public transit, actors’ explicit remarks and actions, as well as their implicit meanings, demonstrate that they interpreted black-white encounters as meaningful negotiations about proper conduct, as assertions of authority, and as claims for the ability to act as one wished. This chapter focuses on the daily exchanges between blacks and whites on Detroit’s buses and streetcars during World War II. To frame the significance of these moments, I first examine scholarship on the unique space of public transit and the circumstances that made these vehicles exceptionally crowded during the war, fostering greater conflict than in other periods. The end of the chapter considers contemporary rumors among white Detroiter that reveal some whites’ implicit understandings of these interracial interactions on crowded public vehicles.

Public Transit as Theater

Public transit played a critical role in blacks’ and whites’ negotiations for space in northern cities, although most of the scholarship on race and public transit has looked at the Jim Crow South, where racially-based behavior on public vehicles was legally prescribed. In many southern cities bus companies had boards or

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screens that the driver placed between seats to signify white and black sections, and which were moved depending on how many whites and blacks were on the bus.\textsuperscript{25} Vehicles in Detroit, as in other northern cities, had no physical divisions to mark who could sit (and stand) where. Thus boundaries were more fluid and racial codes of conduct less starkly defined in the north, leaving greater room for ambiguity and confusion about how to act and how to interpret others’ actions. Space was not segregated in the same methodical and publicized fashion of Jim Crow, but in Detroit public transit was a theater of both particularly frequent and tense encounters between blacks and whites. While legally blacks and whites might sit or stand wherever they wanted in streetcars, these vehicles were still critical points of contact in which blacks and whites formed racial attitudes and watched others model interactions between blacks and whites.

To analyze the significance of these interactions on public transit vehicles, I build on the work of Robin D.G. Kelley and others who view the interior of a bus or streetcar as a theater in which contests for authority played out in front of an audience. According to Kelley, these confined spaces served as “moving theaters” in two senses. First, buses and streetcars served as theaters where “dramas of conflict, repression, and resistance are performed in which passengers witness, or participate in, a wide variety of ‘skirmishes’ that shape their collective memory.” Secondly, the area inside a bus functioned as a theatrical site of battle as well, and

the nature of the confined space on streetcars and buses meant that the significance of each conflict was amplified because of the audience that witnessed it.\textsuperscript{26}

Kelley primarily focused on public transit as a space in which blacks challenged white supremacy and Jim Crow segregation through subtle acts of annoyance to whites. He interpreted the meaning and significance of working-class black riders’ actions - from causing discomfort to white passengers by talking loudly about discrimination to refusing to leave their seats for whites to sit down, to challenging white drivers’ authority - as forms of resistance to segregated public transit and discriminatory treatment. Through these acts, riders could challenge the discriminatory policies of the bus company despite Jim Crow and the real dangers of violence to blacks who defied white supremacy.

Drawing on Kelley’s work, American Studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood has looked at contemporary black teenagers’ use of buses as a space of performance in which to “acknowledge, confront, and contest” mainstream portrayals of youth of color as dangerous and deviant.\textsuperscript{27} Elaborating on the theatrical potential of the space inside a bus itself, Fleetwood explains, “public transit is an ideal stage, framed by the physical limits of the vehicles, for performing and contesting social norms in the presence of others.”\textsuperscript{28} Those who wish to challenge these norms are emboldened by the space’s “anonymity” and the limited potential for riders to visually or orally avoid a performance. As some passengers may lament, one cannot “remove oneself”

\textsuperscript{26} Robin Kelley, \textit{Race Rebels}, 57.
\textsuperscript{28} Fleetwood, “‘Busing it in the City,’” 37.
from a transit vehicle until the operator has brought it to a stop and within this
confined space, “one cannot choose one’s company.”

Among the diverse public on board city vehicles, gender informed how
passengers and employees interpreted one another’s words and actions. Historian
Megan Shockley has argued public transit in Detroit and Richmond during World
War II was “a gendered domain” in which “women’s space was often violated” when
men and women shared tight spaces. Shockley emphasized black women’s
especially precarious position in crowded buses amid black and white men in a
society that did not value the protection of black women. Like Kelley and Fleetwood,
Shockley emphasizes that within the confines of public vehicles, marginalized
members of society found innovative ways to resist the racial and gender hierarchy
imposed upon them. Thus such a space saw the violation of black women’s bodies
and dignity, challenges to black equality, and at the same time resistance to these
transgressions and assertions of equality.

Donald Davis and Barbara Lorenzkowski have demonstrated that “public
transit provided a platform for negotiating and modifying Canadian gender
relations,” especially during World War II when changes to patterns of work
brought men and women into shared space on streetcars. As they argue, gender
divides on Canadian streetcars had been marked before the war. Men sat in the back
and often smoked, while women took the front of the car. The border between

29 Fleetwood, “Busing it in the City,” 37.
30 Donald Davis and Barbara Lorenzkowski, "A Platform for Gender Tensions:
Women Working and Riding on Canadian Urban Public Transit in the 1940s."
Canadian Historical Review 79, no. 3 (September 1998), 431.
male and female space changed depending on how many women were in the car. In addition, most men took the streetcar at the beginning and end of the day when shifts turned over, while most women took the streetcar for errands during the middle of the day. Thus men and women were separated on streetcars both by time of day and within the vehicles themselves. The war, however, disrupted the notion of public transit as a predominantly male sphere when more women took factory jobs. Streetcars became sites of conflict between men and women as they negotiated their claims to the vehicles, and Canadians’ “frustration” with public transit “peaked” during this era.32

Lorenzkowski and Davis’s argument is fundamental to my interpretation of daily interactions on Detroit’s public transit system. I employ their focus on the significance of crowding and contact to understand changes in public attitudes toward fellow passengers, transit operators, and to public transit more generally. In the case of Detroit, building upon their insights, I examine how the space of public transit until World War II was not merely a male space; it was a white one. Using Davis and Lorenzkowski’s consideration of women’s unequal access to public transit, I emphasize the different access of men, women, workers, businessmen, shoppers, and most significantly those deemed by white society to be white or black.

Crowded Vehicles and Inadequate Service

Riding the streetcar may not ever have been the height of comfort and enjoyment, but the wartime transportation crunch made it particularly unpleasant for many. Three factors combined to make Detroit’s public transit especially

crowded during the war: the implementation of rubber and gasoline rationing for private vehicles (discussed in detail in Chapter Four), shortages of equipment and employees because of wartime priorities, and an influx of migrants to perform “war work” in Detroit’s factories. It was a formula for frustration: 50% more riders packed into a contracting fleet of busses and trolleys lacking needed drivers and parts. Only a systemic and creative response by Detroit’s transit authorities could have prevented rapid deterioration in the quality of service and rampant dissatisfaction. Instead, Department of Street Railways (DSR) officials threw up their hands and claimed there was nothing they could do until the war was over.

In Detroit, it was no secret that the DSR did not have enough buses and streetcars to carry all workers—let alone anyone else—to their jobs. As Fred A. Nolan, director of the DSR, wrote in February 1942, “The demand which will be made upon this transportation system during the coming months and years, while still a matter of conjecture as to specific volume, leaves no doubt of the inadequacy of the present facilities to meet the expected situation and of the need for the speedy acquisition of additional equipment [emphasis added].”33 Despite its director’s prediction of future problems, the DSR failed to procure the supplies necessary to meet projected ridership statistics. In fact, as Nolan had predicted, over the course of the war demand for public transit increased and DSR facilities were more overwhelmed.

33 Fred A. Nolan, DSR General Manager, to Board of Street Railway Commissioners, Detroit, Michigan 2/2/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File Dep’t of Street Railways, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
The DSR did make a few changes and additions to its equipment during the war, converting some of its newly created bus lines back to streetcar lines in order to reduce rubber use, and in some cases creating additional service routes or rerouting old ones, but these alone did not create a substantial increase in the system’s ridership capacity. It also cut services where the management deemed it possible to reduce rubber use but still provide transit on standard routes, for example discontinuing charter buses to local churches and urging disgruntled church-goers to take the regularly scheduled bus lines instead. By mid-1944, Detroit’s public transit system had thousands more riders than at the beginning of the war, with only minor increases in numbers of streetcars and service changes to help get workers employed in war-related industries to and from the factories.

Ironically, in the 1930s, General Motors had begun a program of converting streetcar lines to (rubber-dependent) bus lines in cities throughout the country.

34 On reinstating streetcars: Letter from Board of Street Railway Commissioners Secretary to unnamed addressee, 10/28/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR “A-L,” Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
35 See for example letter from Victor Reuther to Walter Rabago, Financial Secretary, Local 163, UAW-CIO, 6/17/1943, UAW War Policy Division Series II, Local Union 163, Box 15, File Reuther, UAW War Policy, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
36 Mayors Papers 1942, Box 2, File Dep’t of Street Railways, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
37 Fred A. Nolan to Board of Street Railway Commissioners, Detroit, Michigan 2/2/1942, Mayors Papers 1942, Box 2, File Department of Street Railways, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library; Operating Statistics, Box 4, File “Department of Street Railways (1),” Mayors Papers 1944, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
38 For more on the General Motors buyout of streetcars across the United States in order to replace them with General Motors-produced buses, see Bradford Snell, “American Ground Transport,” in Jerome H. Skolnick and Elliott Currie (eds.), Crisis in American Institutions (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985); Jim Klein and Martha Olson, Taken for a Ride (Hohokus, NJ: New Day Films, 1996); Kenneth T.
In Detroit, several members of the railway commission believed that buses were superior to streetcars, in part because they cost less to operate. Thus prior to World War II, a few streetcar lines had been converted to buses. During the war tracks on some of the abandoned lines were torn up to use as scrap metal. Therefore when the rubber shortage became apparent during the war, many cities’ transportation networks were especially ill-suited to function without abundant supplies of rubber. The result of conversion to buses was that public transit in many areas required a substantial amount of rubber for operation, which undermined the possibility of public transit to significantly alleviate the rubber shortage of automobiles. Due to lack of supplies (primarily rubber), the DSR could purchase very little additional equipment after 1943. The DSR’s decision to put streetcars back on routes that had been converted to bus routes did mean less rubber use per passenger. It also cost the city more than $1,500,000 per year to save a little more than one ton of


39 “Old Rails to Be Torn Up as Scrap” Daily Tribune (Royal Oak, MI), 10/27/42, p1.
40 Del A. Smith, Director of Public Relations, DSR, to Mr. L.C. Barry, War Production Committee, Ternstedt Manufacturing Company, Detroit, 7/16/1943, UAW War Policy Division, Series II, Box 30, File Local Union 174 May 1943-February 1946, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
rubber by switching a line from bus to streetcar, taking money away from other potential expansions of the DSR during its busy ridership years in the early 1940s.\textsuperscript{41} A further constraint to increasing ridership capacity for the DSR was a prolonged shortage of employees.\textsuperscript{42} Even if there had been an unlimited supply of rubber and the money to buy new buses and streetcars, Detroit’s transit system still would not have been adequate to meet demand. With many potential workers taking lucrative jobs in war-related industries, and with some of the DSR’s employees being drafted into service, there were not enough drivers and conductors for the carriers that the DSR owned.\textsuperscript{43} A sole employee was required to operate a bus, while most streetcars required two employees: the driver of the vehicle (the motorman) and the fare collector (the conductor). Along with collecting fares, operating the vehicles, and regulating entry and exit when there were consistently more people trying to board than space allowed, DSR operators increasingly had to handle incidents that occurred on their vehicles.

To mitigate its shortage of operators, the DSR hired black men to serve as conductors and motormen. The percentage of African Americans employed by Detroit’s public transit system in the 1940s was much higher than in any other major city, making Detroit’s case somewhat atypical during the war. In December 1943, 25.8% of DSR employees were classified “nonwhite,” as were 27.4% of

\textsuperscript{41} Board of Street Railway Commissioners Secretary to unnamed addressee, 10/28/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR “A-L,” Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

\textsuperscript{42} See, for example, “Draft Perils DSR Service,” Detroit Free Press, 1/5/1945, p1.

\textsuperscript{43} Del A. Smith, to L.C. Barry, 7/16/1943, UAW War Policy Division, Series II, Box 30, File Local Union 174 May 1943-February 1946; Memo from DSR General Manager William S. Bullock 6/20/44, DCCR, Part I, Box 2 File DSR Police Reports, 1943, Reuther.
operators.\textsuperscript{44} By contrast, among the 15 largest cities, Washington DC had the next highest percentage of “nonwhite” employees at 11.9%. Fewer data were compiled on percentages of nonwhite operators in other cities, but compared to 27.4% of operators in Detroit classified as nonwhite, only 6.9% of operators in Los Angeles and 6.0% of operators in Cleveland were nonwhite.\textsuperscript{45}

During World War II, the DSR was unusual for its large number of black employees in the most visible jobs and ones that carried with them the import of being in charge of a vehicle and all people aboard it. At the beginning of the war, its operators also had the highest wages of any transit system in the country.\textsuperscript{46} The fact that the DSR hired a greater percentage of African American (male and female) operators than in any other major city during the war might suggest its directors were relatively racially progressive. On the other hand, their decision to hire blacks and women was likely simply a reflection of the tight labor market in Detroit and the DSR’s constant inability to hire as many workers as it needed.

After 1943, when this also failed to stanch the loss of employees to war production jobs and the draft, the DSR began hiring women as conductorettes and motorettes until the end of the war.\textsuperscript{47} Despite the DSR’s hiring practices, at the peak

\textsuperscript{44} Philip W. Jeffress, \textit{The Negro in the Urban Transit Industry through 1945} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p26, 30. All indications are that these statistics refer almost exclusively to black employees, as I have not found references to other employees of color.


\textsuperscript{47} Cyrenius Newcomb, Detroit Area Manager, War Manpower Commission, to Samuel T. Gilbert, DSR Commission, 5/4/43, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 9, File
of mass transit in Detroit when riding public transit was linked to winning the war, hundreds of streetcars and buses were stowed away in sheds for lack of people to drive them. A check in February, 1944, for example, showed that 30% of the DSR’s buses were not in use, due to a combination of lack of parts and lack of drivers.\textsuperscript{48}

The result of these material and manpower shortages and a greatly elevated number of riders was that DSR service during the war usually left much to be desired. As numerous letters to the DSR and to Detroit Mayor Edward J. Jeffries attested, bus and streetcar service was unreliable, overcrowded, and at times unsafe. All of this stemmed from the fundamental problem that more people wanted to ride public transit during the war than could be accommodated. When a bus was full of passengers, the driver would often skip stops along the route, leaving would-be passengers stranded and upset. For those who did wait to try and board the next bus on the same route, it was entirely possible that it too would be full and would pass them up.\textsuperscript{49} Because of the delays inherent in a trip that required waiting for

\textsuperscript{48} George Stockham Jr., Superintendent, Division Of Motor Transportation, to William Walker Jr., Commissioner, Department of Public Works, Mayor’s Papers, 1944, Box 7, File Motor Transportation, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. According to Stockham, only 1557 of 2236 DSR buses were operating at that time.

\textsuperscript{49} Thomas Black, Atty., to DSR Commissioners, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 4, File Department of Street Railways (2), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library; Mrs. Raymond Brent, Secretary, to Mayor Jeffries, 9/15/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR A-L, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
subsequent buses or streetcars, riders were frequently late for work or other appointments.  

By far the most noted problem with Detroit’s wartime public transit was that buses and streetcars were often packed full of people. According to complaints, vehicles were often so full that passengers at the front would have to step out at each stop so that others behind them could exit. Riders referred to being “packed like sardines,” “stand[ing] one against the other,” and vehicles “jammed to the doors with people.” One letter-writer to the Detroit Free Press even described the experience of riding a bus in Detroit as “being pushed around like prisoners in a Nazi concentration camp, after waiting for several jammed busses to pass.”

Undoubtedly, such experiences were unpleasant, and all the more so for those with physical disabilities, carrying packages—often women—that took up more space, or simply exhausted from a day of manual labor. The DSR’s statistics from June 1944 show that streetcars on Detroit’s most popular lines averaged 60 or more passengers per car in most places over the course of the day, and up to 70 passengers per car on the city’s main thoroughfare, Woodward Avenue.

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50 See, for example, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 4, File Department of Street Railways (2), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

51 Mrs. J. DiPrima to Mayor, 11/4/1942 and E.E. Rosinski to Mayor, 10/29/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR A-L, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.


53 Averages are for a 10 or 13.5 hour period at a particular location and include one rush hour, for example 12pm-1:30am or 5am-3pm. H.E. Taylor to William S. Bullock, 6/20/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection Part I, Series I, Box 2, File DSR- Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
One consequence of this overcrowding, at times, was the obstruction of a driver’s lines of sight. In some instances, such safety violations led to fatal accidents. The most catastrophic accident occurred in late October 1942, when a bus collided with a train, killing 16 people. As frequent DSR riders were quick to point out afterwards, buses and streetcars were occasionally so full that the driver would ask passengers standing at the front to tell him/her if there were vehicles on the right side of the bus. Overcrowding, the occasional spectacular crash, and newspaper coverage of each accident combined to alarm many passengers about the safety of riding streetcars and buses in Detroit. These safety concerns persisted, despite the fact that there were many more private automobile accidents than accidents involving public transit. Thus Detroiters may have had an unrealistically inflated sense of the dangers inherent in riding the DSR that contributed to a sense of unease on public transit.

*Everyday Encounters and Increasing Tensions between Blacks and Whites*

Changes to the daily experience of waiting for and riding a bus or streetcar had significant consequences beyond increasing riders’ perceptions of danger. Not being able to sit, put down packages, move much at all, or avoid standing very close to other riders all contributed to passengers’ stress, and tensions on public transit.

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54 “Bus-Train Crash Kills 16 Persons,” *The Daily Tribune* (Royal Oak, MI), 10/28/1942; Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR A-L; Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR M-Z.
56 Mrs. Albert A. Griffiths to Mayor Jeffries, 11/16/1942 and Helene Kramer to Mayor Jeffries, 10/30/1942, Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR A-L, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
57 For safety concerns, see for example Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR A-L; Mayor’s Papers 1942, Box 2, File DSR M-Z, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
during the war ran exceptionally high. Almost from the beginning of U.S. involvement in the war, public transit ridership increased dramatically and incidents on buses and streetcars rose as well. For Detroit in particular, according to the DSR’s General Superintendent of Transportation, William S. Bullock, “racial disturbances” on DSR vehicles increased 300% between spring and summer 1942, by which point rubber rationing had begun to have an effect on car owners’ transportation choices.58 As both the overall number of people riding the DSR and the percentage of black riders rose over the course of 1942-1944, public transit in Detroit became the primary site of conflict between blacks and whites during the war.59

The DSR began reporting “racial incidents” that occurred on its vehicles to the Detroit Police Department in October 1942, after the appointment of Chief John H. Witherspoon, who requested that his department keep track of the growing number of conflicts between blacks and whites on public vehicles. These incidents might start as minor quibbles between passengers, or grumbling about the operator and poor DSR service, and escalate into heated exchanges, fistfights, or stabbings.

In the context of war and limited public transit, the white working-class male employed in a factory producing war materiel came to embody the intended user of

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public transit and the person who most deserved a seat. In contrast, women (particularly those who could be identified as housewives on shopping expeditions) and to a lesser extent children appeared selfish and unpatriotic for taking seats away from deserving riders traveling to and from their factory jobs. As Davis and Lorenzkowski have noted, as more women took factory jobs during the day, they moved their shopping to the end of the day, which meant that they could no longer ride public transit at off-peak hours but instead had to bring groceries and other packages aboard buses and streetcars during peak travel times. These working women were “stigmatized by their boxes and bags[,] they became ‘shoppers,’ their right to ridership in clamorous dispute.”

Ironically, at the same time that society frowned upon female transit riders as taking space from male workers, women were portrayed even more strongly as undeserving automobile drivers during the war, as discussed in Chapter Four.

This is not to suggest that in the realm of public transit traditional gendered notions of civility, manliness, and female fragility disappeared. Detroiter still appealed to city officials to increase public transit services in the name of women and children who suffered from long waits for a bus, and complained about rude riders who “trampl[ed] mothers with small children” as they navigated the interior of streetcars. But on the specific issue of too few seats and too little room for the thousands of Detroiter who wanted to ride public transit, the wartime glorification

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60 Davis and Lorenzkowski, “A Platform for Gender Tensions,” 439.
61 See, for example, Mrs. F. C. Perlman, “Letter to the Editor” and “A Newcomer,” “Letter to the Editor,” Detroit Times, 2/22/1945.
of white male workers contributing to the war effort influenced mainstream perceptions of who most deserved a seat.

Instead of attempting to address the overarching problem that Detroit’s public transit system could not carry all of the people who needed rides, many Detroiters turned against each other and implicitly argued that access to public transit should depend on aiding the war effort. In a letter that privileged war workers above other passengers, one man urged Mayor Jeffries in February 1945 to ration rides on public transit. The writer believed that rationing transit rides would be useful by limiting those not going to work, “keeping out a horde of silly high school girls who bum around the stores after school and fill seats needed by tired workers. We could also weed out the greedy housewife that shops any time she pleases...”  

Another rider wrote to the mayor about what he saw as the inappropriate preferential treatment of school children on buses, especially because schoolchildren paid only 6 cents instead of the regular 10-cent fare. His daily commute to work put him on a bus that passed Cass Technical High School, at the same time that children were riding to school. As he complained, “It takes just a little more [patience] than the average laborer has to have to stand all the way to Cass Tech, while all the seats are occupied by a six cent rider.” In these instances, women and schoolchildren seemingly did not have the right to ride public transit as long as (male) workers did not have adequate access to comfortable rides.

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62 Joseph Murphy to Mayor Jeffries, 2/16/1945, Mayors Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
63 Anonymous to Bullock, 9/20/1944, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 4, File Dept of Street Railways (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
Scholars Dominic J. Capeci and Martha Wilkerson described a “climate of hate” on Detroit’s public transit during the war. Whites, they note, were “repulsed by close physical contact with blacks and troubled by the erosion of their own superior status;” blacks were “alienated by white contempt for their humanity and enraged by the opposition to their socioeconomic aspirations.”\(^{64}\) Megan Shockley wrote that buses in Detroit and Richmond during World War II “appeared to be war zones wherein black female passengers fought white conductors, black female conductors fought white passengers, and black and white passengers fought each other.”\(^{65}\) From 1943 through 1945, there were often several incidents—sometimes as many as ten—submitted to the Police Department each week. The actual number of incidents was almost certainly higher than the number reported. According to historian Arthur Woodford, “fights broke out almost daily.”\(^{66}\)

Perhaps in part because the war made everyone more anxious, many Detroiters responded to the daily pursuit of a streetcar and constant jostling once aboard with verbal or physical outbursts. These outbursts disproportionately occurred between blacks and whites, suggesting that passengers interpreted their negative encounters in racialized terms. If, for example, two black passengers or two white passengers brushed into each other while attempting to find a place to hold on, they might be mildly annoyed at the contact and attempt to move away, quickly

\(^{64}\) Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 188.

\(^{65}\) Megan Shockley, *We, too, are Americans: African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 192.

\(^{66}\) Arthur Woodford, *This Is Detroit: 1701-2001* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 157. By contrast, there are many weekly reports that state “No report of racial activity from major plants in the Detroit area” and contain no incidents of conflict over housing.
ignoring or forgetting the incident. But if one of the passengers were white and one black, the encounter often escalated, taking on greater significance. Had the white rider purposefully refused to move as the black passenger sought space to stand and put his hand? Had the black passenger intentionally pushed into the white passenger as a subtle challenge, hoping others would assume it was an accident as the bus lurched forward? Such ambiguous situations continuously played out in cramped public transit vehicles and led to hundreds of confrontations between blacks and whites— from raised voices, to racial slurs, assaults, and stabbings—that were reported to the Detroit Police Department.

In many cases, white operators harassed passengers because they were black. Such harassment could be overt or subtle, as in the case that Mary Biggs reported to the Mayor’s Interracial Committee on April 11, 1945. According to the Committee’s write-up based on Biggs’s information, the white streetcar conductor on Biggs’ route identified the Hudson Motors plant stop as “’Hudson Motor- the slaves’ entrance.” Seeing Biggs’ indignation at his comment, the conductor “looked insolently back at her and rattled off his badge number … He seemed very ready to give it to her.” In this instance, when a white operator attempted to denigrate his African American passengers by referring to “slaves” at a particular factory entrance, he seemed to have confidence that his employer would not reprimand him for his actions.

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67 Interracial Committee Report, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 3, File Special Incident Reports 1945, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
A particularly egregious incident took place in January 1945, when Mary Doctor chaperoned “thirty-three children” on an evening streetcar ride. In her letter to the DSR’s Superintendent, Doctor recounted that the white conductor shouted at the children who had torn their transfers or did not know what to do with their fares. When she objected to his tone, he threatened to remove Doctor and all of the children from the streetcar. A few stops later, when a white woman boarded, according to Doctor the conductor “talked to me through her saying, ‘that’s the trouble with them, we try to be nice to them and they knife us in the back; the flock of monkeys ought to be back in Africa where they belong.’” When Doctor recorded his badge number – apparently after the white woman had “told him that he might be reported for his remarks” - the conductor mocked her attempt to gain control in the situation, sarcastically remarking, “I’m so scared, I’m so scared.”

In the context of frequent abuse of black passengers by white operators, some black passengers resisted white operators’ antagonisms and fought back with insults, blows, or weapons. At times individual passengers’ actions might appear irrationally confrontational or violent, such as when, early one morning in August 1943, a black passenger blocked the exit door and made it difficult for other passengers to get by him. According to the white conductor’s report, when the conductor asked the passenger to move, the passenger declared “He wasn’t taking any orders from a white son-of-a-bitch,” and then stabbed the driver.69 Such

68 Mary O. Doctor to Mayor’s Interracial Committee and Police Commissioner, 2/9/1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 3, File Special Incident Reports 1945, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. 69 Police Department Memo, Lieutenant in Charge, Platoon #2 to Chief of Detectives, 8/2/1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Series I, Box 2, File
responses must be understood in the context of a heightened level of anxiety during the war in a society undergoing significant demographic changes, the particular aggravations of crowded and unreliable public transit service, the accumulated impact of white operators’ frequent derogatory comments to black passengers, and the confined space of a bus or streetcar “theater” in which interactions played out in front of others. In light of these considerations, we can read the man’s stabbing as an act of aggression not only against the particular white driver who offended him but against constant discriminatory treatment.

A black man or woman operating a streetcar posed a particular threat to some whites’ sense of control, since black operators symbolized blacks’ assertions of authority. White passengers routinely harassed black bus drivers and streetcar conductors as a way to undermine their positions of power and authority. To many whites, having black transit operators was an indication that whites were losing control, signaled by placing a black male or female in a position of authority. The presence of black DSR operators also made some whites anxious that blacks were taking “their” jobs. Encounters between white passengers and black operators regularly played out in front of dozens of passengers, and at times in front of intending passengers waiting outside.

As one investigator of racial tension in Detroit after the June 1943 reported to Horace White of the NAACP, “whites resent Negro conductors and motormen on street cars and other public carriers. When Negroes are accepted [as employees on public transit and in other highly visible positions], they are accepted only as a ‘war

DSR- Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
measure.’ Many whites continually say, ‘When the war is over, if the Negroes keep on getting these jobs, what will our boys have to do when they come back?’”\(^70\) In addition to the threat to white control that black operators posed, their prominent positions suggested to some that blacks were encroaching on “white” jobs, adding to widespread concern about employment after the war. Although the DSR was chronically understaffed during the war, some whites seemed to view the existence of black drivers and conductors as a sign that blacks were taking over whites’ jobs.

A New Yorker who traveled to Detroit after the riot to interview whites and blacks about their impressions of what caused the riot similarly found that white Detroiters were concerned about blacks taking transit jobs away from whites. For some the concern about employment was interlaced with apprehension about placing black women in the role of conductor. This observer recorded, “In the city owned street-cars almost all conductorettes are negro girls. The whites resent this condition as they think an equal number of white women should be employed on street cars.”\(^71\) A St. Louis businessman wrote to Mayor Jeffries after the riot that his “Canadian friends” were unsurprised to hear there had been a riot because they knew “that 90 percent of the drivers of your city service were colored and that this was causing much concern among the people.”\(^72\) As these written records suggest,

\(^70\) “Investigation of Recent Detroit Riots,” Memo from Sheridan A. Bruseaux to Horace A White, Detroit Housing Commission, 7/12/1943, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, Riot Correspondence (3), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

\(^71\) Memo by Operative P. Wilson, 6/26/1943, NAACP Detroit Branch Collection, Box 1, File Civil Rights Complaints (1), Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

\(^72\) William G. Hutton, Wish-I-Wish Company, St. Louis, to Mayor, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (3).
some whites viewed black operators both as a threat to white authority and to whites’ postwar job prospects.

As riders hurried to get to their destination, confrontations often caused delays, and everyone else on board the vehicle or trying to board was forced to wait for resolution (or enter into the conflict themselves to affect the outcome). Thus white passengers’ challenges to blacks’ authority, for example, had a built-in audience that witnessed such struggles, willingly or not. The presence of an audience seemed to raise the stakes of the outcome for those involved.

At times, white passengers explicitly invoked race when expressing anger at or contempt for a black DSR operator. In July 1944, black streetcar conductor C. Young called out to awaken a white passenger who had fallen asleep, telling him that it was the end of the line and he would have to pay another fare to take the return run. Although there was no one else aboard the streetcar, the conductor noted the presence of “a crowd waiting all around the car,” for whose benefit the passenger seemed to shout at the conductor. “You black son of a ......., trying to run the DSR,” the man reportedly yelled, before hitting the conductor. As Young reported, “He hit me and I hit him.” Neither of the men called the police, and the white passenger was never identified. Whether the rider was upset at having slept through his stop, being awakened by the conductor, having to pay another fare, or some combination of these factors, he expressed his anger in racialized terms, singling out the fact that the operator was black and showing dismay at his position
of authority as a black man with his exaggerated contention that the operator was “trying to run the DSR.”

In many other instances, white passengers were not explicit in their prejudice against black operators, but found ways to challenge the operators’ authority. On a late night run, W. Straughter, a black streetcar operator, asked Mrs. C. Reser, a white passenger, to exit from the rear door so that others could enter from the front of the car. In response, Reser “refused” and conspicuously took the operator’s badge number, suggesting that she would file a complaint for his inappropriate behavior. When Reser subsequently contacted the DSR to complain, she asserted that Straughter had “slapped her with his cap.” Amid the anxieties of a changing social order and the increased presence of black operators on streetcars, Reser resented Straughter’s request for her to use the back door in order to expedite boarding for oncoming passengers, perhaps considering it unacceptable for a black man to tell her what to do.

Refusing to pay fares was one common way that black riders, especially young men, antagonized white operators. In early 1943, white DSR operators reported several instances in which groups of black men boarded a streetcar or bus without paying. In one instance, according to the conductor “20 or 30 colored youngsters” boarded without paying, and he was not able to make the passengers

73 Incident Reports 11/9/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
74 Incident Reports 7/11/1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 3, File DPD Reports 1945, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
pay their fares or prosecute them. When smaller numbers of passengers boarded, the DSR often arrested and fined black passengers who did not pay.\textsuperscript{75} This type of conflict did not usually lead to either side becoming violent unless the passenger and operator disagreed on how much money the passenger owed. On occasion, however, violence broke out. Homer Bailey, aboard a streetcar just before midnight on May 4, 1943, pulled out a knife when he got into a disagreement with the conductor over the amount he was supposed to pay (the conductor claimed he was two cents short). The white motorman hit Bailey with a crowbar, sending him to the hospital.\textsuperscript{76}

While black drivers and conductors suffered disproportionate insults and violence from white passengers, they also found ways to challenge these psychological and physical affronts. Black operators did not often press charges against white passengers, perhaps out of realistic concern that they would not receive a fair trial. Instead, black men and women used their positions of authority to demand that white passengers obey their rules and talked back when whites insulted them. In addition, many of the male operators returned the violence when they were assaulted.

James T. Jenkins, who began driving DSR buses in 1941, recalled what it was like to be a black bus driver at that time and pick up white passengers.

\begin{quote}
When I started driving the bus, you had very few blacks driving the bus at that time, and mostly all those were carryovers from World War I. ... You drove up to a corner on the bus and opened your doors, and they would turn their backs and say, 'I don’t ride with niggers.' We used to laugh about it. We
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{75} See Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, Box 1, File 5 “Governor’s Committee,” University of Chicago Archives.

\textsuperscript{76} Exhibit 8, File 5 “Governor’s Committee,” University of Chicago Archives.
used to pull up in front of the Fisher Building on the Dexter bus going to Fullerton or Fenkell and open the doors, and they’d turn their back on you. Me and a guy would holler out: ‘Well, you better come on and ride with me. The one behind me is blacker than I am.’ The fare was six cents, one penny for a transfer. People used to get on, and we had to make change. They used to take their money and hold it in a way that they wouldn’t have to touch your hand.\footnote{77}

In his daily encounters with white passengers, Jenkins was acutely aware of many whites’ apprehension about riding on a bus operated by a black driver, both in terms of the authority it bestowed to the driver and the close physical interaction with a black person that followed. He and others used humor to mock the white passengers who maligned him.

During the summer of 1943, a black bus driver reported to the DSR that he had asked four white passengers to move back in the bus in order to accommodate more passengers getting on. These four “began to make cracks about operator wanting them to get on the roof” and when the driver- seeing that there was considerable room for more passengers- asked one of the men in particular to move back, the passenger “used profane language and threatened [the driver], saying that he and his buddies would put him off [the] bus. Operator then told them he wasn’t going to leave that spot until they left the coach. Passengers left.”\footnote{78} In this instance, the white passengers challenged the black drivers’ ability to make them move back in the bus, and one of them sought to invert the power dynamic of bus driver over passenger by threatening the driver. In the end, however, the passengers submitted


\footnote{78 J.A. Kramer, DSR, Memo to Police Commissioner, 7/28/1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Series I, Box 2, File DSR- Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.}
to the drivers’ insistence that they leave the bus because of their inappropriate actions.

Black women who operated Detroit’s streetcars and buses faced additional challenges to their authority and safety. By 1944, women were employed as operators and conductors (called conductorettes) for the DSR, adding another layer of opportunity, tensions, and conflicts to the daily experience of public transit in World War II Detroit. An incident on Halloween, 1944, demonstrates the ways in which masculinity, honor, bigotry, and refusal to accept discrimination all were intertwined in exchanges that could last less than a minute on a streetcar or bus. As conductor E. Foster, an African American woman, reported, during the evening rush a white passenger “asked for a penny transfer. He dropped the money on the floor. I held out my hand for it and he told me it was on the floor. I asked him for the money a second time. He tried to take the transfer and said that no nigger could treat him like that. A colored man standing nearby told the white passenger not to try taking the transfer. The white man asked him what he had to do with it and the colored passenger told him he wasn’t going to see one of his race mistreated.”

In this particular incident, it is clear that the white passenger’s disrespect for the operator and invocation of racial epithets provoked a bystander to intervene seemingly on her behalf, implicitly threatening the passenger as a way to enforce the conductor’s authority and resist the passenger’s assertion of white supremacy. Unfortunately, in this and many similar reports, the operator offers no conclusion to the incident.

79 Incident Reports 11/9/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
When black conductor D. Greenlee asked a white passenger to “stop swearing,” the man walked up to Greenlee and punched her. Such a response seems entirely disproportionate to the request, but suggests that the passenger resented the black woman’s exercise of her authority to reprimand him. It seems likely that he acted with such violence because of a build-up of circumstances, perhaps other encounters with black operators on previous streetcar rides.  

Elsie Gilliam was one of the first black women to be hired as a conductor for the Detroit Street Railways. Amid the overload of passengers that made streetcar and bus operators’ jobs more stressful during the war, Gilliam faced particular challenges as a black woman in a position of authority on board the city’s vehicles. White passengers often resented seeing blacks, and in particular black women, in these high profile jobs that gave them much interaction with the public. As the end of the war seemed within reach and the question of postwar employment loomed large, some also worried that these employees were stealing whites’ jobs. White anxieties over close physical contact with black bodies and the challenge to white superiority that black DSR drivers and conductors seemed to represent manifested themselves in varied and often unexpected ways.

As a routine part of her job, Gilliam collected fares and made change for those without the exact fare. While Gilliam worked on the Clairmount line in the middle of the afternoon on June 23, 1944, a white woman who had just boarded the car assaulted her, claiming that she did not want to receive pennies as change. Gilliam

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80 Incident Reports 11/3/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
had handed the woman “three dimes, a nickel, and five pennies,” to which the woman had responded, “You black ----, I don’t want any pennies” and slapped Gilliam’s face. The passenger’s offensive remark and invocation of the conductor’s race suggested that she was upset about more than having received five pennies as change. The woman may have interpreted Gilliam’s action as deliberately provocative and an attempt to annoy her. She may also have considered it offensive to have to interact with a black woman who had authority over the streetcar, and in Gilliam’s role as fare collector, someone whose fingers the white passenger might unavoidably touch when paying for her ride.

How the Detroit Street Railways’ directors responded to reported racial incidents is often unclear. Sometimes, when an employee (black or white) assaulted a passenger, there is record that the DSR fired the employee. At other times, the Police Department submitted follow-up reports that detailed when passengers were charged for causing trouble, usually for public drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and/or assault. Only occasionally do the DSR's reports suggest where its leaders placed blame for these confrontations if the employee was not dismissed. For example, if a particular operator had been involved in several disputes, this fact was noted on each incident report, implying the employee was causing trouble and should be watched. A. Pickett, a black conductor, likely fell under suspicion as an employee eager to pick fights with white passengers, based on the following report of an incident she had with a white male passenger. According to Pickett, one evening a white male passenger on her streetcar stood in the rear door and would not move when asked. “He was standing in the rear door telling me he was a white
man. I told him I didn’t care who he was just for him to move out of the door.” The director added at the end of this report, “This is conductorette’s eighth dispute.”

As a black female streetcar operator, Pickett may have been particularly likely to encounter resistance to her enforcement of procedures and decorum. She may also have seen her job as an opportunity to resist racial and gender discrimination, discrimination that could be particularly pronounced against African American women with positions of control.

According to Shockley, black women serving as transit operators represented a grave threat to many whites because they symbolized “a changing racial climate in Detroit.” Violent conflicts between white passengers and black female conductors “signified not just an assertion of authority on the part of conductors but an attempt by whites to reorder their world in order to reassert their authority. Black women conductors symbolized many whites’ belief that a world of privilege was slipping quickly away.” Thus black women who worked as conductors faced a near-constant barrage of verbal and sometimes physical assaults from whites, assaults that cannot be explained merely as expressions of frustration over service delays and crowded buses. White men’s mistreatment of black female conductors not only sent a message of their dominance over black women, but also implicitly suggested dominance over black men who witnessed such transgressions. On occasion, black men who were either passengers or fellow operators aboard a streetcar would

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81 Incident Reports, 10/18/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
82 Shockley, We, too, are Americans, 193.
83 Shockley, We, too, are Americans, 194.
stand up for a female conductor when a white man insulted or assaulted her. One evening in the summer of 1944, for example, a black passenger “attempted to reprimand” a white soldier who he thought had spoken insolently to the black female conductor when asking for a transfer. The conductor refused to get involved, and the conflict continued between the two male passengers, thus creating a chance for the black passenger to defend the black woman’s right to be treated with respect and have her authority be recognized.84

The exchange of money between rider and operator was one of the most common stages for the display of racial animosity. Unlike today, in the 1940s, operators collected fares directly from passengers and made change.85 The seemingly straightforward transaction between rider and operator was fraught with tension and accusations of wrongdoing. If a passenger’s fare slipped to the floor as she handed it to the driver, an already exasperated passenger and operator might jump to conclusions about the other’s intentions. Had the passenger intentionally let the coins slip before handing them to the operator, forcing him to either scrounge on the floor for the coins or lose the money? Had the driver intentionally jerked the bus as he took the money so that the passenger would lose her fare and have to pick it up? Such moments were ambiguous, but how each party interpreted the situation mattered a great deal for the ensuing interaction. When the incident involved a white passenger and black driver, or black passenger and white driver, the moment

84 Incident Reports, 7/27/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
85 It was not until the 1968 that concerns over robbery prompted the DSR to install fare boxes so that bus drivers would have no access to money.
had particular import for many because the participants stood in as representatives of the black population as a whole and the white population as a whole. Additionally, as James Jenkins had reflected, many white passengers took care to avoid touching a black operator when paying a fare or receiving change.

Apart from the ambiguities and tensions involved in the physical exchange of money, many passengers were unfamiliar with the DSR’s transfer policy, which required the passenger to request and purchase a transfer when first boarding, and to use the transfer within a certain amount of time. There was sometimes a gray area when it was unclear whether a passenger had used a transfer properly or whether an operator had properly informed a passenger about the transfer. Those involved often perceived others’ actions as trying to exploit the ambiguity, which created room for suspicion and animosity. Once emotions were aroused, whites often tapped into racial stereotypes and status anxieties about African Americans achieving employment in positions of authority over whites, such as in the role of streetcar and bus operators.

A report from black streetcar operator F. Williams in late November 1943 illustrates the way that a seemingly minor exchange between black operator and white passenger could quickly become a larger conflict. According to Williams, who reported the incident to the Detroit Street Railways as required, the white passenger asked him for a free transfer at one location, when procedure directed the operator to wait and give the passenger a transfer when the streetcar had arrived at a destination further down the line. When the passenger insisted on getting the transfer immediately, Williams held his ground. Then, “after insistence,
while I refused to have dispute with him, he started cursing and calling names.” In order to quiet him, Williams issued the passenger a transfer, at which point the passenger proclaimed, “The Company ought not to tolerate you damn nigger sons of ----- on this job.” As the operator relayed, “Before I could think I lashed out my left hand striking him in the face.” Thus a dispute over the proper moment at which a streetcar operator should issue a transfer to a passenger caused the white passenger to interpret the incident as a black man asserting authority over him. Viewing the event as a threat to his sense of superiority as a white man, the passenger lashed out with racial slurs and an assertion that blacks should not be given jobs as streetcar operators. As a result, the black operator refused to allow the white passenger to get away with his racial insults, using physical violence to assert his sense of dignity and discipline the transgressor.

A white passenger pulled a knife on a black conductor when the conductor did not immediately give him a transfer. The conductor reported having told the man, “Just a minute. I only have two hands,” only to look down and see the knife appear. Pulling a weapon was one way that passengers, black and white, inverted the power dynamics between operator and passenger and demanded immediate service or sought to shape the way the operator responded to the passenger.

Fear of sexual transgressions between black men and white women shaped some white men’s perceptions of public transit as a place where white women were vulnerable to predatory, rapacious black men. Although there do not seem to have been any reported incidents in which a black man sexually assaulted a white woman on a streetcar or bus in Detroit during the war, fear of such an incident sparked
rumors among whites. In January 1943, William Jackle called the DSR to complain “that between 3 and 4 pm daily, at the loading of Clairmount Street cars at Jefferson Avenue and Hart Street, colored men were placing their hands under the dresses of white women who were attempting to board the cars.” The DSR made it a priority to investigate this claim, but apparently found no basis for the assertion that black men were groping white women as they boarded streetcars.86

Fear of interracial sexual encounters led to rumors such as the above in which whites accused black men of sexually assaulting white women, but it also raised concern among some white men that white women were interested in black men. Acting upon this concern, a white streetcar passenger struck a light-skinned black woman who was seated with a black man. Thinking she was white, the white man slapped the woman as a way to convey disapproval over what he perceived to be an interracial couple.87

Racially charged conflicts between passengers were nearly as common as conflicts between passengers and operators. O. Holesh, a white conductor on the Fort-Kercheval streetcar line, reported in June 1945 that most of her passengers were white southerners who worked at the Timken factory and “make remarks to all colored passengers.” According to Holesh, there was “trouble practically every

86 Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, Box 1, File 4, University of Chicago Archives.
87 DPD Memo from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Part I, Box 3, File DPD Reports, 1945, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
night,” between the white factory workers and the black passengers. The DSR reported remarkably few conflicts between white passengers or between black passengers; instead the vast majority of reported conflicts between passengers occurred between black and white passengers.

Often incidents between passengers began over contested claims to space in crowded vehicles. Conflict arose over who had claim to a seat and very frequently when one person asked another to move out of the way of someone who was entering or exiting the vehicle. One night in early December 1942, a black passenger reportedly hit a white passenger seated next to him who would not sufficiently move over to share the seat. Two months later, a 22-year-old black male passenger stabbed a 22-year-old white male passenger when the latter “asked him to move so that he could get past him.” Pulling the knife out of his pocket, the black passenger asserted that he did not have to move for the white passenger. He was subsequently arrested. Then in March 1943, Joseph Bieganski (white) asked Lee Bafford (black) “to move so that a white woman could get off the street car,” according to the report. Bafford responded by stabbing Bieganski, who was sent to the hospital but did not prosecute. In this and other incidents, black passengers

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88 Incident Reports, 6/8/1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 1/45-6/45, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
89 Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, Box 1, File 4, University of Chicago Archives.
90 Incident Reports, 3/3/1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
91 Incident Reports, 4/10/1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
seemed particularly to resent being asked by a white passenger (or operator) to move, perhaps because some whites asked blacks to move in order to avoid physical contact.

After the June 1943 riot, Detroit’s Chief of Police John Witherspoon compiled the reported incidents on DSR vehicles from October 1942 to just before the riot. Witherspoon submitted his compilation to the Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Riot with the purpose of providing evidence that blacks had instigated the vast majority of conflicts on public transit and had shown a propensity for starting violence. The reports tended to find black participants culpable for conflicts, and Witherspoon intended the incident reports cumulatively to demonstrate blacks’ guilt and whites’ victimhood in order to support his assertion that blacks had been responsible for the riot.

But there are other conclusions to draw about the nature of racial conflicts on public transit vehicles during the war and prior to the riot. Examining the above-mentioned December 1942 incident, for example, one could conclude that the seated white passenger instigated conflict by refusing to provide space for a black man to sit next to him, or one could conclude that the latter passenger had started the conflict with an act of aggression, hitting the man who would not move over. Regardless of how one apportions responsibility in each of the cases, it is clear that the combined impact of these minor aggressions was that blacks and whites had greater animosity toward one another on public transit vehicles. As they continued to rely on the overburdened transit system and see conflicts unfold, passengers’ tension and anxiety rose simultaneously.
Contemporary Observers’ Interpretations of Daily Conflicts

Observers at the time noted that public transit was a hotbed for conflict between blacks and whites, suggesting that streetcars and buses were an important site to examine in order to understand existing tensions. Particularly after the June 1943 riot, which brought notoriety to Detroit’s police department and undermined the national discourse of fighting Nazi racial supremacy, Detroiter were on the lookout for signs of racial animosity. As Reverend Horace A. White wrote in a column for the African American daily newspaper *The Michigan Chronicle* in June 1944, “One of the first things” that Detroiter “can do now to prevent race flare-ups” is to address the “very inadequate” public transit in the most populous parts of the city. According to White, several bus and streetcar lines, including those running through African American neighborhoods,

are always over-crowded to the danger point on weekends. These lines not only have to serve the people living in these areas, but they also have to serve the war plants in these areas. There are some forty-two plants in or adjoining these areas. This all means that when the people in these areas have to use the street cars and busses they are passed up and left standing on the corners, and when they are picked up, the street car or bus is filled to more than its normal capacity. Add to this fact that the people who are picked up have been passed up by two or three busses or street cars. When these people finally get on, their tempers are short and their feelings are on edge. It does not take much imagination and more than a casual understanding of human nature to see that here we have the material out of which race conflicts are made.92

Similarly, columnist Patrick McDougall for the *Detroit Free Press* noted the high percentage of Detroit’s legal cases that stemmed from conflicts on, or while waiting for, public transit. Wrote McDougall in August 1944, “One indication of the importance of having adequate transportation facilities is seen in the cases filtering

through Recorder’s Court. A very large percentage of the incidents leading to court cases grow out of Negro and white friction on crowded street cars and busses when workers are homeward bound and when war nerves are at high tension.” As with White, McDougall emphasized the need to improve transit facilities to reduce overcrowding and the interracial conflict it fostered. McDougall also noted that the first recommendation by Detroit’s Interracial Committee (a committee formed after the riot to track and alleviate racial tension) to prevent conflict in the city was “to improve methods of loading passengers on busses and street cars at crowded loading zones.”93 By 1944, clearly, discussions of how to avoid another race riot and de-escalate black-white tension in the city highlighted the rate of incidents on Detroit’s public transit system as a key problem to overcome.

Rumors among whites of an African American “bump club” provide one of the best means of accessing some whites’ reactions to contact with blacks on buses, on streetcars, and while walking on the streets of Detroit. According to the rumors, blacks bonded together to form a group (referred to as a “bump club” or “pushers’ club”) of people who would purposefully bump into whites in congested areas, notably on public transit and busy streets. By some accounts, the club would organize on days they designated as “Push Day.”

The rumors demonstrate a preoccupation with, even paranoia about, physical contact with African American bodies. Unlike in the Jim Crow south where it was illegal for blacks to sit next to (or in front of) whites, on Detroit’s streetcars and buses there were no such laws. As more people took public transit to work

during the war—either by choice, necessity, or pressure to help conserve rubber and gas—the vehicles became more crowded and thus actual contact more common.

Some evidence of the “bump club” rumor has been preserved in the record of letters to Mayor Edward Jeffries. In the characteristic way that rumors spread, one woman wrote to the Mayor in 1944 with concern about the bump club not based on her own experience, but on what had happened to someone she knew. As she explained, "two weeks ago the daughter of a friend went downtown, coming home, on the street car, which was filled as usual on ‘Push Day,’ [...] a young soldier with service ribbons was stuck hanging in front of her, every time the car stopped, the negro at his back gave him a smack with his shoulder, nearly knocking him into her lap, the soldier protested and then the row started.” This example shows the white soldier as victim, antagonized by an African American who took advantage of the jerks and halts of a busy streetcar as pretext to shove the decorated soldier repeatedly. The writer assumed that the Mayor would understand her reference to “Push Day,” revealed by the fact that she herself did not explain its meaning. From the writer's assertion that the streetcar was “filled as usual on ‘Push Day,’” she suggested that “Push Day” was both a common occurrence and a known phenomenon.

According to Howard Odum, rumors serve an important function of allowing people to express their ideas and concerns that they do not necessarily feel

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94 Anonymous letter to Mayor Jeffries, undated, Mayor's Papers 1944, Box 6, File Inter-Racial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
comfortable voicing explicitly. Framing distress about or disgust with physical contact in terms of rumors may have allowed some whites to articulate racial prejudices that they found less acceptable during a war that the United States justified in part by the need to crush Hitler’s racist regime. Rumors also provide an outlet for anxieties about social upheaval, and in particular the “bump club” rumor provided an outlet for some whites’ sense that they were losing control in society as blacks not only formed a greater percentage of the city’s population but also made greater claims to social equality. While overt declarations and expressions of racism acquired negative publicity during the war (and in particular Detroit’s white establishment drew strong criticism after the riot in the summer of 1943), rumors provided an opportunity for many whites to convey revulsion and discomfort about encounters with African Americans in ways that validated their prejudices about African Americans’ essential offensive nature.

Gary Alan Fine has noted that rumors “frequently appear in tandem with social problems” and “are particularly liable to spread when the topic of the rumor is judged to be important and the situation is judged to be ambiguous.” Concern about the increased presence of blacks in Detroit, as manifested most obviously to whites in encounters on public transit, the threats to the city as a racially segregated white-dominated society that World War II posed, and the exceptionally ambiguous nature of proximity and contact in crowded streetcars and buses created ideal

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95 Howard W. Odum, Race and Rumors of Race: The American South in the Early Forties (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1943).
conditions for a rumor. The “bump club” rumor that emerged expressed concern over blacks’ presence and justified that concern with an assertion that blacks were guilty of trying to invert the social hierarchy and upset whites.

Mayor Jeffries acknowledged the existence of the bump club rumor and claimed to have investigated its veracity. In response to a letter from an inquiring school principal in Burlington, Iowa, in early 1945, the Mayor asserted that, “after several thorough investigations there is not trace of organized activity in that respect.”97 The principal, Robert White Jr., had written to the mayor “[i]n these days of all sorts of rumors and stories ... designed to stir up feelings against minorities,” that he had heard about “a well organized ‘bump’ day ... in connection with the race troubles in Detroit,” and wanted to know if such a rumor were true. In the version of the rumor that White had heard, “bump day” was a “day on which [African Americans] deliberately jostled white people off the side-walks on certain occasions.” In this rendition, “bump day” was not necessarily executed on public transit but instead on crowded sidewalks; White had heard a separate rumor about black domestic servants organizing to sabotage streetcars during rush hour.98

An editorial in the Michigan Chronicle in May 1944 categorized the bump club as one of many absurd rumors about blacks made possible only by the great social separation between blacks and whites. Framing the problem of rumors as a threat to “national unity” in time of war, the editorial told readers that the bump club rumor had recently been spread when “a luncheon club speaker in the Detroit

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97 Robert White Jr. to Mayor Jeffries, 1/11/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 3, File Inter-Racial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
98 Robert White Jr. to Mayor Jeffries, 1/11/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 3, File Inter-Racial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
area repeated the old lie that Negroes had formed a 'Bumpers Club' the members of which take time off from work to go downtown and 'bump' white citizens in the crowded stores and streets and on the buses and street cars. According to the editorial, whites could believe rumors about blacks such as the bump club only because there were major barriers between blacks and whites that made whites “abysmally ignorant ... of Negro life.” “In a truly integrated society,” the authors posited, “these vicious rumors would be laughed out of existence, for integration brings understanding and sure knowledge of one another.” In this view, if Detroit were racially integrated in meaningful ways that provided consistent contact between blacks and whites, neither group would be able to believe “fantastic lie[s]” about the other, and instead would be able to dismiss rumors in light of personal experiences and interactions.99

Perhaps because of the prevalence of “bump club” rumors, incidents of reported bumping garnered greater attention, both from DSR directors monitoring interracial interactions and often from whites who believed they had encountered incidents of blacks bumping into whites. A white woman contacted the DSR in October 1944 to report that she had seen a group of knife-wielding black women waiting for a bus who “tried to cause trouble by swearing at white women, pushing them and making threatening remarks.” The write-up noted that the DSR had alerted the police about this incident and that “the police have promised to give this

situation special attention." Compared with other ambiguous interactions on public transit, such as coins dropped as a passenger paid for a bus ticket, or a passenger’s decision to stand in the exit, perceived incidents of bumping may have been particularly troubling to whites who believed there to be an organized effort by blacks to challenge whites’ status through bumping into their bodies in public spaces. For example, according to a DSR report, George Wright, a middle-aged white male passenger “remonstrated” when he believed a group of young black men intentionally bumped into his white friend on an evening streetcar ride in early 1943, although there is no report that Wright’s friend, the alleged victim of bumping, took the incident as an affront, or felt the need to retaliate.101

Three white women who wrote a joint letter to the mayor in July articulated the threat that the alleged bumping posed. They informed the mayor that African Americans “have formed a ‘Pusher’s Club’, the purpose to push White people in busy downtown districts completely off sidewalks and out of their way in order to show their superiority.” These women were frank about their views of African Americans and felt that they represented all whites in the Detroit area when they complained to Jeffries about the “Pusher’s Club” and about blacks moving to formerly all-white neighborhoods. Thirteen months after the racial violence that

100 Incident Reports, 11/1/1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 2, File DSR Reports, 7/44-12/44, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
101 Incident Reports, 3/3/1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Part I, Box 2 File DSR Police Reports, 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
102 Emphasis added. Marcia Hunt, Ellen Roye, and Eleanor Finkelstein to Mayor Jeffries, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 5, File Inter-Racial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
began on Belle Isle, the letter seethed with hatred. "Our topic of ‘Complaint’ is the same as every White person in Detroit and vicinity feels. Perhaps, you have already guess it – ‘The God – Damned Niggers.’ ... These negroes are moving into nice, White neighborhoods ruining property value, surroundings, and people. Perhaps you would like to live surrounded by niggers on both sides- NO?????? WELL, HOW ABOUT US?"103

Analogous to African Americans purchasing homes in white neighborhoods in Detroit, the “Pusher’s Club” posed a threat to white spatial control by forcibly bringing blacks and whites into the same space against whites’ wishes. Thus the letter-writers make connections between the threat of the “Pusher’s Club” and the threat of integrated neighborhoods, which illuminate the functions of the Bump Club rumor. This rumor illustrates whites’ anxiety about bodily contact with blacks as well as resentment over blacks’ infringement on what some saw as white space, and anxiety about blacks’ challenges to the social hierarchy of white superiority and privilege.

Unlike in the realm of housing, where whites’ preference for racially exclusive neighborhoods was often expressed in terms of concern for devaluation of property associated with having black neighbors, whites’ desire to avoid contact with blacks on public transit did not appear to be grounded or even justified as economic concerns, framed in terms of "property values." As the “bump club/push day” rumors make clear, whites had a fundamental concern with the actual physical

103 Letter to Mayor Jeffries, 7/27/1944, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 5, File Inter-Racial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
contact between white and black bodies on streetcars, buses, and on sidewalks, concerns not easily disguised by economic pretext.

Rumors of a “bump club” could also provide justification for why many whites had begun to resent taking public transit conveyances during a time when Americans were asked to sacrifice and take the bus instead of driving to work. As dozens of irate letters from Detroiter to their mayor made clear during the war, Detroit Street Railway riders were becoming increasingly fed up with having to pack into streetcars and buses designed to fit far fewer people, to be squished up against strangers and jostled when someone needed to exit, and often to wait at the bus stop while two or three full buses passed. Concluding that blacks were purposefully bumping into whites in such crowded conditions provided greater justification for some whites to begrudge taking public transit in wartime, and more reason to avoid it when they could.

Conclusion

Detroit’s public transit system brought people from different backgrounds into closely shared space on a daily basis. This space brought blacks, whites, poor, working-class, and middle-class men and women into greater contact and made all more visible to one another. At the same time, the unusually strained conditions of wartime transit made streetcar and bus travel crowded, unreliable, and consequently exceptionally stressful. In such circumstances, DSR patrons were impatient with each other and with the drivers and conductors, and they consistently expressed their frustrations in racialized and gendered ways. The

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104 Mayors Papers 1942-1945, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
manner in which those aboard public transit vehicles lashed out at one another revealed anxieties over interracial encounters and changing social norms between blacks and whites.
Chapter 3
Public Transit as Black Space:
The 1943 Riot and Calls for Segregation

Sam Mitchell headed to work as usual on Monday afternoon, June 21, 1943. An African American veteran of World War I, Mitchell worked as a janitor at the Bankers Trust Company in downtown Detroit.\(^{105}\) He and his wife had heard about violence between blacks and whites the previous night and the possibility that fights were continuing in parts of the city. It was hard to know exactly where the confrontations were and how widespread the violence was. What would turn out to be one of the worst race riots the country had ever seen looked to Detroit’s mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr. and other city officials early that Monday morning like a brief, violent encounter that police had successfully broken up.\(^{106}\) Around 1pm, confident that police officers were handling any ongoing trouble, Mitchell thought it safe to travel downtown to his work and boarded a Woodward streetcar south.\(^{107}\)

Eight blocks north of Mitchell’s stop, a crowd of whites gathered in and along Woodward Avenue, congregating near the safety zone where streetcars loaded and unloaded passengers.\(^{108}\) The crowd had formed spontaneously and been growing steadily in response to reports of violence between blacks and whites late the previous evening on Belle Isle, an island in the Detroit River. By noon that Monday,

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\(^{108}\) Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 58.
hundreds, perhaps thousands, of whites had gathered. Knowing that the city’s public vehicles were a likely place to encounter blacks, the crowd eagerly coalesced around the loading platform. As Mitchell’s streetcar approached, the white crowd surrounded it. “Are there any niggers in there?” one member of the crowd excitedly demanded of the streetcar operator. When the operator did not answer and would not open the front door, someone among the crowd with a crowbar forced his way on board. As soon as the door was pushed open, several white men stormed inside the car and sought out black passengers. These men then began pulling blacks out onto the street one by one, where whites in the crowd surrounded and beat their sought-out victims, chasing them down as they tried to escape.109

Mitchell was stabbed in the side immediately after he exited the streetcar. When he reached the sidewalk of the city’s busiest thoroughfare, the crowd just behind him, he saw two white policemen and asked for their help as the mass of whites approached. The officers at first appeared to escort him to safety but instead marched him back into the middle of Woodward and into the crowd of hundreds of white men and a few women. Two more policemen sat on horseback just behind Mitchell and the officers holding him. As they closed in, whites assaulted him one at a time while the police officers held his arms, preventing Mitchell from protecting himself. Despite bleeding from his stab wound and being assaulted by multiple aggressors, Mitchell managed to free himself from the two officers and ran away, with some of the crowd close behind. Two other police officers in a nearby patrol

109 Lee and Humphrey, Race Riot, 3; Deposition of Samuel Mitchell, NAACP Detroit Branch Papers.

Like Sam Mitchell, dozens of black streetcar passengers were attacked by groups of whites during the June 1943 Detroit riot. Repeatedly throughout the day and a half of intense violence, whites forced streetcars and private automobiles to stop, searching for blacks whom they then forced into the expectant crowd. Aside from police aggression, much of the violence that whites inflicted on blacks happened on or around streetcars. By contrast, black rioters primarily targeted white businesses rather than individuals. Although some blacks attacked whites on streetcars, particularly at the beginning of the riot, the majority of black violence was directed at white-owned property.

\textit{Argument and Scope}

This chapter examines the June 1943 Detroit riot through the space of public transit vehicles, one of the most common sites of white violence against blacks during the riot. Streetcars and buses were places in which whites and blacks commonly encountered each other during the war amid a de facto racially segregated city (the subject of Chapter Two). Whites involved in targeted attacks against blacks during the riot turned to streetcars and buses in their quest to find black victims, suggesting that they associated public transit vehicles with the presence of black passengers and operators. Analyzing white Detroiters’ actions during the riot and in the immediate aftermath, I argue that by the middle of the war
whites viewed the city’s public transit vehicles as black spaces. After the riot, in order to regain spatial control, some white Detroiters suggested segregating all public areas, including streetcars and buses. The riot was not itself the catalyst for major changes in how whites and blacks perceived each other; instead it revealed these broader wartime developments.

During the riot and in World War II more generally, streetcars and buses throughout the city were easily identifiable indicators of the presence of blacks. In predominantly white areas of the city, these vehicles were the most prominent space consistently occupied by blacks. A poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center taken three months before the riot indicated that 58% of white Detroiters wanted the city’s streetcars and buses to have “separate sections for blacks and whites.” That the majority of whites polled thought Jim Crow-style segregation should be imposed in a city in the urban north shows whites’ strong association between public transit vehicles and the presence of black bodies. It also testifies to the unambiguously negative nature of this association. By comparison, the same survey found that “only” 39% of white Detroiters were concerned about working next to a black employee.

George Lipsitz’s conception of a “white spatial imaginary” illuminates the appeal of segregation to many whites in cities beyond the Jim Crow South.

According to Lipsitz, from this vantage one “pursues the ideal of pure and

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111 “A National Barometer of Tension Areas,” Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Box 1, File Reports 1944-45, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
112 “A National Barometer of Tension Areas,” Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Box 1, File Reports 1944-45, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
homegenous space through exclusiveness, exclusivity, and homogeneity.”

Whereas white rioters’ actions to seek out streetcars for black victims demonstrates whites did not view public vehicles as part of this white spatial imaginary, whites’ reactions after the riot demonstrated their desire to reassert dominance over such spaces.

The chapter begins with a consideration of the voluminous riot historiography and how my spatial analysis of violence on and around public vehicles contributes to this literature. I then analyze incidents of white violence against blacks on streetcars during the two days of rioting when white male rioters’ systematic attacks of streetcars and buses to find black victims demonstrated their perceptions of public vehicles as black spaces. The last part of the chapter considers how some white Detroiters made sense of their fear and anger about blacks’ increased spatial presence—emotions that had spawned the violence—through suggestions to Mayor Jeffries that Detroit introduce formal racial segregation in the public sphere. I examine letters from whites whose written appeals to the mayor echoed the concern that public transit had become a black space, and an opinion poll taken two days after the riot ended. In proposing that Detroit racially segregate its streetcars and buses, these women and men wanted to reclaim them as white spaces, with blacks relegated to subservient status and spatially separated from whites. Ultimately, the city’s inaction with regard to alleviating overcrowding on its vehicles ensured that racial conflicts on public transit would continue to escalate over the course of the war.

Historical Interpretations of the Riot

Differing characterizations of the Detroit riot have shaped subsequent understandings of the nature of the violence and of who was responsible. As often happens after a major event, numerous scholars, journalists, organizations, and interested individuals offered explanations for the riot in their attempts to make sense of the violence and to prevent similar outbreaks in the future. Much commentary in the aftermath of the violence absolved white Detrouters of responsibility, blaming blacks for the riot or attributing whites’ actions to forces reaching beyond the city.\textsuperscript{114} The Detroit Police Department and the Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Riot were instrumental in shaping riot discourse and proclaiming black culpability.

The Governor’s Committee’s official report underscored black violence, concluding that a group of blacks had started the riot, and that violence had spread after a young black man started a rumor designed to incite other blacks to riot. It downplayed white violence, in particular emphasizing the youthfulness of the participants, in order to suggest that rioters did not represent most Detroiters. The report asserted that “the riotous element among the whites was younger than the same element among the colored, and that among both white and colored, it was largely the youthful, irresponsible element which participated in this tragedy.”\textsuperscript{115}

News reports ran stories with information from the Governor’s Committee’s Report,

\textsuperscript{114} See, for example, Walter White and Thurgood Marshall, \textit{What Caused the Detroit Riot?: An Analysis} (New York: National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1943).

\textsuperscript{115} “Factual Statement of Incidents,” p15, Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, Part I, Box 1, Folder 2, University of Chicago Archives.
thus spreading its conclusions to a broader audience and reinforcing the validity of its argument that irresponsible black youth had caused the riot. In fact, the Detroit Police Department killed 17 of the 34 people who died as a result of the riot, and all of the police victims were black. Police officers only sporadically attempted to quell white violence, and about 85% of the people they arrested in conjunction with the riot were black.\textsuperscript{116}

Leftist and liberal organizations such as the NAACP and the Young Communist League emphasized whites’ involvement in the riot, but blamed outside agitators, and in particular Fifth Columnists working for the Axis.\textsuperscript{117} These organizations also suggested that hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion, as well as a few outspoken leaders such as Father Charles Coughlin, Reverend Frank Norris, and Gerald L.K. Smith had helped to stir up a “climate of hate” in the city. Much of the press seized the idea that newly arrived white southerners, who brought their experience of Jim Crow to Detroit, had been the chief instigators of the trouble among whites.\textsuperscript{118}

The Detroit NAACP, Young Communist League, United Auto Workers and others urged an investigation of the role of outside agitators who had orchestrated violence against blacks during the riot.\textsuperscript{1} As Adeline Kohl, writing for the Young Communist League of Michigan, wrote to the Mayor a few days after the riot, “These anti-Negro attacks were not 'spontaneous' or 'accidental.' They were a well-planned,\

\textsuperscript{116} “Is the Detroit Police Department Fascist?” \textit{Racial Digest}, July 1943, p43.
well-organized conspiracy on the part of Hitler’s 5th Column to create chaos, violence and death, to strike and halt our war production, to wreck the home front unity of the American people, to help fascism.”  

Although the League acknowledged that youth had carried out much of the violence, they claimed that these teenagers were “tools of the organized conspiracy against our city and country” by Hitler and the Axis. In order to bring those guilty to justice, the League advocated a full investigation into the causes of the riot to uncover the conspiracy. By focusing attention on Axis agents and sympathizers, the League unintentionally helped shift the public’s gaze away from the vast majority of rioters who were white Detroiter, not connected to subversive groups. The NAACP and UAW were more cautious in their conclusions, but raised the possibility of outside agitators and an organized riot to push for a grand jury investigation. Such an investigation seemed the best opportunity to expose and refute the prejudiced findings of the Mayor, Police Chief, and Governor’s Committee.

Nearly half a century after the riot, Dominic J. Capeci and Martha Wilkerson’s extensive study of those arrested in connection with the June 1943 riot disproved many popular beliefs about who had rioted. Contrary to earlier assumptions, the Detroit riot had not been planned by Fifth Columnists or coordinated by white supremacist groups; no prominent individuals or groups organized ahead of time to create the riot. More significantly, and running against the wisdom of much of the

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119 Adeline Kohl to Mayor Jeffries, 6/24/1943, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.  
120 Capeci and Wilkerson, Layered Violence.
riot commentary, most of the participants were not new southern migrants or young black “hoodlums” with histories of criminality.

Instead of fitting into one of several beliefs about the rioters that placed blame on external forces, Capeci and Wilkerson’s research showed that over 96% of the rioters had lived in Detroit for several years at least and did not have previous arrests. Most of those who were arrested (who composed only a subset of those involved in the riot in some way) were young working-class males. The vast majority of the nearly 2,000 arrestees were black men, although white men and some black women were also arrested. Most arrestees were employed, with 86% of black men working as unskilled laborers as well as over half of white men. Black women arrested worked primarily as domestics and unskilled laborers. The median age for each group was in the twenties, though white males were on average only 20 years old and black males 27. Most black men arrested were married, whereas most white men and black women arrested were not. In short, they conclude, those who rioted were mostly male and slightly younger than the average resident, but otherwise essentially indistinguishable from other Detroiter.

Contemporary newspaper articles and other scholarship that focused on the riot’s beginning hours on Belle Isle drew attention to white and black youths’ contests for spatial control of recreation areas and the lack of city parks. This orientation toward the riot suggested the rioters were almost exclusively black and

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121 While very few arrestees were female, and white women composed the smallest group of arrestees, photographic evidence suggests a substantial number of white women participated in the riot.

122 See, for example, U.S. Office of War Information, Bureau of Special Services, “Special Memorandum No. 64: Opinions in Detroit Thirty-Six Hours After the Race Riots,” June 30, 1943.
white male “hoodlums” who were looking for trouble and picked fights that escalated into something much bigger as word of the riot spread across the city. After its origins on Belle Isle, the 1943 riot took place in two main areas: downtown and Paradise Valley, the city's largest black neighborhood. The stark division between white rioters on Woodward Avenue and other major downtown streets, on the one hand, and black rioters in the white-owned business district of Paradise Valley, on the other, has led scholars to widely varied conclusions about the fundamental nature of the riot.

Riot scholars often distinguish between “communal riots,” in which participants assault each other, and “commodity riots,” in which participants direct their violence against property and looted stores. In the dominant narrative, pre-WWII riots were communal riots involving whites and blacks, while those of the 1960s were commodity riots mostly by blacks. World War II riots, including Detroit, fall in the middle and contain elements of both types of riot. Thus these wartime riots were a “bridge” between earlier communal riots and subsequent commodity ones, according to some.¹²³

The Detroit Police Department's actions during and immediately afterward treated the violence as a black-led commodity riot, while national media coverage exposed the heavily skewed violence between blacks and whites in which hundreds and sometimes thousands of whites chased one or two blacks. This work focuses on the large groups of white aggressors and in particular on the sites of their

aggression. Although nine whites died in the riot and hundreds were injured, white violence on Monday June 21 is in some ways better described as a pogrom against blacks than as a communal riot in which large groups of whites and blacks attacked each other.\textsuperscript{124} Jan Voogd’s depiction of the 1919 riots across the U.S. as “caste rupture riots,” is helpful in characterizing whites’ violence in the 1943 Detroit case. Voogd argues that caste rupture riots stem from white men’s perceptions that “boundary-crossing behavior of the black citizens of the community” threatens their “domination of the local culture.”\textsuperscript{125} During World War II, Detroit’s streetcars and buses constantly crossed racial boundaries, both in traversing the city and in creating spaces in which black operators had city-sanctioned authority.

In holding blacks responsible for the riot, Detroit Police Chief John H. Witherspoon specifically referenced the high frequency of racial incidents on public transportation prior to June 1943. Witherspoon claimed that blacks had instigated virtually all of the clashes on transit vehicles in the last year.\textsuperscript{126} By implication, blacks had a propensity to start racial violence, and thus it was logical that black trouble-makers had started the riot and were primarily responsible for the violence that occurred from June 20-21.

\textsuperscript{124} Marilyn Johnson has described the riot in Beaumont, Texas that occurred a week before the Detroit outbreak as “essentially a white pogrom against blacks.” Marilynn S. Johnson, “Gender, Race, and Rumours: Re-examining the 1943 Race Riots” Gender & History, 10 (2): 252. See also, Albert Deutsch, “Decisive Hour,” New York Daily PM, 6/23/1943, p9.


Public transportation vehicles and waiting areas were in fact a major site of rioting throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In Chicago’s 1919 riot, for example, five people were killed on surface or elevated lines on the first day of violence. As Allen Grimshaw contended in his 1960 essay, with the sole exception of public transit sites, most violence during a riot does not occur in “contested spaces” (spaces formerly controlled by whites but which blacks also claim). Buses and streetcars, however, present “an opportunity to catch isolated individuals and attack them without fear of immediate reprisal.” On many lines, passengers rode through neighborhoods racially distinct from their own, making them stand out as potential victims during a riot.

Transfer points were particular hotspots for racial violence, according to Grimshaw’s analysis of several U.S. race riots. Where they disembarked and waited to board on another line, either on the sidewalk for a bus or in a designated streetcar “safety” zone in the middle of the street, intending passengers were especially easy to identify and vulnerable to attack. Perhaps the most notorious episode of violence during the 1943 Detroit riot took place at a streetcar stop when a car of white teenage boys shot and killed Moses Kiska, 58, who was waiting for a second trolley on his way home from work. At his trial, Aldo Trani said that he

131 Shogan and Craig, The Detroit Race Riot, 63.
and three friends just decided to “kill us a nigger”; driving around the area, Kiska had been the first black person they encountered.\textsuperscript{132}

Streetcars provided a ready source of potential victims, which made these vehicles especially appealing targets.\textsuperscript{133} According to Capeci and Wilkerson, during the Detroit riot, “[whites’] assaults on public and private vehicles reversed months of humiliation and symbolized the reestablishment of white dominance and proper etiquette.” In particular, “whites along Woodward Avenue struck blacks for incidents on crowded DSR lines where social distance had eroded steadily-tramatically for some.”\textsuperscript{134} When white rioters in downtown Detroit decided to kill, chase, and beat blacks in the city, they went to the sites where blacks and whites came into contact everyday. In gravitating to streetcar lines along major streets, these white men chose places that they knew to be reliable sites of contact with black bodies.

\textit{White Rioters Target Streetcars as a Source of Black Bodies}

In the summer of 1943, some white Detroit residents felt that their city was under siege. Specifically, as Chapter Two related, many whites interpreted blacks’ actions on public vehicles as direct challenges to white authority, through black men’s and women’s employment as operators, black passengers’ unwillingness to silently accept white attempts at domination, or simply by their physical presence that undermined the idea of white space. Nearly two years into the United States’ active involvement in the war, many whites in Detroit had begun to view streetcars

\textsuperscript{132} Capeci and Wilkerson, \textit{Layered Violence}, 82.
\textsuperscript{133} Grimshaw, “Urban Racial Violence in the United States,” 117.
\textsuperscript{134} Capeci and Wilkerson, \textit{Layered Violence}, 156.
as spaces that blacks inhabited and spaces over which whites did not have clear control. More than a year of confrontations between blacks and whites in crowded streetcars and buses during the war had generally elevated racial tensions in the city, undermined spatial separation of blacks and whites, and threatened whites’ dominance.

The riot began on the evening of Sunday June 20 on Belle Isle and on the bridge connecting the island to the city of Detroit. A series of confrontations between black and white youth precipitated more widespread violence. Most accounts suggest that black youth, seeking revenge for the way a group of white boys had treated them at another park earlier in the week, instigated these initial minor incidents. According to the Detroit Times, which based its story on the governor’s committee, “white youths at Eastwood Park a week prior to the rioting had prevented Negro youths from alighting from a DSR car. These Negro youths started the Belle Isle fracas.” The Detroit Free Press elaborated, “The riot started, investigators said, when a group of Negroes who had been forced to remain on street cars when they went to Eastwood Park a few days before the riot decided to go to Belle Isle. They saw that the Negroes on the Island greatly outnumbered the whites. They decided to get even for their humiliation at Eastwood Park.”

After the initial incident, black and white men in their late teens and early twenties beat

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each other on the island and along the bridge leading to the city after 10:30pm on Sunday night, at times vying for space on buses leaving the island.\textsuperscript{136}

By one historian’s account, the riot actually started "on the contested space of public transportation" when a black youth violated white social norms by dancing with a young white woman on a crowded bus.\textsuperscript{137} According to historian Eileen Boris, the event that precipitated widespread violence took place aboard a bus leaving Belle Isle, the popular recreation spot in the Detroit River connected to the city by a bridge. Late on Sunday, a bus full of Detroiter left the island to head home after picnicking in the park, swimming, and playing outdoors. As other small fights between black and white male youth unfolded across Belle Isle, the bus incident began when white sailors took exception to seeing a black boy dance with a white girl in the aisle. To stop this racial transgression that symbolically threatened the girl's purity in their eyes, a group of white sailors interfered and violently forced the black youth off the bus.\textsuperscript{138} In this version, assertions of white masculinity by protecting white females from the taint of black contact were integral to the beginning of the riot. Whether black-white contact on Detroit’s transit system or in a city park in reaction to an earlier incident on public transit was the immediate trigger for the riot, once violence became widespread whites quickly honed in on streetcars as spaces in which they could find blacks to attack.

\textsuperscript{136} "Riot Narrative, June 20, June 21," Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, Box 1, File 2, University of Chicago Archives.; Lee and Humphrey, \textit{Race Riot}, 26-27.

\textsuperscript{137} Eileen Boris, “"You Wouldn’t Want One of ’Em Dancing With Your Wife’: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II” \textit{American Quarterly} 50:1 (1998): 77-108.

\textsuperscript{138} Boris, “"You Wouldn’t Want One of ’Em Dancing With Your Wife,”” 89.
Conflict spread to other parts of the city by the early hours of Monday morning, even as disturbances on the island and the bridge to Detroit were quelled.\textsuperscript{139} Separate rumors of horrific acts of violence spread among white and black neighborhoods across town, spurring some to avenge these wrongs. After midnight, black patrons of a nightclub in Paradise Valley, the city’s largest black neighborhood, threw stones at whites passing through their neighborhood in cars and aboard streetcars after hearing a false rumor that whites had drowned a black woman and her baby.\textsuperscript{140} By dawn, large groups of whites gathered along Detroit’s main artery, Woodward Avenue, in response to rumors and reports of violence against whites.

Word about the riot had spread quickly but not consistently, and the extent of disorder was unclear when Detroiters woke up on Monday morning and headed to their jobs. In fact, the mayor and his staff had resisted calling for state troops to help maintain order partially because in the couple of hours before rush hour commuting began, several key decision makers believed that the violence had been contained and largely suppressed.\textsuperscript{141} Many workers, particularly African American workers, stayed home from their jobs in order to avoid danger, while others

\textsuperscript{139} Lee and Humphrey, \textit{Race Riot}, 27.
\textsuperscript{141} Capeci and Wilkerson, 9; Statement by Mayor Edward J. Jeffries, Jr., 6/29/1943, \textit{Journal of the Common Council, City of Detroit}, p1826.
ventured to work as normal, or took alternate routes that seemed to avoid the major conflict areas.\textsuperscript{142}

Streetcar operators were often primary targets. As discussed in Chapter Two, streetcar and bus operators represented authority figures to the public, and in daily interaction before the riot many white passengers sought to undermine black motormen and conductors’ control over their vehicles and passengers. Because of labor shortages, discrimination in other industries, and a growing black population in the city, during World War II the Detroit Street Railways had by far the highest percentage of black employees of any transit company. Its employees also had the highest salaries of any in the industry on the eve of U.S. involvement in the war, and continued to have relatively high-paying jobs throughout the war.\textsuperscript{143}

Accounts suggest that during the riot white aggressors were especially pleased to encounter black streetcar operators. In one case, according to Lee and Humphrey, a crowd started to surround a streetcar run by a black operator. The motorman heard a large group approaching and a drunk white man yell, “Here’s some fresh meat! Fresh meat, boys! The conductor’s a nigger! C’mon. Fresh meat!” The operator avoided harm for himself and likely for the other black passengers by accelerating the streetcar before the crowd was able to stop it.\textsuperscript{144}

As traffic and streetcar service continued along Woodward Avenue, whites formed groups and stormed streetcars, attempting to thwart an operator’s ability to

\textsuperscript{144} Lee and Humphrey, \textit{Race Riot}, 2-3.
pull away from a stop. Streetcar operators were sometimes able to accelerate and avoid danger if they saw the crowd far enough in advance. At other times, large groups of whites forced streetcars to a standstill. Once they had stopped a streetcar, invariably members of the crowd boarded the streetcar and searched for blacks. Upon finding black passengers, whites dragged blacks or pulled them onto the street to be attacked by the crowd, as in the case of Sam Mitchell with which this essay began. Although more black men were injured than black women, white crowds also assaulted black women.  

After a while, instead of waiting for a streetcar to approach or slow down, some of the crowd realized that it was possible to disable the car by pulling on or cutting its wires. Once they began this practice, it was much easier to incapacitate the streetcars that came by and search them for blacks to victimize. As Capeci and Wilkerson relate, gangs of whites “divided up tasks- for example some among them pulled the trolley’s pole from electric contact while others cut the cord.”

According to authors Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, “streetcar motormen,” leery of what might happen if they stopped, “began passing their regular stops in the area. But the gangs then forced the cars to stop by grabbing the trolley ropes which dangled from the backs of the cars and yanking the trolley poles off the overhead wires.”

The first streetcar lines to be shut down were ones that served black neighborhoods, such as the Oakland Avenue line which stopped operating at

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145 See, for example, “Deposition of Paul Dennie,” NAACP Detroit Branch Papers, Box 1, File 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.  
146 Capeci and Wilkerson, Layered Violence, 148.  
147 Shogan and Craig, The Detroit Race Riot, 57.
1:30AM on Monday morning “to forestall riotous actions.”148 Closing or rerouting streetcar lines that went through black neighborhoods had the effect of forcing riders of these lines either to walk to their destinations from the downtown points at which the cars terminated, or onto other streetcar lines outside of black neighborhoods, along Woodward Avenue for example, where whites stopped black passengers and assaulted them. Thus while the DSR leaders’ decision to stop some streetcar service was based on the early outbreak of violence in Paradise Valley in which blacks stoned whites on streetcars, one effect of their decision was to decrease opportunities for blacks to travel through black neighborhoods and thus avoid spaces policed by white crowds. By shutting down a select few of the streetcar lines that serviced black neighborhoods, the DSR actually made it more difficult for its black patrons to reach their destinations safely.149 Given how consistent and destructive groups of whites proved to be in derailing streetcars to attack blacks on board, it seems surprising that the DSR did not suspend service along routes such as Woodward Avenue early on Monday morning. By late Monday evening, the DSR had shut down or rerouted sixteen of the city’s street railway lines during the riot.150 In the meantime, however, streetcars continued to be a space that white crowds gravitated toward in their desire to inflict violence on blacks.

149 Deposition by Joe Sallier, NAACP Detroit Branch Papers, Box 1, File 4, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University. Police attacked Sallier after the Kercheval streetcar he rode home from work ceased service at City Hall.
Once massive groups of whites had gathered and begun to attack blacks on streetcars and in cars, some moved eastward toward Paradise Valley, where most of the city’s black population lived. Paradise Valley was the site of the majority of the property looting that occurred during the riot, and where police killed most of the African Americans who died in the riot.151 Because such a large number of blacks lived in Paradise Valley by World War II, large groups of whites did not infiltrate black neighborhoods.152 Although a few white rioters crossed into Paradise Valley, whites did not concentrate on attacking black neighborhoods, marking a distinction between the anti-black violence in Detroit and riots in the early 20th century, particularly in East St. Louis, Springfield, and Tulsa, in which white crowds razed black neighborhoods.153 According to several who observed the large crowds, a few seeming “ring leaders” orchestrated the group’s attacks. These leaders watched for approaching automobiles and streetcars and directed members of the crowd to attack particular targets. Wrote one horrified observer who saw the group grow over the course of an hour,

I went downtown Monday about 11 o’clock on the Woodward Car. Windows were broken. I returned about an hour later on the Woodward car. The mob had increased by hundreds. The car I was on as well as busses were threatened but by some miracle the car got through. I saw three men who were evidently the ring leaders leading the mob. Had the police dispersed the crowd and arrested the ring leaders much bloodshed could have been

152 Some scholars also credit police efforts to halt the crowds’ movement into black residential areas as contributing to the lack of white aggression in black neighborhoods. See Lee and Humphrey, Race Riot.
avoided.\textsuperscript{154}

In this observer’s estimation, if police had thwarted the few leaders of the crowd from attacking vehicles, the rest of the crowd could have been controlled.

Violence continued throughout Monday between blacks and whites in downtown and along major roads. Violence against businesses also continued, with blacks in Paradise Valley vandalizing primarily white-owned stores in the area. White police officers patrolled black rioters and killed black looters, in homicides that the Governor’s Committee later declared were justified because the victims were engaged in felonies and therefore had to be stopped. Meanwhile, white crowds attacked, chased, and brutally beat blacks in other parts of the city and police officers merely verbally encouraged them to disperse, if they took any action to curb anti-black violence at all.\textsuperscript{155}

Groups of whites sustained their attacks of blacks on streetcars throughout the day and night on Monday. In the space of five minutes on Monday afternoon, for example, three black patients were admitted to local hospitals because of injuries they incurred as passengers when white crowds attacked the streetcars they were riding. Luther Jenkins had been a passenger on the Baker streetcar when a group of whites stopped the car and dragged him out. He was admitted to Receiving Hospital at 3:55pm with “temporarily serious” cuts on his head. That same minute, Neil Graham was also admitted to the same hospital for undisclosed injuries incurred “by white mob” when Graham was on a Woodward Avenue streetcar, according to the

\textsuperscript{154} J. C. Liubbs to Mayor Jeffries, 6/26/43, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

\textsuperscript{155} Marshall, “The Gestapo in Detroit,” 141.
note in his hospital file. Five minutes after Jenkins and Graham checked into Receiving Hospital, Jesse Wordlew was admitted to a different hospital with “Laceration of scalp” and “possible skull fracture,” injuries he had received when the group of whites that had harmed Jenkins also pulled Wordlew from the Baker streetcar and assaulted him.

Over the course of the rioting, some black passengers who saw a white crowd in front of them were able to escape before the streetcar reached the crowd, or were hidden by white passengers so that when perpetrators walked up and down the streetcar looking for blacks, there were none in sight. In at least a few instances passengers helped black men and women hide underneath their seats and avoid being taken off by white crowds.\(^{156}\) In such cases the streetcars continued along their routes and after passing through the areas of gravest danger, the hidden black passengers exited. Passenger Walter Holland recalled that when white aggressors first stopped and boarded his streetcar, they attacked two other black passengers who fought back. Other whites boarded and began to attack Holland, who stated that, “there were two Chinese fellows on the street car and they tried to protect me.” Although his deposition does not indicate how his aggressors treated the two men who tried to protect him, members of the group of whites severely beat Holland once others among them had disabled the trolley.\(^{157}\)

Occasionally white conductors attempted to help black passengers avoid harm, either by skipping stops or telling their passengers that it was not safe to ride


\(^{157}\) Deposition of Walter Holland, NAACP Detroit Branch Papers, Box 1, File Walter Holland, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
the streetcar in certain areas. Paul Shirley, a 30-year-old African American riding a streetcar on Woodward Avenue late that Sunday night without realizing that there was a riot going on, remembered benefiting from a streetcar operator’s announcement. The conductor on his streetcar informed passengers that “a race riot had erupted” and suggested that taking the streetcar was particularly dangerous. To avoid the possibility of trouble, Shirley abruptly changed his plans and got off the streetcar before his destination, stopping at a nearby bar instead, and was lucky to be escorted safely by a white police officer when he began walking home.158

Additionally, the interiors of streetcars, in which occupants came into exceptionally close contact, invoked for whites the specter of black male sexuality as a threat to white womanhood. One white participant in the riot claimed “that many white rioters were relatives and friends of women who had been insulted on streetcars.”159 Whether or not this rioter’s statement was itself true, it is indicative of his perception that many white males who engaged in violence during the riot felt that blacks had affronted white women they knew. Thus imagined defense of white female virtue became an added motivator for white men to assault black men on streetcars.

Despite the aid that some fellow passengers and onlookers provided to blacks who were the targets of white violence, Detroit’s African Americans could not trust that whites offering assistance and protection truly wanted to help. According to White and Marshall, nine police officers stopped a streetcar on Monday afternoon and announced that all black passengers should come with the police to avoid

danger because there was a white mob ahead. As the authors relate, “Four of the eight Negroes accepted the offer. The other four chose to remain on the car. They crouched on the floor of the car and were concealed by the skirts of sympathetic white women. These four got to their destinations safely. But the four who had entrusted themselves to the police were either taken from the police by the mob and beaten unmercifully, or were turned over to the mob by the police.” Thus, as Sam Mitchell had learned that same afternoon, white police officers were often complicit in rioters’ attacks of black streetcar passengers.

Federal troops finally ended all major rioting around 11pm on Monday, although violence continued much subdued throughout Tuesday. Workers began to return to their jobs in factories and tried to pick up their routines and recover from the rampage. But there was still tension in the air and for the few days after the riot, according to Harvard Sitkoff, “only the continued presence of soldiers patrolling the streets and armed military vehicles escorting busses and trolleys on their usual runs kept the continuing racial hysteria from erupting again.”

*Avowing the Segregation Solution*

After the riot, a stream of letters to Mayor Jeffries’ office conveyed white Detroiters’ sense that their city was under siege and whites’ safety and comfort were in jeopardy, if not already lost. Unlike the majority of those arrested for

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161 Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 43.
rioting, many letter-writers were women. These letters affirmed what white rioters’ violence had demonstrated: many white Detroiter saw public spaces in the city as occupied and dominated by blacks. While whites’ violence against blacks on streetcars in particular had shown their close association between these vehicles and black bodies, the sentiments many whites expressed in the wake of the violence suggested a method to sever this association by regulating blacks’ movement. In an interesting departure from later postwar patterns of whites rejecting government involvement to desegregate institutions in Detroit and across the country, these white Detroiter actively desired intervention in their community to create a racially segregated metropolis.

Whites who wrote to Mayor Jeffries demanded municipal and federal government involvement to reclaim what they saw as black spaces. On June 28, a resident wrote to the mayor asking him to “have some Law Enforcement in this town” and protect “citizens” and their children from “hoodlums” who were causing trouble on Belle Isle, aboard public transit vehicles, and in schools. "Citizens are being kicked off public picnic tables on Belle Isle and shoved around on street cars and busses. ... We don’t want the Police Officers taking insults or chased into the Belle Isle station any more by hoodlums." An anonymous writer echoed these comments, suggesting that “Negroes have ruined ou[r] beautiful island [and] it isn’t
safe for white people to go there anymore." Wrote another, conveying fear of black aggression against “law abiding white[s]” as well as an enthusiasm for vigilante justice, “If the kind, law abiding white people of the city cannot live their lives without the constant fear of a militant, abusive, destructive race consciousness on the part of the Negro Hoodlums, and if the police cannot give them protection, then there is only one course to follow and that is to take their own protection in their own hands.”

A recurring idea that white Detroitzers proposed after the riot was to segregate public facilities in the city and ensure that contact between blacks and whites was reduced if not eliminated altogether. Letter-writers suggested separate schools, separate recreation facilities, and enforcement of separate neighborhoods. As an observer noted on June 30 after speaking with blacks and whites about the riot, “A man said the present trouble has been brewing for years. Negroes are getting too ‘cocky,’ in the attitude toward the white people and that something should be done as they push people around in street cars, theatres, and other public places. This man said they should have Jim Crow laws in Michigan, like in the south; where the white people keep the negro under control.” Similarly, letters to the Mayor frequently invoked negative incidents they had experienced with blacks on public transit in order to press for segregated facilities, although

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166 Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
167 Philip B. Bruno, 6/26/43 to Mayor Jeffries, File Riot Correspondence (1), Box 8, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
168 See, for example, letters in Riot Correspondence (1), Box 8, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
169 Memo from Operative P. Wilson, NAACP Detroit Branch Box 1, Folder: Civil Rights Complaints (1). Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
none of the letters explicitly suggested separate or divided public transit vehicles. In summarizing a survey of Detroiters’ attitudes that it had conducted two days after the riot, the Office of War Information’s Bureau of Special Services concluded, “For the whites, segregation is the only answer.”

U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle took the idea of segregation a step farther, and suggested that no more blacks be allowed to move to Detroit. On July 15, Biddle wrote to President Roosevelt about the causes of the Detroit riot and offered his ideas for a solution. “The causes of the riot are apparent,” he wrote. “During the past three years the population of Detroit has increased by 485,000 people, many of whom are colored. There are no subways or elevated trains in Detroit so that the transportation situation is particularly difficult causing great overcrowding in the buses.” Biddle pointed to overcrowding in housing and recreation as additional stress points. One of his notorious suggestions was "that careful consideration be given to limiting, and in some instances putting an end to Negro migrations into communities which cannot absorb them, either on account of their physical limitations or cultural background... It would seem pretty clear that no more Negroes should move to Detroit."

At least one writer invoked Biddle’s point that it would be preferable to cut off or severely curtail black migration to Detroit. To Hazel Brewster, the riot had exposed the need for Detroit to embrace southern-style race relations, with clearly

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171 Quoted in Lee and Humphrey, Race Riot, 60.
segregated institutions. Brewster had heard of Biddle’s suggestion and wrote to Mayor Jeffries explaining why it was necessary to take action to stop blacks from coming to Detroit: “Yesterday I was on the street car when there was a vacant seat a white woman was about to sit down when a huge negro woman dashed for the seat and for a few minutes there was a battle. There were about 25 blacks on the car.” Brewster found this situation particularly upsetting because “the white woman had to give up the seat or there likely would have been serious trouble.” In elaborating her position, the author hastened to explain, “I have every respect for that race when it is in its place, but when we who are paying huge taxes and sending our fine educated boys to their death have to cater to that class it is just going too far. Just why are we compelled to put up with this? The situation is never going to get any better they will dominate this country if given the chance. Why should our boys fight to save this country for the like of them?”

Echoing the language of other letter-writers who blamed blacks for the riot and urged the Mayor not to call for a Grand Jury Investigation, this writer invoked paying taxes and fighting in the war to make claims for what the government should do. With her concerns framed in this way, Brewster’s letter suggested that she did not consider blacks to be taxpayers or deserving soldiers. Along with others who wrote of the problems of “citizens” as opposed to “hoodlums,” several white Detroiters implicitly suggested that black Detroiters were not real Americans and did not have the same rights as (white) Americans.

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173 Hazel Brewster to Mayor, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (3), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
Hand in hand with the desire to segregate Detroit was some whites’ concern, at times explicit, that blacks were stepping beyond “their place” in society and demanding too much. Writing immediately after the riot, some residents’ letters suggested that the violence had been a grave manifestation of blacks’ attempts to transcend their social position, rather than whites’ attempts to prevent black social and physical mobility. Underlying their reasons for writing was the concern that blacks in Detroit were becoming “cocky” or “uppity.” A letter from Detroit resident Mrs. Hyde is quoted at length in order to convey her concern that blacks on public transit openly scorned whites and invaded their space:

We don’t like to find fault with our city and the way it is run. But want to tell you that one week ago today my daughter and little granddaughter 2 years old went downtown on a Michigan car. The car was crowded but three colored girls were sitting on the long seat as you enter and there was space for one more. My daughter asked them to please move along a little and they said no and laughed. Everyone thought like we did that they are doing just about as they please they were spread all over the seat with their long legs. Finally I got a seat with the baby and they still laughed, thought they had done a wonderful deed. I will be 60 and not very well, had not been downtown for 6 years. And if this happens again well something will have to be done if the blacks run things as you know they are trying to.174

To this author, the young black women that she encountered openly laughed at her efforts to gain access to a seat and gloated at the trouble they caused, thinking that “they had done a wonderful deed.” In her view, their presence became exceptionally large, not merely occupying seats that she would prefer whites hold, but “spread all over the seat with their long legs.” As in the previous letter in which Brewster described “a huge negro woman” who occupied what she viewed as white space, some whites’ perception of the amount of space that blacks occupied became

174 Mrs. B. Hyde to Mayor Jeffries, 7/6/1943, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (3), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
amplified and contributed to their sense that black Detroiter were attempting to take over control from whites and “run things.”  

An anonymous writer claimed that, “It is true they [blacks] are very cocky as the news said the other night.” He proceeded to give evidence of black’s cockiness from two of his recent experiences; in the first instance a group of four blacks had not moved off the sidewalk to his satisfaction, and in the second a black man had occupied two bus seats by placing an item on the seat next to him. The writer claimed that when he confronted the other rider about moving his packages to create an empty seat, the man refused.

Wrote another white worried about blacks’ threat to white dominance, “the colored people is placing themselves better than the white,” indicated by blacks’ presence in recreation areas and comportment on amusement rides such as in Eastwood Park. Clearly offended by this seeming assertion of dominance, the author found that it was only possible to avoid blacks in more remote areas like Walled Lake, “but it takes gas to go,” making it difficult for her and for others to get there as long as gasoline rationing was in effect.

Despite the fact that white violence against black streetcar passengers played a major role in the riot, afterwards Detroit officials made virtually no effort to

175 Hazel Brewster to Mayor Jeffries, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (3), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library; See Mark Smith, How Race is Made (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006) for a discussion of how whites routinely exaggerate the physical size of blacks, mirroring their concern about blacks’ spatial presence.

176 Anonymous letter to Mayor, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 9, File Riot Correspondence Anonymous, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

177 Mrs. M. Halic to Mayor Jeffries, Mayor’s Papers 1943, Box 8, File Riot Correspondence (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
ameliorate the conditions that had frequently led to conflicts between blacks and whites on public conveyances before June 1943. Many ascribed the violence to competition for limited housing and recreation, and consequently recommended more public housing and parks in the city. Much of the commentary specifically suggested that the riot occurred because black Detroiters were frustrated with the clearly insufficient and segregated housing for the city’s growing black population. In focusing attention on why blacks had rioted, few bothered to consider the integral role that white rioters had played in the violence. This tendency to study why black participants had rioted, and to overlook white participants’ role, was greatly exacerbated by the publication of the Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Riot Report two months later. The Committee’s report put exclusive blame on black Detroiters, black leaders, and the black press for causing the riot and for the violence that ensued, while lauding the white police for their excellent work.178 Thus the motivations for white rioters went largely unexplored, and what cursory explanations were offered did not explain why white crowds during the riot acted as they did, particularly conducting violence against black streetcar passengers and black drivers.

Invoking the problems with DSR service did prove to be a successful, if limited, way to improve service in at least one instance. Gloster Current, Executive Secretary of the NAACP, alluded to the riot and the danger that overcrowded streetcars posed for greater racial violence in requesting that the DSR improve service on one of its lines. On behalf of a member fed up with long delays,

178 Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riot 1943, University of Chicago Archives.
overcrowded vehicles and streetcars passing up passengers, Current wrote to the DSR Superintendent of Transportation, C.J. Wendt, “in view of the recent occurrences, and the temper of the War workers, who are affected by such poor transportation,” that it would be advisable to put additional streetcars on the Oakland line. Notes included with this letter suggest that the DSR did change its schedule so that Oakland streetcars ran more frequently, although it is not known how significant an improvement this was.

After the war, once automobile manufacturers reconverted from weapon and plane production to making civilian automobiles, it was again possible for Detroiters to purchase cars. Car ownership rose dramatically and public transit ridership began a steady decline. As postwar scholars have demonstrated, subsidization of highways and suburban housing undoubtedly played a large role in these developments.

But as whites’ targeted violence in the summer of 1943 illustrates, many white Detroiters had additional reasons to abandon the city’s transit system and the interracial contact it engendered as soon as possible. It was not merely the allure of the automobile that drew public transit riders away from streetcars and buses in the postwar era; many whites also wanted to avoid the diverse public on board and the threat black passengers posed to white spatial control.

Public Transit in the Wake of the Riot

179 Gloster B. Current to C.J. Wendt 9/9/1943, NAACP Detroit Branch Collection, Box 1, File Harrison, W.R. Civic, DSR Transportation, #1392, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
180 Phone Message for Gloster Current, 9/28/1943, NAACP Detroit Branch Collection, Box 1, File Harrison, W.R. Civic, DSR Transportation, #1392, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
From the June 1943 race riot until long after World War II had ended, city officials worried that Detroit would erupt with racial violence again. Problems of discrimination and inadequate services persisted in the aftermath of the riot and as more blacks and whites migrated to Detroit for war jobs. In particular the chronic shortage of housing continued and there were too few recreation areas in the city. In the following months, the Police Department, Detroit Street Railways Commission, and Mayor Edward Jeffries kept close watch on incidents of racial violence on board city vehicles. Thus they noted with alarm that racial violence on public transit vehicles actually escalated after the riot. White passengers in particular increasingly initiated conflict with blacks on board buses and streetcars.182

Detroit’s transit vehicles continued to be overcrowded for the duration of the war. For the first few days after the riot, DSR patrons took care to shrug off ambiguous incidents between blacks and whites that might earlier have turned into verbal or physical disputes.183 But this calm soon passed. Although no major violence again erupted in Detroit during World War II, public transit continued to be the most common site of daily conflicts between blacks and whites, and incidents sparked by whites on buses and streetcars became more common after the riot.184 For example, just over a week after the riot, when federal troops were still in the area, black motorman Edward Richardson had to contend with white soldiers who tried to make his job more difficult. An “Army car pulled deliberately in front of my

182 See incident reports in Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Part I, Box 3, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
184 Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Part I, Box 2, File DSR-Police Reports 1943, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
street car,” Richardson deposed, and he was forced to stop suddenly to avoid an accident. After insulting Richardson, “one soldier yelled, “That’s a good way to make that black bastard stop,”” suggesting that the soldiers had taken offense to seeing a black motorman.185

In direct response to the riot, Mayor Jeffries created the City of Detroit Interracial Committee to oversee racial tensions and make recommendations for how to prevent future problems. Informally known as the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, it was created primarily as a publicity stunt and had little power to affect change in the city. Jeffries had handpicked many of the members to ensure his control over it. As the Michigan Chronicle noted critically at the end of the war, “Mayor Jeffries is boss in name and in fact of the Committee, and when he says jump, the Committee jumps to a man.”186

But the Interracial Committee did feel that it had an obligation to push Jeffries on the issue of the DSR’s manpower shortage. The fundamental problem of too few workers to operate the city’s buses and streetcars became more acute as the war progressed. In the wake of the riot, numerous observers suggested that improving public transit in the city should be a priority in order to avoid further racial violence. In May 1944 Interracial Committee Director Harold Thompson pressed Jeffries, challenging the DSR’s rhetoric that it simply could do nothing because of the shortage of employees. Thompson wrote to the Mayor, "It is obvious that the Department of Street Railways is greatly in need of additional help to man

185 Deposition of Edward Richardson, NAACP Detroit Branch Collection, Box 1, File Edward Richardson, 2951 Burrell, Race Riot, 6/30/1943, #1361, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.
vehicles. We appreciate that the manpower problem throughout this area is extremely difficult, but it seems to us that this is one place where extraordinary efforts at alleviation might be made.” Thompson thought that it was imperative to avoid long lines of blacks and whites waiting to board city vehicles, especially at the time of shift changes at the major factories.187 Only by hiring more drivers to run buses with greater frequency could such volatile situations be avoided.

Pressure to resolve the employee shortage came not only from outside observers. DSR workers themselves demanded action. Yet even in the face of a chronic shortage of labor that resulted in crowded vehicles, infrequent service, a tense atmosphere on board, and a stream of resignations from overburdened employees, the Commission proved impervious. In the summer of 1942, 168 DSR employees had participated in a “wildcat” strike; the Commission fired them. As the DSR’s problem in attracting and retaining operators worsened over the course of the war, other unions urged the Commission to reinstate the dismissed operators.188 The canceled runs and unreliable service that stemmed from too few operators to run all vehicles hurt worker productivity in the war industries.

Mayor Jeffries and the DSR Commissioners he appointed—several of whom were his friends who had little or no experience with public transit189—appeared

187 Harold Thompson to Mayor Jeffries, 5/23/1944, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 6, File Interracial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
188 Emil Mazey, President of UAW-CIO Local 212, to Mayor Jeffries, 2/23/1944 and C. Pat Quinn, President of the Greater Detroit and Wayne County Industrial Union Council, to Mayor Jeffries, 3/13/1944, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 4, File Dept of Street Railways (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
unwilling and unable to pursue long-term strategies to improve the DSR’s service. With run-down vehicles and too few workers to operate them, city officials chose to make excuses for the DSR, rather than search for solutions to their problems, such as making conditions of employment more attractive to potential operators, seeking federal assistance in securing employees and exempting employees from the draft, or streamlining the training process during which many operators-in-training dropped out. Most seemed content, like Commissioner Frank Rising, to let the problem of poor service resolve itself when riders fed up with wartime conditions switched to driving cars after the end of the war. “We anticipated all along that peace would bring a substantial drop in traffic,” Rising declared a few days after the war ended. “The same number of vehicles will be operated and there will be less crowding.”190

The labor shortage plagued the DSR up to and beyond the end of World War II. Public transit, of course, was not the only industry during the war that was hit by severe manpower problems. But while national campaigns urged Americans to work on farms to raise crops essential to the war effort, or work in industry to produce war materiel, there were no comparable efforts to turn out operators to maintain mass transportation.191 Workers and labor leaders connected the DSR’s refusal to improve working conditions for streetcar and bus operators with the ongoing employee shortage, but were unsuccessful in convincing the Board of Street

190 “DSR Riders are Assured More Seats,” Detroit Free Press, 8/18/1945, p5.
191 See, for example, the poster “Work on a farm this summer,” in the New Hampshire Public Library’s online collection, http://www.nh.gov/nhsl/ww2/ww28prt.html (accessed March 15, 2011).
Railways Commission to offer more favorable conditions for employment. The DSR thus missed an opportunity both to improve service during the war and to convince the American public that a functional transportation system, other than mass use of private automobiles, was fundamentally important to the war effort.

*Improving Public Opinion of the DSR*

Burdened with the problems of increasing racial violence on city vehicles amid heightened anxiety about another race riot, a spike in accidents, and high public dissatisfaction with the quality of service, the DSR’s leaders sought to change public opinion of the system. Although it was clear that the transit system needed significant improvements, DSR directors did very little even to maintain service over the course of the war. Having dismissed the idea of trying to actually improve service as impractical under wartime constraints, the commissioners looked for ways to change public perception of the system. The transit system employed an investigative unit to address individual complaints, and took the approach of trying to make the customer feel satisfied that the DSR had listened to his or her concern.

The most novel campaign to sway popular perception came from Mayor Jeffries himself, in the closing weeks of the war. Jeffries had been severely criticized for his inability to prevent the devastating race riot in June 1943 and had seen the spike of violent encounters between blacks and whites on public vehicles continue over the course of the war. At the end of June 1945, recognizing that there continued

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192 Summary Brief Submitted for the Union in the Matter of DSR and Amalgamated Association of Street, Electric Railways and Motor Coach Employees of America, Division 26, 8/7/1944, Mayor’s Papers 1944, Box 4, File Department of Street Railways (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
to be conflicts between blacks and whites on city vehicles, Jeffries approached the committee with a plan to calm passengers’ nerves and use interactions on buses and streetcars to improve race relations throughout Detroit.

Jeffries proposed that the DSR’s 35 “inspectors” who had been assigned to deal with service complaints ride the city’s vehicles and engage passengers in conversations about the state of race relations. According to the mayor’s plan, beginning in late summer 1945, these employees were charged with assuaging racial tensions. As part of a DSR “intelligence unit,” the inspectors were assigned to ride buses and streetcars and strike up conversation with nearby passengers. Whenever possible, they would counter any talk of racial unrest and attempt to calm the air. These undercover workers would seemingly off-the-cuff rehearse a series of talking points about black-white tension easing in the city. Central to the intelligence unit’s work was the concept that multiple people could overhear a conversation between two riders. Taking advantage of the theatrical nature of city vehicles, the plan sought to control dialogue and shape unwitting audience members’ perceptions of racial unrest. While streetcars and buses sat idle for lack of operators, other DSR employees rode jam-packed vehicles assuring Detroiters that racial tensions were abating.

The City of Detroit Interracial Committee liked the idea. As director George Schermer pitched it to the DSR, “The idea of ‘planting’ factual, sound conversational...

comments is an excellent one. It might prove to be one of the most effective technics in improving race relations and community morale.” Schermer argued that the DSR employees currently involved in monitoring the system’s service were uniquely well-positioned to carry out this campaign and influence public opinion. He stressed the need for “constant, repetitious use of the same statement many thousands of times before it would be effective,” as well as changing the talking points when “the old ones wore out.” When he advised the DSR on how to implement the campaign, Schermer noted, “It is important that any statements made be brief and simple and that they be said only as occasion permits it to fit into casual conversation.” He cautioned, however, that not all of the DSR’s current inspectors might be suitable for engaging in these conversations about black-white conflicts. If done improperly, Schermer warned, such interactions might “do much more harm than good,” thus it was necessary for DSR management to closely supervise these men. The Interracial Committee quickly drafted statements about racial conflict that it asked


the DSR to have its inspectors memorize and incorporate into their daily runs on city vehicles. The first, “Statement Regarding Race Relations in Detroit as of the End of June 1945,” was intended to convince listeners that racial conflicts were diminishing in the city and there was reason to expect things to be better in the future. Inspectors were encouraged to tell riders with whom they engaged in conversation that:

> Relations between the racial groups in Detroit are slowly improving. Incidents of a racial character, involving trouble between whites and Negroes, have been declining this spring and early summer. Such incidents are only half as frequent as a year ago. Both whites and Negroes are showing greater tolerance and self control than they have at any time in the last two years.

Such a statement must have made for odd conversation, in which unidentified investigators seemingly spoke with authority about trends in Detroit’s race relations without giving any explanation for their knowledge. In particular the June 1945 statement on race relations instructed inspectors to give others a sense that competition for housing was decreasing because there were fewer blacks and whites in the city. It was not just that race relations were improving, but that a reduction in the number of blacks and whites in the city reduced tension by alleviating competition. To assuage anxiety, inspectors were to tell those with whom they engaged in conversation, “Movement of both whites and Negroes into Detroit has slowed down to nearly a standstill. The total population is declining, thus relieving some of the pressure for housing.”

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The second specific message the Committee wanted to spread, “When People Talk About or Predict Riots the Following Type of Reply Should Be Made,” directly counteracted any suggestions that there might be another race riot in Detroit. Ever since the summer 1943 riot, the Mayor’s Interracial Committee had been concerned that rumors of impending violence between blacks and whites would be the catalyst for future unrest. Two years later—without significant reduction in competition between blacks and whites for housing, transportation, and employment—the possibility for another riot loomed large. The committee thus asked inspectors to take a didactic approach if the conversation turned to rumors of violence, advising that “People should be careful about predicting racial trouble and riots. Incidents and riots occur spontaneously- not by planned action. Talk of impending riot may, itself, help to incite a riot.199

A month before the end of World War II, DSR General Manager William S. Bullock informed George Schermer that his employees had begun to spread these messages. Bullock suggested that the inspectors involved were fearful of being exposed. In order to ensure that they remain “incognito,” these men were unlikely to be able to use the recommended talking points in their entirety. Bullock assured Schermer that the men were carrying out the campaign, but not repeating the points

verbatim. With the support of DSR management, the Interracial Committee, and Detroit Police Chief John Ballenger, the Mayor’s program was briefly put into place.

Failed Promises for Improved Public Transit

With the end of the war in the Pacific imminent, there was no denying that Detroiter had faced years of abysmal public transit. Vehicles continued to be aggravatingly crowded. Passengers at times still faced the prospect of waiting in line at a bus stop for half an hour or more, only to be passed when a full bus approached. Frequent fights continued to break out between blacks and whites on board, although they were slightly less common in the last year of the war.

Detroit’s publicly owned street railway system—in stark contrast to automobile manufacturers—made few promises, let alone preparations, for improved service in the postwar era. The assumption that the end of the war would bring necessary changes to improve rides on buses and streetcars was implicit in city officials’ pronouncements that they could do nothing to improve conditions for the duration, because of wartime constraints on manpower, equipment, and increased ridership diverted from autos.

DSR ridership dipped 10 percent in the days immediately following the war, as some former drivers flocked to their cars for all forms of transit when gas

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200 William S. Bullock to George Schermer, 7/12/1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Part I, Series I, Box 17, File 32 “Departments: Street Railway 1944-1949,” Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

201 See Incident Reports, Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Part I, Box 3, File: DPD Reports 1945, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University; George Schermer to Mayor, 8/23/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 3, File: Interracial Committee, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
rationing was lifted. But there continued to be a steady stream of passengers on buses and streetcars. This was in part because new cars were not available, and many cars had become inoperable over the course of the war for lack of tires or other parts. By one estimate, 140 cars per hour ceased functioning throughout the United States every day of the war. Public vehicles continued to be crowded beyond comfort levels, and at times passengers still had to wait over half an hour for a bus that would stop to pick them up. For DSR riders, it was especially frustrating in the weeks after the war to endure standing-room only vehicles and poor service when the DSR had blamed all of its problems on unavoidable wartime constraints. To make matters worse, some lines were rerouted or canceled altogether.

DSR officials acknowledged that service had been bad during the war, and assured irate patrons that dramatic improvements were imminent, while in the same breath acknowledging that there would actually be cuts to service. In response to a complaint from Mrs. Fanny F. Goffman that the Wilshire bus line she relied on was being cut, for example, a DSR employee wrote that there was a $30 million “modernization program” that would make Detroit’s public transit system much better in the future. The writer attempted to hide the fact that postwar changes had


203 “Study Shows Huge Loss of Civilian Cars,” Detroit Free Press, 7/31/1945, p12. Concern about car loss underpinned the Office of Defense Transportation’s efforts to convince drivers to carpool throughout the war.

204 See letters to Mayor Jeffries, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
resulted in serious inconvenience for some riders. “While this [$30 million] improvement may not involve reinauguration of the Wilshire line,” he wrote, “it nevertheless will be a definite improvement of a type now being carried out in other sections of the city.”

Mayor Jeffries also touted this modernization program in his response to criticism of the DSR and requests for service improvements. In a reply that seems unlikely to have pacified the recipient, Jeffries wrote, “Your suggestion that the Trumbull line be extended has a lot of merit. However, the Department of Street Railways, as you may have read in the newspapers, contemplates abandonment of the Trumbull, Hamilton, and Fourteenth Street car lines as a part of the modernization program announced recently.” Instead, when it was able to order new buses, the plan was to create new bus routes in the area.

Jeffries made vague promises to create “one of the most efficient and up-to-date public transportation systems in the world,” while excusing the DSR’s continued problems in the months after the war ended. Frustrated by the lack of improvement when wartime constraints were lifted, riders wrote to the mayor demanding an explanation. The Mayor developed a form letter that asked for a bit more patience with bad service and blamed overcrowding during the war on “a manpower shortage so acute that at times as many as 300 vehicles were tied up in

205 John T. Nevill to Fanny H. Goffman, 10/1/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

206 Mayor Jeffries to Theodore Deitrich, 9/18/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

207 “Asks $21,500,000 to Streamline DSR,” Detroit Free Press, 8/19/1945.
the yards for lack of operators.” In response to complaints about poor service, the Mayor wrote noncommittally, “I am assured by those in charge that the service rendered by the DSR will be improved within a reasonably short time.”

Deflecting complaints about public transit and suggesting that everything would be fixed in the future seemed a safe re-election strategy before the November 1945 Mayoral vote. But some Detroiters would not buy the Mayor’s excuses for bad service any longer. Blaming the DSR’s problems on a severe shortage of workers during the war was one thing, when it was well-known that workers were in short supply for jobs throughout the city. But claiming a lack of employees after the war was over was quite different. As fears of massive unemployment in the city loomed large at war’s end and companies announced layoffs daily, Detroit resident George Lawrence demanded of the Mayor, “Why all this ‘bologna’ about the public transportation service here in Detroit? Asking people to be patient- why the people have no patience left.” Lawrence challenged the claim that DSR’s inability to fix its wartime crowding was the result of a lack of operators. “As for the shortage of labor,” he asserted, “what a joke with the thousands of men unemployed here in Detroit. Do you expect this excuse to ease the tired legs of the thousands of standing passengers in street cars and buses?”

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208 Mayor Jeffries to Lewis S. Brown, 9/19/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

209 Mayor Jeffries to Mr. Fuchs, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

210 George Lawrence to Mayor Jeffries, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
reasons for poor service and the growing demands for jobs in Detroit. In this light, assertions by DSR heads that “you may be sure that Mayor Jeffries and this Department are doing all we can to eliminate the inconvenience to Detroit bus and street car riders created by the recent war,” likely seemed disingenuous.211

Public appreciation for Detroit’s public transit system also plummeted in the first days of peace when the city revealed that the DSR had actually lost money in the last several months of the war. Despite all-time highs in ridership, and turning a profit earlier in the war, the DSR lost hundreds of thousands of dollars in 1945. In seemingly ideal revenue conditions—peak demand and low expenditures on stock because of wartime restrictions on acquiring new equipment—the DSR had lost over $85,000 in the span of one month, July 1945. In August, half of which was during the war, the DSR lost more than $300,000.212 If the system could not stay in the black when customers were forced to compete for space to stand inside packed vehicles, the public wondered, how could the DSR expect to pay for itself when automobiles were again available?213

To some, news of the DSR’s deficit seemed a fitting payback for riders’ suffering throughout the war and brought renewed gripes about wartime discomfort aboard buses and streetcars. As F. E. White wrote to the Free Press at the end of August, “We must all get quite a chuckle when we read that the DSR

211 Nevill to Goffman, 10/1/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 6, File DSR (1), Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.


apparently operated at a loss for July. If the now crowded street cars and busses
don’t pay, then they never will.”\textsuperscript{214} The combination of poor service and fiscal
problems seemed the perfect reason to demand “new and real people” to replace a
DSR commission that had mismanaged the city’s transit system.\textsuperscript{215}

The DSR’s fiscal problems hit local newspapers less than a week after city
officials announced the modernization program to spend tens of millions of dollars
to improve public transit service for Detroiter. With the stated required
expenditures varying from $20 to $30 million, the thrust of the campaign was to
build bus terminals and purchase newer and more comfortable buses and
streetcars.\textsuperscript{216} “No one in Detroit has been more conscious of the inadequacy of DSR
service than those of us in the city government and in the Department of Street
Railways itself,” Jeffries told the \textit{Free Press}. “During the war period, because of the
unavailability of manpower and new equipment, there has been little the
department could do to remedy the situation.” Anticipating public skepticism about
the feasibility of the project, the Street Railway Commission asserted, “The DSR’s
program is not a dream—impossible of achievement.”\textsuperscript{217}

In the fall of 1945 it became clear that the postwar era did not hold a
promising future for Detroit’s public transit. Grandiose plans for “the finest
transportation system to be found anywhere in the world” failed to translate into

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\textsuperscript{214} F.E. White, Letter to the Editor, \textit{Detroit Free Press}, 8/30/45, p2.
\textsuperscript{216} “Asks $21,500,000 to Streamline DSR,” \textit{Detroit Free Press}, 8/19/1945, p1.
\textsuperscript{217} “Asks $21,500,000 to Streamline DSR,” \textit{Detroit Free Press}, 8/19/1945, p1.
\end{flushright}
tangible improvements. Previously used lines were suddenly cut, with much-touted modern buses sometimes but not always filling in to serve the affected areas. And despite a vast supply of potential employees, the DSR continued to face manpower shortages that kept it from running all its vehicles. Thus the crowding so often blamed on wartime restrictions persisted after gasoline and rubber rationing had been lifted, even when new equipment was again available for purchase.
Chapter 4
A Culture of Driving:
Rubber Conservation, Gasoline Rationing, and Propaganda in World War II

World War II, some scholars have argued, interrupted Americans’ “love affair” with the automobile. According to this school of thought, gasoline rationing temporarily curtailed car driving and suspended car culture before both surged in the postwar era. Because automobile manufacturers stopped making cars for civilians during the war, and rubber and gasoline were rationed, many American car-owners did alter their driving habits. Public transit ridership reached its all-time peak in the United States and numerous workplaces established carpools to reduce the number of cars in operation during the war.

At first glance, messages that implored Americans to cut out pleasure driving, to never drive alone, and to drive more slowly appear to undercut the importance of driving to Americans’ daily lives. By suggesting that “wasteful” driving was selfish and hurt the war effort, propaganda raised the need to rethink one’s automobile use. It introduced rhetoric of resource conservation into the discourse of driving and car ownership decades before the mainstream environmental movement. Concerns about the environmental impact of automobiles became commonplace in the 1960s with attention to auto emissions’ contribution to air pollution, increased with the oil shocks of the 1970s, and have been intertwined with discussions of cars and car

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culture ever since. Before these key moments, however, World War II raised awareness about the resources consumed in producing and running automobiles.

From the national to the local level, the war linked conservation with domestic and international security, environmental sustainability, and personal comfort. Propaganda aimed at car owners suggested that their choices about car use directly affected the United States’ ability to conduct the war. Posters and public service announcements denounced wasteful, unnecessary, and careless driving and stressed that drivers should choose to use fewer resources. For example, “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler,” a memorable poster created in 1942, scolded drivers without passengers for selfish and anti-American behavior and urged them to “join a car-sharing club today!”

Recent attention has turned toward these wartime campaigns as models for affecting cultural and behavioral changes in the current era of resource scarcity and environmental problems related to automobile use. A sharp rise in gasoline prices in the summer of 2008 prompted a flurry of discussion about ways to conserve gasoline, and a surge in nostalgia for the methods the U.S. government used to promote rubber and gasoline conservation during World War II. For some, propaganda of the war evoked a time in which the federal government had been in alliance with environmentalists and forcefully urged Americans to drive less. From this perspective, posters that proclaimed, “When you ride alone, you ride with Hitler” or asked rhetorically, “Should brave men die so you can drive?” had

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encouraged Americans to think twice before driving, and are particularly appealing in light of contemporary problems of climate change, pollution, and securing oil supplies. In 2009, Steven Chu, President Barack Obama’s Energy Secretary, reportedly commented that the U.S. should develop a publicity campaign about the need to conserve energy modeled on conservation posters of World War II.\(^{220}\)

But messages encouraging drivers to change their habits also established the notion that Americans could make key contributions to the war through proper driving, not by giving up driving. The argument of this chapter is that World War II strengthened Americans’ attachment to the automobile and solidified driving as an essential part of American culture. Rather than dampening Americans’ affection for the automobile, wartime propaganda reinforced the notion that driving was fundamental to being an American. Advertisements and government propaganda conflated car ownership with citizenship and portrayed driving as integral to the American way of life. In this way, the war helped establish driving as both patriotic and essential to citizenship. In posters, pamphlets, magazines, and newspaper advertisements, the American driver was portrayed almost exclusively as white. Such depictions implied that the mobility and independence that driving afforded were the sole domain of white Americans.

The chapter begins by situating itself in current scholarship and examining the rubber scarcity that prompted rubber and gasoline rationing. It explores how

government propaganda and advertising related to rubber and gasoline rationing portrayed drivers as citizens and driving as essential to Americans, while simultaneously denigrating alternative modes of transportation including public transit and walking. The proper role of women in the transportation crisis became the subject of much discussion in advertisements and government press releases, demonstrating continued uneasiness about female drivers. Finally, despite being inundated with messages to comply with wartime transportation guidelines and regulations, many Americans chose not to comply. How Detroiter, in particular, resisted the imposition of gasoline rationing and asserted their need to drive in spite of the war is the subject of the final section.

Historiographical Interventions

The war years have not figured prominently in histories of the automobile. In fact the majority of such works focus on the widespread proliferation of automobile ownership in the 1920s and on the development of infrastructure to support increased automobility beginning in the 1950s. To the extent that World War II enters into these histories, it is a momentary stagnation or interruption in the story of an increasingly motorized society.221 By focusing on advertising and propaganda that shaped ideas about proper use of the automobile and its place in society, and how drivers opposed efforts to control their automobility, this chapter demonstrates the pivotal role that World War II played in cementing the automobile

as essential to mobility, personal freedom, and the nation’s success. The war in turn boosted Americans’ desire to drive and own an automobile although none could be purchased for its duration.

Studies of the automobile extend well beyond histories of its development and evolution. One measure of the new directions in scholarship on automobiles is the growth of “automobility studies.” In this field, Cotton Seiler’s recent work has used the term automobility to capture the “multiple, heterogeneous, intersecting components” of the automobile’s impact.222 John Urry has employed “automobility” to encompass the vast “system” of material objects, culture, consumption, mobility, and environmental aspects that comprise the automobile’s dominance.223 By using the term automobility in this work, I draw on Seiler’s and Urry’s multiple layers to include material, socio-cultural, and environmental elements of the car.

Increasingly, automobility studies have taken into consideration racialized and gendered divisions in Americans’ relationships to cars and driving. Cotton Seiler’s insightful essay, “So That We as a Race Might Have Something to Travel By,” looks at African American drivers in the mid-twentieth century.224 As Seiler shows, cars offered opportunity for blacks to experience the freedom of mobility, but black drivers were particularly susceptible to discrimination. Thomas Sugrue, Paul Gilroy, and George Lipsitz each explore whites’ prejudice against black drivers and the

224 Cotton Seiler, So That We as a Race Might Have Something to Travel By.” American Quarterly 58:4 (2006).
threat black drivers’ autonomy posed in the white imagination.\textsuperscript{225} As this chapter illustrates, World War II contributed to an image of driving as exclusively a white domain, at the same time that it emphasized the mobility and freedom that driving offered. Wartime events furthered the racialization of driving as white and public transit as black, creating an increasing divide in status and desirability of public and private forms of transportation.

Virginia Scharff, Margaret Walsh, and Deborah Clarke, among others, have studied female drivers and changing cultural norms with regard to women’s driving.\textsuperscript{226} Although many histories of the car have focused on male drivers, these authors demonstrate that women drove cars from their inception in the United States, and advertising drew upon female beauty to promote particular models of cars for male and female drivers. Walsh argues cars were integral to women’s labor in the twentieth century, and ultimately to women’s widespread use of the automobile has made it “a sex neutral vehicle.”\textsuperscript{227} This work complicates the relationship of women to driving and automobiles by examining the multiple and contradictory messages about female drivers that government propaganda and car advertisements conveyed during World War II. While advertisements increasingly


\textsuperscript{227} Walsh, “Gendering Mobility” 376.
featured solo female drivers near the end of the war, female drivers were particularly targeted in appeals to restrict driving in order to save rubber and gasoline, and were overrepresented in commentary on the benefits of foregoing automobile driving as part of the war effort.

The rubber crisis and resulting transportation problem provided a fruitful opportunity for advertisers and government bureaucrats to demand particular behaviors from the American public. Propaganda to shape Americans’ responses to the rubber crisis was part of a broader array of home-front propaganda during the war that touted certain actions as patriotic and demanded “sacrifices” on the part of individuals in the name of patriotism and necessity to help win the war. My work builds upon a rich scholarship of “sacrifice” that has shown how consumption became integral to American citizenship and the promise of postwar abundance became part of the justification for war. Propaganda in World War II, as these scholars have demonstrated, encouraged identification with consumption as part of being American.228 During the war, advertisers built demand for future goods to be available after the war, and encouraged Americans to think of it as a sacrifice to go

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without these products for the duration of the war. It became patriotic to deny consumption during the war, at the same time that Americans’ identities as consumers solidified. Thus propaganda conflated what it presented as a desirable outcome of the war (a prosperous postwar society) with the war’s purpose by suggesting that the war was being fought to secure this idealized, abundant society built on free enterprise.

The term “propaganda” in conjunction with World War II requires particular attention because of the close relationship between government and private agencies in producing messages for the American public. Historians have addressed the close relationship between federal agencies and the advertising industry. Dannagal Goldthwaite Young has argued that OWI public service announcements (PSAs) were distinct from private advertisements because they were more civic-minded in their messages. According to Young, ‘Unlike product advertisements, PSAs often promoted sacrifice as a civic responsibility, perhaps illustrative of the differences between aims of the OWI and the aims of industry.”

While this may be true to a limited extent, in practice during the war the advertising industry held tremendous influence in the OWI, through the creation of the War Advertising Council (WAC), as Mark Leff has shown. According to Frank Fox, “So completely in fact, did advertising take over OWI ... and so increasingly did the latter’s operations come to resemble the work of the Advertising Council, that the concept of government war information lost all coherence.”

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230 Leff, “Home-Front Mobilization in World War II.”
231 Frank Fox, quoted in Leff, “Home-Front Mobilization in World War II,” 286.
government writers resigned en masse from the OWI in June 1943 because of their
disgust with the power that the advertising industry had over the federal agency’s
messages, diluting the information OWI released and avoiding what these writers
considered the larger issues of the war (including, in particular, informing the public
of German atrocities).\textsuperscript{232}

While government propaganda and corporate advertisements at times
offered distinct and even contradictory messages, much information for public
consumption was produced by collaborations between businessmen and federal
employees. Thus it is essential to consider the combined effects of inundating the
public with messages from multiple government agencies and numerous private
corporations.

\textit{A Severe Shortage of Rubber}

The bombing of Pearl Harbor was one of many campaigns that the Japanese
military carried out on December 7 and 8, 1941. It was part of a series of attacks on
islands in the Pacific intended to wipe out Americans’ ability to use these areas for
staging an attack against Japan, and to secure access to oil for the Japanese
military.\textsuperscript{233} A successful aim of this campaign was to take over the rubber
plantations in Malaya (what is now a part of Malaysia) for the Japanese, thus cutting
off 97\% of the U.S.’s rubber supply in a matter of hours.\textsuperscript{234} Thus from the moment

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{232} Weinberg, “What to Tell America.”
\item \textsuperscript{233} Yergin, \textit{The Prize}, 309.
\item \textsuperscript{234} Richard Lingeman, \textit{Don’t You Know There’s a War On?} (New York: G.P. Putnam’s
Sons, 1970), 235; Foster, \textit{A Nation on Wheels}, 32.
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that the United States entered World War II, the country faced a severe rubber shortage.

Americans in the military and civilians alike needed rubber for a variety of purposes. From tires on tanks and airplanes to gas masks, rubber was essential to combat operations. Entering a war and losing the vast majority of its rubber supplies at the same time, the U.S. government faced the dilemma of how to provide for its military and to make sure workers were still able to get to factories producing war materiel. Military equipment to conduct a war required a staggering amount of rubber: it was essential to all types of transportation, and for a variety of other purposes in the army, navy, and air force, as well as in hospitals and for communications. At the same time, rubber was a key component to the smooth operation of civilian life. Most significantly, the majority of Americans traveled to work by private automobile, transported on tires made of rubber. Public transit systems that used buses required rubber tires, too. Among the civilian population, rubber automobile tires were the chief product dependent on a supply of natural


rubber, although other products such as shoes, women's girdles, and bicycle tires also required it.\textsuperscript{237}

The Office of Price Administration (OPA) began rationing rubber in January 1942, less than one month after the U.S. declared war. The government was not entirely unprepared; having been concerned about this possibility for several months, federal agencies had made efforts to stockpile rubber for use in the event of a shortage.\textsuperscript{238} This supply, however, totaled only about 660,000 tons, which even in peacetime would have lasted only one year.\textsuperscript{239}

Government officials—from President Franklin Roosevelt, to Leon Henderson as head of the Office of Price Administration (OPA)—and tire companies played up the creation of synthetic rubber as an antidote to the rubber shortage. In late 1941 and early 1942, government press releases and newspaper stories quelled Americans’ concerns about the nation’s limited supplies of rubber by explaining that America was increasing its production of synthetic rubber. This was certainly true, but even though “production of synthetic rubber increased a hundredfold” during the war, synthetic rubber was never produced in large enough quantities to seriously offset the shortage of natural rubber.\textsuperscript{240} Announcing that synthetic rubber would significantly help the situation was more a method to keep Americans from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[237] Shoes and bicycle tires were both rationed during the war, and the government heavily discouraged women from wearing girdles, although they were not rationed. See Emily Yellin, \textit{Our Mothers’ War}, (New York: Free Press, 2004), p21.
\item[239] Lingeman, \textit{Don’t You Know There’s a War on?}, 235.
\end{footnotes}
panicking and assure them the government had a strategy than it was an actual solution, whether or not government officials fully grasped this at the beginning of the war.

While tires were rationed for the entirety of the war, gasoline rationing was introduced several months later, and only in certain regions. Gasoline rationing began on the East Coast of the United States in March 1942.\(^{241}\) That December, the OPA rationed gasoline throughout the United States in order to conserve rubber by restricting automobile use, and set a national maximum speed limit of 35 miles per hour.\(^{242}\) Only in the East was gasoline rationing implemented because of a gasoline shortage. In the rest of the nation, it was instituted as a method to reduce tire use since rubber was in much scarcer supply than gasoline elsewhere in the United States.\(^{243}\) In an additional measure that proved exceedingly unpopular, the OPA also banned “nonessential driving” (informally called “pleasure” driving) on the East Coast in January 1943, withdrew the ban in May, and then implemented it again from July until August, attempting to ensure that there was enough gasoline for drivers to get to and from work.\(^{244}\)

*Selling Automobility without Selling Cars*

Although popular histories of World War II routinely laud Detroit-based automobile companies for patriotically halting civilian production and converting to

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\(^{241}\) Flamm, “Putting the Brakes on Non-Essential Travel,” 77.


war production, car manufacturers actually delayed conversion in order to sell more cars. Some plants began to make aviation equipment in mid-1940, in expectation that the United States might enter the war, but it was not until February 1942 that civilian automobile production ceased. According to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, who was an assistant to OPA Director Leon Henderson, heads of the major automobile manufacturers were unwilling to completely discontinue car production despite strong pressure from the government coupled with the U.S.’s entry in the war in December 1941. It took a secret “deal,” proffered by Henderson, to halt auto manufacturing and force full conversion to the war effort. Henderson agreed to allow continued car production into early 1942 and promised not to claim that the car companies were being uncooperative.

When it became clear that Henderson’s public explanation would not be convincing, OPA staff sat in on multiple sessions in which he practiced making it sound believable. In time for a press conference announcing the cessation of civilian car production, Henderson found language to make his case convincing, and cover up the fact that he had bowed to the companies’ leaders’ wishes. According to Galbraith, Henderson

was both imaginative and eloquent. Staff cars were needed for the military; passenger cars were needed for defense workers; the components would otherwise be piled up in the factories during the duration. The weeks until the order went into effect would be used to plan the production of tanks and military vehicles and ensure that Detroit would truly be an arsenal of democracy.246

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Galbraith’s account suggested that top executives at Ford and General Motors were able to ensure the automobile industry secured a reputation for full cooperation and sacrifice as part of the war effort, while actually consuming limited supplies in order to turn greater profits until they were forced to stop. Despite an extreme rubber shortage for military and civilian needs, the federal government acquiesced to automobile manufacturers’ desire to continue using scarce resources to their own benefit and simultaneously to appear patriotic and sacrificing for the war effort. This was a harbinger of what was to come, and of the extent to which notions of citizenship and patriotism would infuse the rhetoric of automobility during the war.

The OWI was instrumental in portraying the automobile as fundamentally important to the war effort. With a limited supply of tires available through rationing, and no new civilian automobiles for consumers from February 1942 until after the war ended, government officials were very concerned that drivers would wear out their tires and lose functionality of their automobiles. The OWI’s guidelines for radio broadcasts suggested local stations emphasize that the country was counting on Americans to keep their cars working. As one memo on carpooling stressed, “All car operators have in their possession a valuable unit in their nation’s transportation plan ... an automobile.” In this way, the rhetoric surrounding driving offered car owners an opportunity to assist their country by keeping their cars in operation.

Ellipsis in original. Office of Price Administration, Department of Information, “The Facts about the Need for Car Pooling,” p3, File Gas Rationing and Car Sharing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 69, Box 221, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
Private companies involved in the making and service of automobiles expanded upon government propaganda that proper car maintenance with helping win World War II. Car dealers, filler (gas) and service stations, tire manufacturers, oil companies and other large and small endeavors advertised their products as helping Americans defeat the Axis. Just before halting car production, companies such as Chevrolet tapped into the rhetoric of conservation and advertised the dealer’s expertise in helping drivers “conserve” their cars. An ad published in *Collier’s* in early February 1942 sought to channel drivers’ concern about maintaining their tires into business for the company’s service stations. It touted twelve “conservation services” that Chevrolet dealers offered, while describing “Chevrolet owners” as “patriotic” and “forward-looking.” The ad encouraged “all motorists” to have their cars serviced because “a mobile nation is a strong nation.” In this line of thought, the driving public contributed to America’s strength and to the successful execution of the war.

Even before the U.S. entered the war, industries connected to the automobile business took preemptive measures to ensure business for themselves, despite the looming threat of rubber shortages. Thus at the end of September 1941, more than two months before Japanese forces seized control of rubber supplies, Firestone Tires printed advertisements detailing how to save rubber. Firestone’s ad, “An Important Statement About Rubber in National Defense; And what you as a car owner and a loyal American can do about it” listed over a dozen steps that car

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owners should take, all of which involved increased car maintenance and purchase of better parts and fluids. Most prominent among the list—and offset in its own box of text and image—was the recommendation of buying Firestone Life Protectors for one’s tires, which would extend the life of tires “thousands of extra miles,” and Safti-Sured Firestone DeLuxe Champion Tires “after your present tires are worn out.” As this Firestone ad demonstrates, before rubber was rationed companies promoted a variety of business-sustaining suggestions billed as conserving rubber, including buying more rubber.249

Advertisements spread name recognition for a brand of car-related products, depicted the company’s (white male) workers as heroic, and created an image that connected service at the particular business with patriotic duty. For example, a Chevrolet ad in the Saturday Evening Post in May 1943 proclaimed, “Your Chevrolet Dealer serves for victory, day after day, in many, many ways. Conserves the lives of the vital cars and trucks which are serving industry—serving agriculture—serving all America. Preserves the greatest motorized transportation system which is helping America to win the war. See him for service today.”250 By describing “vital cars” and “the greatest motorized transportation system” as contributing to the war effort, the advertisement underscored automobiles’ importance and desirability, even at a time when they could not be purchased.

250 Chevrolet Motor Division, General Motors Corporation, “Your Chevrolet Dealer,” May 29 1943, The Saturday Evening Post, p33, Reel 10, D’Arcy Collection, University of Illinois Communications Library.
Results of a survey conducted by the OWI in December 1943 demonstrated that many drivers had been exposed to messages about the need to preserve one’s automobile and take care of its individual parts to ensure it ran properly. Survey researchers asked participants if they were familiar with the government’s “tire conservation campaign,” and if so what the campaign asked drivers to do. When thinking of tire conservation and actions they were encouraged to take, more drivers recalled the importance of having their tires inspected and inflated than recalled the need for reducing driving or driving more slowly.\footnote{Office of War Information, Bureau of Special Services, Surveys Division, \textit{Special Memorandum No. 102: Car Owners Look at the Tire Situation}, January 28, 1944, p8.} Thus, keeping one’s car fully functional seemed to have stuck in drivers’ minds more than limiting or altering one’s driving in any fundamental way.

At the time of this survey, 99\% of respondents were familiar with the tire conservation program.\footnote{Office of War Information, Bureau of Special Services, Surveys Division, \textit{Special Memorandum No. 102: Car Owners Look at the Tire Situation}, January 28, 1944.} Yet to some of its promoters the publicity had been insufficient to achieve adequate compliance. A meeting between staff at OWI, ODT, and the WAC showed agreement near the end of the war that ads promoting “car conservation” needed to be more forceful in their appeals. According to meeting minutes, new ads were to play up the effort that car dealers and owners had made to help meet the emergency but also stress that there was still a major threat of cars breaking down unless they were properly serviced. “In other words,” WAC’s Allan Wilson summarized, new ads should feature “more war, more government, more
urgency of need, more praise for dealer and owner.” These priorities emphasized the temporary emergency nature of restrictions on driving, encouraged automobile owners to take pride in maintaining their cars, and pushed drivers to view car dealers as an important component in proper car care.

Because rubber for civilian use was very scarce and the majority of workers in cities such as Detroit drove to work, the government stressed car drivers’ opportunities to aid the war effort by reducing their tire use. In heavily promoting representations of drivers who had their tires checked regularly as patriotic, this tire conservation propaganda conflated driving and American citizenship. Suggesting it was Americans’ responsibility to take proper care of their tires, these messages portrayed a nation comprised of drivers, ignored the millions of Americans who did not own a car, and did not offer models for non-drivers to be patriotic.

*Automobiles as Preferable to Alternative Means of Transportation*

Government appeals for workers to form carpools targeted only drivers. The car-pooling arrangement that the OPA backed most vigorously was “car-sharing,” in which four or five drivers took turns driving the others to work in their car, with each person responsible for driving approximately one week per month. Radio announcements and posters asked drivers to do their part by joining a car-sharing

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253 Meeting Minutes, April 25, 1945, Washington Office Subject File, 1942-1945, Box 2, File Car Conservation, Advertising Collection, University of Illinois Archives.
club with other motorists, and noted that there was no need to pick up non-drivers.

As an OWI memo in the summer of 1944 assured drivers, “Car pooling does not mean 'thumbing' a ride- or the casual picking up of people waiting for buses or street cars. The kind that counts is the organized car pool whose members rotate the use of cars, ride together, leave some cars at home that would otherwise be burning up gasoline, wearing out precious rubber and parts.” In this situation, owning a car, and subsequently regulating one’s use of it, were keys to helping the war effort. Only those who already drove cars could be patriotic by joining a carpool; those who already did not drive could not contribute by riding with another person, freeing up much needed space on public transit vehicles.

Government propaganda on car-sharing programs encouraged Americans to identify driving with freedom and to see car-sharing as the best way to preserve this freedom during the war. A press release in July 1944 explained, “The driver who drives alone just because he likes his freedom probably doesn’t realize that by saving his car, gasoline, and rubber he can help insure a lot more freedom for himself later on.” Such an appeal framed carpooling as a key measure to ensure drivers could continue to use their cars when they needed them during the war, and would not lose this freedom of mobility at a later date. The pitch for carpooling was

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255 Office of War Information Domestic Radio Bureau Fact Sheet No. 256 "New Car-Pooling Regulations," July 24, 1944, File Gas Rationing & Car Sharing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 69, Box 221, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
256 Office of War Information Domestic Radio Bureau Fact Sheet No. 256 "New Car-Pooling Regulations," July 24, 1944, File Gas Rationing & Car Sharing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 69, Box 221, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
premised on the idea that it was temporary and a tolerable inconvenience in return for continued use of one’s automobile.

Portrayals of carpooling that explained “neighbors” should arrange carpools, implicitly reassured the driving public—represented as all white—that they had total control over who entered their cars. They discounted the prospect of taking strangers “waiting for buses or streetcars” and offered instead an image of co-workers and neighbors joining together to cut down on their use of rubber.²⁵⁷ For whites, taking neighbors and co-workers more likely brought to mind visions of sharing one’s car with other whites than did the vision of picking up intending passengers at a bus stop.

Casting public transportation in a more negative light than carpooling was one method government agencies used to promote car-sharing programs. Describing a film he hoped would be produced to encourage car-sharing, OPA’s Malcolm Lund explained, “The selling job should be entirely positive. It should be pointed out that car-sharing actually works no hardship on anyone, that it is infinitely more desirable than waiting indefinitely while crowded buses pass you up, or fortunately finding a square foot or two on which to stand in a crowded bus.”²⁵⁸

Thus even in addressing the inadequacies of individual automobile use, and promoting restricted driving, the government disparaged public transit as unpleasant and crowded. Adding to the riders’ actual experiences, this public

²⁵⁷ “The Facts about the Need for Car Pooling,” p2, File Gas Rationing and Car Sharing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 69, Box 221, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
²⁵⁸ Malcolm Lund to William H. Wells 9/9/1943, File Gas Rationing & Car Sharing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 69, Box 221, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
characterization of streetcars and buses as undesirable reinforced the importance of

cars and driving to the American way of life and undercut acceptance of alternative

modes of transit.

Government communications about driving asserted that cars were

necessary to victory and deplored the possibility of losing the use of a car. This is

seen particularly in the joint ODT-WAC print advertisements on the theme of “Take

Care of Your Car” published throughout the war and sponsored by local

businesses. In prefacing a series of these ads, ODT Director J. Monroe Johnson

explained the premise to heads of private companies, such as service stations,

whose sponsorship he solicited. Wrote Johnson, these ads “have been prepared on a

common sense, practical basis around the question, ‘Will they [American drivers]

ride... or will they walk?’ It is of first importance to this nation as well as to every

individual and every automotive service dealer in this country that the answer be,

‘THEY WILL RIDE!’” The memo emphasized the basic premise that driving was the

essential mode of transport for Americans, even despite resource shortages that

reduced the availability of rubber and gasoline. The question “Will they ride ... or

will they walk,” is a rhetorical one, meant to underscore the importance of

maintaining one’s car at all costs in order to avoid having to walk.

Ads within the portfolio ODT sent out spoke directly to drivers and urged

them “unless you’d rather walk than ride, continue to treat that car with loving care.” Walking was the unpleasant consequence of inadequate attention to one’s car,

File Gasoline Program and Conservation, Office of War Information, Record

Group 208, Entry 66, OWI Records of Deputy Director Maurice Hanson, Nov 1943-

October 1945, Box 1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
hitting home the importance of keeping the car properly serviced in order to avoid having to walk. As one ad pronounced, “WARNING TO ALL CAR OWNERS: Take care of your car and all its parts OR YOU’LL WALK. Sounds drastic, doesn’t it?” In another, a man learns that if he does not care for his car he will have to walk: “Walk! Did you say walk? To work ... every day. That’s several miles. I can’t walk that far.” Upon this realization, he vows to take better care of his vehicle to avoid walking. “Car, you’re going to get some of the best service you’ve ever had. And believe me, you’ll get it regular from now on.”

Some ads went a step further to depict the negative effects on a man who was forced to walk. One, with the caption “He doesn’t get around much anymore!” featured a picture of a man soaking his legs in a bucket of hot water. The text below the caption read, “He’s got a headache, too! For he’s the man who said, ’New cars are just around the corner!’ Today he’s walking instead of riding because he let his ’old' car die on its wheels... stopped giving it the proper care to help it carry on.”

Having to walk, as depicted in the ad, was such a difficult change from driving that the hardship of walking instead of driving could make a man immobile.

Mass transportation was dismissed as an unreasonable alternative to walking for the man whose car no longer functioned. The advertisement “WARNING TO ALL CAR OWNERS: Take care of your car OR YOU’LL WALK!” suggested that

260 “Go ‘Way Ghost!,” File Gasoline Program and Conservation, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 66, OWI Records of Deputy Director Maurice Hanson, Nov 1943-October 1945, Box 1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

261 He doesn’t get around much anymore!,” File Gasoline Program and Conservation, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 66, OWI Records of Deputy Director Maurice Hanson, Nov 1943-October 1945, Box 1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
mass transit was not an option for those who used to drive, by stating, “Public transportation is already overburdened. Buses and trolleys are bulging to the breaking point.” Next to a drawing of men trying to board an already packed bus, this message directed car owners away from public transportation as a possible means of transport and used its inadequacy to reinforce the importance of having access to a car.\textsuperscript{262}

A government-industry meeting about ODT’s “car conservation campaign” in the spring of 1945 emphasized the importance of cars to the war effort and threatened those who failed to have their car regularly serviced with having to walk instead. As the meeting’s secretary clearly noted, “The primary purpose of this campaign is to bring home to the general car owning public the vital need to keep every privately owned automobile in operating condition right on through to final victory- and on beyond that to the day when new cars can again be purchased. ... It is in the last analysis a question of ‘Look after your car—and all the parts of it—or you'll walk!’” By upholding driving as the preferred method of transportation, to be preserved through careful attention to the needs of one’s car, other forms of transportation appeared less desirable.

\textit{Driving as “Essential”}

Rationing introduced the concepts of “essential” and “nonessential” driving into national discourse. With the beginning of gasoline rationing in seventeen East Coast states in March 1942, car owners had to explain to ration boards their reasons

\textsuperscript{262} “Warning to All Car Owners,” File Gasoline Program and Conservation, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 66, OWI Records of Deputy Director Maurice Hanson, Nov 1943-October 1945, Box 1, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
for requesting gasoline and the amount required for such purposes. This system created a stratification of drivers in which those with “A” ration cards received the least gas (from 1.5 to 6 gallons per week, depending on the current allocation). Car owners who convincingly made the case that they had to drive in order to get to and from work got “B” ration cards. “B” rations were several gallons more per week, at times reaching 16 gallons, but this varied over time and by region. Those whose work involved extensive driving, such as medical doctors, could get a “C” card, entitling them to much more gasoline.

Richard Lingeman has described the status implications of the rationing allocations bluntly: “Obviously, if you were an A card holder, you were a nobody—a nonessential who puttered about in his car on insignificant little errands while cars packed to the roof with joyriding war workers or large sedans driven by powerful men with mysterious connections blew carbon monoxide in your face.” Or, as Daniel Yergin has written, “a degree of shame was felt by those who fell into categories deemed less important to the war effort.” One’s gasoline ration, then, appeared to reflect one’s relative importance in serving the country. Paradoxically, having a larger gasoline ration suggested a person’s contribution to the war was more significant than that of someone granted a smaller share of the nation’s limited gasoline and rubber.

263 Flamm, “Putting the Brakes on ‘Non-Essential’ Travel”, 77.
264 Rae, The Automobile Age, 154; Yergin, The Prize, 363.
265 Mansfield, A Short History of OPA, 164.
266 Lingeman, Don’t You Know There’s a War On?, 239.
267 Yergin, The Prize, 363.
For the most part, instead of looking down on those who used more gasoline, drivers with smaller rations did their best to get more gasoline for themselves. There were two ways to do this: by inveigling to get a larger allotment from the ration board, or by turning to the flourishing black market. It has been said, with perhaps slight exaggeration, that “everybody who could find the flimsiest pretext of essentiality tried to convince his local OPA board that he deserved better of them.”

Classifying certain driving as nonessential cut down on overall driving, but reified the automobile as central to the war effort and the American way of life. By introducing the language of “essential driving,” the government asserted that Americans needed to drive in order to carry out daily business even when they were sacrificing for the war and even when they were “doing without,” as a popular saying put it. The term “essential” suggested that while some driving could be eliminated as a sacrifice during the war, most driving could not be cut out of Americans’ daily activities.

In particular, by stressing the need for drivers to get to their jobs and help the war effort, the Office of Defense Transportation underscored the idea that driving one’s car to work constituted essential driving. With public transportation systems overcrowded in Detroit and other cities even after plants established staggered hours to reduce the concentration of transit riders, the ODT and other federal agencies did not emphasize travel to work by public transit in their informational campaigns. Instead, ODT materials encouraged drivers to see their

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268 Lingeman, *Don’t You Know There’s a War On?*, 239.
cars as integral to the war effort because they conveyed workers to their production jobs. Far from undermining the importance of automobiles in American society, the war justified driving to work as necessary and patriotic because it allowed workers to aid the war effort.

Once the concept of essential driving gained parlance, its definition expanded to encompass a wide variety of functions. Indeed, it appears that the majority of drivers came to see the trips they took as falling under the rubric of “essential driving.” An OWI survey in August 1943 showed that “88% of car owners say they use their cars for necessary driving,” When asked to explain what necessary driving they did, respondents provided a wide variety of answers. In descending order of frequency mentioned, they were “regular business needs,” “transportation to and from work,” “shopping,” “for reasons of health,” “civilian defense work,” “taking children to school,” and “visiting.”269 Taken collectively, drivers interpreted the concept of “essential driving” broadly and believed that almost all of their trips had to be made by private automobile.

**Targeting Female Drivers**

Women were specifically targeted in gasoline conservation propaganda as those most likely to violate driving restrictions and those who should reduce their driving. At times women were expected to embrace walking, while at other points advertisements assured women that they were not expected to give up “essential” driving. United Motors Service’s February 20, 1943 advertisement “Housewife with

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an ‘A’ card” made clear that “housewives” were entitled to drive for certain functions. Next to a picture of a white woman behind the wheel, the ad declared, “Better than anyone else, you know the meaning of ‘indispensable’ driving.” The ad provided its own definition of “indispensable driving: “It's what gets the children to school, takes you marketing, and accomplishes those essential ‘odd errands’ that can’t be predicted or avoided.” The ad’s language drew on the federal government’s categorization of “essential” and “nonessential” driving but offered an expansive view of “essential” that included trips of convenience to run “odd errands,” activities that OWI propaganda explicitly told women to avoid doing unless with a group of riders. By identifying driving as “essential” and “indispensable,” this particular ad recognized white women’s entitlement to driving while it portrayed driving as critical for the perpetuation of daily family life.

Not all ads supported the notion that women’s driving was essential. In fact, a disproportionate number of ads that encouraged drivers to reduce their driving were aimed at women. Propaganda that lauded the benefits of walking for women contrasted sharply with depictions of men in pain from having to walk because they failed to take care of their cars, as described above. While ads in the series “Take Care of your Car ... Or You’ll Walk!” portrayed men who had to walk as suffering, ads and newspaper stories suggested that female drivers in particular could benefit from walking instead of driving. Crafters of this message touted walking as a boon for women’s beauty and health, in addition to helping relieve the crisis in

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transportation. One newspaper ad suggested a silver lining of limited automobile use with the headline “DELIGHTFUL NEW WAY TO REDUCE HIPS!” The text recommended that women should bicycle and walk whenever possible, and that doing so would increase their femininity. “You’ll soon be a finer figure of a woman if you’ll just help make gas rationing work!,” the ad promised.271

Such propaganda reflected broader anxieties about women’s roles and the appropriateness of female drivers. The toughest ads seeking Americans’ compliance with gas rationing singled out female drivers for criticism. Meant to be the words of a Nazi sailor, one cheered, “ATTA GIRL! WASTE YOUR GAS! ... Don’t pay any attention to that gas rationing stuff. Nuts to the war! Be a gas chiseller. Grab all the gas you can. What’s your name, fraulein? We’ll put you down for a Nazi medal!”272 Another, from the voice of an American on an oil tanker at sea, chastised a female driver for wasting gasoline to attend a “fancy pink tea.” After a graphic description of the ways one might die on a tanker, the seaman exclaimed, “listen, lady, we ain’t riskin’ our hides just so’s people can drive to pink teas. Just remember, every drop of that stuff in your gas tank is blood!”273 In this and other appeals to obey gasoline rationing, women were depicted as especially frivolous in their use of gasoline and the consequences as particularly dire. Propaganda thus simultaneously recognized

271 “Delightful New Way to Reduce Hips,” File Gasoline Rationing, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 40, Box 144, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
272 File “Programs 9-1, Gas and Rubber 1942-44,” Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 1 Records of the Office of the Director, 1942-45, Box 6, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
273 “Look, Lady- No Sneakin’ Sub Can Keep Us From Deliverin’ The Gas!,” File “Gasoline Rationing,” Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 40, Box 144, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
women’s driving, if not car ownership, as a growing trend but put women’s access to automobiles as subordinate to men’s.

Suggesting that gas rationing offered a chance for women to benefit from walking—but implying that noncompliance with rationing would force men to walk—reinforced men’s claims to driving. It also sent mixed messages about women’s relationship to automobiles and driving. Margaret Walsh has argued that World War II created the opportunity for more American women to drive when they took on “war work” outside the home and served in the military.\(^{274}\) This opportunity, however, was circumscribed by media messages implying women had less of a right to use automobiles when limited resources called for changes in driving habits.

*Opposition to Gasoline Rationing*

Merely rationing tires had not made a sufficient impact on Americans’ driving habits. For those with four good tires on their cars, the possibility of having them wear out at some point in the future before the war was over—when rubber would presumably again be plentiful—was insufficiently alarming to convince Americans to stop driving. Tires might last for months, or years, before needing to be replaced, and thus a restricted supply of rubber tires to be distributed through rationing did not pose an imminent problem for many drivers. But as some officials saw it, the shortage was severe enough that if civilians did not alter their behavior, the lack of rubber might cause a large proportion of people to lose their mobility before the war was over.

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\(^{274}\) Walsh, “Gendering Mobility,” 384.
There appeared to be a disconnection between the potential severity of a crisis in transportation caused by a shortage of tires, and the gradualness with which the crisis was likely to become apparent. Projections in February 1942 showed that even if passenger tire needs in the United States were cut by 25% the Allies collectively would still have a substantial net deficit in rubber.\textsuperscript{275} For this reason some officials in government agencies such as the OPA thought it was crucial to find more effective ways to convince drivers to immediately begin behaving in ways that would conserve their rubber tires. Gasoline rationing was one possible method to cut down on civilian wear on tires and prolong their use, but government officials worried about how Americans would respond to it. Due to the unpopularity of the idea of gasoline rationing without an actual shortage of gasoline in most parts of the United States, President Roosevelt did not want nationwide gasoline rationing to go into effect until after the mid-term elections of November 1942.\textsuperscript{276}

The Office of Price Administration implemented nationwide gasoline rationing on December 1, 1942. Even before it took effect, there was a high degree of uncertainty—among the public and among government agencies—about whether gasoline was rationed to conserve rubber or because it was actually in short supply. Much of the problem stemmed from the fact that the initial rationing of gasoline on the East Coast had in fact been because of limited gasoline supplies in the area, but top-ranking officials had asked that the OPA not reveal that German submarines had

\textsuperscript{275} “The Rubber Shortage,” Confidential Memorandum, 2/9/1942, File Rationing-gas and rubber; correspondence, memos, statements 1942, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 3D, Alphabetical Subject File O-P, Box 9, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

been exceptionally successful in destroying American oil tankers in the Atlantic and thus had created gas shortages for the region. As an internal memo in the Office of Emergency Management summarized shortly after rationing had taken effect, “Rationing had to be improvised and sold to the public in three weeks, without the chance to divulge the one compelling reason for it.” This caused a conundrum for the OPA, as the memo-writer explained; “If they ration when the supply of a commodity is still plentiful, the administrative problem is much simpler, but the information problem is hard. If they wait until the scarcity is upon us, public acceptance is easy to gain, but the administrative job is appalling. So far they seem to have chosen the latter of the two evils, probably through force of circumstances rather than choice.”

Given the confusion that had ensued when gas was rationed on the East Coast in the summer of 1942, OPA administrators were legitimately concerned with how the public would react to announcements six months later that gasoline would be rationed throughout the country in order to protect the nation’s supply of rubber. Distrust of the government’s decision to ration ran high, as well as misinformation about its purposes. Misunderstanding about the reasons for gas rationing was so great that as late as September 1944 OWI’s current director Elmer Davis was unsure about the purposes of gasoline rationing. As Davis wrote to an OPA administrator, the ODT and OPA seemed to be sending contradictory messages about whether gas

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277 Delia Kuhn to Mr. Pringle, Executive Office of the President, Office for Emergency Management, Confidential Memorandum, 7/3/1942, File Programs 9- Conservation and Rationing 1942-45, Office of War Information, Record Group 208, Entry 1, Box 6, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
was rationed to restrict car use or gasoline consumption. He wanted to get to the bottom of the issue before sending out any more public statements on the topic.²⁷⁸

While a minority of Americans expressed opposition to some rationing throughout the war, the announcement of nationwide gasoline rationing engendered a particularly bold negative reaction.²⁷⁹ Officials were “besieged with protests.”²⁸⁰ Organized resistance to gasoline rationing was strongest in Detroit and Indianapolis in the weeks preceding its implementation and government reports referred to these cities as the “two trouble spots” and “centers of opposition.”²⁸¹ In Indianapolis and its environs, protestors chiefly complained that because there was plenty of gasoline for them to use, it was unfair to ration it. Those who challenged gasoline rationing in the Detroit area, however, were mostly aware that the purpose of limiting drivers’ fuel use was to reduce wear on their tires.²⁸²

Detroiteres opposed to gas rationing framed their protest not in terms of the availability of gasoline but in terms of the dire consequences for their mobility if rationing were implemented in Detroit. According to an OWI public opinion report based on surveys conducted just prior to and subsequent to the nationwide gasoline rationing, those opposed in Detroit felt that limiting the amount they could drive

²⁷⁸ Elmer Davis to Chester Bowles, 9/1/1944, File Programs 9-1, Gas and Rubber 1942-44, RG 208 Entry 1, Box 6, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
²⁷⁹ In September 1943, when asked what problem they would like to discuss with their Congressmen, “gasoline rationing” was mentioned more frequently than any other problem except for “high cost of living.” By contrast, no other rationing concerns were in the top ten listed. Gallup Poll, “Important Problems,” 9/3/1943.
²⁸⁰ Office of War Information, Surveys Division, Memorandum No. 42 Public Opinion After Two Weeks of Nationwide Gasoline Rationing, January 5, 1943.
²⁸¹ Office of War Information, Surveys Division Memorandum No. 42, Public Opinion After Two Weeks of Nationwide Gasoline Rationing, January 5, 1943, 4.
would exacerbate the city’s “transportation problems.” Wrote Reznik, “If gas rationing takes effect in Detroit God help those who will have to depend on the Detroit Street Railway System. It’s the worst transportation system in the world. Ask those who ride it. They ride it not because they want to but because they have to. They don’t own an automobile.” What is particularly striking about Reznik’s letter is the fact that as a person without a car he was concerned enough about the proposal of gasoline rationing to write to the OPA in Washington, DC voicing his opposition to it. His experience with Detroit’s public transportation system had led him to believe that any policies that might increase ridership would be disastrous.

Reznik’s letter was forwarded to the ODT, whose director at the time, Joseph Eastman, replied two weeks later. Eastman informed Reznik that the most important thing was to use cars effectively, but that non-car owners could also help out. “The one immediate help which almost every individual can give is to cooperate in the more intensive use of the personal automobile.”

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284 Steve F. Reznik to W. M. Jeffers, Office of Price Administration, 11/7/1942, File Detroit, MI, Office of Defense Transportation, Record Group 219, Series 109, Box 115, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
did not own a car, Eastman advised, “Even if you do not own a motor car which you could share with other car owners in rotation, you may find a fellow-employee or a neighbor whose terminal-to-terminal trips morning and evening in his machine come at times that would be reasonably convenient for you. Eastman’s emphasis on “more intensive use of the automobile” implied that greater employment of the car was what the country needed; the private auto was a key weapon in the war. His reply to Reznik suggested that the opportunity for non-car owners to be patriotic lay in attaining access to a car and a driver willing to take them. Implicitly, walking, taking public transit, and otherwise avoiding using rubber and gasoline in private cars were not patriotic. In the realm of transportation non-car owners’ ability to connect with a car owner determined their contribution to the war effort.

Resistance to gasoline rationing in Detroit demonstrated that many drivers were opposed to direct limitations on their ability to drive as they pleased, even when the restriction was framed as a temporary and patriotic measure. More significantly, as Reznik’s letter shows, even those who did not own cars could oppose gasoline rationing. Both those with cars and those without saw restrictions on driving in Detroit as a serious threat to their well-being. In the view of those who opposed rationing, any limits on automobile use that forced more Detroiters to ride the city’s overcrowded buses and streetcars were a bad idea.

Conclusion

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285 Joseph Eastman, Director of Office of Defense Transportation to Steve F. Reznik, 11/20/1942, File Detroit, MI, Office of Defense Transportation, Record Group 219, Series 109, Box 115, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.
John Kenneth Galbraith famously commented about World War II, "never in the history of human conflict has there been so much talk of sacrifice and so little sacrifice."\textsuperscript{286} Indeed the war did not bring extreme hardship to Americans on the home-front, as compared to those in other warring nations. But both during the war and in popular parlance since, many Americans have embraced the idea that they made significant sacrifices, and did so gladly.\textsuperscript{287} As I have shown here, American drivers were asked to make relatively minor changes to their driving habits during the war, and many refused to do even this little. But the rhetoric of driving and sacrifice during the war had enduring effects in the postwar era and created the perfect opportunity for car-related businesses to promote unlimited driving as the ultimate reward after years of sacrifice.

An October 1945 advertisement for United Motors Service articulated the underlying message of longing for the total freedom to drive at war's end that had underpinned its ads throughout the war. It described a driver who had "been waiting, dreaming of the time when gas rationing would be over and he could head for the open road on a well-earned vacation trip." The ad played on its enduring wartime theme of the need for routine car maintenance to keep it in good condition, but substituted the end goal of "enjoy[ing] many miles of safe, satisfying 'pleasure'"

\textsuperscript{286} Cohen, \textit{A Consumers’ Republic}, 70.  
driving as your reward” for such service instead of the wartime message that car maintenance was integral to the war effort.\textsuperscript{288}

Unlimited use of the car as a “reward” for proper automobile upkeep during the war promoted driving as an activity even more than a form of transportation. Often it was also linked to the joys of being an American, and the ability to enjoy these pleasures after years of wartime restrictions. As an ad in late December 1945 put it, “It’s time to take your reward: you took the trouble, spent the money, to keep your car in good shape during the war years when it couldn’t be replaced. You’ve earned the right to take those trips… drive where you please.”\textsuperscript{289} Those with cars were all too ready to do so.

\textsuperscript{288} United Motors Service, “Fill her up ... MY EYE,” October 27, 1945, \textit{The Saturday Evening Post}, p44, Reel 10, D’Arcy Collection, University of Illinois Communications Library.
\textsuperscript{289} United Motors Service, “What’s to Stop Us?,” December 22, 1945, \textit{The Saturday Evening Post}, p42, Reel 10, D’Arcy Collection, University of Illinois Communications Library.
Chapter 5  
Driving as a Fundamental Right:  
The Oil Workers International Union Strike and “Essential” Driving

One month and one day after the Office of Price Administration lifted gasoline rationing throughout the United States, workers at an oil refinery outside of Detroit struck, setting off a series of work actions that shut down the flow of gasoline to the city’s stations. This chapter examines the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) strike of September-October 1945, its impact on driving, and how Detroiters responded to a gasoline shortage directly after living with wartime gas rationing. As I argue, the strike demonstrated that by the end of the war many Detroiters had come to see access to gasoline as a fundamental American right, and interruptions to their gas supply as anathema to their freedom. Furthermore, many Detroiters saw driving as constituent of citizenship, and—only weeks after having lived with driving restrictions, including lowered speed limits and rationing—could not conceive of altering their lifestyles to accommodate a severe shortage of gasoline.

The End of Gas Rationing

Planning for the postwar automobile industry began well before the war ended. After V-E Day, celebrating the end of the war in Europe on May 8, 1945, automobile manufacturers began to retool their plants to produce cars for civilians while continuing to fill their wartime military contracts. A limited number of civilian cars were actually produced several weeks before Japan surrendered in mid-August 1945. But it took months before mass production of automobiles fully resumed in

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Detroit, after the federal government canceled its military contracts with automobile manufacturers and they retooled their plants to produce new models.

As Paul Casdorph has described, “forty-three months of rationing, consumer shortages, and rearranged living were enough. And no pent-up desire was greater than the wish to buy a new family automobile.”\(^1\) Automobile companies started preparing to cash in on rising demand for new cars long before the war was over. Wartime advertisements kept brand names in the public eye and sought to cultivate loyalty. Preparing future customers for what would be a lengthy delay between war’s end and the availability of new cars, for example, Buick employed the slogan “When better cars are built, Buick will build them.”\(^2\)

For the first few years of the postwar era, demand for personal automobiles vastly outstripped supply. Americans looking to buy a car had to prove that they had a used one to trade in. Some offered bribes to be placed higher on the waiting list. Automobile companies’ advertisements promised better models as soon as new cars were available, and urged customers to put their names on the list of people wanting to buy a certain model immediately. Just before Japan surrendered, the Detroit Free Press began printing daily stories about the resumption of car manufacturing, how long it would take to produce the first postwar models, and how much these coveted cars would cost. Related industries, such as service


\(^2\) See Buick Advertising Files, National Automotive History Collection, Detroit Public Library Skillman Branch; Buick advertisement, *Detroit Free Press*, 10/10/1945, p11.
stations and oil companies, assured drivers of old cars that their products would greatly enhance a car’s performance and were “the next best thing” until new cars arrived. The Crest Co. in downtown Detroit pitched their seat covers as a way to “fool the predictors- get some new car joy now!” As its ad promised readers, “Crest Seat Covers make a new interior for your worn, faithful, shared-and-not-spared car. ... Crest Covers are one wonderful investment for appearance-wear-pride-thru your long wait for a new car.”

Through their advertisements, car-related industries explicitly acknowledged, and cultivated, widespread frustration at having to wait for a new car in the postwar era.

When it was clear that the end of the war was imminent, some Detroit drivers used their remaining gas ration coupons to purchase as much gas as they could. Gas stations saw a “buying spree” as Americans learned that gas rationing would cease when the war was over. Japan surrendered on August 14, and the OPA ended gasoline rationing on August 15. By contrast, some foods continued to be rationed by the OPA in the months following the war. Car owners formerly constrained by gas rations gleefully tore their gas ration coupons apart and waited in line to buy as much gasoline as their tanks would hold. There was a flurry of


driving right after the war and much celebration of the freedom to drive. Station
attendants reported running out of gas a few hours after opening. Over the next few
days businesses’ parking lots filled throughout the city. On the first Sunday after the
war, cars streamed out of Detroit as residents took day trips to picnic and be
outdoors, or simply drove because they could. The motto for peacetime in Detroit,
it seemed, was “Fill ‘er up.” As one columnist exalted, “Fill ‘er up! I’d almost
forgotten how [the words] sounded.” For those with functional cars at war’s end,
the opportunity at last to drive as much as one wanted seemed the reward for years
of sacrifice. The future of driving without limits appeared bright; as soon as workers
could produce enough goods, tire rationing would be lifted and new cars would be
available.

Labor at the End of the War

For the duration of the war, the CIO leadership had agreed to a “no-strike
pledge” to maintain high levels of production. Immediately after the war ended,
President Truman issued an executive order that allowed companies to raise wages

296 “Aging Jalopies Soon Drain Gas Pumps,” Detroit Free Press, 8/16/1945, p1;

297 “Autoists Buy More Fuel; Speedy End of Gas Rationing Is Seen,” Detroit Free Press,
8/13/1945, p11; “Fill Her Up!,” Detroit Free Press, 8/14/1945, p6; “Aging Jalopies


299 Many labor historians have examined the workers’ predicaments during the war,
and the wildcat strikes that took place. See Martin Glaberman, Wartime Strikes: The
Struggle Against the No-Strike Pledge in the UAW During World War II (Detroit:
Bewick Editions, 1980); Nelson Lichtenstein, Labor’s War at Home: The CIO in World
War II (Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Nelson
Lichtenstein, Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit (Urbana:
University of Illinois Press, 1995).
without getting government approval first. This opened up the floodgates for workers to demand wage increases, and the CIO began a campaign to preserve “take-home pay” for members.300

Detroit, the “arsenal of democracy,” became the epicenter for labor’s campaign to guarantee good wages in the postwar era and insist that companies share their prosperity with workers. In September, the Detroit Free Press began running columns on “the strike situation at a glance” to let readers know what plants were on strike and how many workers were involved. In mid-September, there were tens of thousands of workers striking every day, mostly in automobile-related industries. For example, while the OWIU strike grew, 40,000 Ford workers were not working because of “strikes in feeder plants” that produced automobile parts.301 The massive UAW strike in late 1945 has garnered the most scholarly attention, and the OWIU strike has received virtually none.302 Yet the OWIU was the first CIO union to walk out in the 52 for 40 campaign, and the first postwar labor dispute in which the federal government intervened.303

302 It does not appear that any scholarly accounts of the OWIU strike have been published since 1950.
In the immediate aftermath of the war, Detroit’s mainstream press consistently portrayed the public as purchasers. In referencing labor-management strife, for example, editorial cartoons explicitly referred to the public as consumers who were hindered by strikes. As a wave of strikes in Detroit halted production of automobiles and automobile parts, and interrupted the distribution and manufacturing of gasoline for cars currently on the road, one cartoon depicted the “consuming public” waiting tensely to see how the labor strife would turn out. The perplexed and angry public—portrayed as a middle-aged white man—is forced to wait in front of a door marked “private keep out!,” from behind which signs for expletives protrude, suggesting much disagreement taking place in the “labor, management, government conference” from which the man has been excluded. The artist implies that the public should have a say in labor negotiations, because the outcome of these negotiations directly affects the public who wants to buy new products.

A similar cartoon in the *Free Press* showed the public as an “innocent bystander” whom workers injured when they went on strike. In the illustration, management consults a large document labeled “labor demands,” while the figure representing a worker turns to the public and barks “If he doesn’t give me what I


want I’ma gonna sock YOU right on th’ nose!”306 Another by the same artist, Frank Williams, envisioned the public picketing the CIO, carrying placards that read, “Unfair to unorganized public,” and “We want new cars, radios, stoves, washers, etc, etc, etc, etc.”307 In these and other depictions, the public’s interest appeared to directly contradict workers’ interests, suggesting the public identified more as consumers than as workers.

These cartoons appeared at the same time that Detroit’s daily papers printed articles about the innovations in 1946 model year automobiles that were essentially advertisements for the manufacturers, coupled with a prominent photo of the automobile. The first Sunday after the gasoline strike, for example, the Detroit News ran the caption, “How the New Cadillac Looks,” atop a picture of the 1946 model. The following week the paper announced, “New Pontiac Reveals Numerous Body Changes” and featured a picture of the car and an article about its development.308

Stories and images that told the public about the types of cars that would be available and how they would be improvements from previous models contrasted sharply with photographs of partially assembled cars in plants where production was suspended because of strikes either in that particular plant or because of strikes that stopped production of parts needed to complete the assembly of the


automobile. Underneath one image of partially-completed autos at Ford’s River Rouge plant, titled “Unfinished Autos—The Assembly Line at a Standstill,” the caption informed readers that, “Work has ceased because of the shortage of parts due to strikes.” Thus without referencing automobiles directly, cartoons such as that portraying the frustrated “consuming public” shut out of labor-management negotiations particularly evoked the delay in car production caused by strikes in the automobile industry. It underscored the idea that the “public” suffered when there was a delay in car production. Identifying as purchasers encouraged the public to align their interests with those who would provide consumer goods quickly and cheaply.

*Shortage, Again*

When the war ended, many companies laid off workers or drastically reduced their hours. On September 16, 1945, refinery workers in Local 456 of the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU) went on strike in Trenton, Michigan, twenty miles southwest of Detroit. The employees’ bargaining team had been in negotiations with Socony-Vacuum over postwar pay for months, with little progress. In choosing to strike, these men sought the wage guarantee that OWIU leaders pressed locals to fight for across the country as the war ended.

Throughout the U.S., as a chronic labor shortage gave way to unemployment during reconversion to civilian production, companies such as Socony-Vacuum cut

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workers’ hours. During the war, workers had typically worked 48 hours per week, with the eight overtime hours at time-and-a-half pay, the equivalent of 52 hours’ pay per week.311 After the war, many corporations cut workers’ hours to 40 hours per week. By one estimate, this reduction in hours reduced oil workers’ pay to $150-$200 per month, an approximately $1000 drop in annual pay from wartime.312 O. A. Knight, President of OWIU, and other leaders of the national union organized a campaign after V-E day to secure a 40 hour work-week at 52 hours’ pay for all members when the war ended.313

The Trenton workers were the first in the Midwest to follow the OWIU’s national campaign demanding 52 hours’ pay for 40 hours’ work. When they walked out of the Socony refinery, their placards proclaimed “52 for 40- or Fight,” playing off the 1844 rallying cry of soon-to-be President James Polk to expand the Oregon territory to the 54°40’ north parallel. To earn the same pay for 40 hours as they had been making for 52 hours of work would require an hourly wage increase of 30%. The OWIU framed this increase as a fight for “preservation of the American standard of living,” keeping pace with their wartime wages.314


314 *International Oil Worker*, October 1945, p1.
30% wage increase, Socony-Vacuum offered no more than 15%, and Local 456 made good on its threat to strike.\textsuperscript{315}

Three days earlier, a walkout of approximately 100 drivers of the Refiners Transport and Terminal Corporation had garnered little attention amid a city rife with labor strikes, even though the drivers’ refusal to deliver gas cut the supply to Detroit area stations in half.\textsuperscript{316} But when the Socony-Vacuum workers went on strike shortly thereafter, it severely restricted both gasoline production and transportation in the region. Local and national press took notice.\textsuperscript{317}

The following day, 6,000 oil workers struck in Chicago, headquarters of the OWIU.\textsuperscript{318} Over the course of the next week, the strike spread to oil workers throughout the midwest, and to dozens of refineries in Texas and California.\textsuperscript{319} From a few hundred strikers in Detroit on September 16, the OWIU’s “52 for 40” campaign grew to over 20,000 workers on strike by September 22.\textsuperscript{320} At first Aurora and Keystone, two smaller refineries in Detroit, surreptitiously filled Socony-Vacuum’s orders that the major refinery could not complete because the strike had halted its operation. But CIO members soon found out about this practice and swiftly shut

\textsuperscript{315} O’Connor, \textit{History of Oil Workers International Union CIO}, p52


\textsuperscript{319} See “National Affairs,” \textit{Time Magazine}, October 1, 1945, p21.

\textsuperscript{320} “21,000 Out in Nation’s Refineries,” \textit{Detroit News}, 9/22/1945, p1.
down both of the other refineries as well. When Local 389 in Detroit, with over 500 members, stopped work on September 20, all of the area’s refineries ceased gasoline manufacturing. By September 22, most of the city’s gas stations had closed. With less than a week’s supply of gas on hand, the DSR warned it would have to cut bus routes. Some taxicab service in the city was suspended.

Alarmed by the interruption to gasoline supplies in the country, Secretary of Labor Lewis Schwellenbach called labor and industry leaders to Chicago for negotiations. Schwellenbach was under pressure to resolve labor issues in Detroit. Despite the Secretary’s public statements that the talks “must not fail,” neither side seemed willing to compromise. The meetings failed to produce any agreements, and the strike continued to spread.

The OWIU successfully stopped gasoline manufacturing in the Midwest and halted transportation of fuel from refineries to gas stations when non-unionized drivers agreed to respect CIO picket lines. A major breakthrough for the union

322 “City Running Short of Gas; Mayor Asks Truman’s Aid,” Detroit Free Press, 9/22/1945, p1.
323 “The Refineries Shutdown,” Detroit Free Press, 9/22/1945, p4. Ironically, immediately after the war the DSR had resumed its conversion from streetcar lines to buses, even though during the war the extra rubber that buses required made them less desirable and harder to maintain given the severe rubber shortage.
came when strikers from other plants convinced Local 513 at the Whiting, Indiana refinery to stop working. With over 6,000 employees, it was by far the largest oil refinery in the region, and when the Whiting facility shut down it was extremely difficult for any gas stations to procure additional fuel.\(^\text{326}\) If Detroit was likely the most incapacitated by the gasoline shortage, the situation was similar throughout several cities in the Midwest.\(^\text{327}\) In Toledo, Ohio, in fact, the city formally implemented gasoline rationing, setting up a rationing committee to determine need and allocate cards for those who qualified. In Detroit, however, the Mayor’s office refused to be responsible for distributing gasoline.\(^\text{328}\)

Despite the lack of gas in the Midwest, hundreds of Detroiters quickly took advantage of their proximity to Canada, and gasoline stations in Windsor (the city directly across the Ambassador Bridge from Detroit). Windsor stations raised their prices and extended their hours for Detroit drivers. On September 29, the Detroit Free Press documented a “stampede” of cars “line[d] up for a mile” to cross the bridge to Canada in hopes of buying gas across the border.\(^\text{329}\) Into October, Windsor


\(^\text{328}\) “Gas Rationed in Ohio Strike,” *Los Angeles Times*, 9/22/1945, p1; “Detroit Irked, But CIO Keeps Ration on Gas,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 10/2/1945, p2; “U.S. Offers Oil Peace Plan,” *Detroit Free Press*, 10/2/1945, p1. The *Los Angeles Times* (page 9) reported on September 27 that in Toledo “the only filling station which still had gasoline to sell without a city gas ration card” had cars “lined up for two miles.”

continued to be a major source of gasoline for Detroit drivers who did not support the strike.

As gas supplies dwindled in early October, some Detroit schools temporarily closed because school buses were not running. In nearby industrial suburb Allen Park, school superintendent C. G. Sudman explained that part of the reason schools could not open was that “Fourteen of our teachers must drive to get here and they have been refused gas. Some have tried to make it by bus but the busses are overly crowded and far apart.”330 Without improved bus service after the war, it was easy for potential riders to dismiss public transit as a means to commute to work and underscore driving as the only option.

“Essential” Driving

After gasoline stations in the city had been closed for a few days, it became clear that most city departments did not have large reserves of gasoline and would run out of fuel in less than a week. The Jeffries administration considered forcing striking workers to open gasoline stations and provide fuel but ultimately did not do so.331 Instead, Detroit OWIU Local 389 undertook the task of determining what uses of gasoline were crucial to the continued functioning of the city. Local 389's president Earl Burnett and secretary-treasurer Fred Fell, in consultation with city administrators, put together a “list of essential users” to receive gasoline for the duration of the strike. The problem, of course, was that not everyone agreed on who constituted an “essential” gas user during the strike.


Mimicking the much-despised rationing boards set up during the war to dispense ration coupons and determine how much gasoline a driver needed, the union undertook the task of dispensing fuel to the groups of people who met its criteria for emergency gasoline. It granted gasoline to certain institutions—including hospitals, the health, police, and fire departments, and the DSR—and to individuals in select professions. Union members created and implemented a program of distributing gasoline to select gas stations in the city at which “essential users” could get gas during the strike. Specially marked union trucks carried gas supplies to those stations designated to disburse the fuel.332

The OWIU sought to identify people whose services using gasoline were necessary to the public, and who could not conduct these services without additional gasoline. As discussed in Chapter Four, the government had deemed driving to work “essential” during the war because it allowed workers to get to war-related jobs such as producing weapons. During the strike, it became clear that Detroiters had imbibed this philosophy, as both those doling out “essential” gasoline and those demanding it justified their actions in terms of the work drivers performed. In addition to city departments, the union recognized “doctors, nurses, clergymen, undertakers, [and] dairies” as “essential users,” and workers in these occupations were able to go to one of 15 stations in the area to procure gasoline for their vehicles.333 Those on the list were granted access to gasoline supplies while the

332 “City Running Short of Gas; Mayor Asks Truman’s Aid,” Detroit Free Press, 9/22/1945, p1

rest of the city’s gas stations remained closed. Detroiters who needed gasoline were urged to call Local 389 and make arrangements to procure it at one of the designated stations kept open only for this purpose.334

Just as during World War II, many of those who did not get a privileged status to use more gasoline tried to convince others that they had to use their cars. As soon as it became known that the Union was creating a list to allocate some gasoline, Detroiters jammed telephone lines with their pleas that it was critically important for them to drive. Local union officials said that they were “swamped” with callers who claimed they should be on the essential list.335 When a potential customer arrived at the station, he or she had to get approval from an OWIU member on duty before the gas station attendant would provide fuel.336

The mayor’s office clashed with labor leaders over which municipal functions qualified for “emergency” gas and which did not. Jeffries demanded that all city workers have gasoline for their vehicles, and threatened to seize supplies if the OWIU did not give the city as much as he requested. Local 389 secretary-treasurer Fred Fell, responsible for determining essential use, told the mayor that the DSR was still operating and city employees should use that service instead of claiming that they could not get around without gasoline. “We won’t supply gas to anyone that doesn’t need it,” Fell declared pointedly. In what seemed an overt power play to

334 Some griped that the OWIU only allowed to stay open those stations that were sympathetic to the union.


appease Detroitors who criticized Jeffries for doing nothing during the strike, the mayor insisted that the union grant his wish and, despite threats, the local allocated the “essential” gasoline for garbage trucks and other city services.337

Much as during World War II, the classification of essential user of gasoline was fraught with meaning beyond simply access to fuel for one’s car. Receiving permission to get “emergency” gas was a symbol that one was important to the community. Descriptions of who could get gas during the strike emphasized the important work that these drivers did, not that their work required gasoline to perform it. For example, a news story about who could get gas during the strike explained that gasoline was available to people “whose services are necessary to the community’s peace, health and safety,” not for “ordinary citizens.”338 In this way, access to gasoline became conflated with doing important work, not just work that required driving. Newspapers wrote of people in “essential occupations” as having access to gasoline, emphasizing the importance and prestige of their work.339 As confusion over “essential,” escalated, the OWIU refined its position to provide gasoline for “dire emergency cases,” taken to mean “those arising from serious illness, injuries or death.”340

The public frequently interpreted the designation of “essential” gasoline users as delimiting essential workers. Being designated as “essential,” and thus

entitled to more gasoline than other people, carried with it tremendous status. As during the war, the category of “essential driving” underscored the importance of the automobile in everyday life (see Chapter Four). But after the completion of a war that some felt had been waged to guarantee there would be no more need to sacrifice, drivers for the most part seemed unwilling to consider public transportation as an alternative during the strike. Although newspaper reports claimed already-packed vehicles were becoming even more crowded, ridership increased by roughly 5% when gasoline stopped being available.\(^{341}\) Instead of recognizing that just as in the war, insufficient public transportation made it difficult to cope with resource shortages that hampered automobile travel, and thus demand better service in the future, the press and much of the public seemed to see public transit’s inadequacies as reason to dismiss the possibility of getting around by bus.

Some among the majority of Detroiters who were unsuccessful in their attempts to be added to the “essential use” list implored Mayor Jeffries to act on their behalf. In their appeals to Jeffries, many irate drivers justified their request for inclusion on the list of essential users by insisting that it was critical that they be able to perform their jobs and/or make a living to provide for family. Their arguments were based on their need to work, more often than on inability to perform work without a car.

The logical corollary to designating certain people as essential gasoline users was that others were “nonessential” users. Those told by the OWIU they did not merit gasoline during the strike suffered a blow to their egos on top of annoyance at

not being able to fill their tanks. One driver who was declined essential gas during the strike lamented “I have to use my truck every day, to make a living. Tonight I was refused gasoline because making your living is not essential. ... if the police department don’t take steps to assure a fair and equitable ration of gas for essential users, then maybe the so-called nonunion non-essentials will have to protect themselves. The Union Officials have all the gas they need, very essential. Are they any more essential than anyone else.”342 Wrote one upset Detroiter to the mayor, “My husband earns his living for our little girl and me by the use of his car. The gas tank is almost empty, and he has come home after a futile attempt to purchase gasoline.” She continued bitterly, calling attention to the fact that he did not have a privileged status on the essential user list, “It so happens that he is not a doctor or nurse.”343

In part because Detroit’s public transit system had been so inadequate during the war—and continued to be after the war ended—drivers tended to frame their options as either driving to work or not going to work at all. Thus they envisioned being categorized as essential or not as determining whether one worked. “My pay stops when I am without gasoline,” Nelson Bayer wrote to the Detroit News, without identifying his profession. “Has the right to make an honest living been revoked, pending CIO approval?,” he continued. “I need gas to go to

342 William Seater to Mayor Jeffries, 9/26/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

343 Letter to Mayor Jeffries, 10/1/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
work. I need work to live and so do thousands of others. How are we going to enforce our rights as American citizens— with guns and violence?”

On occasion, however, writers alluded to the inadequate public transit system to explain why they needed to drive. But more often people seemed to assume that the DSR was not a viable option. As George Cooper, a gas station operator asked about the future prospects of the shortage, apparently not facetiously, “If the strike continues much longer, there won’t even be any more driving to work. What will the public do then?”

When there had been a rubber shortage during World War II, government policies had encouraged drivers to see their cars as essential to the war effort, because driving allowed workers to get to their jobs producing goods for the war. Detroiteres had experienced first-hand how inadequate the public transit system was for handling the wartime transportation shortage, and neither city, state, nor federal officials had sought to alleviate the DSR’s problems during the war. As a result, when a shortage of resources struck the city only a month after V-J Day, few viewed the DSR as a viable solution for getting to work or running errands.

Securing Gasoline by Force

Sun Oil Company published an ad in the local papers on September 28 claiming that its truck drivers wanted to deliver gasoline to Detroit area gas stations

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345 See File Union Strikes, Box 7, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

but could not do so because striking workers had physically intimidated their workers, removing them from trucks and beating them.\textsuperscript{347} The anti-labor \textit{Detroit News} was quick to take up the management’s cause, declaring “If Sun is willing to deliver gas, its men and trucks should be protected by Detroit policemen, or by State Policemen, by Michigan State Troops, by United States Army troops, if necessary.”\textsuperscript{348}

The prosecutor for Macomb County, west of Detroit, enraged workers and became a hero for anti-labor forces when he ordered police under his jurisdiction to arrest strikers who prevented Sun Oil employees from delivering gasoline. Talking to the Police Chief of the city of Mt. Clemens, Michigan, prosecutor Wilbur Held instructed, “If they [pickets] lay hands on a truck driver, jail them for kidnapping. If they interfere otherwise, jail them for interfering with another person’s normal occupation.”\textsuperscript{349} After this announcement, the OWIU stopped picketing trucks and gas stations operated by non-unionized workers in Mt. Clemens.\textsuperscript{350}

To reclaim the right to gasoline, many advocated using force to oppose the strikers. Following this development, Detroiters flooded the Mayor’s office with demands that Mayor Jeffries similarly intervene in the labor dispute and order the police department to escort and protect truck drivers delivering gasoline to stations. Typical of the sentiments writers expressed, H. W. Hannert’s note to the mayor stated, “As a citizen of this city I demand that police protection be given the Sun Oil

\textsuperscript{347} Sun Oil Company advertisement, “Sun Oil Workers are Not on Strike!,” \textit{Detroit Free Press}, 9/28/1945, p11.


Co drivers in delivering gas to the Sun stations. I am plain mad about this lack of gas foolishness. Let’s bring it to an end quick.”351

Suggesting the mayor use, “our well trained police force,” one writer was “interested to know why I, as a citizen of this free land, must get the permission of some radical CIO member before I can purchase gasoline.” Lillie Fredericks asked for Detroit to follow the lead of Macomb County and use “police protection” to regain control of the gasoline supply. “I say meet force with greater force! But let right prevail- the rights of every citizen!”352 Similarly, the Kiwanis Club of Detroit “voted unanimously” to encourage Jeffries to seek “police protection for gasoline deliveries.”353

Navy Seizure

Eventually 43,000 OWIU members struck in 20 states, working for 22 different oil companies.354 After talks between OWIU leaders and oil company executives failed to produce agreements about the wage increase, and public outcry about the disruptions caused by the gas shortage escalated, President Truman intervened. On October 5, Truman ordered the Navy to seize control of oil companies, and ensure that gasoline production, transportation, and sale resumed.

351 H. W. Hannert to Mayor Jeffries, 9/28/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

352 Lillie Fredericks to Mayor Jeffries, 9/30/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

353 Telegram from Kiwanis Club to Mayor Jeffries, 10/1/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

without interference.\textsuperscript{355} Schwellenbach and Truman had laid the groundwork for the Navy takeover by framing the strike’s interruption to the gasoline supply as a matter of national security. They claimed that it was a threat to the U.S. Navy to allow the dispute to continue, and was delaying the return of U.S. troops from overseas.\textsuperscript{356}

OWIU President Knight directed members to comply with the President’s order and the Navy’s oversight of the process, but publicized the fact that the Union continued to be on strike against the oil companies. Knight wanted to ensure that the OWIU appear patriotic and cooperative with the Navy even as it continued to press the oil companies for higher wages.\textsuperscript{357} Navy control of oil processing continued for months, and without the ability to strike the OWIU had lost its strongest bargaining chip to press management for its demands. President Truman created a “fact-finding board” to determine what the oil company’s could afford to pay workers. In January 1946, he recommended that the Union and management agree to an 18% increase in wages, as opposed to the 30% the OWIU had struck for.\textsuperscript{358} Most locals settled for 18% increases to the hourly wage, while a few took

\textsuperscript{355} O’Connor, \textit{History of Oil Workers International Union CIO}, 54.


15%.\textsuperscript{359} These increases still resulted in a net loss of weekly pay for workers compared to 48-hour weeks during the war.

At the national level, the OWIU did not secure its “52 for 40” wage increase. Yet several locals throughout the United States successfully negotiated a 30% increase before the Navy took over operations of the oil industry. Wilshire Oil, in Long Beach, California, agreed to the increase on September 29, becoming the first company to comply with the OWIU’s demands. In the Detroit area, Aurora and Keystone settled with the OWIU for 30% on October 1, making Trenton Local 456 the first to secure the desired increase in the midwest.\textsuperscript{360} Independent of the specific wage settlements, the strike was successful for the OWIU in helping it to unify oil workers across the industry and around the country, and it was the first nationwide oil strike in the United States.\textsuperscript{361} The strike’s publicity also led to a surge in the union’s membership.\textsuperscript{362}

\textit{Driving as a Fundamental Right and Citizens as Drivers}

In shutting down gasoline stations to the general public as a strategy for securing “52 for 40,” the OWIU underestimated the associations that many Detroiter would have as drivers. It was not simply that Detroiter saw themselves as consumers, and viewed the oil strike as a hindrance to their opportunity to

\textsuperscript{359} O’Connor, \textit{History of Oil Workers International Union CIO}, 55.

\textsuperscript{360} “Trenton First Down, and First to Sign for 52-40,” \textit{International Oil Worker}, November 1945, p14.

\textsuperscript{361} “What We Achieved,” \textit{International Oil Worker}, October 1945, p1.

\textsuperscript{362} “OWIU Membership Hits All-Time High,” \textit{International Oil Worker}, November 1945, p1.
consume. The threat to car owners’ ability to drive seemed to be especially intolerable. Writing to Mayor Jeffries, residents described driving as a basic “right.” Veteran R. E. Greene invoked his efforts “fighting for everyone’s rights” abroad during the war and demanded, “Now I want my rights observed too. What are YOU going to do about it?”

Twenty-one people signed a letter to the Mayor that advised, “Yours is the immediate duty to take action to enable ordinary citizens to purchase gasoline and fuel oil for homes whenever available and to insure bulk delivery to stations without interruption.” One of the duties of their elected official, these writers expressed, was to provide an uninterrupted supply of fuel.

A medical doctor who was granted “emergency” gasoline wrote the *Detroit Free Press* to complain that the union decided who could get gasoline instead of everyone having the opportunity to buy it. “‘The Union allows.’ In such words am I told where I may buy needed gasoline and at the same time are the great majority of my fellow citizens told that they are not allowed to buy. Is this America? Is this the vaunted freedom that we have been cherishing[?],” the writer asked. In his view, it was un-American for the striking workers to prevent gasoline purchase by much of the public. Another resident found it particularly galling that veterans could not get gasoline because of the strike. “The soldier returns from war to find a union

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363 R. E. Greene to Mayor Jeffries, 10/3/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

364 Telegram to Mayor Jeffries, 10/2/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

representative at the gas station determining his eligibility to buy gasoline. Now that’s something!,” she wrote.  

If driving seemed an American right, it was not a great leap to depict strikers interfering with automobile production as enemies of America. World War II only a few weeks past, there were ready images of the enemy upon which to draw a comparison. One writer, Brewster Loud, Jr., opined to the Detroit News editor, “Naziism [sic] rides again, only now it is not in Germany but in the U.S.A. We now see a group of oil and refinery workers fostering their selfish interests in the present strike, which is placing in jeopardy the health and welfare of the innocent bystanding populace.” By interfering with gasoline supplies, Loud claimed, the strikers caused hardship and unhappiness. People “are being deprived of their livelihood- salesmen, for instance- and their right to the pursuit of happiness, by the continuation of this strike.” Loud concluded by suggesting that if Americans did not stand up to the tyranny of the union that was inflicting these problems on the American public, “the American people can be condemned as being more docile and therefore worse than the German people.”  

Not just the ability to perform one’s job was on the line in the oil strike, but also freedom from tyrannical control over one’s access to gasoline. In this way, some drivers portrayed unions as antithetical to American values because they regulated access to gasoline, which was essential for work and leisure.


Linking the strike to practices in Nazi Germany, several residents expressed concern to the Mayor that allowing a union to determine who could get gasoline was a prelude to the demise of democracy. Marian Paterson, a “busy housewife,” wrote a seething letter to the Mayor, excerpted here at length to convey the sense of frustration and anger it expressed.

You were voted into office to promote and defend a way of life which we took the trouble to go to war about fairly recently. ... I protest against having my life managed against my express will! I will go without gas for boys who are trying to save my way of life, but I will not go without gas because a union man decides I should not have it. ... now democracy itself is insulted! ... This is the first letter of this nature I have ever written. However, the time has come when I will not, like the fat faced hausfrau and city officials of Germany, be in a position to have to say, ‘No, I was never a Nazi, but what could I do about it? I didn’t know what was happening?’ In the meantime, I cannot go the necessary five miles to get food for my household- the food which the union is so willing to have spoil- with millions of people starving throughout the world. Forgive me if I do not want that kind of irresponsible representation. Forgive me also if I cannot sincerely say, Respectfully, Marian S. Paterson

To Paterson, the Mayor had failed to protect his constituents’ “way of life.” It was not a trivial matter who determined gasoline allocations and whether one could drive to get groceries, but instead represented a society in which one’s life was managed by someone else.

The Los Angeles Times worried that Los Angeles would soon face a gasoline shortage like that in Detroit. In early October a story informed readers that the possibility of gasoline rationing in L.A. “had all the earmarks of Communist origin,

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368 Marian S. Paterson to Mayor Jeffries, 9/26/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
since it would be a first step in a ‘proletarian dictatorship.’”

Restricting Americans’ access to gasoline, then, seemed tantamount to tyranny.

As strikes persisted and increased in numbers, the notion that Detroiter were consumers hurt by lack of gas for their autos and by the cessation of auto production became more explicit. Local press and individuals writing to the newspapers and the Mayor’s Office showed that many Detroiter identified strongly not just as consumers but in particular as drivers. One measure of the degree to which World War II had solidified the notion that America was a nation of drivers was the number of editorial cartoons that used the automobile and driving to represent the American public during the oil strike immediately following the war. Frank Williams’ cartoon “The Real Shortage” published on September 28, 1945 labeled a prominently-featured gasoline pump “Public Rights,” suggesting that gasoline was a basic right that the public should expect. In the image, a sign “closed by union order” hung from the pump, to the consternation of the white male driver who saw it upon stepping out of his car. The cartoon invited the viewer to identify with the driver, viewing the union’s strike as an impediment to his attainment of the “public right” to gasoline.

In another cartoon published at the end of September, “What a Way to Run a Service Station,” the white male “public” yells for help from the driver’s seat of a car at a service station. The car has been jacked several stories above the figures of

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“labor” and “management” who charge at each other down below, ignoring the
driver’s needs.371 While boss and worker fight, the driving public is stranded,
helpless, and immobile.

Depictions of the effects of strikes in auto-related industries on the American
public also featured Uncle Sam as a driver. In a cartoon titled, “Is this the postwar
dream car?,” driver Uncle Sam cries “I can’t see where I am going!” The car tilts
alarmingly downwards from an extremely large front wheel, labeled “high wages,”
to the properly proportioned back wheel labeled “low prices.”372 In this depiction,
high wages prevent the driver from having control of his car and even seeing the
road in front of him. Only by lowering wages, the cartoon suggests, will Americans
be able to drive.

Cotton Seiler has argued that mobility, and in particular automobility,
became deeply intertwined with Americans’ notions of freedom. Connecting the role
of freedom of mobility to the promotion and appeal of the Interstate Highway Act
during the Cold War, Seiler has shown how driving became associated with
American individuality and liberty. But an important step in the linking of freedom
and automobility occurred earlier, during World War II, when Americans could not
actually perform their freedom to drive. Americans internalized restrictions on
driving as temporary limitations to help secure a way of life in which they could
drive as much as they wished. Contrasting sharply with raised expectations of
freedom to drive without restriction when the war was won, the gasoline shortage

372 “Is this the postwar dream car?,” Detroit News 9/21/1945, p22.
during the strike produced clearer articulations of the centrality of driving to the American way of life.\footnote{Cotton Seiler, Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).}

Corporations played to the citizen-driver in building resentment against workers’ demands. As mentioned earlier, Sun Oil Company appealed to the public to demand government intervention in the OWIU strike against the union in order to speed up gas delivery to local stations and thus hasten the resumption of sales to the general public. General Motors framed labor’s demands as hurting the driving public. “Danger on the Production Front: How much will you have to pay for your new car? How long will you have to wait to get it?,” asked one advertisement.\footnote{General Motors advertisement, “Danger on the Production Front,” Detroit Free Press, 10/4/1945, p12.} The ad portrayed General Motors and “American industry,” as instrumental to the Allied victory in World War II and claimed that because “during the war, Victory Was Our Business,” the company had not profited and thus could not increase workers’ wages in the postwar period without hurting the consumer.

As the OWIU’s campaign for a 30% wage increase continued into December and was eclipsed in the media by the UAW’s campaign for a 30% wage increase, an editorial cartoon featured an irate driver (labeled “public”) stalled in a car trying to navigate a dirt road filled with large rocks labeled “strike.” The driver/public is indignant that bad faith bargaining has made it impossible for him to drive, as demonstrated in his statement, “I said let’s take the main road,” identified as “good
faith in collective bargaining.” In this image the driver is directly equated with the public, and again the public’s interests contrast with those of workers, with workers’ strikes preventing the car from moving forward.

_Detroit’s Mayoral Election, November 1945_

One immediate consequence of the gasoline strike was to galvanize opposition to mayoral candidate Richard Frankensteen in the month before the November 1945 election. Despite the fact that Jeffries was the incumbent, Frankensteen came in first in the August 7 nonpartisan primary to decide which two candidates appeared on the November ballot. Frankensteen garnered a larger number of votes than previous labor candidates for Detroit mayor, in part by criticizing Jeffries and the DSR Commission for having failed to provide adequate public transit service during the war. “The patience of the public spirited citizens of Detroit has reached a stage of exhaustion,” Frankensteen wrote. “In this city it is inexcusable that workers are forced to wait hours for a crowded street car or overloaded buses to transport them to work. Nor is there any reasonable excuse why busy housewives are compelled to strap-hang all the way downtown when shopping for the family.” Before the war was over, a platform that involved alleviating the DSR’s overcrowding problem appealed to many voters. But when the war ended soon afterwards, and strikes interfered with drivers’ access to gasoline,

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Frankensteen’s reputation was tarnished by his union connections. Concern that he would interfere with driving became a much stronger factor than his support for improvements to public transit.

Frankensteen was vice president of the United Automobile Workers and had strong CIO support. Because of his CIO union background, although he was not directly involved in the OWIU strike, he became linked to it in public discourse. Thus drivers fed up with not being able to get gas were quick to see Frankensteen as an enemy, someone who would not intervene to help drivers get what they wanted.

The final weeks of the mayoral campaign were particularly bitter, and Jeffries was widely criticized for waging a negative campaign and in particular appealing to bigotry to get votes. While the mayor did not get an outpouring of support for his policies and past record, he benefited from negative reactions to the strike and associations with the CIO.

Although outraged that he had not been able to get gas flowing earlier, many who complained to him noted that they feared much worse if Frankensteen were elected. In the case of securing gasoline supplies, Jeffries was “the lesser of two evils.” Wrote one Detroiter to Jeffries, “I guess this strike has been a Godsend to you and as an awakener to the voting public of what can happen when the CIO goes


379 Theresa B. Lloyd to Mayor Jeffries, 9/30/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.
on its high horse. Because of course Frankensteen is definitely out now."\(^{380}\) Another wrote in a letter to the *Detroit News*, “Don’t [the unions] realize that Frankensteen has lost any chance he had of becoming Mayor of Detroit?”\(^{381}\) And as one wryly suggested to the mayor, “Go easy on the striker’s [sic]. They have successfully won the next election- for you.”\(^{382}\) Having lost the August primary by 14,000 votes, Jeffries beat Frankensteen on November 6 by 58,000 votes.\(^{383}\)

*Conclusion*

The real test of how thoroughly automobility had become part of the American way of life came a month after the war ended, when Oil Workers International Union members struck for higher wages in Detroit and across the country. Detroiters expressed disbelief that such an interference with their ability to drive could happen in America. As Americans adjusted to a postwar society without gasoline rationing, the nationwide oil strike in the fall of 1945 revealed drivers’ belief that the war had secured their right to drive without restriction.

The weeks-long episode exposed many Detroiters’ conviction that an unhampered ability to drive was a fundamental right. In their protests against the CIO picketers who prevented them from getting gas, drivers accused the union of

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\(^{380}\) Lillie Fredericks to Mayor Jeffries, 9/30/1945, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.


\(^{382}\) R. L. Young to Mayor Jeffries, undated, Mayor’s Papers 1945, Box 7, File Union Strikes, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library.

trampling on their basic rights by depriving them of the opportunity to fill up their tanks. In this way, the war emerged as a guarantor of a future without hardships, a temporary period of sacrifice for the sake of assuring a future of plenty. The strike shortly after hostilities ended posed a challenge to the postwar vision of “freedom from want.”

The oil strike evinced the great extent to which driving and American citizenship had become conflated during World War II. In replicating the category of “essential driving” that the U.S. government had used during the War, the OWIU and city officials reinforced the importance of driving to the American way of life. With long-promised improvements to public transit still unfulfilled, much of the public dismissed buses and streetcars as an unreasonable alternative to private cars, even during the temporary shortage.

The strike also revealed how discredited public transit was in Detroit. When suddenly faced with gasoline shortages due to union pickets, drivers complained that it was essential for them to have gas and that they could not function without it. That the DSR’s service had only worsened since war’s end made driving seem all the more imperative. Framing their options as getting to work by driving or not getting to work at all, drivers’ responses to the strike underscored how fleetingly they had considered alternative modes of transportation during the war.

As the strike demonstrated, immediately after the war Detroit drivers ceased to accept any restrictions on their driving. Many had seen the successful fighting of the war as a guarantee of a higher standard of living in the future, and in particular had seen access to gasoline as critically important to the American way of life. The
strike forced drivers to abruptly abandon the limitless driving they had only briefly experienced since gasoline rationing had been lifted on August 15. More than three years of proudly “making do” and “doing without” notwithstanding, Detroiters saw an interruption to the city’s gasoline supply as catastrophic and wanted the government to do whatever was necessary to get gas flowing again immediately.
Epilogue

In the summer of 1946, Detroit celebrated the 50th anniversary of the automobile in America with a festival meant to rival a World’s Fair. Over the course of twelve days in late May and early June, Detroit hosted the National Automotive Golden Jubilee, a tribute to the automobile industry that projected a bright future for the Motor City in an era of postwar peace and prosperity. The Jubilee featured parades of new cars, opulent award ceremonies for the automotive industry’s “pioneers,” and antique autos to commemorate Detroit’s automotive history and ingenuity. In the opening ceremony, the queen of the festival “waved a wand” that caused the “first-ever use of atomic power for peacetime purposes,” meant to represent the energy of the future.384

Detroiter vied for spots along Woodward Avenue to see the “parade of progress” stream by, featuring historic cars produced in Detroit since 1896, as well as the new postwar models.385 Three hundred thousand spectators watched as numerous floats and bands paraded for hours. Woodward had been painted gold for the occasion, to emphasize its grandeur.386

385 Ibid.
Billed as “the greatest celebration ever staged by any great city,” the gala was meant to “restore the unity” of Detroiter around the automobile as a symbol of Detroit’s greatness and promise for the future. Racial violence and labor strikes had shaped the image of the city during World War II and in the months following its end. Automobile manufacturers created the enormous pageant to focus attention on Detroit’s industrial might, and to appeal to Detroiter as car owners and drivers. William Knudsen, former president of General Motors and organizer of the Golden Jubilee, saw the occasion as an opportunity to "bring this city back into the good grace of the world."

Yet while the pageant centered on “the convenient, economical, modern transportation that has become a standard in the American way of life,” few cars were being produced. Ironically, as Detroit began the Golden Jubilee celebrations as homage to the automobile, virtually all of the city’s automobile manufacturing plants were closed because of strikes. It would be months before cars were widely available for purchase, but the festival encouraged Detroiter to anticipate the production of new automobiles as a fulfillment of their long-frustrated dreams.

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391 Ibid.
Less than a year after the country had faced severe shortages of rubber, gasoline rationing, and restrictions on “nonessential” driving, Detroit offered a vision of the future centered on the automobile not merely for all transportation but as a source of pride, pleasure, employment, and liberty.

At roughly the same time as the Golden Jubilee, Detroit’s City Plan Commission released its Master Plan for the City of Detroit. Wedded to the image of Detroit portrayed in the Automotive Golden Jubilee, the Master Plan called for a series of highways, expressways, and more parking lots throughout the city. Unlike plans created just two years before, this comprehensive document did not include expansion of public transportation services. By 1946 it was no longer politically necessary for city politicians even to promise improved public transit for Detroit.

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