
Racism and Resistance:

African-American Labor and

Housing Discrimination

During the 1940s

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Introduction:

Maya Angelou said in her famous autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, “I would have the job. I would be a conductorette and sling a full money changer from my belt. I would.”¹ Her steadfast determination and resilience against centuries old racial barriers allowed her to become the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco. Angelou’s feat was one of many firsts for black women. Shirley Chisholm became the first black woman to run for president in 1972. In 2013, Black Lives Matters became one of the first mainstream racial activism groups and was founded by three African-American women. Both today and historically, black women have been the most underprivileged group in America, through hundreds of years of racialized misogyny. Throughout much of the country’s history, the majority of its historians have been white and racist. Black women as a result have been systematically erased and ignored from America’s narrative.

Black women faced economic disparities, struggles, and obstacles during the World War II era that were unlike any that whites faced. The United States had just come out of the Great Depression, in which blacks were especially impoverished and unable to receive aid, to the most racially tumultuous and economically prosperous part of the first half of the 20th century. They came into the 1940s to cities such as Atlanta and Detroit with new prospects. African-Americans hoped for factory jobs with better pay, affordable houses to buy or rent, and better schools for their children. None of these were available without a staggering cost. Black women had to protest and fight alongside the NAACP and other groups to even be considered for labor outside of domestic work, a facet of discrimination dating back to slavery. Housing had a plethora of problems including predatory realtors, segregated neighborhoods, and whites that were heavily resistant to black migration. Schools were segregated throughout the nation and colleges

¹ Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (Random House: New York, 1969), 91.

followed suit. The aftermath of the war led to an influx of both black and white men that either saw to return to jobs they saw as rightfully theirs, or to enroll in college. Blacks, however, had very little choice in college and many were unable to enroll due to a lack of available openings. Many historians write the America in World War II as a culmination of the war effort, pushed by men and women in racial harmony to defeat the fascists, as working in perfect tandem with the victorious war effort. This thesis argues that this view fundamentally ignores the racial dichotomy of America in which blacks were systematically oppressed at every level of existence. African-American women struggled and fought a plethora of oppressors to achieve even the smallest of advancements for labor and housing rights in Atlanta and Detroit during and after World War II.

African-American women are a mostly ignored centerpiece of American history as a whole, but especially in women's rights and labor rights. The rights that these groups have now is from decades of activism and protests with black women being front and center for both. One of the most pivotal points of history is the World War II era, which is primarily responsible for the advancement of these efforts. The war itself is the most historically documented series of events ever with hundreds of books, movies, academic papers, and controversial arguments that continue to be shared. Alongside the war is the growth of feminism and women's labor that is well documented with a significant focus on white women. The lesser told history, or herstory, is that of the systematically oppressed black women, who fought the government, corporations, white men, white women, and even black men, to a degree, to achieve their equal rights. This project attempts to correct the failings of other historians by putting black women at the forefront of history. Each chapter discusses specific, yet intrinsically connected aspects of black women's lives including labor, education, housing, violence, and activism.

Chapter One details both the labor advances that black women earned and the obstacles that they either overcame or pushed them back. As the Great Depression came to an end, hundreds of thousands of blacks moved towards cities in search of new higher-paying jobs. What they initially found were the same type of domestic work that was offered to them before. The government gave no assistance and had to be threatened with marches and protests in order to provide aid for black workers. After this and in conjunction with the NAACP and an assortment of labor unions, black women were readily employed by major manufacturers. While their factory jobs allowed for the financial security they were unable to get as domestic workers, they still faced staunch discrimination from white women, many of whom outright refused to work with blacks. Employers that hired black women, begrudgingly or not, typically gave them both the most dangerous assortment of work and worse hours such as the graveyard shift. Discrimination encapsulated every aspect of a working black women as she faced both racism and sexism from her employers and white co-workers as well as harassment and assault on public transportation.

Chapter Two specifies the severe housing discrimination that blacks faced in Detroit and Atlanta both during the war and after. Whites initially kept blacks entirely segregated through any legal means necessary, by way of various local, state, and federal laws. When these laws were overturned or fought against, blacks attempted to move out towards white neighborhoods. Those with higher-paying jobs were able to move into middle class white sections of a city, resulting in the current residents fleeing. Realtors preyed on white fears in order to profit greatly from this phenomenon, which resulted in racial tensions and blacks being financially exploited. Other whites would actively fight and intimidate blacks to stay away from their areas, which often resulted in either assault or death. The Ku Klux Klan was revived in Atlanta after the war

and enacted terror and violence on black communities. Both city governments actively attempted to create large-scale public works projects in order to further segregate the black communities from white areas of the city. Even the GI bill, which helped hundreds of thousands of veterans buy homes and enroll in college, was discriminatory in both its incarnation and practice. Many of the colleges and schooling available to blacks offered little to no actual promise for higher-paying positions.

Chapter three details the excessive variety of anti-black policies and actions by both governments and white citizens and the responses of black civil rights groups. Politically, some Democrats saw blacks as a necessary voting bloc, but few politicians ever did anything beneficial for them. Mayor Hartsfield of Atlanta, however, built up a moderate base of whites and blacks. His leadership strengthened blacks at times and weaken their power at others while leaving a lasting legacy on the city. The NAACP worked to improve voter restrictions on blacks and challenge other unequal legislature that made blacks second-class citizens. The Ku Klux Klan's revival in Atlanta and Detroit's strained racial tensions led to conflict and intimidation of voter rights along with other issues. A small altercation was the fuse that lit the racial tensions in Detroit into the Detroit Race Riot of 1943, which left several dozen dead and hundreds injured. Protests against injustice helped set the pace for civil rights movements into the 1950s and helped show that black women were essential to black activism.

Chapter Four relates the previous chapters of this thesis to race relations today. There has been a significant amount of progress that has been fought for over the past seventy years. Equality on the surface appears to be closer than it has ever been in America, but many aspects of racism and discrimination remain. Police and other privileged whites kill African-Americans and continue to live their life with no justice. Employers are still able to discriminate against

blacks and do so legally in many cases. Schools and housing are both still highly segregated, especially in cities. Even with the advancement of rights in numerous areas for blacks, the reality of America is still one that maintains a hierarchy in which white men are at the top and black women are trapped at the bottom.

Historiography:

On the surface, this thesis provides a historical narrative of both oppression and success that is common throughout American history. Its context, however, shows one of the most significant periods of American history from a lens that is typically overlooked. There are hundreds of articles and books that detail labor history during World War II and the empowerment of women in the 1940s through the advancement of job opportunity. What the vast majority of those works fail to include is an intersectional piece that includes or focuses on black women. As one of the most oppressed groups in the nation's history, they are often ignored in textbooks and academic research. This project gives a close look at Atlanta and Detroit, two pivotal cities in the 1940s that are both incredibly different in structure, politics, and industry, yet share such stark similarities with its treatment towards black women. It shines a light on an oppressed group with their struggles and successes during a time when black women were routinely ignored by media, historians, and by the majority of white America.

There are gaps in three areas of historiography that this thesis attempts to fill, with the first focusing on black feminism in the 1940s. There are multiple noted black feminists in other areas of the 20th century. Mamie Till, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, and Zora Neale Hurston some of the more well-known writers and activists. They were prominent in the 1920s and 1960s, which have carefully recorded details on the black women's movement during the Harlem Renaissance and the rise of the Black Panther party. There are, however, very few well known

black feminists during World War II and the early aftermath. Those that were prominent such as Claudia Jones were arrested for her ties to the communist party and are typically more relevant to the 1950s. This era did not have a major unified movement for black women's rights in the conventional sense that other times in American history did. There was not a fight to gain the right to vote or to protests for women to be secure in their sexuality and bodies. What this era did provide that is overlooked are the struggles and battles that black women faced to achieve successes in labor rights.

This leads into the second section of ignored historiography of black women and labor rights. Women's labor rights during the war are a heavily researched topic, but with most academics and scholars focusing on white women gaining better labor opportunities. These historians fail to address black Americans and their unique struggle with employment. Black women were paid significantly less, typically given late night shifts, and were routinely ignored by unions and government programs. The New Deal for example specifically left out professions that were primarily filled with black workers. Black women coming out of the Great Depression had no government assistance, money, or a feasible way to climb the socioeconomic ladder. New jobs and positions allowed for small amounts of financial gain and quality of life improvement. The problems laid out here lead into the third realm of historiography that this project seeks to improve on, which is black women and discrimination.

Discrimination was an omnipresent aspect of life for black women. They faced both racism and sexism from white men, racism from white women, and sexism from black men. On the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, they were on the bottom with little chance of being able to climb up. The improved job opportunities due to the booming war industry allowed a chance at gaining financial security and independence for black women, but there was always a cost.

When employers hired women, white women were preferred and consistently hired over black women. There is a distinct lack of historical attention paid to the privilege and racist actions that many of these white women had and performed. They would conduct hate strikes if black women were hired to try to ensure their separation from blacks.² Employers would make excuses to prevent blacks from being hired to ensure a segregated workplace, regardless of the illegality of their actions. Discrimination is not an overlooked topic, but it is at this point in American history. There are a number of secondary works that were a mixture of excellent and adequate resources for this thesis.

Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* gives a general overview of Detroit's history from the 1930s and on. It provides excellent detail on the problems of labor, housing, and discrimination in the industrial city. The book clearly discusses the major organizations and events that are relevant to this time period. Sugrue highlights the class and race inequality that has maintained constant throughout various decades in Detroit, focusing on black laborers. What this book lacks is a stronger focus that details the struggles and obstacles that black women faced during the 1940s. It offers specific information about black struggles in general but does not provide enough detail on black women.³

Kevin Kruse's *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*, provides the same general overview that Sugrue does, except it is focused on Atlanta. He goes into great depth on the factors that cause inequality for blacks in the southern city. There is a plethora of information on racial tensions, the rise of moderate politics and later conservatism. It highlights

² Allan Winkler mentions aspects of racism against blacks and resistance to racist employers but fails to mention anything more than a single sentence specifically about black women. Allan Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1976), 58.

³ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996).

the behind the scenes deals that went into running the city and the attempts made at racial integration in the 1940s. Kruse goes into more detail on black women in the city than Sugrue, but still comes short of a satisfactory focus for this project.⁴

Ira Katznelson's *When Affirmative Action Was White* offers a specific lens into unequal labor rights for blacks. It discusses the inherent structural racism within welfare, the New Deal, the GI Bill, and a multitude of other government programs and employers. He connects every financial aspect of the mid-20th century to how it directly affected blacks of the time and showed the clear quality of life difference between whites and blacks. Katznelson provides an adequate amount of information on black women and his book is an especially important piece of black labor historiography.⁵

Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II by Allan Winkler is one of the most dated secondary sources used. His work provides a general overview of the domestic events of the war and includes information about various minority groups. As a book that only has subsections on women and African-Americans, it did not offer much relevant information that was relevant to this project. What Winkler does explain is a basic overview of Fair Employment Practice Committee and several other methods of resistance that African-Americans utilized to seek equal labor rights.⁶

Ain't I a woman: Black women and Feminism by Bell Hooks provides the most focused look at black women of almost any academic book. Her discourse on the extensive factors that contribute to black women, racism, and sexism show a deep understanding of black history in

⁴ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2005).

⁵ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White* (New York City, New York: Norton & Company Inc., 2005).

⁶ Allan Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1976)..

America. Her work is an intersectional piece that is critical to black feminist historiography. What Hooks' book lacks is a stronger focus on 1940s America as it covers the general black female experience from slavery up until the 1980s.⁷

Dayo Gore's *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* provides similar information as Bell Hooks, but with a focus on 1940s to 1980s America. The clear problem in this book lies within its context of a cold war book mostly relating to the 1950s and 1960s. There is, however, valuable information about black women, feminism, and labor rights in the World War II era. This book discusses black female leaders that few other sources mention.⁸

Jacqueline Jones' *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family, From Slavery to the Present* gives a general overview of black women from slavery to the 1980s. It only has a small section dedicated to the World War II era, but is filled with a trove of information. Jones focuses on the lives and struggles that black women faced throughout centuries of American history. She clearly depicts labor discrimination as one of the most significant problems during this era and some of the various efforts that were put in place to stop it. Like Winkler, Jones also wrote her book several decades ago in the 1980s. It is, however, more detailed and focused on relevant topics for this project than *Home Front*.⁹

Methods and Sources:

Most of the sources used for this thesis were obtained from the Purchase College library database, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. As vernacular and language discussing race was different in the 1940s, the search terms varied heavily for primary sources. At that time, it was

⁷ Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1981).

⁸ Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York City, New York: New York University, 2011).

⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Woman, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. (New York City, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985).

commonplace to for African-Americans to be referred to as negroes or other more derogatory racial epithets. Racial epithets and slurs were not used for research or at all in this thesis.

Academic scholars typically labeled them as black while journalists and other writers often used negro. Secondary sources typically use more modern and respectful vernacular such as African-American or black.

The primary sources used for this project were a mixture of news articles and academic journals written in the 1940s and 1950s. Purchase's database is rather limited in its collection of historical articles and newspapers which prevented a greater variety of sources. The Saturday Evening Post, The Journal of Negro Education, and academic sociology articles were the majority of results from the school's archive. ProQuest offers a much larger collection of newspapers specifically but contains few pieces relevant to this thesis.

Chapter 1: Progress for and Discrimination Against Black Women in the Workforce

The labor dynamic in America radically shifted for women from the end of the Great Depression to the economic boom of World War II as millions joined the workforce. Women of color, many of whom had worked previously in domestic jobs, had more opportunity to advance in blue collar employment. Defense factories in Detroit hired thousands of African-American men for factory jobs with higher wages than were available before the war. Large factory owners and most other employers, however, systematically attempted to prevent black women from obtaining higher paying jobs. While Atlanta was not a major factory hub like Detroit, its centralized black neighborhoods and esteemed black university allowed for numerous black-owned businesses to thrive and create a black community. Many blacks in the city, however, had to work at jobs in white parts of the city and still faced discrimination. Black mothers were especially vulnerable as they had to deal with finding care for children, the lowest wages offered, and harassment on public transportation. The obstacles and discrimination that black women in new labor opportunities faced set up their problems for housing and were intrinsically connected through a lack of financial means and racism.

The effects of the Great Depression and reactive New Deal set the pretense for the rough start of blacks finding employment during the war. The average unemployment rate for Americans was 25 percent during the Great Depression, but it was twice that or more in some areas for African-Americans. Scholar Ira Katznelson wrote of the South during the Great Depression, “Having hired black household help was nearly universal among middle-class and upper-class whites in the region. Even some one in five relatively poor whites with family incomes under \$1,000 per year, employed black maids during the depression.”¹⁰ The jobs black

¹⁰ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White* (New York City, New York: Norton & Company Inc., 2005), 32.

women had at this time were primarily farmers or domestic servants, both positions that were reminiscent of their roles as slaves. Black maids could make as little as \$5 a week and were one of the most vulnerable groups of workers. They often faced harassment, physical abuse, and sexual violence at the hands of their employers. Maids and farmers were also the hardest hit professions and received minimal to no aid from the government. Major aspects of the New Deal were deliberately discriminatory. Social security and unemployment specifically left out farmers, servants, and maids, the vast majority of which were black. Southern Democrats ensured that every major part of the New Deal left out these jobs to ensure blacks would stay in states of poverty. The results and responses to the Great Depression left most African Americans in a uniquely low and impoverished position by the time the war improved the economy.¹¹

The start of America's involvement in World War II caused hundreds of thousands of men to enlist, which gave way to a plethora of employment opportunity for people to join the labor force coming out of the depression. Demand for workers after the war started dramatically decreased unemployment across the board for all races and genders, but with heavily disproportionate numbers. Jacqueline Jones said, "For the first two and a half years of the war, especially, when defense plants hired any black women at all, they used them as scrubwomen or janitors. Labor-hungry employers hired either white women or black men first, depending on the industry, but black women always last."¹² Factories and employers would focus on white women for jobs that they deemed suitable for the stereotypically weaker sex. More strenuous and dangerous jobs would go to black men that were considered temporary or expendable. What menial jobs were left for black women, if any were hired at all, were custodial and service jobs. Due to this, some black women were unable to escape the domestic service jobs that they had

¹¹ Katznelson, *Affirmative Action*, 32-36.

¹² Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Woman, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. (New York City, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985), 238.

previously held such as maids and cooks for wealthier whites. In addition to the poor job choices, many of these jobs only became available because they were abandoned by white women who could were far more readily hired in factories. There were changes and progress made by the early 1940s that allowed for better chances at work for black women, but there was still heavy discrimination.¹³

Progress was not made without serious civil rights protests by leaders such as A. Philip Randolph and others. In 1943, Randolph was aiming to lead a black only 100,000 man march and protest for civil rights in Washington D.C. Roosevelt, fearing bad publicity in a tense time during the war, met with Randolph instead. Allan Winkler said, “The president tried to use his well-known powers of persuasion to get Randolph to back off, but the black leader pressed for ‘something concrete, something tangible.’”¹⁴ The president responded to the pressure and agreed to create the Fair Employment Practice Committee. Roosevelt said to the press, “There shall be no discrimination in the employment of any person in war industries or in government by reason of race, creed, color, or national origin.”¹⁵ This resulted in the creation of the Fair Employment Practice Committee, or FEPC, which was designed to aid workers.

The FEPC fielded discrimination complaints but was only able to resolve one third of the total cases it received. Its function was to settle disputes between workers and employers but was only able to be effective in major wartime industries. Most employers that they dealt with either ignored the FEPC’s orders or heeded them at a surface level while continuing to discriminate against blacks quietly. The committee itself was underfunded with a small \$80,000 budget, constantly forced to move locations, and only had a small number of agents. It had several

¹³ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love*, 236-40.

¹⁴ Allan Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1976), 62.

¹⁵ Associated Press, “The President’s Order,” *New York Times*. May 29th, 1943. 6.

successes, only when the war effort was believed to be at stake, but ultimately failed to achieve much notable progress. Its symbolic influence showed that the government made an attempt at equality for working blacks, but was unable to do more. While more men worked in wartime industries, it helped pave the path for better anti-discrimination laws to empower women. Other organizations that attempted to aid African-Americans were unions and the NAACP that gave workers a more powerful voice and bargaining chip.¹⁶

The United Automobile Workers, or UAW was the major black-friendly union in Detroit and one of the only in the country. Membership for the UAW rose its ranks of black workers by over a million from 1940 to 1945. Membership was available to both men and women, whom were given assistance in finding jobs throughout the city. While this union was not always consistent in fair treatment of workers, it did help secure several victories for black workers, especially in Detroit where it was headquartered. Thomas Sugrue said, “Only 11 of 44 firms surveyed by the UAW in late 1942 had black workers... 119 of 197 Detroit manufacturers surveyed had no black employees. A 1944 report found that a ‘44% advance in wartime employment brought with it an advance of 103% in the total number of Negroes employed.”¹⁷ They often worked in conjunction with the NAACP to pressure the FEPC or support protests and even political candidates. The NAACP actively pushed to improve workers’ rights through protests, lawsuits, and attempts to expose the illegal hiring processes of major companies. Their joint efforts were the primary reason that the FEPC was successful in Detroit. Even with these organizations pushing black labor rights, African Americans in Detroit, particularly women, still faced severe discrimination.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 26-28. Winkler, *Home Front*, 62-63.

¹⁷ Sugrue, *Urban Crisis*, 27.

¹⁸ Sugrue 27, 82, Winkler, 62-63.

Discrimination towards black female laborers goes far beyond a lack of jobs offered before the FEPC's successful challenges during 1943. Both private and public companies used any means necessary to stem the hiring of these women. Employers would use methods or excuses based around segregation. Some companies would argue that they have not had time to create segregated bathrooms or work areas. Others outright refused to hire blacks. Lionel Kimble wrote, "African-American women who filled out applications for employment were refused the opportunity to submit those applications even while white women were allowed to fill out the employment blanks."¹⁹ Tactics like this were common across the board. Large companies producing goods for the war effort could be reined in by the FEPC with enough influence from the NAACP and UAW in addition to public protests. Private employers, however, had almost no hope of being successfully challenged by African-Americans. The FEPC and other organizations could not spare the resources and time to focus on private employers to help one or two black workers when challenging companies such as Ford and other Detroit industrial plants could help thousands of black workers achieve better pay or even to be considered for being hired. The discrimination did not end here, however, and continued heavily even after with the jobs that black women were hired for.²⁰

Black women after 1943, even with advancements in pay and potential work that they were hired for continued to face significant discrimination. After continued legal challenges from the NAACP and FEPC towards Ford and other major industrial companies in Detroit, many of these companies started to hire black women against their will. In hiring an increase of African-American women, they promoted white workers and left black women in the lowest rungs on the industrial ladder. They had to work dangerous jobs that had high injury rates, low pay, and long

¹⁹ Kimble, Lionel Jr. "I Too Serve America: African American Women War Workers in Chicago, 1940-1945." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, no. 4 (2000): 415-434. JSTOR.

²⁰ Sugrue 28, Winkler 55, 63.

hours. Jones wrote, “In airplane assembly plants, black women stood in stifling ‘dope rooms’ filled with the nauseating fumes of glue while white women sat on stools in the well-ventilated sewing room. Elsewhere black women worked with ammunition and gunpowder, poisonous plastics and acetone... all without the prospect of job advancement or promotion.”²¹ These conditions were inherently dangerous with some bordering on being illegal. Many factories kept black women in these repugnant settings with longer hours, lower pay, and fewer breaks while white women were given amenities and clean working environments. A segregated work area was one way for them to lessen racial tension as some whites felt so strongly that they went on hate strikes to oppose black women being hired. These types of dangerous and stressful conditions did not only affect black women in the workplace, but also negatively impacted their home life and children.²²

Taking care of children was another major difficulty for black mothers. Many factories would also force black women into grueling graveyard shifts, which made taking care of their children and homes incredibly difficult. Graveyard, or third, shifts typically ran from midnight until 8 A.M. Women working late shifts had a challenging time in getting home in time to prepare their children for school. Mothers would have their pay reduced for family emergencies or any time they were late or had to leave early. Some could not afford a babysitter or childcare while many others were unable to place their children in care due to a segregated daycare center or its location. Kenneth Clark stated, “That segregation has detrimental personality effects upon Negro children which impair their ability to profit from the available educational facilities.”²³ He argues that segregation and racism is a direct cause of depression in young black children. One

²¹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love*, 240.

²² *Ibid*, 240, 251; Sugrue 27-28; Martin, Louis E. "Profiles: Detroit." *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 17, no. 5 (1944): 282.

²³ Kenneth B. Clark, “The Social Scientist as an Expert Witness in Civil Rights Litigation.” *Social Problems* 1, no. 1 (1953): 7.

expert speaking to the *Saturday Evening Post* said, “Women don't have wives, nobody at home to clean the house, get breakfast, pack a hearty lunch and have a hot supper waiting. With a home and often youngsters to look after before or after her eight-hour trick at the plant plus transportation time, Rosie has a job and a half.”²⁴ While this article specifically only mentions white women, the problems are twofold for black women. White women did face the same circumstances of raising a child and working, but they had inherent privilege over black women. Whites did not receive intense racially charged discrimination to any capacity and were rewarded with better pay, hours, and job opportunity for simply being born white. Daycare centers were more affordable and would always take white children while typically being located near white neighborhoods. Whites could even get to work more easily. Public transportation was far more convenient for white women as streetcars were heavily segregated.²⁵

Public transportation was another necessary risk for working blacks that systematically exploited them. Private bus companies were complicit in restricting the accessibility of African-Americans. In Atlanta, these companies refused to offer service to any black neighborhoods in the city. Kruse says, “Once transit companies finally did provide service to these areas, black riders had to pay high prices.”²⁶ Black workers that were trying to save money to buy houses were now being exploited by a racist monopoly that overcharged them for inadequate service. For many, it was a necessity to use public transportation to get to their jobs, most of which paid blacks poorly. What transpired from blacks using public transportation was another battleground of racial tension.

Buses were partially integrated with a color line that kept blacks in the back and whites up front. All of the drivers in Atlanta were white and carried guns while working due to

²⁴ J.C. Furnas, “Are Women Doing Their Share in the War?” *Saturday Evening Post*. April 29th, 1944. 13.

²⁵ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love*, 253-255,

²⁶ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 111.

racialized fights occurring on streetcars. In 1946, a black World War II veteran named Madison Harris got into an argument with a driver and left the bus. The driver pulled out his gun, which prompted Harris to put his arms up in the air, and then shot him. Another similar occurrence happened that same year with a black veteran who was followed out of a bus by the driver and shot multiple times. Several other white men who heard the gunshots came out to assist the streetcar operator. Judge A.W. Callaway ruled, “This is nothing but a case of justifiable homicide.”²⁷ Both the city and the bus company, Georgia Power, sided with drivers in every case that was brought up. This type of violence was common, justified by the state, and left dozens of blacks dead.²⁸

The sequence of factors that systematically oppressed African-American laborers during World War II ensured their status as a second-class citizen both during and after the war. It ensured that, regardless of the opportunities that were created, blacks were still poorer and worse off than whites by a significant margin. Black men and women were both able to advance economically, but with numerous costs to health, family, and safety. The FEPC, UAW, and NAACP all attempted to support black workers with minimal success. White workers, especially in industry jobs in Detroit, enacted hate strikes to prevent an integrated workforce. Factory owners and other employers often ignored qualified black applicants while accepting white ones without a resume. Public transportation could be fatal for some black men while black mothers often had to work graveyard shifts and were unable to take care of their children during the day. Even with slightly better pay and more economic opportunities, most black women were still in a financially unstable spot and were unable to save much. Many attempted to move into better neighborhoods but were mainly unable to due to a lack of wealth. The connection between labor

²⁷ Kruse, *White Flight*, 109.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 108-111.

and housing discrimination is intrinsically tied together because of both the available money that black families had and the racism that was used to enforce segregation.

Chapter 2: Urban Housing Discrimination Against African-Americans

As African-Americans moved into major cities in greater numbers and increased their agency within these areas, whites resisted in any fashion they could. Two of the biggest destinations that blacks migrated to from the late 1930s to early 1950s were Detroit and Atlanta. These were also the cities that had the most violence and resistance to integration. Whites attempted to subvert the flow of blacks into cities and funnel them into poor overcrowded neighborhoods in order ignore them as much as possible. Real estate agents worked together in nefarious ways to exploit both whites and blacks for financial gain. State governments typically attempted to keep the two groups separated entirely by keeping housing districts segregated and using any legal means possible to prevent integration, including the use of eminent domain. Outside groups such as the Ku Klux Klan actively harassed, intimidated, and murdered African Americans who tried to move into white neighborhoods. Most federal attempts to aid blacks and veterans ended up being tools to further discrimination and widen the maw of segregation. While blacks spread throughout Detroit and Atlanta, they were systematically oppressed by whites, realtors, bankers, colleges, along with their respective local, state, and federal governments.

Detroit and Atlanta offered a number of benefits for blacks to migrate to. There was cheap housing, amicable black communities, job opportunity, and most importantly, a semblance of an escape from the Great Depression and the Jim Crow South. Detroit was far north of the Mason-Dixon line that separated aggressively racist Southern senators with the moderate, but negligent Northern politicians. Both areas allowed for social and economic advancement to a degree, especially in the wartime economy. Relatively stable black communities were a welcome sight to those who moved from desolate rural regions that were strewn across the South. While blacks migrating to Atlanta and Detroit may have escaped some of the more extreme Jim Crow

violence, there is still an exponential amount of racism and oppression. What these African-Americans found in the cities were severe housing and wealth disparities that blacks faced compared to whites.²⁹

Housing disparities in the early 1940s between African-Americans and whites showed an entirely different dynamic and way of living for the two. Ira Katznelson said, “Not even one in a hundred black farm families had cold or hot water piped into their homes... compared to about 20 percent of white families. Whereas approximately one in three whites possessed an icebox or mechanical refrigerator, fewer than one in ten blacks did.”³⁰ These former luxuries that had become, by the 1940s, a staple for white Americans was inaccessible and unaffordable to blacks. It was rare for black neighborhoods to have adequately paved roads for cars or streetlights. Wealth disparities were also significant. In Atlanta, blacks earned an average of \$760 a year whereas even poorer whites earned over \$2,000 a year. Only three percent of blacks earned more than \$2,000 a year in what was one of the wealthiest Southern cities. Detroit shared similar circumstances. While there was a dramatic population increase of over 150,000 new African-Americans in the industrial city, there was less than 2,200 residential units built from 1941-1944. Many black families, especially after the war, lived in single room homes or shared a small apartment with other families. This advancement and integration into cities that previously were almost entirely white stoked racial tensions and came with costs, both socially and financially.³¹

White fears were the cause of most racial tension and the two cities reacted in similar ways. In both cities, large regions of the white majority city actively prevented blacks from

²⁹ Allan Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1976), 60.

³⁰ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White* (New York City, New York: Norton & Company Inc., 2005), 33.

³¹ *Ibid*, 32-33; Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*.(Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 41-43.

integrating into their communities. This was done through a mixture of redlining, discrimination, and intimidation. Some whites protested and rioted to scare African-Americans into moving away or would flee their homes if they had the financial means. In Atlanta, white politicians proposed building a highway to segregate the white and black sections of the city. Atlanta's highway did not come into fruition, but the same proposal succeeded in Detroit. Thomas Sugrue said, "Detroit's city planners promised that the proposed system of cross-city expressways would dramatically improve the city's residential areas, as well as bolster the city's economies. For the thousands of blacks... both promises were false."³² The city's leaders destroyed hundreds of buildings and bisected the black community, entrapping thousands that lived there in a state of poverty with minimal government assistance. Each city reacted differently to black migration, but they all initially attempted to maintain segregation through their own means, with some being more aggressive than others.³³

Detroit was one of the most aggressively segregatory cities, even before their citywide highway projects started in the late 1940s. The Detroit Real Estate Board warned realtors in the Eastern part of the city, "not to sell to negroes in a 100 percent white area."³⁴ Real estate agents who failed to follow this command were to be immediately removed from any realtor organizations and effectively banned from the practice. White customers would boycott companies that sold to blacks while many banks refused to even offer loans to black families, regardless of wealth and status. This left African-Americans being forced to be preyed upon by loan sharks or high interest contracts that resulted in them paying for far more than the actual

³² Thomas Sugrue, *Urban Crisis*, 47.

³³ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2005), 59-60.

³⁴ Thomas Sugrue, *Urban Crisis*, 46.

cost of the home. These types of tactics were common as housing was incredibly restrictive for blacks in the city.

It was not just predatory realtors and loan sharks that restricted African-Americans from buying homes, but federal and state laws as well. Federal housing policies that rated neighborhoods based on a variety of factors, but was mostly based around the race and ethnicities of its inhabitants. The rating system showed that A and B ranked neighborhoods were acceptable and ideal while C or D ranked areas were dangerous and decrepit. White neighborhoods across the city were virtually all given A's for their rating while any neighborhood with more than a few black families were rated as a D and deemed hazardous. Businesses and investors saw these ratings and refused to give money or build in or adjacent to those areas. Another factor of these ratings were restrictive covenants written into the deeds of most buildings in Detroit that prevented African-Americans from purchasing land in that region. Over 80 percent of all buildings in the inner part of the city had these racialized covenants. In addition to this, banks refused to finance any projects involving the construction of black homes. Covenants were outlawed in 1948 through the Supreme Court's *Shelley v. Kraemer* decision.. Shortly after the case, the *Columbia Law Review* Association said, "Prior to *Shelley v. Kraemer*, state courts which had been confronted with the question uniformly held that when a state court enforced discriminatory private agreements, the discrimination did not result from state action within the meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment and hence no constitutional issues were raised."³⁵ Detroit's real estate agents doubled down on enforcing the racialized deeds regardless

³⁵ "State Action Reconsidered in the Light of *Shelley v. Kraemer*." *Columbia Law Review*, no. 8, Dec. 1948. 1241-1245.

of the illegality of their actions. Legal public policy was instrumental in maintaining segregation in Detroit and was effective in keeping African Americans in poorer communities with little way of financial opportunity.³⁶



A young black man selling ice cream on East Lafayette Street on July 22nd, 1949. This area was part of the Black Bottom neighborhood before the buildings were destroyed for a nine-mile freeway in the 1950s.³⁷

Atlanta may not have built a dividing highway, but instead instigated white fear to threaten blacks to city-wide maintain segregation. Their dividing road was called Ashby Street and was a major segregation line in the city. Whites ensured by almost any means possible to

³⁶ Thomas Sugrue, *Urban Crisis*, 42-48.

³⁷ Photograph. Detroit: Detroit Public Library. July 22nd, 1949. <https://digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org/islandora/object/islandora%3A137933> (December 11th, 2018).

keep blacks on the opposite side of the street. The city's Home Owners' Loan Corporation used a practice called red lining, showing that all homes owned by or near blacks were risky investments and in decline. Other organizations followed this model, promoting the notion that the color line of black neighborhoods actively decreased property value, scaring white homeowners. The National Association of Real Estate Boards included, "A realtor should never be instrumental in introducing to a neighborhood a character of property or occupancy, members of any race or nationality, or any individual whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in the neighborhood."³⁸ This carefully worded doctrine specifically targets blacks and other minorities without individually naming them. These ideas heavily stoked white fear, prompting whites to intimidate blacks through threats and sometimes acts of violence and terror.

Violence was enacted differently in Detroit and Atlanta. In Atlanta, violence and murder came from the Ku Klux Klan, which was headquartered in Southern city. The protestant terrorist group had not returned to its former strength after its steady decline during the depression, but its thousands of members in the 1940s caused turmoil and brutality across the country. Its short revival directly after World War II led to dozens of deaths, voter discrimination, brutality, and preventing blacks from moving into white neighborhoods. They initiated their return with a 300-foot burning cross on the outskirts of the city that could be seen for several dozen miles. Their membership was widespread across the city including councilmen, accountants, and most importantly, a large portion of the police force. One patrolman was awarded a medal for killing 13 blacks and asked his fellow policemen for support in killing more. Dr. Samuel Green, the leader of the Atlanta rebirth of the Klan, said, "America is calling every White Man, who has red

³⁸ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 60.

blood, into the fight... White supremacy is threatened on every hand, you cannot fail.”³⁹ Judges, lawyers, and police that were part of the Klan allowed their own to run free and continue their slaughter of African-Americans.⁴⁰

When thousands of African-American soldiers returned from the war to Atlanta, they engaged in the battle of Ashby Street against white supremacists called the Colombians, the Ku Klux Klan, and white homeowners. The first group would arrest and assault any black person in a white neighborhood at night leaving them with scars and false charges of drunkenness or loitering. They would also throw bombs or use dynamite to blow up black houses that they deemed too close to white homes. When the Colombians were outlawed and listed under the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Klan filled the power vacuum they left. The KKK employed similar tactics but were often more vicious and left more blacks dead. Klansmen went on raids of black tenants moving near white homes torturing them or sometimes killing them if they refused to leave town. Ultimately the KKK fell to a similar fate to the Colombians with the addition of their leader dying and no immediate successor leaving the terrorist group to collapse. While their Atlanta reinstitution only lasted for two years, they caused dozens of deaths, attacked hundreds of people, and terrified thousands. This terror was mainly due to fears of African-Americans moving towards into neighborhoods were while the Ku Klux Klan reacted with the help of white businessmen.⁴¹

Heavy African-American population growth in these major cities required a lot of new tenants and home-buyers to move into any area that was open to them. White real estate agents heavily took advantage of the mixture of racial tensions and fears with a combination of

³⁹ Ibid 50.

⁴⁰ Kruse, 44-50; Richard Rovere, “The Klan Rides Again.” *Nation* 150, no. 14, April 6th, 1940. 445-446

⁴¹ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 50-54.

nefarious tactics to reap immense profits. One self-proclaimed blockbuster under the pseudonym, Norris Vitcheck, explained the process stating, “I make my money—quite a lot of it, incidentally—in three ways: (1) By beating down the prices I pay the white owners by stimulating their fear of what is to come; (2) by selling to the eager Negroes at inflated prices; and (3) by financing these purchases at what amounts to a very high rate of interest.”⁴² White families would flee in droves when a black family moved into their neighborhood or block. These blockbusters would be able to entirely turn a city block from white to black in a week or sometimes less. This kind of predatory practice allowed for blacks to increase their population and create their own communities, but it also worked against them twofold.

Blockbusters overcharged black families on the houses they rented and bought, which damaged the community for years. High interest rates and unfair contracts bled African-Americans dry of the money that could have been used to advance economically and improve their communities. The extra interest forces these buyers to rent out parts of their home leading to overcrowding, to ignore maintenance costs leading to degradation of the home. Financial problems for many black families end up putting mothers to work to make ends meet or a father having multiple jobs. The effects of blockbusting are far-reaching too with white businesses, churches, and organizations that close in fear of the oncoming color line shifts. Vitcheck’s source stated, “The Board of Education contributes by writing off a school once it begins to change racially, consigning it to overcrowding, double shifts and supervision by the least experienced and lowest paid teachers—and by giving it the lowest proportion of counselors.”⁴³ Inadequate education for black communities with families already bordering on poverty leaves their future financial prospects looking fairly grim, further entrapping blacks in a cycle of poverty that has

⁴² Norris Vitcheck, “Confessions of a Block-Buster,” *Saturday Evening Post* 235, no. 27, July 14th, 1962.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 18.

been ongoing since the end of slavery. A lack of education and housing opportunity was a continuing narrative for blacks, which was heavily encapsulated by the discrimination of the GI Bill.⁴⁴

The GI bill, which served to assist returning servicemen with a college education after the war, helped hundreds of thousands of World War II veterans. Winkler said, “The Servicemen’s Readjustment Act - the GI Bill - provided liberal unemployment benefits, gave veterans preference in finding jobs, offered them substantial educational assistance, and guaranteed loans for the purchase of a small business, farm, or home.”⁴⁵ The senators and military leaders that helped shape and pass the GI Bill were all white and entirely disinterested in maintaining fair treatment for black soldiers. Senators such as John Rankin, a notoriously racist Democrat, spearheaded the bill and redesigned it to allow local branches of the government to control the flow of money and benefits for veterans. Local control of these assets and benefits allowed for heavy discrimination of all of these factors.

Black servicemen were often unable to get loans in Southern regions, especially in cities like Atlanta. A soldier from Atlanta was told, “The Veterans Administration on Friday that discharged Negro soldiers in the South are discouraged from enjoying the benefits of the ‘GI Bill of Rights.’” Katznelson said, “The GI Bill’s remarkable bounty thus could be directed to the country’s poorest region while keeping its system of racial power intact.”⁴⁶ Private businesses that were part of the bill such as banks could also deny loans to blacks at their whim. Many banks refused to give loans to blacks, regardless of their veteran status, or only offered loans with high interest rates. African-American soldiers returning from the war were liable to fall into the trap of blockbusting where they bought houses from predatory realtors that exploited them.

⁴⁴ Vitcek, 15-19; Katznelson, 110.

⁴⁵ Allan Winkler, *Home Front*, 89.

⁴⁶ Katznelson, *Affirmative Action*, 122,125.

The other major aspect of the GI Bill was education and the discrimination of blacks being able to continue their schooling to achieve a better career.⁴⁷

This aspect especially harmed blacks as a majority of colleges were still only for whites or rarely allowed any blacks in. In 1946, only .5 percent of the 9,000 students at the University of Pennsylvania, a Northern Ivy League college, were black. This was higher than most northern colleges as many only admitted whites. Kenneth Clark said, “That, if non-segregation can work on the graduate and professional level, it can work equally well on the elementary and high school level.”⁴⁸ Southern colleges, however, fared better for many blacks to a limited degree. Only 15 percent of colleges in the South accepted African-American veterans and they were all black colleges. The majority of these schools only enrolled several hundred students at maximum capacity. More than half of black applicants were turned away because there was not enough room. The college facilities were underfunded and poorly managed. Most were unable to afford proper equipment for classrooms or even a small library of academic texts. Of the few majors that were offered, the only one that was lucrative and helpful to most students was the education field to become teachers. One of the few successful colleges was the Atlanta University Center, a combination of several large black colleges in the city. Clarence Bacote, a history professor at the college said, “You could live here, at any of these schools and not suffer the injustices that the person who had to make his living in the city did. You didn’t have to face Jim Crow, you had your own group right here.”⁴⁹ College for blacks may have been a bastion away from racism, but it was a privilege only accessible to wealthier families and veterans who were able to access benefits from the GI Bill. The Atlanta University Center, however, was a major outlier against

⁴⁷ Katznelson, 123-128; Winkler 89.

⁴⁸ Kenneth B. Clark, “The Social Scientist as an Expert Witness in Civil Rights Litigation.” *Social Problems* 1, no. 1 (1953): 7.

⁴⁹ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 30.

dozens of other black colleges that were wholly unsuccessful and unable to match the funding and education that white veterans received at their separate and entirely unequally better schools.⁵⁰

Housing discrimination was one of the most significant aspects of Jim Crow that reinforced segregation. At its core, it kept African-Americans in decaying communities that were trapped in a cycle of poverty. Slums that were falling apart in Atlanta and Detroit that should have been torn down and rebuilt were where most blacks were forced to live. In Detroit, middle class black families could move into white neighborhoods in attempts to escape cyclical poverty. This was done by blockbusters who exploited white fears and black families for a profit. In Atlanta, the lines of black neighborhoods were heavily enforced by the Ku Klux Klan and other racist whites who wanted to maintain segregation. There was little escape from aspects of the Jim Crow South in Atlanta, which was kept together by a mixture of violence and racist legislation. Wealthier black families and some veterans were able to find solace in the city's black university, which provided an island that was free from racism, yet surrounded by it. The battle fought against discrimination during the war and afterwards was a fight between Jim Crow politics supported by white supremacist groups and black leaders who were seeking civil rights and fair treatment.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 30-31.

Chapter 3: Anti-Black Politics and Resistance in Atlanta and Detroit

Segregation in the late 1930s to early 1950s led to disparate types of life for whites and blacks in America. African-Americans were treated by some Democrats as a necessary voting bloc to have and by Republicans as the 'other' that could be exploited and left segregated. In Atlanta, blacks were taken with Mayor Hartsfield's moderate and practical approach that occasionally catered to them. Black leaders attempted to confront a number of these issues through peaceful means, but with varying success. Public reactions on both sides eventually became violent resulting in harassment and riots. The most dangerous single group was the Ku Klux Klan, whom along with other white supremacy groups, threatened and murdered black leaders. Even in the face of violence and oppression, the NAACP and other black activists protested for both their rights and their lives. Their successes empowered African-Americans across the country giving them more voting power, stronger labor rights, and more of a legal voice.

African-Americans in most cities for instance were able to achieve some economic successes in their communities but were forcibly kept from being able to improve their social status and political power. A number of blacks were able to find decently paying work or create their own successful business in, Atlanta, Detroit, and other major cities. They were, however, barred from most higher paying jobs and constantly discriminated against. Civil rights groups such as the NAACP and others were instrumental in gaining various rights and privileges through the 20th century. African-American leaders criticized the Jim Crow laws equating them to the persecution of Jews in Germany. They were seeking a double victory to destroy win the war by destroying Nazism in Germany and to simultaneously eradicate racism at home. It was pressure from groups such as the NAACP, National Negro Congress, and United Automobile

Workers, or UAW, that pushed the FEPC to actively investigate and resolve some of these complaints. Sugrue said, “The UAW’s record in achieving racial equality in the workplace and in union offices was inconsistent.”⁵¹ The committee attempted to enforce the resolutions they handed down with selective effort, choosing to ensure that all wartime industries continued to run efficiently while ignoring others. Selective policing of discrimination and focusing solely on wartime efforts aided some African-Americans that were being targeted or ignored by employers, but did not aid more than a few thousand people. While double victory would ultimately fail, there were still victories to be won to gain political power and stronger rights against Jim Crow laws.⁵²

Blacks in Atlanta registered to vote en masse when they were finally able to vote without restrictions in April 1946. The state Supreme Court overturned Georgia’s law on white primaries. African-Americans suddenly had a representative voice in Atlanta politics with nearly 40% of the vote. The moderate mayor, William Hartsfield, was forced to listen to this new powerful voting bloc and acquiesce to some of their demands. In 1951, he allowed for the NAACP to hold its national convention in Atlanta and even attended the opening ceremonies, which was unheard of for a white politician. Another progressive idea pushed by black civil leaders was the need of black policemen to patrol segregated neighborhoods. White cops either refused to go to segregated areas of the city or caused more damage than good when they would leave their white neighborhoods. African-Americans to becoming state police officers gave them a more even footing in challenging their oppressors, many of whom were white cops. Black officers also provided a much more approachable site that presented less danger than a

⁵¹ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 100.

⁵² Sugrue, 26-27; Allan Winkler, *Home Front U.S.A.: America During World War II* (Arlington Heights, Illinois: Harlan Davidson Inc., 1976), 62-65.

potentially racist white cop. While Hartsfield did some good for blacks in Atlanta, he also actively worked against them to appease the his mostly white constituency.⁵³

Hartsfield and his assortment of faux-progressive business leaders that supported him enacted numerous policies and heavily pushed to maintain a white majority while seceding as little to African-Americans as possible. In 1950, the mayor annexed a large area surrounding the city and increasing its population by nearly 100,000 people. Hartsfield said, “Our negro population is growing by leaps and bounds. They stay right in the city limits and grow by taking more white territory inside Atlanta... the time is not far distant when they will become a potent force if our white citizens are just going to move out and give it to them.”⁵⁴ This action, which was supported by the black electorate for the sake of keeping a good relationship with a mayor who treated them better than previous politicians, reduced their near voting majority back to less than a third. While the annexation of area around Atlanta helped increase the city’s size and population, it also acted as a form of voter suppression, which was an incredibly common tactic under the Jim Crow laws.

Voter suppression worked in a number of ways in the South, mostly by causing fear or directly preventing blacks from voting. On the political side, there was little to no legislation that came out of the various New Deal programs that helped African-Americans. Roosevelt needed white Southern congressmen to pass the programs, which prevented any Civil Rights legislation from being included. In the 1940s, there were still virtually no laws against lynching, grandfather laws, and poll taxes. Registering to vote could be incredibly restrictive due to this. Some states such as Texas and Georgia had lifted some restrictions on voting on primaries, which at the very least allowed black voters to support a candidate that might support them before the final

⁵³ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2005), 36-38

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

elections. Voting was typically safer in cities like Detroit where there was a smaller ratio of zealous white supremacists. Like black men, black women sought to exercise the right to vote. Dayo Gore said, “Initiatives led by black women, such as Negro Women Incorporated (NWI)... organize women for mass participation in the war effort. In 1944, NWI launched a fall event, ‘Negro Women Have a Vote - How Shall They Use It’ to encourage black women to vote.”⁵⁵ African-Americans in general had trouble voting in many districts because of white supremacists. Minor acts of violence occurred often, but there was one major point in Detroit where tensions boiled over to a deadly three-day riot.⁵⁶

Unlike Atlanta, there was no direct Klan activity in Detroit. Racial tensions from former white supremacist groups and were instrumental in causing the Detroit Race Riot of 1943. A direct offshoot from the Klan, the Black Legion filled in the gap as both a fascist and white supremacist group to spread terror in Detroit. The group attacked and murdered dozens of people, including communists, local black leaders, and black men seen with white women. Members of the fascist group were mostly lower middle class and worked in factories. These factory workers intimidated and harassed black workers that joined unions such as the UAW, which grew exponentially during the war. Louis Martin said, “Detroit has become the headquarters for Gerald L. K. Smith of Louisiana, Frank Norris of Texas, and hundreds of lesser philosophers of the Klan ‘way of life.’”⁵⁷ These men were well known and influential white supremacists. While the Black Legion ended shortly before World War II started, these workers

⁵⁵ Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York City, New York: New York University, 2011), 39.

⁵⁶ Kevin Kruse, *White Flight*, 33-35.

⁵⁷ Martin, Louis E. "Profiles: Detroit." *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 17, no. 5 (1944): 281-282.

held onto their racist tendencies. Former members and thousands of other racist whites kept tensions high when black workers were hired to the same factories during the war.⁵⁸

White mobs, bombings, and lynching were all tactics used to scare black voters, regardless of the original reason for the violence. Overpopulation and decades of racial tensions caused the Detroit Race Riot of 1943. The initial rumor that sparked this riot was that white men had thrown a black woman and her baby off of a bridge, killing them both. This rumor was false but instigated the deadly riot. With the police mostly standing by and sometimes encouraging violence, there were dozens of fights between whites and blacks that led to nearly 700 people being injured and over 30 deaths. The police that did attempt to aid blacks were insulted and attacked by white mobs who referred to the cops as fascists and gestapo. Life Magazine stated in an article, “Detroit can either blow up Hitler, or it can blow up the U.S.”⁵⁹ The magazine showcased numerous photos that showed the whites’ brutality and mob mentality of the Detroit riots. The riot was the culmination of racial tensions with white resistance against blacks, who were protesting against unfair housing and labor conditions. Black resistance against these types of attacks came in various forms and from different groups and community leaders.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Peter H. Amann, “Vigilante Fascism: The Black Legion as an American Hybrid.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol 25, no 3. (1983), 490-524; Sugrue, 29.

⁵⁹ “Race War in Detroit.” *Life* no. 15, July 5th, 1943. 93-102.

⁶⁰ Thomas Sugrue, 29, 55. Louis Martin, 280-283.



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A white mob burns an overturned car owned by a black man during the Detroit Race Riot of 1943. Other incidents like this happened across the city from June 20th to June 22nd, 1943.

One group that protested anti-black violence were black churches. While many were Baptist, the black Christian community would often come together, regardless of denomination. to speak against the injustices that were enacted on them by whites. These ministers worked together with the NAACP to protest lynching, social discrimination, and political discrimination. Jerome Holland said, “By writing letters, holding mass meetings, threatening boycotts and other weapons at their disposal, the Negro Church has helped occasionally to break the economic

⁶¹ Photograph. New York City: Time Inc. July 5th, 1943. Life Magazine, “Race War in Detroit.” Newspaper, Google Books. <https://books.google.com/books?id=SFAEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&dq=detroit%20race%20war&pg=PA93#v=onepage&q&f=false>. (October 24th, 2018).

discrimination practiced by the whites on the Negroes.”⁶² Ministers inspired activism by both educating their congregation about current problems and empowering people to speak against those injustices. They were not always effective or successful, but most churches maintained a steady stream of protest even after the 1940s. Most black ministers were proactive in supporting civil rights, but there were a number whom preferred to submit to their status as second-class citizens instead of fighting against white supremacy.⁶³ While the churches worked together and were responsible for multiple civil rights victories, they were not a single unified group. The NAACP was the largest black organization that focused on civil rights.

The black-led organization was national and worked towards the improvement of African-American lives. They fought numerous legal battles against unfair practices and unjust laws. One battle the NAACP fought was the case of Rosa Lee Ingram who was charged with murder and sentenced to be executed by electrocution. A white man who got into an argument with her and threatened her with a gun was killed with the courts sentencing her in less than a day. Gore said, “In particular, these activists sought to highlight black women’s struggles with sexualized violence and economic exploitation and to engage in ongoing conversations over the meanings of black motherhood and womanhood within the United States.”⁶⁴ Other accomplishments of the NAACP were successfully defeating the whites only primary, registering thousands of black voters in Atlanta, and, along with the FEPC, challenging major wartime industries to achieve better labor rights for black workers in Detroit. They did not win every battle, but they achieved empowering victories on many occasions.⁶⁵

⁶² Jerome Heartwell Holland, “The Role of the Negro Church as an Organ of Protest.” *The Journal of Negro Education* 11, no. 2 (1942): 166.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 165-169.

⁶⁴ Gore, *Radicalism*, 76.

⁶⁵ Gore, 75-76; Kruse, 23, 33; Sugrue 30, 55;

Throughout a combination of omnipresent systematic oppression and violence, African-Americans still resisted white supremacy and won major victories. These were achieved by the NAACP, UAW, and FEPC, working sometimes together and sometimes separately. Black churches also played a pivotal role in encouraging protests of unjust practices. Many of these protests were in response to the brutal attacks that were inflicted upon blacks by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Colombians, and Black Legion. These groups and their remnants were instrumental in inciting the Detroit Race Riot of 1943 due to their growing resentment of blacks integrating more into white neighborhoods and previously white-only jobs. White resistance to integration and blacks protesting for civil rights are inherently connected through the focus of money, labor, and housing.

Chapter Four: In Conclusion, Little Has Changed

The 1940s World War II and postwar era allowed for significant advancements in black rights and black women's labor rights. Organizations such as the NAACP and UAW succeeded in gaining stronger voting rights, the beginnings of school desegregation, and improved economic opportunity. The FEPC assisted both of those groups in supporting black workers who faced discrimination in major wartime industries and allowed the basis of anti-discrimination legislation to form. Black colleges provided some of its students with the chance to go into white-collar professions and achieve better financial success than ever before. All of these contributions to civil rights formed the beginnings of important legislation and changes in society to improve the lives of African-Americans. While these were all highly necessary changes to integrate American society and create a more equal population, the problems that affect the country today essentially remain the same.

There is a fundamental need for America to recognize and acknowledge the racist past it has been built upon. The narrative of an idealistic superpower that ignores all facets of its bloody history is one that has been perpetuated by primary education and numerous scholars, further entrenching millions of people in the belief that racism is not a problem in the country. Racism is one of the most significant issues in the country, being maintained by a mixture of societal ignorance, racism, and systematic oppression with nearly every factor of living. There are modern comparisons for every specific example given in this thesis. In 2014, Michael Brown was shot in Ferguson, Missouri, in a similar fashion to Madison Harris' death in Atlanta. Brown was unarmed and slain by a policeman after an alleged, but unproven altercation. The police officer, Darren Wilson, had no charges filed against him and was rewarded with hundreds of thousands of dollars in support by right-wing groups that supported a murderous policeman over

the death of a black teenager. White men effectively being judge, jury, and executioner over African-Americans has been a time-honored tradition in America that has been criticized, but accepted by its society for centuries. The racist standards that divide whites and blacks are drastically different in terms of prison terms as well.⁶⁶

Women of color are still given exponentially longer and more serious punishments than white men. Just like with Rosa Lee Ingram, Cyntoia Brown's actions killed a white man. In 2004, the sixteen-year-old sex trafficking victim killed her solicitor after the man assaulted her. She was sentenced to 51 years in prison before she is eligible for parole.⁶⁷ White men, however, often get away with crimes that are equally heinous or worse. In 2015, Brock Turner raped a young woman behind a dumpster and was caught during the act. Multiple articles ignored the rape charges and highlighted his times as a competitive swimmer. Turner's father complained stating, "That his son's life had been ruined for '20 minutes of action.'"⁶⁸ He was sentenced to six months in prison and was released in three. There are thousands of other cases that similarly portray the state of America, in which a woman of color's life is ruined for an action to protect herself while a white man is given a slap on the wrist for destroying someone's life.

Discrimination has not changed in America, it has just evolved and been given new names.

Housing and school districts reflect the state of the country in the same way that they did in the 1940s, except that there are modern ways to segregate whites from blacks. Housing projects that were erected during the New Deal and World War II era created segregation where integrated communities previously existed. White parents in more affluent communities were

⁶⁶ Emily Brown. "Timeline: Michael Brown Shooting in Ferguson, Mo." *USA Today*. August 14th, 2014.

⁶⁷ Associated Press. "Court Woman Convicted as Teen Could Be Free After 51 Years." *The Associated Press*. Dec 6th, 2018

⁶⁸ Liam Stack. "In Stanford Rape Case, Brock Turner Blamed Drinking and Promiscuity." *New York Times*. June 8th, 2016.

forcing their school districts to secede from larger school districts that contained a larger and more diverse population. Alvin Chang said, “They were carving out a more affluent, more white area and starting their own school district with it.”⁶⁹ This specific district in Jefferson County, Alabama, wanted to prevent black students from being brought to their schools. Dozens of communities around the country have tried the same tactic with mixed success. Even the quality of schools is inherently tied to the wealth of a community. Property taxes based on the value of a person’s home are used to fund public schools. This creates an enormous divide between white schools in a middle-class or wealthier area compared to a poorer black area, especially one in cities like Detroit. White families could move to small nearby towns to escape living in a diverse city. Others who remained in cities could opt to send their children to private schools, another facet of education that prevented black students from joining due to a severe wealth gap. All of this is done under the pretense of racist white parents who do not want their children to be around black children. The audacity of racism would be so appalling and shocking if it had not been the reality in America for centuries.

These problems that envelop the American people’s lives are ones that are not easily answered with a general population that remains ignorant or detached from the racist existence they live in. Comprehensive governmental reform and a dramatic shift in the views of politicians and voters would be needed to even begin to amend many of these nationwide problems. The NAACP and newer movements such as Black Lives Matters works to educate, protest, and win equal treatment for African-Americans in a society that still places them as second-class citizens. Their actions have brought forth a new wave of black intersectional activism that is far more mainstream than ever before, especially with younger audiences. There is a long road ahead for

⁶⁹ Alvin Chang. “School Segregation Didn’t Go Away. It Just Evolved.” Vox. July 27th, 2017.

equality with every victory presenting a new challenge. What white America must do is take a long sobering look at its bloody history, acknowledge their collective privilege, and work to reform the country and weaken its structures of systematic racism.

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- ⁷⁰ Peter H. Amann, "Vigilante Fascism: The Black Legion as an American Hybrid." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* vol 25, no 3. (1983), 490-524.
- ⁷¹ Maya Angelou. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (Random House: New York, 1969), 91.
- ⁷² Associated Press, "The President's Order," *New York Times*. May 29th, 1943.
- ⁷³ Emily Brown. "Timeline: Michael Brown Shooting in Ferguson, Mo." *USA Today*. August 14th, 2014.
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⁷⁸ Jerome Heartwell Holland, "The Role of the Negro Church as an Organ of Protest." *The Journal of Negro Education* 11, no. 2 (1942): 166.

⁷⁹ Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1981), 147.

⁸⁰ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Woman, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present*. (New York City, New York: Basic Books Inc., 1985), 235.

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