

**A Tense Coexistence: Examining the Interracial Character of Belle Isle Park
in 1920s-1940s Detroit**

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Introduction

Behind each race riot is a rising tide of interracial irritation and frustration stimulated by economic deprivation, political powerlessness, merchants' sharp practices, police arrogance, and incidents in streets, parks, and mass transportation facilities.¹

On June 20, 1943, a major race riot broke out in Detroit on Belle Isle, an island park in the Detroit River. However, many are likely more familiar with the 1967 uprising in Detroit. Historian Matthew Wilhelm Kapell writes that the 1943 riot and other prior racial conflicts in Detroit, "have been overshadowed by the events of the 1967 'Twelfth Street Riot,' and often each previous event has been recast as merely a precursor to the summer of 1967."² In other words, the 1967 Detroit uprising is seen as the ultimate cataclysmic event that each prior interracial battle, such as the 1943 riot, had been building towards. Kapell attributes this overshadowing to an aversion to depicting events that contradict the "popular narrative of a unified nation fighting for good" during World War Two. Indeed the Detroit Riot of 1943 demonstrated clear divisions within American society in terms of racial conflict. In addition, the "primacy of the 1967 rebellions" dominates conversations around urban decay in the Civil Rights era.³

The scale of the fighting in the 1967 uprising undoubtedly overshadowed the 1943 riot. In 1967, the uprising lasted 5 days, resulted in 43 deaths (33 of whom were Black), and caused \$36 million in (insured) property damages.⁴ In comparison, in 1943, the riot lasted 48 hours (2

¹ Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot, Detroit 1943* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), xiv.

² Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, "'Miscreants, be they white or colored': the local press reactions to the 1943 Detroit 'race riot,'" *Michigan Academician* 39, no. 3 (2009): 213.

³ Kapell, "'Miscreants, be they white or colored'," 218.

⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 259.

Niraj Warikoo, "43 Fatal Victims of the Detroit Riot of 1967," *Detroit Free Press*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.freep.com/story/news/detroitriot/2017/07/23/victims-detroit-riot-1967/499550001/>.

days), resulted in 34 deaths (25 of whom were Black), and caused \$2 million in property damage.⁵ However, this should not discount the effect that the 1943 riot had on Detroit's citizens. Kapell notes that the 1943 riot "involved a greater percentage of the city's population than later disturbances," and points to the testimony of Black Detroiters who did not think of 1967 as a "riot" when compared to 1943.⁶

Indeed, the 1943 riot and the 1967 uprising were markedly different. In 1943, the riot began on Belle Isle, a park, whereas the 1967 uprising began in the streets outside of a "blind pig" (illegal bar) in a mainland Black neighborhood.⁷ Furthermore, the causes of each of these events differed. Historian Thomas Sugrue argues that the 1943 riot erupted due to "increasing black and white competition for jobs and housing," whereas the 1967 uprising occurred during a time when "blacks had lost the competition."⁸ Sugrue points out that changing racial demographics also distinguishes 1943 from 1967. In 1943, Black and white Detroiters participated in the riot "in roughly equal proportions."⁹ In 1967, however, Black Detroiters made up the "vast majority of participants," countered by overwhelmingly white "armed officials."¹⁰

Therefore, there are clear differences between 1943 and 1967 in terms of participants, settings, and stakes. These two events fit into a model of "old" vs. "new" race riots, as suggested by sociologist L. Alex Swan. Now, Swan was comparing the "old" style 1943 Detroit riot with the "new" style 1943 Harlem riot, but there are clear similarities between the Harlem riot and Detroit's 1967 uprising:

⁵ Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 87.

Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 29.

⁶ Kapell, "'Miscreants, be they white or colored,'" 214, 218.

⁷ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 259.

⁸ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260.

⁹ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260.

¹⁰ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 260.

In the 1943 riots of Detroit and New York are to be seen – virtually side by side – the old and the new in race riots. Detroit presents the traditional pattern of two race-motivated groups in violent opposition; New York, on the contrary, offers an example of destruction and looting by Blacks with virtually no contacts between whites and Blacks; in fact, opposition white groups never formed in New York, save for white police who attempted to enforce middle-class values with which the police themselves had identified.¹¹

Detroit's 1967 uprising fits this "new" riot model better. This means that the violence of 1943 and 1967 cannot be conflated, but rather represent different types of conflict. In 1943, Black and white Detroiters directly fought each other in the streets, whereas in 1967, Black Detroiters clashed with the majority-white police and national guard, with relatively little participation by white Detroiters.

In discussing the historiography of the Detroit Riot of 1943 it is necessary to examine first contemporary accounts by sociologists, then historical studies, then studies of race and recreation. This will provide a framework for understanding why the riot began on Belle Isle. Wayne (State) University sociologists Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey's contemporary book *Race Riot, Detroit 1943* (first published in 1943), attempted to demonstrate that Black and white Americans could feasibly coexist and thrive in mixed public spaces despite the violence of the Detroit Riot of 1943. They argued that racial violence inevitably broke out in densely populated areas when Black and white people lived separately from one another: "When the two races are not consciously preparing themselves to live democratically, frictions occur in overcrowded streetcars, parks, swimming pools, motion picture houses, restaurants, and the like."¹² On the other hand, they argued, when Black and white Detroiters lived, worked, and went to school within close proximity of each other, they did not fight each other during the riot.¹³

¹¹ L. Alex Swan, "The Harlem and Detroit Riots of 1943: A Comparative Analysis," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 16 (1971): 77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40999915>.

¹² Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 6.

¹³ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 17

Later historical studies, such as Robert Shogan and Tom Craig's book *The Detroit Riot: A Study in Violence* and Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson's *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943*, focused on individual participants and the nature of their interactions that contributed to the outbreak of violence. Both works give descriptions of the conditions on Belle Isle on the day of the riot, and the settings in which Black and white park goers converged that were unique to a recreational space like Belle Isle.¹⁴ Each of these works identified lack of recreation, or resentment from barriers to recreation, as a catalyst for the violence. For example, just days before the outbreak of violence on Belle Isle, young Black Detroiters attempted to use Eastwood Park, an amusement park in suburban East Detroit, alongside whites, who subsequently assaulted the Black youths. To add insult to injury, the Detroit police forced the Black patrons to leave. Some of the young Black Detroiters present on Belle Isle on June 20 (1943) had been subjected to this treatment at Eastwood earlier that week and therefore felt embarrassed and vindictive.¹⁵ Furthermore, the riot began on Belle Isle, a park, meaning that the riot should not be separated from its recreational context and that historians must treat it, at least initially, as a conflict over the use of a recreational space.

Therefore, we must turn to existing scholarship surrounding race and recreation in the twentieth century, such as Victoria W. Wolcott's work *Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters* and Jeff Wiltse's work *Contested Waters*. Wolcott's book covers segregation in recreational spaces due to racist ideas about Black people carrying diseases, as well as the conflicts instigated by whites

¹⁴ See Pages 5-6 and 95 in Capeci Jr. and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence* and pages 35-37 in Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1964) for a discussion on interracial fighting on Belle Isle June 20, 1943 in playground spaces, picnic areas, and refreshment stands.

¹⁵ See pages 5-6 in Capeci Jr. and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence* and page 36 in Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot* for a discussion on Eastwood (amusement) Park. See page 94 in Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, for a contemporary observation on the poor state of recreational opportunities for Detroit's youths in "both the white and black slums."

attempting to prevent Black people from entering these spaces. Wolcott elaborates on the few opportunities for Black Americans in terms of recreation, who if they wanted to attend recreation spaces, could only do so on designated “off-days” so that they would not interact with white patrons. Moreover, Wolcott notes that whites especially feared the possibility of mixing in intimate activities that could lead to interracial sexuality, such as dancing and swimming.¹⁶

Wiltse’s book takes a closer look at the segregation of swimming pools by race. Following a shift in northern city swimming pool policies that made it common for men and women to swim in the same space, prejudiced whites opposed racial integration in swimming pools because they wrongly believed that this would place white women in danger of sexual assault by Black men.¹⁷

For a more community-specific approach, Historian Richard Walter Thomas’s *Life for Us Is What We Make It* identifies clear instances of segregation in public accommodation in Detroit. In the 1920s-30s, many white-owned restaurant owners barred Black patrons from eating at their establishments. Dance halls and amusement parks only allowed Black patrons on specific days at inconvenient times. Theaters permitted Black Detroiters but often placed them in segregated sections, and Black swimmers faced violence when they tried to swim in majority-white pools.¹⁸

With this historiography in mind, it would follow that rampant segregation and discrimination in Detroit’s mainland recreational facilities carried over to the island park Belle Isle. However, the truth is more complicated. Not much has been written about interactions

¹⁶ See pages 17-20 in Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) for a discussion on segregation in recreation spaces such as amusement parks, beaches, roller rinks, and swimming pools.

¹⁷ See Page 124 in Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), for a discussion on the segregation of swimming pools by race following the integration of pools by gender.

¹⁸ See pages 127-134 in Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), for a discussion on the level of segregation in Detroit in restaurants, dance halls, amusement parks, theaters, and swimming pools.

between Black and white Detroiters on Belle Isle prior to the 1943 outbreak. Historian Victoria Wolcott provides a brief description of Black and white Detroiters on Belle Isle pre-riot, stating how they enjoyed the island's features "in separate groups," and that they occasionally fought "over the use of an outdoor grill or prime fishing spots."¹⁹ Historians Dominic Capeci Jr. and Martha Wilkerson mention a 1940 "disturbance" on Belle Isle between Black park goers and police, that led to whites nicknaming the park "[pejorative] Island."²⁰

Shogan and Craig elaborate on Belle Isle in the 1920s and 1930s, but do not tell us much about what types of interactions and activities occurred during this time:

In the 1920's and 1930's, the island became particularly popular with Negroes because it was convenient to Paradise Valley, the big ghetto on the East Side, because it offered a cheap way to relax, and because it was one of the few recreation areas around Detroit open to them. As the number of Negroes who frequented Belle Isle increased over the years, many whites chose to seek their recreation elsewhere. But thousands of whites still went there, and some were openly resentful of the growing Negro use of the island.²¹

Shogan and Craig also explain in slightly more detail the events of the 1940 violence on Belle Isle, stating how it erupted after police took a young Black Detroiters accused of stealing a canoe into custody.²² Therefore, there is evidence of recreational conflict pre-riot occurring on Belle Isle.

From these limited descriptions of Belle Isle, pre-riot, it is impossible to fully grasp how Black and white Detroiters felt about this space. Further research into incidents in the 1920s and 1930s is needed in order to more accurately gauge the level of animosity of white Detroiters towards Black park goers on Belle Isle, as well as the level of Black presence and visibility at the park. Therefore, this essay will analyze the types of activities (especially intimate activities such

¹⁹ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 43.

²⁰ Capeci Jr. and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 188.

²¹ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 34-35.

²² Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 35.

as swimming which scholars such as Wolcott and Wiltse have underscored as volatile) and spaces available on pre-riot Belle Isle, as well as the interactions that occur within these spaces.

Chapter one will begin with an analysis of the Belle Isle Field Day, a large annual athletic invitational that brought Detroit's elementary students, including Black children, to Belle Isle in the 1920s and 1930s. This event has been largely overlooked by historians but is essential in understanding the attitudes of Black and white Detroiters towards interacting in a mixed space. Surprisingly, both Detroit's white and Black press hailed the event as racially harmonious, as a day where people of all races, genders, and social standings assemble peacefully. This raises an interesting historical question: how did Belle Isle, supposedly an interracial paradise in the 1920s and 1930s, transform into a powderkeg ready to blow by the 1940s? The key is critically examining the Belle Isle Field Day, which was just that: a day. For one day, under the conditions of organized recreation, white Detroiters agreed to be in the same space as Black Detroiters. Outside of the controlled environment of the Field Day, white Detroiters protested the presence of Black Detroiters on the island. Black Detroiters - accompanied by an increasing number of Black newcomers to Detroit - finding little sufficient recreational facilities on the mainland, consistently went to Belle Isle, one of the only large recreational spaces available to them. As their numbers and opportunities on Belle Isle increased, so too did their resolve to be treated equally. When faced with potential discrimination, Black visitors to Belle Isle made their displeasure known through protest. This increase in Black numbers, along with their increased authoritative power, caused white visitors to be resentful. Therefore, the Detroit Riot of 1943 did not appear out of thin air on an island known for interracial harmony but erupted as the culmination of a series of previous conflicts on an island known for interracial uneasiness.

Chapter two begins with a discussion of the types of behavior unique to amusement spaces as opposed to more formal settings. In amusement settings, people lose the structure that more formal settings, such as school or work, impose on the people within those spaces. In recreational spaces, people act less composed, engaging in activities that are not favorably looked upon in structured environments. For this reason, whites oftentimes segregated areas of amusement out of an irrational fear of how Black people would act in these spaces. If these spaces allowed Black visitors, white visitors would band together to expel them. This chapter will examine this practice in action at Eastwood Amusement Park, where just days before the Detroit Riot, white visitors (decidedly in the majority) at Eastwood attacked Black visitors. This provides an interesting contrast to the island park Belle Isle, a public park which on the first day of the riot, had majority-Black attendance. How then, did the riot break out in a majority-Black space? This chapter will argue how Belle Isle's layout, specifically its few and densely packed playgrounds, concession stands, and bus stops, brought white and Black patrons together in frustrating bottleneck situations that escalated tension. This chapter will also use Historian Joshua Cole's concept of provocation to argue that interracial incidents on Belle Isle occurred not as Black aggression, but as a Black response to perceived white discrimination. No one incident caused the riot, but the riot erupted as the culmination of a series of smaller events that fizzled out throughout the day (whether by themselves or through Belle Isle police intervention). This chapter also examines different white perspectives on the riot, demonstrating that not all white Detroiters felt the same way about mixed spaces. However, many white Detroiters still expressed hostility towards Black Detroiters in mixed settings. The source of this hostility stemmed from Black Detroiters' use of limited facilities on Belle Isle, a perceived loss of authority over Black

Detroiters in recreational settings (despite Belle Isle police often siding with white visitors), and a false belief that Black Detroiters threatened white women in mixed spaces.

Finally, chapter three explores the impact of the riot. It starts with an examination of a Field Day put on by a union group a few months following the violence. This chapter argues that this Field Day, a seeming repeat of the earlier events mentioned in chapter one, did not demonstrate that Belle Isle provided a racially harmonious space. Rather, the union Field Day again exemplified organized recreation, in which white Detroiters acquiesced to participate alongside Black Detroiters. Furthermore, the union Field Day did not represent the feelings of white Detroiters as a whole, because the event was largely for union workers. White union workers likely worked regularly alongside Black Detroiters, and some perhaps subscribed to the integrationist ideas of the union leadership. Additionally, for a few months following the Detroit Riot of 1943, Black Detroiters temporarily abandoned Belle Isle, likely out of a fear of white retaliation. Eventually, Black Detroiters began attending Belle Isle again, especially since the island park still offered swimming opportunities that mainland parks did not guarantee. However, the island did not represent a perfect model of integration. Black and white Detroiters, while visiting the same space, avoided interaction with each other. For example, Belle Isle attained almost a type of segregation, namely the visitation of white and Black Detroiters at different times of the day. On occasion, white Detroiters made up the majority during the day, whereas Black Detroiters made up the majority at night when white Detroiters began heading home. At the same time, Black and white Detroiters felt comfortable enough to be within close proximity of each other. Black and white Detroiters sat near and walked past each other on the clearly integrated beach, yet there was clustering and groups. When they visited the island, Black and white Detroiters went in homogeneous groups. Finally, interracial violence did not end. Black

and white Detroiters, when they occasionally interacted with each other, came into conflict with each other. Some white Detroiters felt comfortable enough to enter into the same space as Black Detroiters, but others doubled down on the false idea that Black Detroiters controlled Belle Isle.

Chapter One

Island Paradise: Belle Isle and the Intersection of Race and Recreation

The contestants and spectators began the trek to the little island that sits in the middle of the Detroit [River], early Friday morning. The huge army moved in automobiles, trucks, busses, bicycles, motorcycles, and other modes of transportation. Street cars unloaded thousands at the Belle Isle Bridge, some taking the ferry boat across the river and others walking across the half-mile bridge. Gleaming rows of white tents - 450 - set up Thursday, were ready for the sturdy boys and girls who received their final instructions from school directors.²³

This was the 1932 Belle Isle Field Day as reported by the *Baltimore Afro-American*, a Black newspaper. First held in 1915, this annual athletic meet evolved from a relatively small gathering of hundreds of athletes to an extravaganza that brought together thousands of Detroit elementary school students and adult spectators for Track and Field competitions in the island park in the Detroit River.²⁴ The reason that this event received attention from a Black publication is that this event provided Black Detroiters, especially young Black Detroiters, the opportunity to take part in recreational activities that they sorely lacked in mainland Detroit, seemingly without objections from white competitors and their parents.

Even though Detroit in the 1920s “ranked third among U.S. cities” in the amount of land set aside for play areas, Black Detroiters could not take full advantage of all the facilities available.²⁵ In mainland Detroit, Black residents attended twelve mostly homogeneous playgrounds. The same could be said for recreation centers, as it appears that Black residents primarily used only six out of the forty-six facilities run by the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department. Out of the nineteen recreation centers run by the Recreation Department that had swimming pools, only two were in Black sections of the city, and four others were “contiguous

²³ “Strolling About Detroit,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 11, 1932, 23, ProQuest.

²⁴ “Continue Isle Meet Training,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 1, 1931, 8, ProQuest.

²⁵ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation (The Council: Detroit, 1926), Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1.

to colored districts.”²⁶ For play, it appears Black Detroiters could only fully access facilities with majority-Black attendance within or within close proximity to their communities. Some smaller Black communities near the outskirts of the city did not even have any recreational facilities recorded near them.²⁷ Detroit’s Recreation Commissioner claimed that Black Detroiters could use any of the department facilities, but in practice, Black Detroiters faced opposition, especially (as the Commissioner himself admitted) in swimming pools. When white patrons held the majority in pools, they reacted violently to Black Detroiters if they tried to enter the pool alongside whites. At the Kronk Community Center in northwest Detroit, a “clash” occurred when Black patrons “insisted upon entering the swimming pool along with the whites.”²⁸

Detroit’s rampant segregation of recreational facilities, as well as widespread white hostility towards Black Detroiters within nominally mixed spaces, makes the Belle Isle Field Day stand out as an anomaly. As early as 1927 the *Detroit Free Press* remarked on the racially diverse participants: “But back to the crowd, for the crowd, after all, was the thing. White boys, Negro boys, little orientals, and their sisters. Scores, hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands

²⁶ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, JLC, 3.

²⁷ See map of “Public Recreational Resources of the Detroit Negro” in Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, JLC, 4. The map shades in Detroit’s majority-Black neighborhoods and uses three dots to symbolize playgrounds, community centers, and school recreation centers. Every single one of these dots is located either within the shaded areas or within almost immediate vicinity of them. Outside of these shaded communities and their immediate vicinity, no dots are marked deep into the white neighborhoods, meaning that Black Detroiters did not have access to playgrounds and community centers in firmly white territories.

²⁸ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, JLC, 10.

Warren M. Banner, “Observations on Conditions Among Negroes in the Fields of Education, Recreation and Employment In Selected Areas of the City of Detroit, Michigan,” June 1941, box 74, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 21-22.

- there seemed to be millions of them,” with girls “as numerous as the boys - as it should be in this modern world.”²⁹

The field day in 1927 lived up to its name in terms of scale. The *Free Press* called the setup an “army encampment.”³⁰ Figure 1 corroborates this description. A sea of white tents looms in the background of the photo. Crowds of people stand along the sidelines. Families mill about on the outskirts of the field of play. On the left side of the photo, a group of mothers and children hold hands as they walk along the thoroughfare. Scores of young athletes line up at the starting line, presumably waiting for the gun or whistle to begin their event. In front of them, rows of hurdles stretch out into the distance out of frame. The level of organization seems high, with signs and markers for each event. One can clearly see the sign for boys' broad jump on the right side. Behind the broad jump sign, what appears to be an event worker rakes the pit while a group of what appears to be (event) officials deliberate. It looks like the field day had multiple pits for broad jump, perhaps to accommodate a large number of athletes, as two signs clearly in view mark pit 1 and pit 3. In front of the sign for pit 1 stands a Black athlete, perhaps waiting for his turn to jump, or for his results from the officials. What this reveals is that young Black and white athletes likely competed side-by-side.

Four years later, the *Free Press* elaborated on the seemingly interracial and egalitarian nature of the 1931 Field Day. It described the scene as a “melting pot”:

...black, brown, yellow and white children; black, golden and red-haired, participated on equal grounds Friday. For the day, at least, differences in family incomes and social positions were forgotten. All came together to compete on a field where favor, color, race and wealth gave no advantage, where only natural skill, strength, agility and stamina counted.³¹

²⁹ “World Record at Field Meet,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 4, 1927, 5, ProQuest.

³⁰ “World Record at Field Meet,” 5.

³¹ “Detroit ‘Melting Pot’ Develops Sportsmen,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 6, 1931, 8, ProQuest.



Figure 1: Belle Isle Athletic Field, Field Day 1927, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections³²

³² Detroit News, *Belle Isle; Athletic Field. - Field Day.*, 1927, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, <https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc139>.

The *Free Press*'s description of the Field Day is utopic. It leads its readers to believe that these athletic competitions gave young people of all classes, races, and genders opportunities to participate and interact in the public sphere together in a way they could not in mainland Detroit. Can historians treat this account as reliable? Because the *Free Press* sponsored the event, it may have placed the event in the best possible light. Indeed, for its 1931 Field Day coverage, the *Free Press* included comments from the mayor gushing about the field day: "The Detroit Free Press is rendering a great community service in its sponsorship of this activity."³³

However, to an extent, this event did offer an opportunity for marginalized young people in Detroit. Not only did Belle Isle's Field Day make Detroit's minority populations and women more visible, but it also enabled them to fully demonstrate their athletic prowess. For instance, at the 1932 Field Day, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that the Detroit elementary schools with the largest Black populations swept the podium when Miller Intermediate School, Garfield School, and Sherrard School took first, second, and third place respectively. Young Black Detroiters, making up five thousand of the thirty-two thousand competitors and competing in front of a crowd pushing three hundred fifty thousand spectators, excelled at the sporting events, taking home top honors.³⁴

They did so alongside young white Detroiters. The *Free Press* marked the participants on the starting line: "red-headed and freckled, a son of a bank director in the same heat with the son of a Chinese restaurant man...two ebony sirens.... A fine muscular Negro boy... a white boy in overalls...."³⁵ Even the white mainstream press remarked on the success of Black athletes. In 1925 the *Detroit News* reported on the success of Miller School, "due largely to the performances

³³ "Mayor Praises Meet," *Detroit Free Press*, June 6, 1931, 8, ProQuest.

³⁴ "Strolling About Detroit," 23.

³⁵ "350,000 Crowd Island to See Record Event," *Detroit Free Press*, June 4, 1932, 1, ProQuest.

of its numerous negro athletes.”³⁶ Seven years later, Miller continued its dominance, as the *Free Press* acknowledged the “husky” and “sturdy boy and girl athletes” from Miller Intermediate.³⁷ The increased presence and abounding success of Black athletes did not necessarily lead to racial conflict. In fact, quite the opposite. The *Afro-American* highlighted instances of interracial play. One young Black Detroiter played a doubles match on the tennis courts with three young white Detroiters, and another Black youth went on a canoe ride with kids of “Jewish and Italian extraction.”³⁸ In sum, according to the *Afro-American*, “It was a day when all racial prejudices were laid on the shelf and every one had a good time.”³⁹

Belle Isle on one particular day - an exception in space and time. Both white and Black media had reasons for depicting the island in this way. For one, the *Free Press* sponsored the field day, meaning it had a vested interest in portraying the event as a complete success. Black newspapers, clearly dedicated to the social uplift of Detroit’s Black population, broadcast the achievements of young Black athletes. Additionally, Black newspapers likely wanted to use the Belle Isle Field Day as proof that Black and white Detroiters could coexist in the same space, thus combating harmful stereotypes that Black people posed a threat to white people. For these reasons, historians cannot treat the Belle Isle Field Day as the norm for race relations on the island park because both Black and white media embellished the event. Moreover, the Belle Isle Field Day cannot be the status quo for Belle Isle because the event took place only once a year. The newspapers admit this, each giving its own version of “for one day.” For one day, the city converged on the island for a day of fun, in which people of all races, ethnicities, and genders supposedly got along with each other.

³⁶ “In 10 Sections,” *Detroit News*, June 6, 1925, 1, NewsBank.

³⁷ “Miller Champions Sweep to Victory at Field Meet,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 4, 1932, 1, ProQuest.

³⁸ “Strolling About Detroit,” 23.

³⁹ “Strolling About Detroit,” 23.

What happened on the other three hundred and sixty-four days? What happened when Black people ventured to the island to use facilities outside of the exceptional moment given by the field day? Did segregation and discrimination materialize on the island in the same way as they did on the mainland? To answer these questions, first, we must examine the character of the island without the field day, the activities that the island offered, and the demographics of the participants. This chapter will highlight the numerous amenities on the island and why they drew large crowds. It will also examine how the island attracted Black Detroiters, specifically, through work opportunities and expressions of Black culture. This chapter will also document instances of interracial strife predating the riot of 1943, demonstrating that while the Field Day may have been exceptional, Belle Isle was not. Finally, this chapter will discuss shifting demographics on the island, and how the increase in Black Detroiters on Belle Isle, along with their increased agency on the island through jobs with more authority, inspired Black Detroiters to protest negative treatment by whites on the island, leading to white resentment.

Sacred cows from India... furry Polar bears... brilliant pheasants... strange fish... a paradise of flowers. Whispering woodlands of wild creatures... speedboats flashing through the water... gargantuan ore steamers plowing past... airplanes droning overhead. Such is the kaleidoscopic life on Belle Isle, Detroit's famous playground - the center of her out-door activities. You can reach Belle Isle three different ways - on foot - by automobile over a new bridge, nearly a mile long - and by a fleet of steamers which ply back and forth from the downtown waterfront.⁴⁰

This was an ad in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* for Belle Isle. To Detroiters Belle Isle was not simply a park, it was the foremost outdoor entertainment venue in all of Detroit. By the late 1920s, the 800-acre island in the Detroit River had everything: a zoo, an aquarium, a golf course, a "40-acre athletic field," a bathing beach and bathhouse, inlet lakes and waterways, canoe rentals, miles of roads and trails along the shoreline and through the interior for drivers and

⁴⁰ Greater Detroit Committee, INC., "The Most Beautiful Island - Park in the World," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 5, 1927, 29, ProQuest.

pedestrians, woods, and its own police force to oversee all of it.⁴¹ Belle Isle's numerous amenities and large size attracted and sustained immense crowds of people. By the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Belle Isle was not only crowded (simply) on special days: it was crowded constantly, especially during the summer months. It was so crowded that a 1928 *Detroit Free Press* article recommended that Detroit's drivers look to other locations in Detroit and the surrounding metropolitan area for amusement so as to avoid congestion on Belle Isle. In fact, even getting to Belle Isle was a tedious and frustrating process. Drivers traveling down East Jefferson and Grand Boulevard awaited the "usual traffic jam," joining "hundreds of impatient motorists."⁴² Drivers bound for the island faced a high risk of damaging or even totaling their vehicles.

Once on the island, visitors looking to cool off found crowds of people on the beach, including "the everpresent heedless fat persons" so self-absorbed that they trampled unsuspecting children as they walked the beach.⁴³ At the end of the day, when park-goers packed up to leave, they faced the same frustrating ordeal. Drivers hopped back in their cars to find that crossing the bridge back to the mainland "takes one from 45 minutes to an hour," and oftentimes longer as cars' gas tanks often ran dry, causing long standstills.⁴⁴ Getting to the bridge itself was also an ordeal when the island, flooded with cars, became one big parking lot. Motorists trying to leave the park found their vehicles blocked by a sea of automobiles. On one Wednesday in July

⁴¹ "26,000 to Compete on Final Field Day," *Detroit Free Press*, May 28, 1928, 4, ProQuest.

"Belle Isle Lures City," *Detroit Free Press*, May 31, 1928, 13, ProQuest.

"Know Your Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 1928, 2, ProQuest.

"Know Your Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, January 5, 1929, 2, ProQuest.

⁴² "Motorists Offered Broad Roads Leading to Recreation Spots," *Detroit Free Press*, July 15, 1928, 55, ProQuest.

⁴³ "Motorists Offered Broad Roads Leading to Recreation Spots," 55.

⁴⁴ "Motorists Offered Broad Roads Leading to Recreation Spots," 55.

1936, the (car) crowding became so bad on the island that “parking rules had gone by the boards and cars were parked three and four deep on the pavement.”⁴⁵

The intense effort of going to and from the island meant that visits to Belle Isle were full-day affairs. Belle Isle facilitated several activities that stayed open after dark. Beginning in 1925, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra (DSO) performed concerts on the island.⁴⁶ These free concerts were an immediate success. They lasted six weeks during the summer.⁴⁷ These concerts often highlighted the music of Detroit’s ethnic groups, such as on Polish, Italian, and German music nights.⁴⁸ Eventually, they included Black cultural products. In 1930, the DSO held a “Negro Music Night” that showcased Black musicians and arrangements.⁴⁹ This became an annual event, and in 1939, several local Black choir troupes performed.⁵⁰

Belle Isle also welcomed and accommodated informal picnickers. Many of these picnickers may have been Black Detroiters. During the particularly scorching summer of 1936, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that many residents trekked to Belle Isle for relief, staying on the island into the early hours of the night and even overnight:

There were thousands, unable to get away to the lakes, who spent their nights on Belle Isle. Those with automobiles usually drove around until late, and then pushed over to the isle where they spread out blankets and spent the night. They returned to the city the following morning. Many families just moved over to the island, sleeping there and cooking their meals on the small ovens the city has prepared for the housewives and picnickers.⁵¹

⁴⁵ “Some Michigan Highs,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 9, 1936, 11, ProQuest.

⁴⁶ “Detroit Summer Concerts to Open at Belle Isle July 12,” *Billboard*, July 4, 1925, 30, ProQuest.

⁴⁷ “Isle Concerts Fine Success,” *Detroit News*, August 15, 1926, 25, NewsBank.

⁴⁸ “Detroit to Have Race Music Night,” *Chicago Defender*, June 14, 1930, 2, ProQuest.

⁴⁹ “Symphony Uses Negro Music,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 16, 1930, 8, ProQuest.

⁵⁰ “Annual Race Music Night is Observed in Detroit,” *Chicago Defender*, August 26, 1939, 6, ProQuest.

⁵¹ Russ Cowans, “Around the Motor City,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 25, 1936, 18, ProQuest.

While there were concession stands on the island, they did not offer the same amount of snack options as on the mainland. One popcorn-loving patron derided the sole popcorn stand for the giant park as “dinky” and grumbled that it was located in the “most inaccessible part of the island.”⁵² Belle Isle did have a traditional restaurant, known as the Belle Isle Casino. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it served as a popular banquet and party spot for local social organizations.⁵³ Additionally, in 1933, at the end of prohibition, the Casino was the sole spot on the island where patrons could drink alcohol.⁵⁴

Belle Isle also allowed night swimming. By 1933 the hours of Belle Isle bathing beach extended from eight in the morning to nine at night.⁵⁵ Belle Isle’s bathing beach provided refuge to many Detroit residents on hot summer days: that is, at least to those who reached the line first. The beach was so popular that on one day in 1927, “a line of nearly a thousand persons” formed in front of the bathhouse entrance to the beach.⁵⁶ The people who stepped in line too late decided there was no way they were getting in, so they “changed in their automobiles” and found different “piers and stretches of shore” on the island to swim at.⁵⁷ This indicates that visitors to Belle Isle improvised, making use of all the available space, using other beaches when the main one was full.

Since the 1890s there had been a police station on the island to keep watch over these activities. In 1897, a *Free Press* article commented that it seemed unnecessary because of the

⁵² “A Popcorn Fan Protests Scarcity of Island Stands,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 18, 1937, 6, ProQuest.

⁵³ “School Briefs,” *Detroit News*, June 6, 1925, 6, NewsBank.

“Fraternal Notes,” *Detroit News*, July 24, 1927, 16, NewsBank.

“Groups Plan Many Picnics,” *Detroit News*, July 5, 1936, 32, NewsBank.

“Lodge World Plans Outings,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 30, 1939, 11, ProQuest.

⁵⁴ “Picnickers Throng Casino as Beer Returns to Island,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 29, 1933, 1, ProQuest.

⁵⁵ “What’s Doing Today in Detroit,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 10, 1933, 20, ProQuest.

⁵⁶ “Crowds Seek Admission to Beach,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 2, 1927, 2, ProQuest.

⁵⁷ “Crowds Seek Admission to Beach,” 2.

lack of crime on the island, but that “its being there is a reminder that order is to be maintained on the island as elsewhere.”⁵⁸ The station contained a jail for temporary detainment, and it served as a mini hospital and refuge for lost children.⁵⁹ In the 1920s and 1930s, the Belle Isle police stayed on the look-out for thieves who targeted sleeping islanders as well as poachers who tried to hunt the pheasants raised “for culinary purposes” on Belle Isle.⁶⁰ They patrolled the edges of the island in a police boat.⁶¹ They enforced the rules of the island, preventing people from swimming before the bathhouse opened for the summer and getting people to leave for the night.⁶² However, the police force on the island was not without flaws. The Belle Isle police faced a scandal in 1929 when the commanding officer of the Belle Isle police station was suspended for liquor smuggling during prohibition, accused of driving a police vehicle filled with alcohol from Canada over the Belle Isle bridge and into mainland Detroit.⁶³

There had been a history of Black workers at the Belle Isle Casino as far back as the 1910s. In 1911, the white waiters at the Belle Isle Casino, angered by a policy that customers did not have to tip them, decided to “mutiny.”⁶⁴ They refused service to a Black picnic group even though “their agreement required them to wait on any one who chose to sit down at a table,” and they threatened to quit. The manager, undaunted by the threats, fired the white waiters and replaced them with Black waiters.⁶⁵ By the 1920s, (it appears) Black Detroiters served as Belle Isle Casino cooks. In 1928, a Black cook filed a suit against his former employer for firing him

⁵⁸ “Belle Isle Police Station,” *Detroit Free Press*, May 9, 1897, 32, ProQuest.

⁵⁹ “Belle Isle Police Station,” 32.

⁶⁰ “Hot Weather,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 4, 1933, 16, ProQuest.

“Pheasant Poachers,” *Detroit News*, December 7, 1932, 9, NewsBank.

⁶¹ “Current News Events In Pictures,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 14, 1928, 28, ProQuest.

⁶² “Water 63 and Climbing, Beach Opens Thursday,” *Detroit News*, June 3, 1925, 1, NewsBank.

“Belle Isle Police,” *Detroit News*, July 23, 1929, 4, NewsBank.

⁶³ “Detroit Police Captain Breaks Down on Liquor Charges and Goes to Hospital,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1929, 2, ProQuest.

⁶⁴ “Negroes Replace White Waiters,” *Detroit Free Press*, August 10, 1911, 5, ProQuest.

⁶⁵ “Negroes Replace White Waiters,” 5.

“without a hearing and without just cause.”⁶⁶ During the 1930s, Black and white workers presumably worked side-by-side on public welfare projects on Belle Isle. In 1933, two men - one white and one Black - on “public welfare rolls” rescued two drowning children.⁶⁷ They were “working nearby” when, hearing the screams, they rushed into action.⁶⁸

Belle Isle’s bathing beach was segregated by gender until 1927 when the fence separating men and women was brought down. However, the same rules of modesty applied to all the bathers, especially the women, who were “compelled to wear two piece suits or suits provided with skirt attached.”⁶⁹ This integration of male and female swimmers falls in line with the trends of municipal swimming pools across the country during the interwar years. During this time, these pools began to allow men and women to swim alongside each other because this “promote[d] family and community sociability.”⁷⁰ However, when pools began to allow this interaction between men and women, they immediately took action to prevent Black people, especially Black men, from using their facilities, as Black men were perceived as having an “untamed sexual desire for white women.”⁷¹

In the north, characteristically, white pool workers attempted to dissuade Black patrons from entering, but they “did not outright deny them admission.”⁷² When that strategy failed, white swimmers attacked Black patrons for breaking the color line. Northern whites shored up segregation through violence, and subsequently Black and white people did their outings

⁶⁶ “Fired as Casino Cook, He Sues Commissioner,” *Detroit News*, December 1, 1928, 3, NewsBank.

⁶⁷ “Black, White Heroes Save 2 From Drowning,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 8, 1933, 23, ProQuest.

⁶⁸ “Black, White Heroes Save 2 From Drowning,” 23.

⁶⁹ “Belle Isle Bathing Beach to Open at 10 a.m.,” *Detroit News*, June 5, 1927, 1, NewsBank.

⁷⁰ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 103.

⁷¹ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 124.

⁷² Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 123.

separately. Black people went to “pools nearest to their homes,” as did whites.⁷³ Black people had fewer pools to choose from. In Cincinnati, for example, they only had access to two out of eight pools.⁷⁴ By the 1920s, northern and southern cities enforced segregation on public beaches.⁷⁵ Whites attacked Black people who wandered into designated white swimming areas, as at the beginning of the 1919 Chicago Race Riot, when a white man stoned a fourteen-year-old Black youth who “drifted over to the white beach.”⁷⁶

In the 1920s, there was already pushback from whites at a Detroit community center where Black people tried to swim in the same pool.⁷⁷ However, Belle Isle’s beach was not necessarily segregated by race in the 1920s. In fact, it seemed quite the opposite. A 1926 survey by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan claimed widespread use of the park by Black Detroiters: “Colored people make wide use of Belle Isle Park without any friction with whites. They bathe on the beach, use the canoes and other facilities without any appreciable unpleasantness.”⁷⁸ Granted, this survey was taken before the fence separating male and female bathers was torn down, meaning that Black men were likely unable to interact with white female swimmers, so the fear that Black men would violate white women did not materialize on the island, at least not yet.⁷⁹

However, about a month after the publication of this article, an anonymous woman known only as Mrs. H.R. submitted a suggestion to the *Detroit News* concerning Black

⁷³ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 123.

⁷⁴ Wiltse, *Contested Waters*, 140.

⁷⁵ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 24.

⁷⁶ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters*, 26.

⁷⁷ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, JLC, 10.

⁷⁸ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, JLC, 11.

⁷⁹ “Belle Isle Bathing Beach to Open at 10 a.m.,” 1.

beachgoers. Mrs. H. R. stated that Belle Isle had good bathing facilities, “[b]ut what Detroit needs is more bathing beaches and one especially for colored people. Belle Isle has everything else, but why not a beach and bath house for colored people? I think they would enjoy this very much and more people could take advantage of Belle Isle.”⁸⁰ This woman brought up two concerns, which we need to read between the lines to find. The first concern, a proposal for more bathing beaches, we can infer because of the reality of the day: overcrowding on Belle Isle’s main bathing beach. As established earlier, Belle Isle’s main bathing beach attracted many swimmers, and could not accommodate everyone, prompting latecomers to go to the other (presumably smaller) “stretches of shore” for a beachfront.⁸¹ Mrs. H.R. thus likely wanted the expansion of the main beach shoreline so that she could swim without being surrounded on the main beach, avoid waiting in a long line, and/or avoid having to use a smaller beach where it could be even more congested.

The second concern that we can infer is that Mrs. H.R. personally believed that there was not an insignificant number of Black bathers on the beach. Mrs. H.R. stated Belle Isle needed a beach for Black people, right after stating that Belle Isle needed more beaches. She stated that if Belle Isle added a segregated beach, “more people could take advantage of Belle Isle.”⁸² We can surmise from these statements that Mrs. H.R. believed that there were too many Black Detroiters for her taste on the beach, and that she believed their presence prevented other people, perhaps coded as specifically white people, from using the island. Therefore, this shows that some white

⁸⁰ “Belle Isle Bathing Beach to Open at 10 a.m.,” 1.

“The Public Letter Box: Bathing Beaches,” *Detroit News*, July 7, 1927, 4, NewsBank.

⁸¹ “Crowds Seek Admission to Beach,” 2.

⁸² “The Public Letter Box: Bathing Beaches,” 4.

Detroiters, maybe especially white women, wanted to enforce segregation on Belle Isle's beach due to what they viewed as an excessive number of Black bathers.⁸³

However, were there many Black bathers on the beach at this time? This is disputed. In a letter to the editor of the Black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, one man offers a response to the request given by Mrs. H.R. in the *Detroit News*. He questioned the necessity of enforcing segregation on the Belle Isle bathing beach when "Many Negroes never go to Belle Isle to swim."⁸⁴ Rather, the author stated, "[Black Detroiters] prefer, as is their right, their own places. They are financing at great sacrifice many nearby resorts where they can order and control things in conformity with their wishes in a way that is not possible nor justifiable in a tax supported place like Belle Isle."⁸⁵ The author of the *Defender* article claimed that both Black and white Detroiters wanted separate swimming arrangements because they felt "uncomfortable in the presence of the other."⁸⁶ This means that perhaps there were not as many Black swimmers on Belle Isle's beach. Indeed, in Figure 2 there is only one Black youth visible among a throng of young white men and interspersed young white women. The young Black Detroiters stands to the right of the diving board, looking on as a young woman dives into the water. Perhaps this is representative of the Black population in Detroit. One cannot claim the Belle Isle bathing beach to be a bastion of racial equality when in reality, there were not that many Black Detroiters using the beach alongside whites in the 1920s.

⁸³ Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York: Picador, 2004), 17, 147. The prefix "Mrs." shows that this woman was married, and perhaps she had children, maybe daughters. Given the historical precedence of labeling Black men as sexual predators against white women and the subsequent white parents' fears for their daughters, it follows that Mrs. H.R. would ask for a separate beach for Black Detroiters, fearing for herself and her daughters. However, this is purely speculation, as the piece does not offer any information on this anonymous woman's homelife.

⁸⁴ Harold M. Kingsley, "Observations: The Trend of Current Thought and Discussion: Segregation," *Chicago Defender*, August 20, 1927, A2, ProQuest.

⁸⁵ Kingsley, "Observations," A2.

⁸⁶ Kingsley, "Observations," A2.



Figure 2: Belle Isle Bathing Beach, Diving Scenes, undated, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Detroit News, Belle Isle; Bathing Beach. -Diving Scenes, Undated, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc20857_1.

However, clearly, there were some Black Detroiters using the beach, and some were enough for individuals like Mrs. H.R., who felt strongly enough about it to suggest separate swimming arrangements. This discomfort would eventually materialize in the form of physical violence on one day in late September 1931. The Black publication the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that an off-duty lifeguard shouted pejoratives at a group of three young Black Detroiters who were “peacefully standing on the sand of the beach,” instigating a fight.⁸⁸ Subsequently, the initiator of the fight, joined by his on-duty white coworkers, “forced the boys into a bathhouse and gave them a severe beating.”⁸⁹ The lifeguards claimed that the Black youths were drunk and that they wanted to start a “riot.”⁹⁰

Perhaps this attack on Black swimmers by white lifeguards could be seen as a response to a rising number of Black Detroiters going to Belle Isle. Indeed, Detroit’s Black population grew by 50% from 81,000 in 1925 to 120,000 in 1930. This may have resulted in an increase in Black patrons on Belle Isle. However, the character of the island certainly began to change in 1940, when Detroit’s Black population swelled to almost 150,000.⁹¹ Discrimination continued for Black Detroiters looking for leisure on the mainland. In the late thirties and early forties, the white management of local YMCAs turned Black Detroiters away, instructing them to attend the only branch that served Detroit’s Black community.⁹² In the years leading up to 1941, Rouge Park, a mainland park that offered similar activities to Belle Isle, enforced an “absolute expulsion

⁸⁸ “White Lifeguards are Fired After Beach Fight in Detroit,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 19, 1931, A3, ProQuest.

⁸⁹ “White Lifeguards are Fired After Beach Fight in Detroit,” A3.

⁹⁰ “White Lifeguards are Fired After Beach Fight in Detroit,” A3.

⁹¹ Boyle, *Arc of Justice*, 4.

Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 23.

⁹² “Board of St. Antoine Assails Discrimination at ‘Y’ School,” *Detroit Tribune*, November 5, 1938, 1, Library of Congress.

Banner, Observations on Conditions Among Negroes, June 1941, box 74, Detroit Urban League Records, BHL, 23-24.

of Negroes from use of the public swimming pool.”⁹³ Thus, Belle Isle, given its - albeit somewhat checkered - history of inclusion, seemed to be the ideal destination for Black Detroiters.

The subsequent war period led to an increased sense of self-worth in Detroit’s Black community:

The war inevitably improved the financial lot of the Negro.... This sudden gain in status, which violates one of the underlying prejudices of millions of Americans, evokes a powerful reaction...white elements are conditioned to be irritable upon the slightest provocation - or to no provocation at all. The Negro, in turn, conscious of his improved situation, no longer accepts discourtesies, incivilities, and bolder provocations from white elements without fairly aggressive protest or retaliation.⁹⁴

It appears that more Black Detroiters, spurned by mainland Detroit’s recreation spots, went to Belle Isle beginning in the 1940s, and they made their presence known through their actions. Black Detroiters now responded with increased intensity when they felt they were unjustly targeted, and they had larger numbers for support.

This is exactly what happened in July of 1940 when a “riot” broke out on the island.⁹⁵ This fight differed from the attack on Black beachgoers by white lifeguards in 1931. During that skirmish, it seemed that the Black beachgoers were alone, as they did not receive any support from other Black beachgoers. Not this time. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that 3,000 Black Detroiters “stormed the Belle Isle Police Station” to “liberate a youth who had been suspected of

⁹³ Banner, Observations on Conditions Among Negroes, June 1941, box 74, Detroit Urban League Records, BHL, 19.

“Motorists Offered Broad Roads Leading to Recreation Spots,” 55.

This *Free Press* article mentioned River Rouge park as a solid alternative to Belle Isle. The article labeled Rouge park as a prime picnic area and as a spot that does not get overcrowded.

⁹⁴ Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot, Detroit 1943* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 9-10.

⁹⁵ “3,000 Attempt to Free Youth Held as a Thief,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 5, 1940, 1, 14, ProQuest.

stealing a canoe.”⁹⁶ A young Black Detroiter allegedly took a rentable canoe from a dock. The man who had just docked the canoe noticed it was missing and notified a Belle Isle patrolman, who instructed the young Black Detroiter to return. As the patrolman made his announcement, the *Free Press* reported, a crowd of Black Detroiters began to surround him. When he arrived back on shore the young Black man apparently made a run for it and was pursued and overtaken by Belle Isle police. All the while the crowd that had formed had also been tailing the police and the suspect. The *Free Press* reported that the crowd became agitated, shouting and throwing projectiles at the patrolmen on the way to the Belle Isle station. When the patrolmen arrived at the station a crowd had formed there too. The patrolmen stationed there barricaded the doors. The crowd threw rocks and bottles through the windows. As he made his way through the crowd the Inspector on duty claimed to have been clawed by a woman. The Inspector who was attacked said the following about the crowd of Black Detroiters:

We had to clean them out.... They would not behave and there would not have been a window left in the station had we not cleared them out. There were a lot of good colored people on the island and they were loud in their complaints against these roughnecks. Windows had been broken in the skating pavilion and the canoe pavilion. One man was knocked down while carrying ice cream cones to his family and an old man was beaten up earlier in the day. We made arrests, but there were no complaining witnesses, so we released the prisoners.⁹⁷

The *Detroit News* similarly reported that the lawful Black population’s majority staunchly opposed the actions of a few rabble-rousing people in the crowd. The *News* took statements from Black religious leaders, one of whom stated that “only a small contingent” of Black Detroiters took part in the riot, and that nobody “deplored [the riot] more than these law-abiding Negroes....”⁹⁸ The reverend lamented that this riot reflected poorly on Black people, seeing it as a step back, especially since it followed a recent high-profile talk on race relations in which

⁹⁶ “3,000 Attempt to Free Youth Held as a Thief,” 1, 14.

⁹⁷ “3,000 Attempt to Free Youth Held as a Thief,” 1, 14.

⁹⁸ “Negro Pastor Deplores Riot,” *Detroit News*, July 6, 1940, 6, NewsBank.

white Detroiters “generously co-operated.”⁹⁹ The Black religious leader firmly placed the blame on this small faction of “irresponsible” and “easily excited” Black Detroiters, and pledged to do “[w]hat we can do to curb that element....”¹⁰⁰

The *Free Press* portrayed the group of Black Detroiters as the combatants, as the agitators who assaulted the Belle Isle police officers and innocent bystanders. The *Free Press* crafted a narrative depicting the police as the sole victims of the ordeal, shining a particularly bright light onto the many injuries the crowd inflicted on the officers. To further justify the actions of the officers, the *Free Press* included the statement by the Inspector who praised the “good colored people” who criticized the “roughnecks.”¹⁰¹ The *Detroit News* also separated Black Detroiters into good and bad by using the authoritative testimony of Black religious leaders as proof of this distinction.¹⁰²

By separating the Black Detroiters into good and bad based on who was in the crowd, Detroit’s white mainstream media completely negated any legitimate concern felt by those in the crowd. By contrast, the *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper, brings a perspective sorely lacking in the white press coverage: the point of view of the group of enraged Black Detroiters. The *Chicago Defender* reported:

However, some of those who participated in the demonstration declared that [the suspect] was beaten by the arresting officer, and then chained to a motorcycle. These persons charge that it was the action of the arresting officer which precipitated the disturbance. [The suspect], in jail, said that he had been beaten by the policeman before the demonstration was staged. His allegations were substantiated by his mother.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ “Negro Pastor Deplores Riot,” 6.

¹⁰⁰ “Negro Pastor Deplores Riot,” 6.

¹⁰¹ “3,000 Attempt to Free Youth Held as a Thief,” 1, 14.

¹⁰² “Negro Pastor Deplores Riot,” 6.

¹⁰³ “Score Rowdism That Led to Near Riot,” *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1940, 4, ProQuest.

What this shows is that Black Detroiters witnessed the arrest and thought something was not right, namely that the suspect seemed to be a victim of police brutality. Indeed, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, white policemen acted violently toward Black Detroiters, no matter if they had committed a crime or not.¹⁰⁴ Likely angered by the repeated discrimination, and emboldened by the support from an increased number of Black patrons on Belle Isle, these people in the crowd likely felt that they needed to defend this young Black man.

However, the *Chicago Defender* piece included one of the same statements by a prominent Black religious leader that the *Detroit News* utilized: “Many members of our race were on the island and did not contribute to the disorder and were sorry that it happened” and that “This disturbance, in spirit, does not reflect the holiday spirit of the majority of Negroes in the city of Detroit.”¹⁰⁵ Now, this tepid response by a Black leader and a leading Black newspaper may strike the reader as odd considering the implications of police brutality. However, in this instance, given the fact that the white newspaper portrayed Black park-goers as violent instigators and considering the harsh stereotypes previously mentioned in this chapter, perhaps Dade and the *Chicago Defender* felt they had to prove that Black Detroiters were not violent. The symbolic implications of the riot on the Fourth of July also could have placed Black Detroiters at risk of being branded un-American. These labels could have had potentially drastic consequences because they may have demonstrated to white Detroiters that segregation was necessary, so Black media and religious leaders also singled out the participants and condemned them in an attempt to counteract justification for racial separation.

Black Detroiters also responded to an incident in August of 1942 that involved a Black worker and recent white southern migrants. While Black workers had been on the Island since

¹⁰⁴ Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 165.

¹⁰⁵ “Score Rowdyism That Led to Near Riot,” 4.

the 1910s, they did not work in leadership roles. In the 1910s and 1920s, Black Detroiters worked as waiters and cooks on Belle Isle, serving patrons rather than instructing them. By the 1930s, they worked alongside white Detroiters on public works projects but still did not enforce rules on patrons.¹⁰⁶ By the 1940s, however, things had changed. Some Black workers on Belle Isle now had authority over patrons, including white Detroiters. This incident in 1942 involved a Black female playground attendant exercising authority over white patrons. The incident began when two white children refused to let a Black child use the slide. The playground attendant admonished the group of white children for not letting the Black child use the slide. Then, the mother of the white children called the attendant “vile names” and struck her.¹⁰⁷ The father of the white children then reportedly said that back where the white family was from, Kentucky, they did not allow Black people in the park. He then made a threatening gesture by reaching into his pocket as if he was going to grab a knife. The playground attendant got the attention of two Belle Isle policemen, likely also both Black, because the father told them “he did not have to answer to [pejorative] policemen.” They arrested the father for “disturbing the peace.”¹⁰⁸

This interaction can be seen as a microcosm of the broader situation in Detroit during World War Two: “Southern whites have come here in vast numbers, bringing with them their Jim Crow notions of the Negro.”¹⁰⁹ These white migrants thought that their southern Black migrant counterparts became “too ‘uppity’” after receiving a “decent wage” and gaining a “sense of freedom.”¹¹⁰ One white southerner also thought northern native Black Detroiters to be “bold” and

¹⁰⁶ “Negroes Replace White Waiters,” 5.

“Fired as Casino Cook, He Sues Commissioner,” 3.

“Black, White Heroes Save 2 From Drowning,” 23.

¹⁰⁷ “Dixie Whites Start Row on Belle Isle,” *Detroit Tribune*, August 8, 1942, 1-2, Library of Congress.

¹⁰⁸ “Dixie Whites Start Row on Belle Isle,” 1-2.

¹⁰⁹ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 91.

¹¹⁰ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 91.

“brassy.”¹¹¹ In the case of the 1942 playground incident, the suggestion of increased authority of Black Detroiters over white patrons on Belle Isle led to resentment from at least one family of recent southern white migrants. The white southern family wanted to reassert the authority they had over Black people in Kentucky, attempting to press the subordination of this Black playground attendant through intimidation. However, she had aid in the form of Black policemen. This meant that on Belle Isle by the 1940s, Black Detroiters may have felt a sense of security that they did not experience on the mainland. The increased number of Black patrons on the island, coupled with the increased authority given to Black workers, made Belle Isle a space where Black people could defend themselves from dehumanization.

Belle Isle was the only spot in Detroit that guaranteed Black Detroiters full access to recreational facilities alongside white Detroiters. As the Black population of Detroit increased, more began heading to Belle Isle for leisure, thus making it one of the only public places where white and Black Detroiters congregated together in large numbers. By the 1940s Black Detroiters likely felt more secure on Belle Isle than ever before, due to safety in numbers as well as due to protection by Black workers with increased authority over patrons. As demonstrated, this earned the ire of prejudiced whites, who lashed out at Black patrons and workers out of resentment at losing complete spatial domination. Belle Isle at this point was an established staple in Detroit’s Black community that was worth defending. Their actions sent a message to prejudiced white patrons that discriminatory behavior would no longer be tolerated.

¹¹¹ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 91.

Chapter Two

Belle Isle and the Detroit Riot of 1943

By the 1940s, the large increase in migrants, both Black and white, to Detroit in search of jobs in the defense industries severely congested Detroit's park spaces.¹¹² Unlike in the 1920s, when Detroit boasted a third-place ranking among U.S. cities for land reserved for play, it appears that by the 1940s Detroit's recreation priorities had shifted, as it provided less space for recreation for a rapidly increasing population.¹¹³ Detroit fell behind other big cities in providing parks for its citizens.¹¹⁴ Detroiters living in crowded residential areas found little green space. For the 400,000 people living inside of Grand Boulevard, the total area allotted to parks amounted to 35 acres, while cemeteries took up 260 acres.¹¹⁵ Additionally, in 1943, Black Detroiters still faced the same issues when it came to accessing recreation as in years prior. Black children found themselves barred from school playgrounds. Most bowling alleys, roller rinks, and dance halls turned Black Detroiters away. The exceptional facilities that allowed Black entrance had conditions, such as the Graystone Ballroom, which increased its admission "from 75 cents to \$2.25 or \$2.50" for Black patrons.¹¹⁶

On Sunday, June 20, 1943, on a summer day pushing 90 degrees, 100,000 Detroiters gathered on Belle Isle to cool off and leave their troubles on the mainland. Belle Isle by 1943 had

¹¹² Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 3.

¹¹³ Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation (The Council: Detroit, 1926), Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1.

¹¹⁴ Rev. Merrill Bates Speech at the United We Stand Conference, 1943, box 88, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Page 2. Source Merrill Bates Speech found through consultation of Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 187-188, 293.

¹¹⁵ Rev. Merrill Bates Speech at the United We Stand Conference, 1943, box 88, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan, WPR, Page 1.

¹¹⁶ Rev. Merrill Bates Speech at the United We Stand Conference, 1943, box 88, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan, WPR, Page 2-3.

expanded to 985 acres (likely an incremental process to accommodate Detroit's increasing population), and on June 20 the park goes crowded Belle Isle's many amenities.¹¹⁷ Now, one might point out that in the 1920s and 1930s, for the Belle Isle Field Day, Belle Isle sustained a far larger crowd and remained peaceful. The crowd attending the 1932 field day for instance amounted to over 350,000. However, at that field day in 1932 Black participants made up a clear minority of the people on the island, 5,000 out of 32,000 thousand competitors, and the ratio likely remained the same for Black spectators compared to white spectators. Furthermore, organized recreation took place - competitive track and field events - which differs from people pursuing their own recreation.¹¹⁸ By 1943, however, the racial demographics of Belle Isle had changed from white to Black majority. On June 20, 1943, Black Detroiters made up 80% of the people on the island.¹¹⁹ When held against historical precedent in Detroit, it is curious that the interracial fighting which broke out on Belle Isle on that day occurred in what was by then a majority-Black space. This contrasts with previous outbreaks of violence. In the 1920s, clashes in mixed recreation spaces did not usually happen in spaces where Black people made up most of the population.¹²⁰ Indeed, Detroit pools in the 1920s that allowed mixed swimming faced fewer instances of conflict when Black Detroiters made up the clear majority of their patrons.¹²¹

Therefore, this chapter will explain why conflict broke out on Belle Isle. This chapter will differentiate behavior in amusement spaces from more formal spaces. Using Victoria Wolcott's concept of transgression, this chapter discusses how more illicit, noncompliant types of behavior, even coming from adults, emerge in amusement settings because they break down traditional

¹¹⁷ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 5.

¹¹⁸ "Know Your Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, October 6, 1928, 2, ProQuest.

¹¹⁹ "Strolling About Detroit," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 11, 1932, 23, ProQuest.

¹²⁰ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 5.

¹²¹ Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 134.

¹²² Citizens Research Council of Michigan, *The Negro in Detroit*, Section VII: Recreation, 10.

social etiquette in favor of fun. This chapter also directly links Eastwood Park to Belle Isle, as just days before the Detroit Riot of 1943 broke out on Belle Isle, a smaller one erupted at Eastwood Park. By exploring how Belle Isle's layout brought people into close (too close for comfort) contact with each other on crowded playgrounds and long lines, the chapter investigates how these conditions led to conflict, as these jostling, shoulder-to-shoulder contact in these spaces produced frustration among visitors. Black park-goers, likely aware of the fact that they were visiting the only space in Detroit where they could inhabit the same areas as white Detroiters, were more sensitive to perceived white discrimination and would respond if they felt threatened. Joshua Cole's concept of provocation helps to frame these types of interactions. Finally, this chapter examines the riot's spread to mainland Detroit, and the different reactions by white Detroiters to Black Detroiters' use of mixed spaces, both on Belle Isle and in mainland Detroit.

When discussing the types of activities that took place on Belle Isle, it is important to distinguish places of amusement from other public spaces. Different types of behaviors materialize in a space such as a park than in a school or residential environment, where presumably inhabitants of those spaces bring a certain decorum and societal expectations for behavior. Not so in an amusement park. Characteristically, amusement parks by the 1930s had a "transgressive power" that disrupted traditional social etiquette: "Within parks individuals could move outside their ordinary social sphere, reinvent themselves, and create new identities."¹²² Even adults found that in amusement parks they acted differently, finding that the attractions brought out the kid in them, which included a tendency to cause some trouble.

¹²² Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20.

The possibility that this “transgression” could get out of hand motivated park owners to take action, most notably by barring “undesirable[s],” or more specifically Black patrons whom they stereotyped as dirty, to ensure that their amusement parks remained white, which the white public equated with safety.¹²³ If Black patrons could make it through the gates, they found an environment of “internal segregation.”¹²⁴ Private security blocked Black patrons from concession stands, swimming, dancing, and roller-skating, all activities that whites viewed as dangerous because they “promoted heterosocial mixing” between Black and white patrons.¹²⁵

However, it did not seem that Eastwood Park, an amusement park in suburban East Detroit, enforced these policies on its Black patrons. Figure 3 depicts a scene from an event sponsored by the Detroit Police that took place in late June of 1937. One can clearly see from this picture that no enforced segregation took place. Black and white patrons alike freely walk amongst each other in locations that - according to broader trends of amusement - would normally be segregated to prevent mixing through touch contact. For instance, Black children lined up in front of and behind their white counterparts for what appears to have been a climbing attraction in the bottom left-hand corner of the photograph. Hungry Black and white visitors also crowded around a concession stand labeled “Frozen Delight,” located in the upper right-hand corner of the photograph. However, before we assume that Eastwood Park was ahead of its time, we must consider the circumstances. For one, whites made up a clear majority of the participants. Additionally, the event taking place on this day was sponsored by the Detroit police - every one of whom visible in the photograph was white - who in the years prior repeatedly targeted and killed Black Detroiters over little to nothing and whose presence therefore likely reminded Black

¹²³ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 20.

¹²⁴ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 20.

¹²⁵ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 20.



Figure 3: Eastwood Amusement Park, Detroit Police Entertains Children, June 28, 1937, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Detroit News, Parks; Amusement; Eastwood. -Detroit Police Entertains Children, June 28, 1937, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc77458_1.

patrons of these potential acts of violence.¹²⁷ With these factors in mind, white patrons at Eastwood park retained total spatial domination over Black patrons. Armed with superior numbers and the total backing of the police force presence, white patrons at Eastwood Park therefore might have tolerated an acceptably small number of Black patrons at the park.

On June 15, 1943, just days before the events of a watershed moment in Detroit's history, a skirmish between white and Black Detroiters erupted at Eastwood Park.¹²⁸ At first glance, this conflict does not seem out of the ordinary. In recent years, previous large-scale interracial battles initiated by white Detroiters over perceived rapid integration in schooling and housing occurred at Northwestern High School in 1940 and the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in 1942, respectively.¹²⁹ However, this time, the fighting occurred due to interactions in a recreation space, specifically in an amusement park, rather than through schooling or residential association. The *Detroit Free Press* reported that following a "few minor quarrels" between Black and white amusement park-goers, hundreds of white patrons, including several high schoolers and servicemen, converged on Black patrons in an attempt to force them to leave the park.¹³⁰ Police had to resort to tear gas and clubs to break up the fighting. The *Free Press* and the *Detroit News* reported that these battles occurred because Black patrons refused to leave the amusement park on the orders of white patrons. This wording tacitly blamed the ensuing violence on Black people for wanting to use an amusement park alongside whites, as it made it appear that violence

¹²⁷ Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 165.

¹²⁸ "Police Clubs Quell Youths in Zoot Fight," *Detroit Free Press*, June 16, 1943, 1, ProQuest.

¹²⁹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 186.

Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 73-77.

¹³⁰ "Police Clubs Quell Youths in Zoot Fight," 1.

resulted when Black Detroiters did not give in to the unreasonable demands of white Detroiters.¹³¹

On the other hand, the *Michigan Chronicle* did not include the statement that Black patrons refused the orders of whites to leave and instead reported solely on how the trouble began. The *Chronicle* blamed the violence on a “gang” of white teenagers who wanted to use a boxing bag that Black youths had been using, and who (perhaps after being refused) attempted to force the group of young Black Detroiters from the park.¹³² Essentially, this conflict started because white Detroiters wanted to continue to dictate what Black Detroiters could or could not do. Furthermore, the police seemed to place disproportionate responsibility on Black participants. They ejected approximately 50 young Black Detroiters from the park and placed them directly on streetcars bound for Detroit. The police also kept incoming arrivals of Black customers on the streetcars and prevented them from entering the park.¹³³ This likely sent a message that Black presence in white-majority areas inevitably caused violence and that the solution to curb any violence is to expel Black visitors. However, this hypothesis already failed in the Eastwood Park skirmish, because when police removed the Black patrons from the park, the violence did not diminish immediately. Instead, the *News* reported, “Police separated the [Black and white] groups but fighting continued between several factions of the white group even after the police put Negroes on street cars and sent them home...”¹³⁴ This disproved the idea that Black Detroiters were the sole sources of violence in this space.

¹³¹ “Police Clubs Quell Youths in Zoot Fight,” 1.

“Youth Gangs Fight in Park,” *Detroit News*, June 16, 1943, 1-2, NewsBank.

¹³² “Eastwood Park Riot Squelched by Police,” *Michigan Chronicle*, June 19, 1943, 1, ProQuest.

¹³³ “Eastwood Park Riot Squelched by Police,” 1.

“Police Clubs Quell Youths in Zoot Fight,” 1.

“Youth Gangs Fight in Park,” 1-2.

¹³⁴ “Youth Gangs Fight in Park,” 2.

The interactions that took place on Belle Isle preceding the later outbreak of violence on the bridge have been well documented by historians, both at the time and years later. This chapter builds on their findings by interpreting the interactions within the specific recreation framework, as well as considering how the design of Belle Isle facilitated these interactions. Much of the narrative of the events on Belle Isle follows a group of young Black Detroiters. The story begins with two Black youths in their late teens, Aaron Fox and Raymond Thomas, who arrived on Belle Isle at noon on Sunday, June 20, 1943. They wanted to cool off on the beach but the bathhouse, with room for 20,000, had reached total capacity and had an extremely long line. They initially stood in line but eventually decided to leave, wandering through the park and finding four more friends who joined them. The group ended up at a playground at 3:30 p.m. where a group of young people had been playing dice. Coincidentally they ran into two of their friends playing the game, H.D. Minnifield and Charles Lyons. Fox and Lyons had gone to Eastwood Park a couple of days earlier where they had been accosted by white gangs and forced out of the park.¹³⁵

It is important to examine the dice game further in light of the historical behavior of Black and white interactions on Belle Isle. Usually, Black and white visitors on Belle Isle employed self-separation from each other, white Detroiters likely out of prejudice and Black Detroiters likely out of fear of reprisal from whites.¹³⁶ However, by the 1940s this seemed impossible given the large increase in Black patrons on the island. In fact, by this point, it seems young Black and white Detroiters especially became somewhat used to interacting in spaces on the island where the facilities were densely packed together. A year after the riot, the Chairman of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Youth Problems sent a letter to the President of Common

¹³⁵ Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence* (Philadelphia: Chilton Company, 1964), 35-36.

¹³⁶ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 43.

Council detailing suggestions for expanding park facilities to avoid interracial tension on Belle Isle. He highlighted three areas of potential conflict because they involved the use of limited facilities that were densely packed together. He recommended that “playground equipment be decentralized and that it be substantially increased (to avoid tension in one concentrated area).”¹³⁷ Similarly, he stated that Belle Isle should increase the number of grills and that they should be “decentralized.”¹³⁸ Finally, he urged that “there be more concessions for selling soft drinks, ice cream, etc., on the island proper (to avoid tension in one concentrated area).”¹³⁹

Therefore, these preexisting conditions on Belle Isle facilitated mixed-race interactions, likely contributing to this particular dice game involving young Black and white Detroiters, who converged on the presumably crowded playground. This mixed dice group played together, but likely out of proximity rather than enthusiasm. Additionally, they shot craps, meaning they probably gambled for money, which likely motivated both Black and white Detroiters to join for a piece of the cut. These factors demonstrate that this game did not indicate complete racial harmony, but rather expressed the unique conditions of a recreation space that enabled transgressive behavior like gambling (likely hidden from view of authorities in such a large crowd), and the closeness of facilities that Belle Isle in particular offered.

The play did take a violent turn after an accusation of cheating, likely a byproduct of both the stakes of the play, as well as racial tension. The latter had manifested on Belle Isle’s playground before, most notably in August of the previous year, when an argument erupted

¹³⁷ Letter to John Lodge, President of Common Council from John Ballenger, Chairman of the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Youth Problems, June 30, 1944, box 17, City Departments: Parks and Recreation 1944-1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹³⁸ Letter to John Lodge, June 30, 1944, box 17, City Departments: Parks and Recreation 1944-1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, WPR.

¹³⁹ Letter to John Lodge, June 30, 1944, box 17, City Departments: Parks and Recreation 1944-1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, WPR.

between the parents of two white children who had blocked Black youths from using a slide and the Black playground attendant.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, on Belle Isle, Black and white youth played alongside each other, but there existed an undercurrent of potential conflict.

The “white cheaters” of the dice game got away after a brief fight, which angered Lyons.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, Belle Isle, its racial demographics shifted, “may have emboldened” Lyons, who saw an opportunity “to do like they done to us at Eastwood Park.”¹⁴² Lyons took a stick and hit a nearby white boy, who ran away. He then went up to white men sitting down, hitting one with a stick and telling them “Time to get home.”¹⁴³ Seeing the eight young Black Detroiters, the white men left. Lyons and his group continued to disrupt white gatherings. They stole food from a picnic and stole money from two white teens, Gus Niarhos and Clyde Fields. Meanwhile, several other conflicts occurred in other parts of the island. Parkgoers flooded the Belle Isle police station with grievances. Two young Detroiters, one Black and one white, fought with each other at the pony stand. Two Black women accused a white man and a white woman of harassing them. Five Black Detroiters came to blows with two white Detroiters over the use of a grill.¹⁴⁴ One version of the so-called “chief incident” found by an investigator that sparked the riot on the bridge was an alleged attack by Black Detroiters (presumably men) against white girls while they were swimming.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 5.

“Dixie Whites Start Row on Belle Isle,” *Detroit Tribune*, August 8, 1942, 1-2, Library of Congress.

Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 5-6.

¹⁴² Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 5.

Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 36.

¹⁴³ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 36.

¹⁴⁴ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 20.

These tense interactions can be described as “provocations.” According to historian Joshua Cole, a provocation is “a form of verbal or physical attack that is designed to draw attention to perceived differences in such a way as to heighten or elevate the sense of conflict between them....”¹⁴⁶ Taken separately, individual provocations do not necessarily lead to inevitable violence. Indeed, in the following paragraphs, I will offer examples of brief conflicts on Belle Isle, and show that rather than exploding into an island-wide pandemonium, these conflicts often fizzled out, resolving themselves or being resolved by third parties like the Belle Isle police. Rather, as Cole points out, violence directly stemming from a provocative action is dependent on “the contingency of every other kind of human activity,” meaning that each of these individual negative interactions between white and Black park-goers, while not individually creating the riot, “cumulatively” laid the foundation for violence.¹⁴⁷ However, it is worth mentioning that not all interracial interactions on the island proved to be combative. For example, white teenage hot dog stand worker Hal Cohen seemed to be fine interacting with Black park-goers. Cohen gave directions to a shaken Black patron who looked like he had been attacked. It also appears he worked alongside a Black employee at the stand, as together they cleaned up the stand at the end of the night.¹⁴⁸

Belle Isle police officers Steele and Byers (both white) on night patrol responded to some of the disturbances.¹⁴⁹ At 8:23 p.m. their scout car headed to the skating pavilion, which also served food, to break up a fight, which ended when they got there. Shortly after, they met up

¹⁴⁶ Joshua Cole, *Lethal Provocation: The Constantine Murders and the Politics of French Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 84.

¹⁴⁷ Cole, *Lethal Provocation*, 86.

¹⁴⁸ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 40-41.

¹⁴⁹ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 36-39. Shogan and Craig do not state explicitly that Belle Isle Police Officers Steele and Byers were white, but from these officers’ interactions with white and Black island goers it is apparent that they were more interested in protecting the white visitors, who made up the minority of the island that day, than they were the Black visitors.

with white teen Earl Bayock, who after buying a snack walked between “three lines of people” waiting their turn for concessions at the pavilion.¹⁵⁰ Black Detroiters made up most of the customers in line, and one accused Bayock of shoving them while he crossed between the lines, insisting on an apology. When Bayock declined, the accuser and a group of Black Detroiters assaulted him.¹⁵¹ Again, Belle Isle’s configuration of facilities contributed to a bottleneck where Black and white Detroiters gathered together. Belle Isle only had three locations marked for “refreshments,” and the lack of concession stands resulted in lengthy wait times for food.¹⁵² However, Black Detroiters affected by the actions of Bayock, who himself considered the actions to be “unavoidable and incidental contact,” likely felt reminded of the discriminatory treatment they encountered in mainland Detroit in white-owned restaurants, where they faced obstacles to eat, including marked up prices, poor service from waiters who held them in contempt, and outright bans in violation of civil rights laws.¹⁵³ In Cole’s framework, Bayock’s action, whether Bayock was conscious of it or not, was provocative to Black Detroiters because it “drew attention to lines of conflict or social division,” namely the issue of mixed eating places.¹⁵⁴ It is likely that Bayock’s assailants attacked him because they perceived that Bayock was trying to intimidate them in a space where Black Detroiters could buy food from the same counter as

¹⁵⁰ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 36-37.

¹⁵¹ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 37.

¹⁵² Letter to John Lodge, June 30, 1944, box 17, City Departments: Parks and Recreation 1944-1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, WPR. Recapitulation of Recreational Areas, Facilities, Services, and Activities, Winter 1943-1944, City of Detroit, Department of Parks and Recreation, box 17, City Departments: Parks and Recreation 1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

¹⁵³ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 95. Capeci and Wilkerson spell Earl’s last name as Bayock, and since it is the most updated history it is the name I have used.

Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 127-131.

¹⁵⁴ Cole, *Lethal Provocation*, 86.

whites with little to no issue (almost unheard of in mainland Detroit) and they were not willing to give up one of the only spaces in Detroit that did not create barriers to mixed eating.

Steele and Byers escorted Bayock to the Belle Isle station for medical attention and then drove towards an island bus stop meant for passage back to the mainland. Impatient park-goers stood in long lines for the trip home. For one bus, the people in line surged forward to try to get on the bus, and during the frenzied attempt to board the bus one Black teen named James Wilson “pushed against” a young white Detroiter, separating the boy from his mother, Mrs. Peterson.¹⁵⁵ Mrs. Peterson pushed Wilson and brought her son onto the bus with her. Wilson then, according to Mrs. Peterson, retaliated by striking her shoulder and calling her a “son of a bitch.”¹⁵⁶ Wilson charged Mrs. Peterson with calling him a slur. The Belle Isle police officers, siding with Mrs. Peterson and her child, took Wilson into custody and escorted him to the Belle Isle police station for “profane language.”¹⁵⁷ In this case, Mrs. Peterson deliberately initiated contact with a specific target, whereas Wilson, likely jostling with other people to reach the bus like the rest of the crowd, coincidentally bumped into her son during the mayhem. Mrs. Peterson also used a term dehumanizing Black people (far more offensive than what Wilson allegedly said). Wilson, understandably, responded in kind to an intentional physical and emotional assault. However, the police on duty, mirroring private security in amusement parks, demonstrated their commitment to protecting white families from alleged Black violence.¹⁵⁸ This shows that even on the Black majority Belle Isle, white Detroiters still enjoyed preferential treatment from the security forces on the island.

¹⁵⁵ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 37-38.

¹⁵⁶ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 38.

¹⁵⁷ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 38.

¹⁵⁸ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Rollercoasters*, 20.

At 9:10 p.m. Steele and Byers responded to a similar crowding situation at a ferry dock where Black and white park goers fought so much that the dock worker closed the ride service down. Steele and Byers restored order and reopened the ferry dock. At 10:15, Steele and Byers picked up Gus Niarhos and Clyde Fields, whom Lyons and his entourage had robbed, at the skating pavilion. The officers administered first aid at the Belle Isle police station and subsequently made their way to the bridge to take them home. They encountered a large stoppage of cars. Many people had remained on the island, choosing to stay until it cooled off. Walkers also filled the bridge, because after seeing the overcrowding at the Belle Isle bus stop, they decided they would walk to the bus stops at the end of the bridge on the mainland. Lyons and his group walked among the many pedestrians on the bridge.¹⁵⁹ At 10:45 Lyons knocked into a white man named Joseph B. Joseph, after which Lyons launched obscenities at Joseph and assaulted him with assistance from his group. Joseph began to flee back to the island and came across two white sailors coming from Belle Isle.¹⁶⁰ Likely used to fighting Black Detroiters, one of them blew on his whistle for aid from his comrades stationed at the Naval Armory just “a few hundred yards from the mainland edge of the bridge” on Jefferson Avenue.¹⁶¹ Joseph then flagged down Steele and Byers in their scout car and got in, but they did not locate his assailants.¹⁶²

White sailors from the armory made their way toward the bridge, contributing to a brawl involving hundreds of Black and white Detroiters. The Williams family, a Black family in a car on the bridge at the time, found themselves enveloped by the fighting. They witnessed white

¹⁵⁹ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 38.

¹⁶⁰ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 39.

Sailors stationed at the armory regularly fought with Black Detroiters in the months leading up to the riot. The previous day, a group of Black Detroiters assaulted two armory sailors, so this may have been on the minds of these individual sailors.

¹⁶² Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 39.

sailors targeting Black Detroiters' cars, smashing windows.¹⁶³ At 11 p.m. a Black woman named Gladys House, walking on the bridge towards the mainland with her companion, ran into a crowd of white Detroiters (including "several white girls") who told her "We don't want any [pejoratives] on Belle Isle" and proceeded to attack House and her companion.¹⁶⁴ Thirty minutes later, a crowd of 5,000, mostly white Detroiters, gathered at the mainland end of the Belle Isle bridge. They targeted Black Detroiters, moving east and west of the bridge on Jefferson Avenue, as well as to the north until police finally dispersed the crowd at approximately 2 a.m. on Monday, June 21, 1943.¹⁶⁵

At 12:30 a.m. on Monday, June 21, after hearing word of the violence on Jefferson Avenue, one incensed Black individual named Leo Tipton took it upon himself to tell other Black Detroiters. Posing as a police officer, Tipton went on the stage of the Forest Club (one of the only recreation spots for Black Detroiters) at the intersection of Forest and Hastings in Paradise Valley during a large dance that brought in hundreds of Black youths. Tipton spread a rumor that whites had tossed a Black woman and her child off of the Belle Isle Bridge.¹⁶⁶ This rumor demonstrated "black male outrage over white violence against women and children."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶³ Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press 2001), 40-41.

¹⁶⁴ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 26-27.

See Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot* page 39. Fighting between white and Black women also occurred on the bridge. A fistfight involving white and Black teenage girls who "bumped into each other on the bridge" also contributed to the ballooning violence.

¹⁶⁵ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 6.

Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 40.

¹⁶⁶ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 7.

See Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, "Riot Zone map" for the Forest Club's location. See Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* page 36 for a description on the boundaries of Paradise Valley.

Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 27.

Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 43.

¹⁶⁷ Marilynn S. Johnson, "Gender, Race, and Rumours: Re-examining the 1943 Race Riots," *Gender & History* 10, no. 2 (August 1998): 267.

Furious, club patrons spilled out into the street. At 1 a.m. Black Detroiters began attacking white passersby and police officers up and down Hastings.¹⁶⁸ Two hours later, with their segregated community under police lockdown, Black Detroiters started looting white-owned businesses, which to them represented “white domination” and exploitation.¹⁶⁹ White Detroiters responded on Woodward Avenue at 4 a.m., where they targeted Black Detroiters until a temporary cease at 6:30 a.m. White rioters threw projectiles at cars driven by Black Detroiters and gathered around mixed all-night theaters to attack Black patrons as they left the venues.¹⁷⁰ By noon, white Detroiters had resumed their attacks against Black Detroiters, this time to a greater extent, even stopping traffic to tear Black passengers from streetcars and/or overturning Black-owned cars and setting them on fire.¹⁷¹ Detroit police let these white rioters roam unimpeded. Itself a department shaped by racial discrimination - in 1943 Black men made up only 43 of the 3,400 strong force - the DPD put this tradition into action during the riot.¹⁷² Figure 4 shows a large group of white rioters surrounding an overturned car, and two police officers in the background appearing to be simply walking (even lackadaisical, as the one to the far right has his arms at his sides) instead of taking control of the situation. On the other hand, most deployed officers at this time patrolled the segregated Black East Side.¹⁷³ In general, Detroit police showed contempt for Black rioters, refusing to protect them from and/or treating them with extreme violence.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 28.

¹⁶⁹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 8-9.

Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 28.

¹⁷⁰ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 9-10.

¹⁷¹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 10.

Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 31-33.

¹⁷² Janet L. Langlois, “The Belle Isle Bridge Incident: Legend Dialectic and Semiotic System in the 1943 Detroit Race Riots,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 96, no. 380 (April-June, 1983): 189.

¹⁷³ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 10.

¹⁷⁴ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 29.



Figure 4: A group of white rioters surrounds an upturned car on Woodward. June 21, 1943.

Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections¹⁷⁵

Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 31-33.

¹⁷⁵ Detroit News, Riots: Detroit: Race Riots, 1943. June 21, 1943. Burning & Wrecked Autos. Rioters Running from Tear Gas. Burning Car on Woodward near Stimpson, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc77238_3.

Detroit police even attacked Black Detroiters not involved in the fighting, but simply for walking in the street. In a report following the events of the Detroit Riot of 1943, Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP documented several instances of police brutality and indifference. One officer knocked a medically discharged Black soldier (in uniform) unconscious for nothing. The soldier did not know about the fighting and had simply been walking in a Black community in the direction of a theater on Woodward. In another case, four officers watched as a crowd of white Detroiters assaulted a Black bank employee on Woodward. The employee got the attention of two of the policemen, who along with two mounted policemen, provided escort down Woodward. However, the officers did nothing to stop white Detroiters in the crowd from repeatedly hitting the Black employee along the way. The employee finally made a run for a squad car, whose officer gave him a ride. Finally, police officers not only demonstrated their prejudice through physical actions but also through verbal means. A police officer forcibly arrested a Black man who was making his way to the store to buy milk. While taking the Black man to the hospital the officers told him in the car that “These people have been looking for trouble and now they’re getting it.”¹⁷⁶ What this tells us is that prejudiced Detroit police looked to “profit from fear and violence.”¹⁷⁷ They used the white fear of Black Detroiters to their advantage, as justification to brutally take out their own personal hatred on Black Detroiters.

The violence continued into the afternoon and evening of June 21, 1943. Michigan’s Republican governor Harry F. Kelly met with Detroit’s mayor Edward Jeffries to discuss the prospect of martial law. Kelly, reluctant to ask for necessary permission from Democratic president Franklin D. Roosevelt, failed to take action until 6 p.m. After seeing firsthand a mob of

¹⁷⁶ Report of Thurgood Marshall, Special Counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Concerning Activities of Detroit Police During the Riots June 21 and 22, 1943, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Pages 6-7, 10.

¹⁷⁷ Cole, *Lethal Provocation*, 85.

whites charging after a bloodied Black Detroiter, he declared a state of emergency and mobilized Michigan State Troops.¹⁷⁸ For the next three hours, as the city waited for the state troops to arrive, the situation worsened. Fires raged in buildings and in cars, “smoke, tear-gas vapors, small arms fire, epithets, and screams filled the air.”¹⁷⁹ The Michigan State Troops would not arrive quickly enough to stop the violence, so Governor Kelly then called for federal troops at 9:20 p.m. This call for army support brought “instant reinforcements,” and the federal troops brought the city back under control “within two hours.”¹⁸⁰ Sporadic fighting occurred throughout the following day, but by June 23, more reinforcements arrived, and the fighting dissipated.¹⁸¹ In all, thirty-four people died. Of those thirty-four, twenty-five were Black, seventeen of whom died at the hands of Detroit police. The police killed no white Detroiters. Hundreds were injured. The riot caused \$2 million in property damage, caused a loss of one million work hours due to absenteeism, and cost over \$100,000 a day to pay for the state and federal troops.¹⁸²

Hal Cohen, the concessions worker on Belle Isle, could be considered exceptional, as Jewish Detroiters generally had a better relationship with Black Detroiters than non-Jewish white Detroiters. Cohen did not object to working alongside a Black Detroiter in an impersonal setting such as the workplace. The account provided in Robert Shogan and Tom Craig’s *The Detroit Race Riot* indicated that Hal worked alongside at least one Black employee.¹⁸³ In one of their surveys of Black/Jewish relations prior to the Detroit Riot of 1943, Wayne University academics asked Jewish and non-Jewish whites their thoughts on participation in different settings that involved close proximity to Black Detroiters. Three settings involved impersonal contact: street

¹⁷⁸ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 13.

¹⁷⁹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 14.

¹⁸⁰ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 14-15.

¹⁸¹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 17.

¹⁸² Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 18.

Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 29.

¹⁸³ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot*, 40-41.

car, school, and office. Another setting involved social exposure: theater. For every single question, fewer Jewish participants objected to these scenarios than white gentiles. For each hypothetical impersonal interaction, “no greater than seventeen per cent of Jews” objected to sitting next to a Black Detroiter.¹⁸⁴ On the other end, over 50% of white gentile Detroiters objected to sitting next to a Black Detroiter on the streetcar, 66% to sitting next to a Black kid in school, and 70% to working alongside a Black coworker in an office.¹⁸⁵

However, for both Jewish and white gentile Detroiters, both groups’ percentages of objection rose for the social setting, which interestingly only included sitting in a theater. Still, fewer Jewish people (31%) than white gentiles (83%) stated they would not sit next to a Black person in a theater.¹⁸⁶ The fact that the objection level rose for both groups in a social setting is important because it demonstrates that the prospect of interactions with Black Detroiters outside of the etiquette-defined public transportation, school, and workplace affected white Detroiters (both Jewish and non-Jewish) more. Perhaps this is due to the fact that social interactions in spaces like theaters had more variables that were unsettling to whites.

One such variable was sexual intermixing between Black and white Detroiters (specifically Black men and white women). In the aftermath of the 1943 Riot, the NAACP sent investigators to find out what they could learn from local residents.¹⁸⁷ The investigators reported

¹⁸⁴ Eleanor Paperno Wolf, Albert Loving, Donald C. Marsh, Some Aspects of Negro-Jewish Relationships in Detroit, Michigan, Part I. Commercial Relationships, Summary of Six Surveys, The Graduate School, Wayne University, box 9, Negro/Jewish Survey final, Donald C. Marsh Papers Part 2, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Pages 2, 39.

¹⁸⁵ Wolf, Loving, Marsh, Some Aspects of Negro-Jewish Relationships in Detroit, box 9, Negro/Jewish Survey final, Donald C. Marsh Papers Part 2, WPR, Pages 2, 39.

¹⁸⁶ Wolf, Loving, Marsh, Some Aspects of Negro-Jewish Relationships in Detroit, box 9, Negro/Jewish Survey final, Donald C. Marsh Papers Part 2, WPR, Pages 2, 39.

¹⁸⁷ Report of Thurgood Marshall, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, WPR, page 1. In his report Thurgood Marshall mentions that the NAACP hired two private investigators from New York to interview Detroit citizens in the wake of the riot of 1943. The document immediately following Thurgood Marshall’s report is not titled but is likely the account of the

that many white women feared interactions with Black men leading up to the riot: “During the past year there have been numerous reports of negroes [sic] attacking young girls. At night white women are afraid to go out without escorts through colored sections, and these are numerous; for fear that they would be raped.”¹⁸⁸ Significantly, the white provocation in question highlighted a supposed difference between Black and white Detroiters: namely, the “perceived” extreme sexual appetite of Black Detroiters.¹⁸⁹ It is not a coincidence that the “white counterpart” to the rumor spread by Leo Tipton involved the rape and murder of a white woman at the Belle Isle bridge.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, white Detroiters’ fear of sexual violence committed against white women permeated mixed spaces, in particular enclosed, more intimate spaces such as the Roxy Theater, an open all-night mixed theater on Woodward. Supposedly, Black male patrons at the Roxy regularly targeted white women in the theater which provoked the women’s dates. One of the investigators reported on this alleged activity:

At 7:00 P.M. I entered [the Roxy Theatre], after being told that it is a 24 hour theatre and a mixed crowd of whites and blacks attend. I was told that negroes deliberately sit near white girls and try to make them. They feel their legs and this causes trouble from their white escorts. A complaint is made and police make arrests at times.

This fear of what Black Detroiters, specifically Black men, could do in mixed theaters with apparently no structured assigned seating, likely weighed on the minds of the surveyed Jewish and white gentile Detroiters. As a result, many white Detroiters viewed segregation as a solution.¹⁹¹

two private investigators, as the report begins with a description of how the investigator traveled from New York to Detroit.

¹⁸⁸ Report on 1943 Riots, June 26 - July 4, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Page 5.

¹⁸⁹ Cole, *Lethal Provocation*, 84.

¹⁹⁰ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 27.

¹⁹¹ Report on 1943 Riots, June 26 - July 4, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, WPR, Page 5.

Furthermore, it is clear that white Detroiters resented having to share the best recreation space with Black Detroiters. In the wake of the 1943 violence in Detroit, embittered white Detroiters told the investigators about how Black people not only took over Belle Isle, but also allegedly taunted and harassed white Detroiters. Supposedly, on one occasion a group of Black Detroiters occupied lunch benches and began charging white park-goers who wanted to use them. Additionally, the idea that Black people had gained control of the island dissuaded another white Detroiters from traveling to the island to fish:

Last summer negroes went to Belle Isle early one Sunday and took over the benches and tables used for eating lunches. They demanded and received from 25¢ to 50¢ to release same to whites. This caused considerable trouble at that time. One man said, ‘Hell, you might as well turn over Belle Isle to the blacks, as they are in control there any way. The police make little to no effort to control the situation.[’] One white man told me that he used to go fishing at Belle Isle but had to stay away on account of the negroes taking charge of the place.¹⁹²

Now, it is difficult to prove these accusations that Black park goers accumulated benches and consistently charged white park-goers for their use; however, it does seem to be a reversal (i.e. the shoe is on the other foot) of historical white discriminatory practices that added extra conditions for Black Detroiters to experience the same recreation. In the years preceding the Detroit Riot of 1943, Black Detroiters paid extra to be allowed into downtown theaters, paid double for the same accommodations as whites in hotels, and faced exorbitant markups in the prices for everyday items in restaurants and grocery stores.¹⁹³ Furthermore, the practice of Black patrons taking over amenities from white patrons in protest was not unique to Detroit. For example, in suburban Cleveland in the summer of 1941, a group of Black patrons at a swimming pool, after being regularly intimidated by white swimmers from entering the pool, “retaliated by

¹⁹² Report on 1943 Riots, June 26 - July 4, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, WPR, Pages 4-5.

¹⁹³ Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It*, 125-128.

taking over the pool using sheer numbers....”¹⁹⁴ With this in mind, the story of Black Detroiters charging white park goers for the use of the bench sounds more believable as a strategy, as a literal turning of the tables on discriminatory practices in Detroit.

It is interesting too that this individual claims that the police on Belle Isle had no control on the island. This perhaps suggests a shift on Belle Isle in which whites did not receive the preferential treatment from law enforcement that they enjoyed in mainland Detroit. However, as indicated in Shogan and Craig’s *The Detroit Riot*, the police on Belle Isle did make an arrest on June 20, 1943, in favor of a young white Detroiters and his mother, even though she struck first and called the arrested Black man a racial slur. Moreover, three years earlier, the Belle Isle police arrested a Black youth and criminalized the Black crowd that protested his arrest. These examples show that the Belle Isle police may have upheld the shrinking white hegemony on the island, barring some exceptions, such as when two Black officers arrested a southern white man for intimidating a Black playground attendant. However, perhaps the handling of the riot of 1940, as well as a large number of smaller conflicts likely too numerous for the Belle Isle police to respond to on June 20, 1943, convinced these white Detroiters that the police had permanently lost white control of the island to Black Detroiters.¹⁹⁵ To these white Detroiters, the Black presence on Belle Isle had at this point become unbearable, so it seems that they, and perhaps many others, begrudgingly abandoned the space entirely.

Furthermore, one man said Black Detroiters were getting too bold and that Detroit needed Jim Crow in public places:

¹⁹⁴ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 55.

¹⁹⁵ Shogan and Craig, *The Detroit Riot: A Study in Violence*, 37-38.

“3,000 Attempt to Free Youth Held as a Thief,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 5, 1940, 1, 14, ProQuest.

“Dixie Whites Start Row on Belle Isle,” *Detroit Tribune*, 1-2.

A man said that 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 to put them in their places. He said that they had it coming to them 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. He said they have the nerve to insist on going into the best places in Detroit for amusement.¹⁹⁶

This individual’s statement seems to be a direct reaction to the alleged actions of contemporary Black Detroiters, who white Detroiters claimed systematically barged into them out in the streets and on public transportation.¹⁹⁷ It appears that white Detroiters felt slighted when Black Detroiters did not submit to unspoken laws of deference. Furthermore, it is interesting that this man felt angered by Black Detroiters having “the nerve” to want to have the best options for recreation. This demonstrates that in Detroit, there existed not only a concern among whites about interactions with Black Detroiters, but also a more sinister belief that Black people did not deserve to be in the best facilities alongside whites. White Detroiters resented that Black Detroiters simply wanted what any person would want for themselves and their families. For example, in an Urban League report on areas of transition in Detroit in 1941, the author summed up the motivation for Black Detroiters to move out of the congested East Side into better housing and neighborhoods:

The opposition often aroused against acquisition by Negroes of residential property is an impressive comment on the lack of real democratic thinking among so many Detroit citizens. The desire of Americans to acquire property and a home is usually presented as an example of civic virtue. These Negro prospective purchasers are, like other citizens, seeking to invest in a home. They seek the best

¹⁹⁶ Report on 1943 Riots, June 26 - July 4, box 1, Reports, NAACP Detroit Branch Records, WPR, Page 13.

This language is very reminiscent of what is described in Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, page 91, which discusses how white southern migrants contribute to worsening race problems by attempting to enforce southern codes of conduct on Black Detroiters. However, it is not completely clear that this individual had southern origins. He sounds more like a native Detroiters, or at least a longtime resident, as he mentions how “trouble has been brewing for years,” suggesting that he had witnessed problems amp up over time.

¹⁹⁷ Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 28-29.

dwelling facilities in the most desirable neighborhoods where their investment will bring them comfort and attractive social surroundings for their families in the years to come.¹⁹⁸

The same could be said for Black Detroiters wanting to have access to the best recreational facilities in Detroit. Many likely wanted to go to areas where they did not have to fear for their children's safety in inadequate and inconveniently located recreation centers.¹⁹⁹

The outbreak of violence on that summer night in 1943 can be seen as the culmination of a series of provocations that began on mainland Detroit and spread to the island park. To Black Detroiters, Belle Isle as a space represented an exception to the segregation and mistreatment in public accommodations that they faced on the mainland. A fight over a picnic table or grill or a spot in line at a concession stand with a white person was provocative because it reminded Black Detroiters of those negative conditions. The fighting on the island, therefore, was about Black Detroiters' unimpeded use of Belle Isle's facilities alongside white Detroiters.²⁰⁰ White Detroiters, on the other hand, felt that they had lost control of the island, despite the fact that the Belle Isle police still favored the white minority. The angered whites who left Belle Isle in protest of its changed demographics made provocative statements that blamed Black Detroiters' desire for wanting equal access to quality leisure space for themselves and their children. As a

¹⁹⁸ Warren M. Banner, "Observations on Conditions Among Negroes in the Fields of Education, Recreation and Employment In Selected Areas of the City of Detroit, Michigan," June 1941, box 74, Detroit Urban League Records, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 7-8.

¹⁹⁹ Banner, Observations on Conditions Among Negroes, June 1941, box 74, Detroit Urban League Records, BHL, 21-23.

Young Black Detroiters living in the Black West Side enclave in northwest Detroit had limited options for play. The two facilities run by the Detroit Department of Parks and Recreation - Kronk Community Center and Northwest Playfield - were located at opposite ends on the outskirts of this Black community. The landscape also made it dangerous for Black children to reach these places, as they had to cross busy streets to reach these places.

²⁰⁰ Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 44.

result, opportunistic parties, like the Detroit Police, conflated this reasonable desire for access to public space with criminality and used this to brutally suppress Black Detroiters during the riot.

Chapter Three

Belle Isle Reborn

Approximately three months after the riot broke out on the island, another field day took place on Belle Isle. This time, a union sponsored the interracial athletic event. The *Detroit Tribune* reported on the first annual field day on Belle Isle sponsored by Ford Local 600 UAW-CIO on Saturday, September 18, 1943. The *Tribune* highlighted a statement put forth by the union group, which claimed that its field day disproved the Dowling Report, an investigation into the Detroit riot that placed disproportionate blame on Black Detroiters for provoking the riot.²⁰¹

The union group claimed that its field day demonstrated that white and Black Detroiters could coexist in a recreational setting. At the inaugural 1943 event, twenty-five thousand people attended, and the union claimed that no “incident” occurred.²⁰² The police never had to get involved in breaking up any fights. Rather, Black and white workers, along with their spouses and children, “played together, watched together, marched together.”²⁰³ The following year, the *Michigan Chronicle* reported on the racial harmony of the day, elated that “[n]o discrimination hindered participation in any of the 100 events.”²⁰⁴ Black athletes again had the opportunity to shine. The *Chronicle* boasted about the success of the Miller school athletes, who “dominated” the sprint races.²⁰⁵ The coverage of this field day sounds very similar to rhetoric in the Black

²⁰¹ Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 30-31.

“Tranquility on CIO’s Field Day at Island Refutes Dowling Claims,” *Detroit Tribune*, September 18, 1943, 3, Library of Congress.

²⁰² “Tranquility on CIO’s Field Day at Island Refutes Dowling Claims,” 3.

²⁰³ “Tranquility on CIO’s Field Day at Island Refutes Dowling Claims,” 3.

²⁰⁴ James E. Williams, “Miller Athletes Top UAW-CIO Track Meet,” *Michigan Chronicle*, August 5, 1944, 15, ProQuest.

²⁰⁵ Williams, “Miller Athletes Top UAW-CIO Track Meet,” 15.

press more than a decade earlier about the *Free Press*-sponsored field day, during which the majority-Black Miller school also excelled at the athletic events and everyone got along.²⁰⁶

This field day makes it seem that Belle Isle recovered quickly and that it continued to be an integrated space despite the traumatic events earlier that year. However, this coverage ignored several elements that emerged in the aftermath of the violence, most importantly the temporary lull in Black attendance on Belle Isle. Therefore, this chapter will examine the effects of the Detroit Riot of 1943 on Black Detroiters and their subsequent reluctance to attend public recreation spaces alongside white Detroiters. A review of police reports on Black attendance on Belle Isle constructs a picture of the island that upholds as well as dismantles certain expectations about Black presence on Belle Isle and correspondingly Belle Isle as an integrated space. The police reports reveal that the Black presence on Belle Isle diminished dramatically in the months following the June 1943 Riot. However, the police reports also show that by 1944, the Black presence gradually recovered, and then by 1945 it almost reached the level it had been in June 1943. Additionally, this chapter holds the significance of the UAW-CIO field day up to scrutiny, arguing that it was not as groundbreaking as it seems. Still, Belle Isle offered a viable alternative for Black Detroiters compared to comparable parks in mainland Detroit, especially regarding swimming facilities.

The Dowling Report, an informal name for the Governor's Fact-Finding Committee's assessment of the Detroit Riot (*The Factual Report*), stated that Black Detroiters started the fighting on Belle Isle and that Detroit's Black press and prominent figures fomented racial tension through inflammatory language. The Report claimed that these individuals and organizations "exaggerated racial discrimination" and "exhorted racial militancy."²⁰⁷ The

²⁰⁶ "Strolling About Detroit," *Baltimore Afro-American*, June 11, 1932, 23, ProQuest.

²⁰⁷ Capeci, Jr. and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 30-31.

Dowling Report provoked immediate pushback. One article from the *Pittsburgh Courier* pointed out the limitations of the findings of the Governor's Commission on the Detroit Riot. The author zeroed in on the faulty logic of the report which blamed two Black Detroiters for starting the riot, rather than the white Detroiters who attacked them first: "And the whites who deprived Negroes of equality had nothing to do with the riot. The guilty party was the Negro who simply asked that he be given the same equality enjoyed by other Americans."²⁰⁸

Meanwhile, other people espoused the belief that white and Black Americans could not coexist in the same space. For example, the U.S. Attorney General recommended that President Roosevelt halt Black migration to northern cities. In response, the *New York Amsterdam News* suggested that the Attorney General's strategy appeased southern landowners and businessmen who (likely out of fear of losing a workforce) were "alarmed over a large number of Negroes leaving the Southland daily."²⁰⁹ The Attorney General argued that overcrowding on Belle Isle started the Detroit riot, and said that summertime especially was volatile because the deficiency of recreation brought "too many Negroes and whites into close contact."²¹⁰ Under the guise of overcrowding, the Attorney General essentially blamed Black migrants by focusing on limiting their migration to the north.

After the violence of the Detroit Riot, integrated sports competitions seemed in danger of disappearing due to the backlash that competition between Black and white athletes could attract. For example, integrated boxing matches seemed poised to be put on hold indefinitely. The *Michigan Chronicle* predicted, "there'll be no mixed bouts in Detroit for some time. The local promoters will be reluctant to put a colored boxer against a white boy, fearing that the contest

²⁰⁸ P. L. Prattis, "The Horizon: Biddle's Action Poses Question of How to Pass Judgement on White Friends," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 21, 1943, 13, ProQuest.

²⁰⁹ "Keep Negro in Southland, Attorney General Urges: Ask F.D. Act to Put Clamp on Migration," *New York Amsterdam News*, August, 14, 1943, 1-2, ProQuest.

²¹⁰ "Keep Negro in Southland, Attorney General Urges," 1-2.

would provide the spark that would inflame racial hatreds and send them roaring into another bloody war.”²¹¹

Upon first glance, it appears significant that such a field day would occur soon after such a catastrophe for race relations in Detroit. However, given the union sponsorship, this field day cannot be considered the norm for interactions on Belle Isle. A UAW-CIO affiliated union sponsored the event, and the CIO movement especially emphasized the importance of promoting Black visibility and agency among its ranks:

In its formative years the CIO was the only large-scale organization on the American scene which offered talented young blacks opportunity, dignity, and a sense of genuine participation. This was in marked contrast to the AFL’s long tradition of discrimination against minorities.²¹²

However, there may have been limitations within even pro-integrationist unions when it came to advancing race relations in recreation. In late February of 1944, the Civil Rights Federation in Detroit launched an Institute on Race Relations that lasted six weeks. During the second session, Dr. Winton Krogman of the University of Chicago held a discussion titled “Science Challenges Racism.” One union member brought up a concern:

A member of the Rouge Plant Local said he wished to present his problem: He is on the union’s social committee. A dance was given and present at the dance were a number of Negro boys, few Negro girls and a number of white girls. One Negro boy asked a white girl for a dance and this caused trouble at the party. The social committee were at a loss to know what to do about it. Discussion of this brought out the opinion to which all seemed agreed that you cannot teach anything to people who are prejudiced by a medium as intimate as dancing. It would be better to plan other kinds of social activities. Besides, though the social angle is important, it is not as important as jobs and housing.²¹³

²¹¹ Russ J. Cowans, “Sport Chatter,” *Michigan Chronicle*, Jul 03, 1943, 18, ProQuest.

²¹² B.J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence, (revised edition)* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 73-74, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²¹³ Devera Stocker, Science Challenges Racism, Group 4, box 67, Institute on Race Relations - 1944, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Page 3.

This demonstrates that discriminatory feelings still existed among union ranks in Detroit and that they materialized at integrated union social events. Moreover, some participants in the Institute of Race Relations apparently felt that holding social events involving dancing may have been futile and that unions were better off by not holding these events because they would not be able to turn the hearts and minds of people opposed to social interactions between Black and white Detroiters. Instead, they believed that unions should organize different types of activities.

Ultimately, integration in social activities did not hold as important a place as integration in jobs and housing. This is telling because job and housing discrimination is different from recreational discrimination. As historian Victoria Wolcott states: “Separate public accommodations were the most visible form of segregation. More than employment and housing discrimination, problems hidden from public view, recreational segregation was an observable product of white supremacy.”²¹⁴ This demonstrates that integration-minded people during this time focused more on desegregating impersonal interactions between coworkers, rather than desegregating social interactions occurring on a daily basis in the public eye. With this in mind, the union field day on Belle Isle seems much less groundbreaking and more non-threatening and palatable for white Detroiters given its structured competition. White Detroiters had already tolerated the organized integrated Belle Isle Field Days for years.²¹⁵

Ernest Goodman, Outline of Summary of Institute on Race Relations (1944), box 67, Institute on Race Relations - 1944, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI;

Letter from John F. Shepard, President of the Civil Rights Federation, to Friend (unnamed church leader), box 67, Institute on Race Relations - 1944, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Records, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²¹⁴ Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 50.

²¹⁵ “Detroit ‘Melting Pot’ Develops Sportsmen: Children Give Fine Display at Belle Isle Meet Where Only Ability is Test,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 6, 1931, 8, ProQuest; “World Record at Field Meet,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 4, 1927, 5, ProQuest.

It is worth mentioning that one of the events of the 1944 field day involved a potentially polarizing activity: dancing. However, the *Chronicle* described the event as a “national dancing competition.”²¹⁶ In its coverage of the 1944 field day, the *Free Press* identified one event called the “folk-dancing contest.”²¹⁷ For the 1944 field day, the *Free Press* printed a page with a photograph of two young Polish-American girls in traditional garb who “danced a vivacious polka in these airy costumes.”²¹⁸ Therefore, the folk-dancing contest may have involved traditional ethnic dances, so the dance partners would likely be homogeneous.

As a result, the significance of this integrated event loses some of its luster when we consider that a union affiliated with the most dedicated integrationist agenda at the time organized this mixed-field day. It likely did not change the hearts and minds of many Detroiters outside of the integrationist ranks, as it mimicked the integrated Belle Isle Field Days of the past. Furthermore, it seems doubtful that much of the broader public on Belle Isle participated in the event. After all, it is worth mentioning again that the statement of the UAW-CIO committee on the inaugural 1943 field day said, “Negro workers and white workers, their wives and their kids, played together, watched together, picnicked together, marched together.”²¹⁹ This indicates that the field day may have been more of an internal event where coworkers and their families came together. Indeed, the *Free Press* ran the headline that the first field day gathered over 25,000 people. The president of the Ford Local 600 counted these people as “members,” which meant that (likely) mainly union members attended the event.²²⁰

²¹⁶ Williams, “Miller Athletes Top UAW-CIO Track Meet,” 15.

²¹⁷ Truman Stacey, “\$64 Question: 10,000 at Big Field Day, but Who Knows What Happened – or If It Did?,” *Detroit Free Press*, 12, ProQuest.

²¹⁸ “Fabulous Fortune in Idle Silver,” *Detroit Free Press*, July 31, 1944, 18, ProQuest.

²¹⁹ “Tranquility on CIO’s Field Day at Island Refutes Dowling Claims,” 3.

²²⁰ “Heroes, Stars Help Union’s Bond Picnic: Ford UAW Field Day Attracts Over 25,000,” *Detroit Free Press*, September 13, 1943, 1, ProQuest.

Therefore, this event may have been meant more as a demonstration of the success of workplace integration rather than as an advocacy of widespread social and recreational integration. While this event may have proven that Black and white union workers used to interacting in close proximity could coexist peacefully on the island, this relationship cannot necessarily be expanded to the rest of the white Detroiters who attended Belle Isle. In short, white union workers were an exception. They likely were accustomed to working alongside Black Detroiters in the factories, and this particular union group had ties to a particularly integrationist element within the American union movement, meaning that they were more likely in favor of integration than the average white Detroiters. The Detroit Riot, in fact, created lasting trauma that left mixed spaces like Belle Isle temporarily but significantly reduced in capacity.

In the weeks after the riot, Belle Isle did not attract as many Detroiters as it previously had. On Sunday, June 27, relatively few people went to the island. Unlike the week before, when the crowd had reached 100,000 people, over 80% of whom had been Black Detroiters, on June 27 Black Detroiters became the minority on the island again: 500 white families to 200 Black families attended.²²¹

On June 27th, even with temperatures pushing 90 degrees, people did not venture to the island to cool off because many Detroiters, Black and white, felt afraid of the space known as the origin of “an interracial holocaust.”²²² Ironically, this may have been the safest time to visit, or at least white Detroiters would have felt the safest, as 200 soldiers and a police force patrolled the island, setting strict timetables for opening and closing in keeping with the midnight curfew.²²³

²²¹ Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot, Detroit 1943* (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), 52.

²²² Chas. H. Loeb, “Lift Martial Law in Detroit; Soldiers Stand Ready: Call-Post City Editor Gives Impressions of Detroit Scene After Rioting; Property Damage Runs Into Two Million Dollar Figure,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, July 3, 1943, 11-B, ProQuest.

²²³ Loeb, “Lift Martial Law in Detroit; Soldiers Stand Ready,” 11-B.

This type of enforcement on Belle Isle mirrored what was happening in mainland Detroit's mixed spaces. For two months following the riot, fears of an eruption of violence persisted. All-night theaters, in particular, "begged for special attention" from Detroit police, who had expanded their patrol network in order to combat the venues' collective "problem with the unruly."²²⁴ All-night theaters had these concerns because they continued to attract a "large mixed patronage of Negroes and whites."²²⁵

These patrols of mixed spaces likely were heavily armed, as seen in Figure 5, an October 1943 photo of police officers training on Belle Isle. On the left side of the photograph, one can clearly see an officer holding a machine gun. Stretching to the right of him, fellow officers present shotguns with fixed bayonets. On the right end of the photograph, an officer appears to hold a grenade/tear gas launcher. Clearly, these officers were engaged in riot control training on Belle Isle.

Outside of the organized events on Belle Isle, minor conflicts occurred on Belle Isle a little less than two months after the riot. In the wake of the Detroit Riot of 1943, the Detroit Police Department created an investigative team that kept track of interracial violence throughout Detroit's precincts. The Harbormaster's Division - in other words, the Belle Isle police - kept track of incidents and provided estimations of total attendance on Sundays, including the percentage of attendees who were Black.²²⁶ On Sunday, August 8, 1943, Belle Isle accommodated 80,000 visitors, and Black Detroiters only made up 5% of these attendees.

²²⁴ "Detroit Centers Strong Police Patrol Around Theaters Since Race Riots," *Variety*, August 11, 1943, 8, ProQuest.

²²⁵ "Detroit Centers Strong Police Patrol Around Theaters Since Race Riots," 8.

²²⁶ Progress Report on the Community Barometer, January 30, 1945, box 1, Reports and Plans, 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.



Figure 5: Police Training at Belle Isle, October 29, 1943, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections²²⁷

²²⁷ Detroit News. Police; Training. Training at Belle Isle, October 29, 1943, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, <https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc22376>.

However, the police reported that of the three interracial incidents that Sunday, each time a young Black Detroiter initiated the attack against a white individual or group.

A police report noted that leading up to the weekend, on the evening of Thursday, August 5, there had been some minor interracial fighting. At 6:30 p.m., three young Black Detroiters (male) aged 11-12 threatened a white Detroiter (male) aged 11 with a knife. The young Black Detroiters were placed in Juvenile. The same report noted that three days later, during the evening on Sunday, August 8, two more fights occurred. The first incident transpired at 7:45 p.m., when three young Black Detroiters (male) aged 13-14 pursued a white 18-year-old (male) who was riding a bike. The Belle Isle police made no arrests after the incident. The second incident occurred concurrently with the first, at 7:45 p.m. A young Black Detroiter aged 13 (male) and three other Black Detroiters aged 14-15 (female) stole a picnic basket from a (presumably off-duty) police officer who was picnicking with his family. The 13-year-old Black Detroiter was placed in Juvenile.²²⁸ It is curious that young Black Detroiters made up one hundred percent of the incidents reported by the Belle Isle police during the week in August of 1943, especially considering that Black Detroiters made up a disproportionate minority of the total crowd at Belle Isle on Sunday. This may reflect a tendency of the Belle Isle police to enforce the law on the island based on the findings of the Dowling Report, which “categorized rioters as ‘youthful, irresponsible’ males, overwhelmingly blacks under thirty-one years of age, who generally disturbed the peace, carried concealed weapons, broke, entered, and looted stores.”²²⁹

²²⁸ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, August 11, 1943, General Summary of Reports of Racial Activities During the Week of August 2 to 8, Inclusive, box 2, DSR-Police Reports, 1943, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²²⁹ Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*, 34.

A year later, however, it seemed that Belle Isle had recovered and Black Detroiters had returned. In the Sunday, June 18, 1944 issue of the *Detroit Free Press*, a white columnist named Elizabeth Hawes spoke fondly of a recent trip to Belle Isle on an unspecified Sunday. She described her day like this: “Peace - it was wonderful! The sun shone down on Negro and white alike - hundreds of us. Still there was plenty of room for everyone, it’s such a fine big place.”²³⁰ Heading home, she flagged down a taxi on East Jefferson Avenue and spoke about her fun time on the island. The taxi driver had strong feelings about the current state of Belle Isle and responded to Hawes by saying, “Belle Isle is a good place but nobody wants to go there now. It’s full of [pejorative].”²³¹ This interaction represented a microcosm of the attitudes of white Detroiters towards Black attendance in public recreation spaces. The white columnist Hawes seemed to have little issue with the “hundreds” of Black patrons on Belle Isle, whereas the white taxi driver vehemently condemned the space for being too Black.²³²

The taxi driver’s claim suggests that Black people made up a clear majority on the island. The columnist from the *Free Press* seemed to indicate that Black and white Detroiters had an equal holding on the island. However, neither the columnist’s nor the taxi driver’s assessments of the demographics of Belle Isle matched the actual numbers in late June of 1944. For example, on Sunday, June 18, 1944, the Harbormaster’s Division on Belle Isle reported that total attendance on Belle Isle amounted to 90,000, with Black Detroiters making up 10% of the population

²³⁰ Elizabeth Hawes, “‘Chop-Chop’ Goes Detroit — Why? Asks Miss Hawes,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 18, 1944, 5, ProQuest.

²³¹ Hawes, “‘Chop-Chop’ Goes Detroit — Why? Asks Miss Hawes,” 5.

²³² Hawes, “‘Chop-Chop’ Goes Detroit — Why? Asks Miss Hawes,” 5.

(approximately 9,000 people).²³³ The following Sunday, June 25, Black Detroiters made up 15% of the 35,000-strong crowd (approximately 5,250).²³⁴

However, Black attendance came closer to the majority in July of 1944. On Sunday, July 2, 1944, the Harbormaster's Division reported that 50,000 people attended Belle Isle, and stated that Black Detroiters made up 10% of the attendees. However, the Belle Isle police noted an interesting phenomenon: "There is a considerable increase of colored attendance on Belle Isle Park after midnight, this increase being about 50 per cent of total attendance."²³⁵ At this time of night, Black Detroiters would not be using Belle Isle as a recreation space, but more as a campground of sorts where they could spend the night.

Indeed, this harkens back to the behavior of Black patrons in the past, who spent the night on the island during a hot summer day back in 1936.²³⁶ This behavior continued in 1944, as the *Free Press* reported on a record-hot 98-degree Friday, August 11 day that drove Detroiters to Belle Isle. The Belle Isle police counted 50,000 people who went to the island during the night to escape the weather, many bringing makeshift beds with them. The *Free Press* may also have referred to Black Detroiters among these crowds: "Record weekday crowds thronged Belle Isle,

²³³ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, June 23, 1944, General Summary of Racial Activities for the Week Beginning June 12, and Ending Midnight June 18, 1944, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DSR-Police Reports, 1/44-6/44, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²³⁴ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, June 29, 1944, General Summary of Racial Activity for the Week Beginning Monday, June 19, and Ending Midnight, Sunday, June 25, 1944, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DSR-Police Reports, 1/44-6/44, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²³⁵ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, July 5, 1944, General Summary of Racial Activities for the Period Beginning June 26, 1944, and Ending July 2, 1944 – midnight, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DSR-Police Reports, 7/44-12/44, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²³⁶ Russ Cowans, "Around the Motor City," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 25, 1936, 18, ProQuest.

while weary tenement dwellers sprawled on the grass of the city's parks in search of coolness."²³⁷ Indeed, Black "tenement dwellers" living in congested areas like Paradise Valley likely had many reasons to stay the night at Belle Isle in hot weather. For one, substandard housing that oftentimes did not provide running water would make it impossible to cool off at home. Many of the houses in this area also had wood frames and old electrical systems, and as a result, fires became commonplace. The hot temperatures of summer likely exacerbated the potential for fires breaking out, so perhaps here is another reason why Black Detroiters preferred sleeping outside to staying in their homes where they would suffocate. Additionally, Black Detroiters likely preferred the fresh air to the garbage-filled streets of the segregated district: a result of overcrowding and once-a-week garbage pickup.²³⁸

However, this pattern is also reminiscent of the schedules of segregated dance halls in mainland Detroit, which relegated Black Detroiters to one night a week or gave them an inconvenient time slot late at night or in the early morning hours.²³⁹ Now, Belle Isle was not a segregated space, nor did it enforce an explicit rule that white Detroiters use it during the day and Black Detroiters use it at night, meaning that this behavior was voluntary. White Detroiters dominated the day, then at night as the white patrons vacated the space, more Black Detroiters arrived and made up a larger percentage of the total population. Therefore, one might say that the segregated patterns of behavior on the mainland carried over to the island, as white and Black Detroiters attended the island at different times of the day without active enforcement of segregation. This made Belle Isle a unique space in that it allowed mixed attendance, but the

²³⁷ "Detroit is Promised Break in Heat Wave: 50,000 Seek Relief at Belle Isle as Mercury Hits 98 Second Day," *Detroit Free Press*, August 12, 1944, 1, ProQuest.

²³⁸ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 37.

²³⁹ Richard W. Thomas, *Life for Us is What We Make of It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915-1945* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 131.

patrons separated on their own, making the island somewhat segregated depending on the time of day.

While Black attendance at Belle Isle certainly was not negligible - Black Detroiters definitely would be clearly visible in the park - it did not amount to an overwhelming Black majority like the one on June 20, 1943.²⁴⁰ The statement by the taxi driver reveals, therefore, that some white Detroiters after the riot may have been increasingly sensitive to a Black presence in mixed spaces, to the point that they could not accept even a minority Black presence. Indeed, outside of Belle Isle, there were a couple of instances in 1944 where young Black Detroiters faced discrimination and expulsion. One such place where young Black Detroiters confronted discrimination was Rouge Park. The Mayor's Interracial Committee, a body established by Mayor Jeffries to handle race relations after the Detroit Riot of 1943, received a report from a secretary of the Central Y.W.C.A.²⁴¹

The Y.W.C.A. Girl Reserves had scheduled a picnic at River Rouge on Thursday, August 10, 1944. Out of the 40 girls attending the picnic, 12 were Black. The Y.W.C.A. group arrived at different times, not all together, and so the girls chose to go swimming at Rouge Park's public pool whenever they individually got there. Two white girls who arrived first went in, but the health examiner prevented two of the Black girls from entering. He instructed them to show him their arms and legs. He gave one of the Black girls, who did not have any scratches, a slip for her

²⁴⁰ Lee and Humphrey, *Race Riot*, 52.

²⁴¹ Beulah T. Whitby, The Organization and Program of the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Committee January 13, 1944 to May 14, 1953, In Transfer Summary From The Mayor's Interracial Committee to the Commission on Community Relations, May 14, 1953, box 21, Racial, Mayors Interracial Committee - Report, Donald S. Leonard Papers: 1925-1966, Michigan Historical Collection, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Mayor Jeffries of Detroit established a temporary Interracial Committee on June 25, 1943, in order to discover what led to the violence as well as advise him on the best courses to take. Then on January 18, 1944, the official Mayor's Interracial Committee replaced the temporary committee.

to sign. The slip stated that she simply “can’t go in.”²⁴² He told the other girl that she had bad feet and wrote that on the slip. The girls left and got their money back. Another group of two Black leaders and four Black girls arrived at the pool at 7:30 p.m. and were told the pool had closed, but as they left they saw that a white woman and her child were allowed in. Another reporter also stated that a pool attendant at Rouge Park said that pool workers “went out of their way” to keep Black patrons from entering due to the fact “that on occasions when they had let them in white bathers had lined up to prevent their going in and there had been trouble.”²⁴³

The incident at Rouge Park’s pool demonstrated that the fight over water spaces in Detroit’s parks had not abated. Belle Isle again stood out from this park in that it provided an integrated bathing space. Figure 6 shows a scene from the Belle Isle bathing beach on Sunday, July 1, 1945. There are several Black Detroiters in this picture walking between and sitting next to white patrons on the beach, although they make up a minority of beachgoers (but still a substantial minority). On this day, the Harbormaster’s Division estimated that 100,000 people attended Belle Isle and that Black Detroiters made up 20% of the total attendance. They reported no interracial conflict occurring on Belle Isle during the day.²⁴⁴

Indeed, Figure 6 shows a bustling scene, with beachgoers stretching far into the distance. The closeness of white and Black beachgoers is evident. In the bottom left of the photograph, a group of three white boys plays in the sand next to a Black boy and his mother. Immediately

²⁴² Summary of some incident reports from the community barometer, 10/26/1944, box 1, Reports, 1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, Pages 2-3.

²⁴³ Summary of some incident reports from the community barometer, 10/26/1944, box 1, Reports, 1944, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, WPR, Pages 2-3.

²⁴⁴ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, July 3, 1945, General Summary of Racial Activity for the Week Beginning June 25, 1945, and Ending Midnight July 1, 1945, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DPD Reports 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.



Figure 6: A View From the Belle Isle Bathing Beach, July 1, 1945, Walter P. Reuther

Library Digital Collections²⁴⁵

²⁴⁵ Detroit News. Belle Isle; Bathing Beach, A View From the Belle Isle Bathing Beach, July 1, 1945, Detroit News Photograph Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library Digital Collections, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, <https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:vmc33652>.

behind the three boys, a lone white boy sits beside two Black men. Towards the center of the photograph, a white girl looks at the camera while standing in front of a group of Black men and boys. Behind her and to the right, two white women in black bathing suits walk freely.

However, the fact that both Black and white Detroiters inhabited the same space and existed in close proximity to each other does not necessarily indicate full integration. From the photograph, we can clearly see clustering. There does not appear to be any interracial group, but rather Black and white Detroiters stay in separate parties. The white and Black people in the sand sit either with their backs turned to each other, or look in opposite directions. In the center of the photograph a young white Detroiters sits on a step alongside a group of Black Detroiters, but instead of facing the water, turns his body ninety degrees so that he faces the camera. A young Black Detroiters towards the right of the picture appears to be running, and he would have run right past the white boys behind him to the left.

Therefore, while both white and Black Detroiters could freely enter the bathing area at Belle Isle, a luxury not guaranteed for Black Detroiters at other mainland parks, the bathing area did not represent full integration. The photo shows clear self-separation on the part of Black and white Detroiters - likely for different reasons. Black Detroiters likely sat separately from white Detroiters on the beach out of fear of being attacked or arrested. White Detroiters, as seen at Rouge Park, likely still held racist fears of contamination by Black Detroiters. On Belle Isle, these fears subsided enough that both parties could coexist in the same space, but not as integrated groups. What may have enabled the coexistence is the layout of a space like the Belle Isle Beach. The photo shows that the beach, even under the stress of a large group of people, had room to spare. One can still see relatively large patches of sand between white and Black beachgoers, meaning that they did not have to be as close to each other as near the edges of a

limited space like a pool. Furthermore, the Belle Isle beach had open water, not enclosed water like a pool, meaning that in addition to spreading out on a beach, white and Black Detroiters could spread out in the water. Whereas they might accidentally brush against each other in a crowded pool, the open water allowed them to avoid this type of interaction, meaning that white Detroiters may not have been as concerned since they did not get close enough to Black patrons to touch them.

Eventually, by 1945, the Black population on Belle Isle practically reached the level it had been at the day of the 1943 riot. On one particular day, Sunday, July 8, 1945, the Harbormaster's Division on Belle Isle reported that approximately 175,000 people visited the island park, and Black Detroiters made up 75% of that population. No interracial conflict broke out on that day.²⁴⁶ However, this type of attendance was not consistent and fluctuated. The following Sundays, July 15 and July 22, 1945, the attendance figures were 8,000 people and 100,000 people with Black attendance at 5% and 25% respectively. On neither of these days, did interracial conflict occur.²⁴⁷ This meant that Black attendance on Belle Isle did not necessarily dissuade white Detroiters from attending the island. White Detroiters still visited the island in large numbers and did so somewhat peacefully alongside Black Detroiters. However, on

²⁴⁶ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, July 10, 1945, General Summary of Racial Activity for the Week Beginning July 2nd, 1945 and Ending at Midnight July 8th, 1945, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DPD Reports 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²⁴⁷ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, July 17, 1945, General Summary of Racial Activities for the Week Beginning July 9, 1945, and Ending Midnight July 15, 1945, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DPD Reports 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, July 24, 1945, General Summary of Racial Activity for the Week Beginning July 16, 1945, and Ending Midnight July 22, 1945, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DPD Reports 1945, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

occasion, white Detroiters lashed out against Black patrons on the island. At 1:35 p.m., on Friday, March 22, 1946, a duo of young white Detroiters in a car attacked two young Black Detroiters walking on a street on Belle Isle, “trying to run them over then coming back and slapping them about the face.”²⁴⁸ This demonstrates that Black Detroiters still faced racial targeting out in the open on Belle Isle, and in broad daylight. Still, many Black Detroiters likely preferred this risk to attending the horrible and limited recreational facilities in the segregated section of Detroit. By 1946, according to Edlee Webster of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, young Black Detroiters living in “blighted areas” had few options: they could play in the streets, on playgrounds with “the most ancient of equipment,” or if they could afford the carfare they could travel “to distant parts of the city” for fun.²⁴⁹ The fact that there were instances of large Black attendance on Belle Isle post-riot indicates that the island remained the prime destination for Black Detroiters seeking respite from their continued difficult living conditions and poor recreation options.

²⁴⁸ Letter from Commanding Officer, Special Investigation Squad, to Chief of Detectives, Detroit Police Department, March 26, 1946, General Summary of Racial Activity for the Week Beginning March 18, 1946, and Ending Midnight March 24, 1946, as Reported by the Following Precincts, box 2, DPD Reports, 1946, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.

²⁴⁹ Edlee Webster, “Riot City, 1946: Part II - Housing and Recreation,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 4, 1946, 8, ProQuest.

Conclusion

Belle Isle did not serve as a shining model for how integration could succeed in Detroit. Despite what the press (both Black and white) may have said about the Belle Isle Field Days in the 1920s and 1930s, interracial tension arose on the island park outside of those exceptional days. Fighting took place on the beach, at the playground, and over the use of rental canoes: all before the Detroit Riot of 1943. Some white Detroiters wanted to enjoy Belle Isle apart from Black Detroiters, as in the case of the white Detroiters who wrote to the *Detroit News* about her desire for a separate beach for Black Detroiters at Belle Isle, thus demonstrating a desire to create segregation on the island.

Nonetheless, Belle Isle was a space where the pervasive segregation of recreation spaces in Detroit faltered, where it was inconsistent. While not necessarily constantly interacting with each other in the same space, Black and white visitors on the island frequented the same areas. They waited in line in concession stands, sat near each other on the crowded beach, played in the playground (occasionally engaging in mixed play), and clustered around the bus stops for a ride home at the end of the day. An intense urgency to segregate the Belle Isle beach out of fear of interracial mixing never materialized in the same way as mainland Detroit's pools. Neither did clear, divisive racial lines emerge on the island's beach in the same way that they had on Chicago's beachfront at the time of the outbreak of the 1919 Chicago riot. Detroit's 1943 riot did not occur because Belle Isle's facilities constrained Black people to certain sections of the island. Black Detroiters roamed the island freely, and apart from a few incidents, could make full use of the island's amenities without having to wait until whites had finished using them.

The island park at the time of the Detroit Riot of 1943 could also be viewed as a microcosm for mainland Detroit's overcrowding crisis during the 1940s. Conditions for

recreation on Belle Isle mirrored Detroit's crowded streets and transportation system. The limited playground facilities, refreshment stands, and grills on the island park brought Black and white Detroiters into direct competition for their use. Black use of these limited facilities sparked resentment from whites, some of whom out of protest stopped visiting the island altogether.

But other white Detroiters continued to come to Belle Isle, even expressing enthusiasm about the interracial nature of the space. The white female *Free Press* reporter wrote in her piece in 1944 about how she had a grand old time on the island surrounded by hundreds of Black and white Detroiters who did not fight each other: her language was reminiscent of Detroit's press in the 1920s and 30s surrounding the Field Day. But she also reported on the other viewpoint, that of her cab driver, who dismissed her sense of a good time by saying how no white Detroiters wants to go to Belle Isle because of his perception that there had been a drastic increase there in Black Detroiters. Perhaps in this cabbie's view, no white Detroiters in their right mind would willingly enter a space where Black Detroiters made up a substantial part of the total attendance.

But many white Detroiters did enter this space, demonstrating that not every white Detroiters closed ranks and packed up to leave permanently. They did not completely abandon Belle Isle once more Black Detroiters began to use the space again. Belle Isle remained integrated. Despite an initially sizable decrease in the numbers of Black Detroiters at Belle Isle in the immediate months following the Detroit Riot of 1943, they eventually began going to the island in large numbers by the following summer. On occasion following the riot, Black attendance even surpassed that of whites, but for the most part, white Detroiters still went to the island in droves, outnumbering their Black counterparts. Therefore, the Detroit Riot of 1943 did not cause Belle Isle to become racially homogeneous one way or the other.

Belle Isle thus complicates the conversations historians have had on segregation and discrimination in urban recreational spaces in the twentieth century. The island park does not fit neatly into this mold but rather complicates it. The fact that Belle Isle's beach did not segregate its patrons by race challenges our current understanding of interracial mixing in the water. Apart from a few isolated incidents, no major white effort emerged to prevent Black Detroiters from using the Belle Isle bathing beach, whether through force or intimidation. The current historical understanding presupposes that major white retaliation against Black bathers was imminent and inevitable, but, it just did not happen on the Belle Isle beach in this expected way. Yet Belle Isle does still match some of the findings because of instances of profiling against Black park-goers by white lifeguards and police. Self-separation by Black and white Detroiters, as well as an unspoken practice of attending the island at different times of the day, demonstrated that the "integrated" Belle Isle was not as forward as it appeared. Rather, this showed that uneasiness permeated throughout the island. And of course, the Detroit Riot of 1943 started on the island park.

Belle Isle cannot be labeled an exception, nor can it be called the norm. The interracial nature of the island may have given the illusion of racial progress, but the types of interactions reveal the discomfort felt by both white and Black Detroiters, for different reasons. Belle Isle intensified awareness of race. White Detroiters clearly became more sensitive to the increased numbers of Black Detroiters on the island and believed that this increase signaled the loss of a valued white space. Black Detroiters, aware of their increased standing on Belle Isle, became more sensitive to white provocations, specifically perceived threats to access to Belle Isle's amenities. But neither white nor Black Detroiters completely abandoned Belle Isle in the 1940s. Belle Isle remained an important space for both Black and white Detroiters. Therefore, they

worked out an accommodation of sorts, such as visiting at different hours and/or attending in racially homogeneous groups that would not intermix: strategies that would enable a tense coexistence, and nothing more.

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