

## Privilege and Oppression: The Configuration of Race, Gender, and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949

Pamela Sugiman

Volume 47, 2001

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t47art03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Sugiman, P. (2001). Privilege and Oppression: The Configuration of Race, Gender, and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 47, 83–114.

Résumé de l'article

Dans la plupart des études sur l'industrie automobile au Canada, la main-d'oeuvre a été organisée pour inclure seulement les hommes blancs. Toutefois, un tout petit nombre d'hommes noirs ont eu depuis longtemps une forte présence dans l'industrie, occupant les emplois les plus sales, les plus hasardeux et les moins désirables dans les usines d'automobiles de St. Catharines et de Windsor, Ontario. Cet article essaie de reconstruire la vie professionnelle et la participation syndicale de ces hommes. Il met en évidence les thèmes de la race et du genre dans le milieu d'influence de la production capitaliste. En examinant les oppressions multiples, simultanément vécues et combattues, l'étude démontre davantage que les relations de domination sont beaucoup plus compliquées et historiquement dépendantes des conjonctures que la plupart des analyses de l'industrie et du « travailleur automobile » avaient suggéré.

# Privilege and Oppression: The Configuration of Race, Gender, and Class in Southern Ontario Auto Plants, 1939 to 1949

Pamela Sugiman

OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES, attempts to theorize the relationship of race, gender, and class, and discussions of the centrality of these forces in shaping our lives have become increasingly sophisticated and passionately debated.<sup>1</sup> The main contributions of this debate have been the identification of multiple oppressions based on multiple social locations, a recognition of the simultaneity of oppression and struggle, accounts of the lived experiences of women and men of colour, and a

<sup>1</sup>See for example, V. Agnew, "Canadian Feminism and Women of Colour," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 16, 3 (1993), 217-28; V. Amos and P. Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminist Review*, 17 (1984), 3-19; F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries*, (London 1992); H. Bannerji, ed., *Returning the Gaze* (Toronto 1993); M. Barrett and M. McIntosh, "Ethnocentrism in Socialist Feminist Theory," *Feminist Review*, 20 (1985), 23-47; R.M. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender" in R. Hennessy and C. Ingraham, eds., *Materialist Feminism* (New York 1997), 236-47; H. Carby, "White women listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood," in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back* (London 1982), 212-35; A. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York 1983); P. Essed, *Everyday Racism* (Alameda, CA 1990); P. Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (London 1990); b. hooks, *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (London 1981); R. Jhappan, "Post-Modern Race and Gender Essentialism or a Post-Mortem of Scholarship," *Studies in Political Economy*, 51 (Fall 1996) 15-63; S. Razack, *Looking White People in the Eye* (Toronto 1998); D. Stasiulus, "Rainbow Feminism: Perspectives on Minority Women in Canada," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 16, 1 (1987), 5-9; J. Vorst, et al., eds., *Race, Class, Gender. Bonds and Barriers*, 2nd edition (Toronto 1991).

re-examination of earlier analyses of social inequality through the lens of race and gender.<sup>2</sup> Discussions of multiple identities and counter-hegemonic discourses based on racial, gender, and class differences have been at the core of much post-modernist writing on the body, sexuality, reproduction, experiences of violence, and representation in popular culture. Materialist analyses of economic (work) institutions and discussions of political economy in Canada, however, have been more resistant to this new paradigm.<sup>3</sup> As a result, our understanding of the race, gender, class nexus is limited, remaining largely at the level of culture, subjectivity, and individual experience.

There is a need then for social historians and social scientists to rethink some of the old conceptual categories, with an eye to understanding the ways in which race, gender, and class, as historically configured, have structured the economic institutions that govern our lives. How, for example, has this nexus organized wage earning and shaped workers' experiences in this country? Moreover, what is the link between the gendering and racialization of capitalist workplaces and the politicization of the worker, the development of a worker consciousness, and the collective mobilization of the working class? Importantly, how can we theorize this link between structure and lived experience without reverting to old additive or

<sup>2</sup>R.M. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender"; G. Hull, P. Bell-Scott, B. Smith, *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (Old Westbury, NY 1982).

<sup>3</sup>Some notable exceptions include S. Arat-Koc, "Importing Housewives: Non-Citizen Domestic Workers and the Crisis of the Domestic Sphere in Canada," in M. Luxton, H. Rosenberg and S. Arat-Koc, eds., *Through the Kitchen Window* (Toronto 1990), 81-103; A. Bakan and D. Stasiulis, eds., *Not One of the Family* (Toronto 1997); G. Creese, *Contracting Masculinity: Gender, Class and Race in a White-Collar Union, 1944-1994* (Don Mills, Ontario 1999); T. Das Gupta, "Anti-Black Racism in Nursing in Ontario," *Studies in Political Economy*, 51 (1996), 97-116; W. Giles and V. Preston, "The Domestication of Women's Work: A Comparison of Chinese and Portuguese Immigrant Women Workers," *Studies in Political Economy*, 51 (1996), 147-82; R. Ng, "The Social Construction of Immigrant Women in Canada" in R. Hamilton and M. Barrett, eds., *The Politics of Diversity. Feminism, Marxism and Nationalism* (Montreal 1986), 269-86.

In comparison, American studies of the relationship of race, gender and class are now numerous. Among others, see J. Jones, "Race and Gender in Modern America," *Reviews in American History*, 26, 1 (1998), 220-238; C. Guerin-Gonzales, "Conversing Across Boundaries of Race, Ethnicity, Class, Gender, and Region: Latino and Latina Labor History," *Labor History*, 35, 4 (Fall 1994), 547-563; E. Higginbotham, M. Romero, eds., *Women and Work. Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Class* (Thousand Oaks, California 1997); T.W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*. (Cambridge 1997); E. Nakano-Glenn, "The Dialectics of Wage Work: Japanese-American Women and Domestic Service, 1905-1940," in E. Dubois and V. Ruiz, *Feminist Studies*, 16, 3 (1980), 432-71; D. Tomaskovic-Devey, *Gender and Racial Inequality at Work* (Ithaca, New York 1993); M.B. Zinn, B. Thornton Dill, eds., *Women of Color in U.S. Society* (Philadelphia 1994).

multiplicative analyses based on the equation race + gender + class or race x gender x class?<sup>4</sup>

This paper offers an examination of the ways in which the matrix of race, gender, and class has structured the automobile manufacturing industry of southern Ontario, a work setting that has long been racialized and gendered. Since the beginnings of the industry, white men have dominated the auto manufacturing workforce. Anyone who was not white and male was in the minority, different, an intruder, treated as unequal. In the auto plants of southern Ontario, two such "minorities" existed. One, small groups of women, many of whom were born in Canada of Anglo-Celtic and Eastern European descent, worked in McKinnon Industries of St. Catharines, Ontario and the General Motors Company of Canada's (GM) manufacturing facility in Oshawa, Ontario.<sup>5</sup> Two, even smaller pockets of black men, mostly Canadian-born, were concentrated in janitorial jobs and various types of foundry work in McKinnon Industries and the Ford Motor Company of Canada, as well as some smaller auto foundries in Windsor.<sup>6</sup>

In earlier research, I documented the experiences of white, women auto workers, tracing changes in both their position in the industry and their perceptions and politics over the course of several decades.<sup>7</sup> This study is an attempt to reconstruct a small part of the lives of black men, on the job and in their union, at a time when their numerical presence in the auto plants was at its peak, throughout World War II and into the post-war period.<sup>8</sup> It is based on a review of union

<sup>4</sup>R. Brewer, "Theorizing Race, Class and Gender," 238.

<sup>5</sup>McKinnon Industries was originally a subsidiary of General Motors and later became a General Motors plant.

<sup>6</sup>Small numbers of Armenian, Chinese, and Chinese-Canadian workers were also employed in the southern Ontario auto industry during the Second World War. However, I have chosen to focus here on black workers because they represented the largest minority, with the longest history in the plants.

<sup>7</sup>P. Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma: The Gender Politics of Workers in Canada, 1937-1979* (Toronto 1994).

<sup>8</sup>Unlike their American counterparts, these workers were so few in number, so seemingly marginal to either the company or the union, that their unique histories have never been traced. Paradoxically, they are workers whose difference made them highly visible in the workplace; yet this difference has rendered them largely invisible in Canadian labour history. Currently, there are no published scholarly accounts of the ways in which race has been used in structuring the auto industry in Canada. In comparison, one can find a number of studies of gender and race relations in the American auto industry, as well as in the UAW International Office, and regional and local UAW offices in the United States. See for example, K. Tucker Anderson, "Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II," *Journal of American History*, 69, 1 (June 1982), 82-97; L. Bailer, "Negro Labor in the American Automobile Industry," Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1943; K. Boyle, "'There are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960," *Labor History*,

documents, as well as the oral testimonies of twelve black men who were employed in the industry during these years.<sup>9</sup> (See Appendix A for a description of these men.)

Oral testimony is a valuable methodological tool to unearth the histories of invisible groups, who by virtue of their small number, have escaped scholarly attention.<sup>10</sup> Due to the hegemony of whiteness in the auto plants, black auto workers have almost no place in Canadian labour history. Jobs in auto manufacturing have been viewed as "naturally" white (and male); analyses of the racialization and *gendering of workplaces* have been confined to those settings in which women and people of colour are numerically dominant.<sup>11</sup> Yet in spite of the scant numbers of black men in the plants, auto manufacturers drew on widespread cultural beliefs about race and gender, and exploited and reinforced the structural inequalities that working-class blacks faced in wartime southern Ontario. Employers manipulated these beliefs in hiring workers, allocating them to jobs, and establishing the terms of their employment. In doing so, management was central to the construction of difference among workers — a notable achievement given the striking social homogeneity of the workforce as a whole.

Considering the industrial backdrop that employers had set in place prior to the emergence of the United Automobile Workers' Union (UAW), I also comment on the ways in which black men, as individual workers and subsequently as trade

---

36, 1 (Winter 1995), 5-23; N. Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Automobile Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca, New York 1990); J.A. Geschwender, "The League of Revolutionary Black Workers: Problems Confronting Black Marxist-Leninist Organizations," *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 2, 3 (Fall 1974), 1-23; sections in S. Jeffcrys, *Management and Managed: Fifty Years of Crisis at Chrysler* (Cambridge 1986); sections in Alex Lichtenstein, "Labor Radicalism, Race Relations, and Anticommunism in Miami During the 1940s." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, D.C., 30 March 1995. M. May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: The Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day," *Feminist Studies*, 8, 2 (Summer 1982), 399-424; A. Meier, E. Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York 1979); R. Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana 1987); B.J. Widick, "Black Workers: Double Discontents," in B. Widick, ed., *Auto Work and Its Discontents* (Baltimore 1976), 52-60.

<sup>9</sup>It was extremely difficult to locate black men who had worked in the auto industry during the period of study. Given the harsh conditions of their work, a sizeable number of these workers left the auto industry after the Second World War. Also, many of the men who remained in the plants suffered from serious health problems such as silicosis. Many of these men had died before this project was undertaken. By the time all of the interviews for this study were completed, several participants had died.

<sup>10</sup>For an insightful discussion of the use of oral testimony, see C. Van Onselen, "The Reconstruction of a Rural Life from Oral Testimony: Critical Notes on the Methodology Employed in the Study of a Black South African Sharecropper," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 20, 3 (1993), 494-514.

<sup>11</sup>See D. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (London 1991); D. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, (London 1994).

unionists furthering collective goals, coped with, and at times resisted their racial subordination.<sup>12</sup> Industrial unionism played a central role in shaping these strategies of coping and resistance. Yet the UAW posed contradictions. While the union served as an ally, offering both a philosophical commitment to social (racial) equality and justice, and the material resources and tools with which to seek it, the UAW also contained the struggle to racialize worker resistance.<sup>13</sup> Union leaders lacked an adequate understanding of racial and sexual discrimination, and they typically reduced both to class relations between workers (as a homogeneous entity) and their employers. Furthermore, the union constructed a false dichotomized "choice" between racial (and sexual) *difference* on the one hand and *equality* on the other. Believing in the importance of a unified "workers' consciousness," UAW leaders, at times, posited difference or divisions within the working class as a threat to the labour movement.

An understanding of the social meaning of racial and sexual difference is central to an analysis of the workplace, working people, and their struggles. When we recognize these differences, we uncover many parallel, but separate working-class realities. The distinctive experiences of black men in the industry can be attributed to the particular ways in which race, gender, and class, both as subjectivities and social processes, have converged at different moments and touched the lives of workers, as well as shaped the larger historical scenario.

In exploring the racialization of gender, and the gendering of race within the sphere of capitalist production — in viewing multiple oppressions, simultaneously experienced and resisted — we furthermore see how relations of domination are far more complex and historically-contingent than most analyses of industry and "the auto worker" have suggested. In the auto plants of southern Ontario, relations of exploitation were common to all, but workers faced different forms of oppression, and experienced relative privileges, depending on their place in the race-gender-class order.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The UAW officially known as the International Union of Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Workers, was an international union whose central offices were located in the United States. In addition, several regional UAW offices were established throughout the USA and one regional office was set up in Canada. Initially the Canadian jurisdiction was called District Council 26. Later, it was referred to as Region 12, and subsequently it was renamed Region 7 (also known as the Canadian Region). In September 1985, the Canadian Regional Office broke away from the UAW International and formed an independent union called the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). This paper focusses on the UAW in Canada. Given that developments within Canada departed significantly from those in the US, my findings are not generalizable across national boundaries.

<sup>13</sup>I wish to thank Joan Sangster for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>14</sup>For a thoughtful discussion of privilege and oppression simultaneously experienced, see R. Jhappan, "Race and Gender Essentialism," 40.

*Constructing Difference Among Auto Workers*

Though data on the demographic composition of auto plants in Canada is based largely on anecdotal evidence, it is undeniable that employers used race and sex as criteria in filling jobs. Prior to World War II, in the pre-union period, sizeable communities of black families lived in the auto towns of St. Catharines and Windsor. St. Catharines, a small city near Niagara Falls, was the home of McKinnon Industries. Windsor, a mid-sized city that is situated across the river from Detroit, was the location of the Ford Motor Company of Canada, Chrysler Canada, and a number of affiliated auto foundries such as Auto Specialties, Walker Metal Products, and Malleable Iron.

Despite the strong presence of the auto companies in their communities, however, most blacks understood that auto employment was unattainable to them. Before World War II, only a handful of blacks worked in auto.<sup>15</sup> In the 1920s, two black men, members of the Nicholson family in St. Catharines, poured iron in the McKinnon foundry. They may have been the only two "coloured men" employed by the company at this time. In the 1930s, McKinnon Industries hired a large number of Armenians. These men, most of whom were recent immigrants to Canada, lived in company housing on Ontario Street, which was located opposite the plant. They occupied many of the jobs that increasing numbers of blacks would later fill. In the 1920s, some black men also found work in the Ford Motor Company, though their exact number is not known. Auto employees Lyle Talbot and Rod Davis, respectively, had a father and grandfather working in Ford.<sup>16</sup> Talbot's father was hired in 1919 and worked as a machine operator in the transmission department until 1947.

With the outbreak of World War II, employers were forced to alter their hiring policies in response to stepped up production demands and the temporary departure of many prime-age, white, male employees. Thus, the doors to the auto plants opened a crack for some of those workers who had long been on the outside. For instance, during this time, Ford hired a number of Chinese men in its Windsor plant.

<sup>15</sup>White women too have had a long presence in the auto industry, and likewise they constituted a small minority. Of the Big Three auto makers, General Motors consistently employed the largest number of females. In 1918, women comprised less than 6 per cent of GM's total hourly workforce. But between 1942 and 1943, the number of women employees increased dramatically. In 1942, GM's Oshawa plant employed only 200 women, but by March 1943, this figure had risen to 400 out of a total workforce of 4,000. Rapid expansion of production as well as growing wartime labour shortages drew even more women into McKinnon Industries. According to UAW estimates, the female workforce in McKinnon rose from 600 in 1942 to 1,200 out of a total workforce of 4,500 in 1943. Where previously women had made up about 8 per cent of the total personnel, their proportion increased to 25 per cent.

<sup>16</sup>Rod Davis was a participant in a session of the CAW Workers of Colour Leadership Training Programme.

Proud of this move, company publicists featured a photograph of each of their 56 Chinese workers in its monthly magazine, *Ford Times*. Ford described the employment of these men as a patriotic gesture in the context of war.<sup>17</sup>

During these years, the company also continued to hire black men in relatively small, but growing numbers. In the United States, the well-known industrialist Henry Ford had established a reputation for providing jobs to "Negroes," a move indicative of his paternalistic relationship with the African-American community.<sup>18</sup> In 1941, blacks constituted roughly ten per cent of the workforce (11,000 workers) in the Ford Motor Company in the US.<sup>19</sup> While Henry Ford also upheld this reputation in Canada, the numbers of blacks in the Windsor plant seem almost insignificant in comparison to those in the US. For example, when Lyle Talbot began to work at Ford (Windsor) in 1940, he joined roughly 200 black men.<sup>20</sup>

McKinnon Industries was the other major employer of black men in the auto industry. In 1938, the company hired approximately 80 men, many of whom were black, in its foundry division.<sup>21</sup> Richard Nicholson, relative of the two Nicholsons who worked at McKinnon in the 1920s, was one of these recruits. Shortly after joining the company, he witnessed the entry of several more blacks. According to Nicholson, roughly fifteen to twenty black men were hired in McKinnon Industries during World War II. By 1943, there were at least 40 to 50 black men out of a total workforce of 4,500.<sup>22</sup>

Of the "Big Three," Chrysler Canada had the most overtly racist hiring practices.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the company did not hire a black worker until it was pressured

<sup>17</sup>"Gung Ho," *Ford Times*, 3, 5 (October 1943), 12-14; "Heart Strings Stretch From Windsor 'Round the World....," *Ford Times*, 2, 2 (November 1942), 3-4. In contrast, in June 1944, the National Selective Service of Canada (NSS) requested that McKinnon Industries employ a small number of Japanese Canadian men. One Japanese Canadian man had already been employed in the foundry. However, the UAW Local 199 Bargaining Committee opposed the hiring of Canadian-born "Japs," and recommended that the matter be taken up with both the NSS and the company and that it be discussed further by District Council 26. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs (ALUA), Box 11, UAW Region 7 Toronto Sub-Regional Office, Local 199 Report to District Council 26 Meeting, Minutes (June 1944), 8-11.

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of the relationship between Henry Ford and the African-American community, see L. Bailer, "Negro Labor in the American Automobile Industry"; K. Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows..."; A. Meier and E. Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*; B. Widick, "Black Workers: Double Discontents."

<sup>19</sup>B. Widick, "Black Workers, Double Discontents," 53.

<sup>20</sup>Interview #2, 30 May 1994.

<sup>21</sup>ALUA, UAW Canadian Region Series III, Box 70, Report of UAW Local 199, District Council Minutes (1939).

<sup>22</sup>ALUA, UAW Research Department, Acc. 350, Box 11, "Questionnaire on Employment in UAW-CIO Plants, Employment, Women and Negroes, UAW Regions 4-9A" (April 1943).

<sup>23</sup>In September 1949, Canadian Region Director George Burt reported to the Region 7 Staff, that the Chrysler Corporation of Canada "does not hire Negroes" and that "in Windsor most



to do so by law in the 1950s. In 1951, the Ontario Fair Employment Practices Act<sup>24</sup> was passed and in 1953, a Federal Fair Employment Practices Act was set in place. According to the latter piece of legislation, any company that had a contract with the Canadian government was prohibited from engaging in racially discriminatory hiring practices. Thus, in October 1953, for the first time in its history, Chrysler Canada hired three black men to work on its assembly lines.<sup>25</sup>

None of the companies, however, offered employment to black women. According to a report by Lyle Talbot, former Ford employee and president of the anti-racist organization, the Windsor Council on Group Relations, at a time when many employers badly needed to replenish their diminishing supply of workers, "the doors of virtually every factory in the Windsor area were closed tight against coloured girls and women."<sup>26</sup> In fact, of the fifty shops in Windsor that were under UAW contract, not one employed a black woman in either office or factory. Talbot noted that, "[i]t was common knowledge of the coloured people of Windsor that their womenfolk were hardly ever sent to factories, stores or offices" by the federal government wartime agency the National Selective Service (NSS) because of a "gentlemen's agreement." In those few cases where the NSS did send black women

---

of the Negroes are in foundries." ALUA, UAW Canadian Region Collection, Box 39, File 1, "Minutes, Region 7 Staff Meeting" (1947-50). The issue was raised again by Canadian UAW Education Director Thomas MacLean at the Canadian Region staff meeting in September of the following year. MacLean and a number of members who were active in local Fair Employment Practices Committees were challenging the company's discriminatory hiring practices. ALUA, UAW Canadian Region Collection, Box 39, File 2, "Minutes, Region 7 Staff Meeting" (September 1950-53).

<sup>24</sup>The Fair Employment Practices Act, 1951 was enacted to prohibit discrimination in employment on the grounds of a person's race, creed, colour, nationality, ancestry or place of origin. The Act covered application forms and advertisements. It did not include "sex" as a prohibited ground of discrimination.

<sup>25</sup>ALUA, UAW Region 7 Toronto Sub-Regional Office Collection, Box 9, "Minutes, Staff Meeting" (26-27 October 1953), 6.

<sup>26</sup>Lyle Talbot Private Collection, untitled document (March 1950). During the Second World War, a small group of black persons based in Toronto challenged the discriminatory practices of the National Selective Service in recruiting workers for essential war industries. See J. W. Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience*, Canadian Historical Association Booklet 41 (Ottawa 1985), 17.

This stands in contrast to the situation in the United States. In the US, labour market shortages during the Second World War were so great, and the black population much more sizeable than in Canada, that both black women and men began to get jobs in the auto industry. For example, Chrysler went from 0 black women to approximately 5000 in April 1945. See B. Widick, "Black Workers: Double Discontents," 93. In the mid-1960s one black female was employed in Chrysler Canada's administrative office. In Oshawa, the home of General Motors of Canada, there was no black community from which to draw workers.

for jobs, the employers had apparently reprimanded NSS officials. World War II, "broke the barrier" for "coloured men" only.<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, personnel managers asked job applicants few questions about their employment experience or other personal qualifications. (In men of all races, employers overlooked the unique talents of the worker, i.e. skills for the job.) In working-class men, auto employers sought "human machinery" to perform labour that had been organized for profit-making only.<sup>28</sup> Yet in specifically pursuing "coloured men," on occasion, management was underlining the salience of race in this class context. Richard Nicholson worked in the foundry in St. Catharines for thirty-six years. He remembers his entry into the company.

I heard the rumour...that McKinnon Industries was hiring blacks....They were looking for *coloured people* to work in the foundry so I went down there to Ontario Street and "bingo!" I got hired right away because I was a big lad and everything [emphasis mine].

During the war years, auto manufacturers recruited black men through various government and community networks. Many men found their jobs by way of either the NSS, district service clubs, or ministers of black baptist churches. When neither the NSS nor the neighbourhood rumour system yielded sufficient numbers of black males, however, employers resorted to more active and direct means of recruiting, reaching out beyond local communities. Local folklore tells us that years ago, recruiters for McKinnon Industries went to Toronto to find black men. Then in 1940, under the exigencies of war, they travelled to Nova Scotia as part of a further recruitment drive.<sup>29</sup> The NSS paid the men's passage from Nova Scotia to St. Catharines, a distance of close to 2,000 kilometres. At various points in time, McKinnon managers also recruited black men from Fort Erie and Niagara Falls.<sup>30</sup>

### *"Foundries Is Made For Black Men"*

Auto makers took special measures to locate black male labourers largely because they wanted them to fill the most undesirable jobs in the plants — jobs that few white men wanted. In the auto plants of Ontario, racial segregation was never enforced as a matter of company policy nor was it written into collective agreements

<sup>27</sup>Interview #12, 20 February 1995.

<sup>28</sup>I wish to thank *Labour/Le Travail* reviewer #2 for bringing this point to my attention.

<sup>29</sup>This finding was generated through a series of informal classroom discussions that I held with participants in the current CAW Workers of Colour Leadership Training Programme. Many of the students in this programme shared stories that had been passed on to them from fathers, fathers-in-law, uncles, and grandfathers who had once been employed in the auto industry. Three interview informants also independently recollected that recruiters for McKinnon Industries had sought black workers from Toronto and Nova Scotia.

<sup>30</sup>Interview #1, 18 October 1990, interview #12, 20 February 1995; for example, as well as private conversations with various black CAW members who are currently living in St. Catharines and Windsor.

(as it had been in the US). Yet management used informal, unspoken means of exclusion to place blacks in one of three areas: the heat treat, the powerhouse, or the foundry. Within various departments or divisions, some black men could also find work as janitors.<sup>31</sup> According to Lyle Talbot, who temporarily worked in each of these jobs, they were all bad places to be. The powerhouse was dirty.

[T]hey'd get all kinds of soot from the smoke....

In the powerhouse, there was a big pile of coal out in the yard, and big transformers that were run by coal, heat. Black men worked in a tunnel where the coal was brought in on a conveyor from the coal pile into the big furnaces that generated the heat for the power. The men had to make sure that the coal did not fall off the conveyor going through.

The "heat treat's the same thing," Talbot added. This is where they treated the metal with heat in long ovens. The worst of the three areas, however, was the foundry — "where all the heavy, slugging, dirty work" went on.<sup>32</sup> The vast majority of the black workforce was situated in the foundry.<sup>33</sup> And there, along with Armenians, they typically performed the least desirable job of iron pouring.

The men poured their own iron and you had to go out and shift the moulds — had a plate on top about that thick and go on top of the moulds for them to pour the iron. Sometimes they'd be pouring and the mould would be bad and as they poured in the iron would burst out the side and sometimes, as soon as that iron, just a drop, would hit ... the concrete it would look like fireworks.<sup>34</sup>

GM worker Richard Nicholson commented on the relationship between race and job allocation:

In 1938 ... when I went to General Motors, they hired us blacks for one reason. They didn't lie to you. When they hired me, they told me ... "We got a job for you in the foundry. It's a hot job. It's a hard job."... [T]hey kept calling in blacks, more blacks. They would've hired

<sup>31</sup> *Ford Graphics*, 6, 13 (15 July 1953), 6.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of foundry work in early twentieth century Canada, see C. Heron, "The Craftsman: Hamilton's Metal Workers in the Early Twentieth Century," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 6 (Autumn 1980), 7-48. Decoufle and Wood examine mortality patterns among workers in a grey iron foundry for the period 1938 to 1967. The authors highlight the connection between foundry employment and race. P. Decoufle and D.J. Wood, "Mortality Patterns Among Workers in a Gray Iron Foundry," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 109, 6 (1979), 667-675; see also, E.S. Gibson, R.H. Martin, and J.N. Lockington, "Lung Cancer Mortality in a Steel Foundry," *Journal of Occupational Medicine*, 19, 12 (December 1977), 807-812.

<sup>33</sup> Black men in the US were also concentrated in foundry work, as well as wet-sanding operations, material handling, and janitorial assignments. See K. Boyle, "'There Are No Sorrows,'" 8; B. Widick, "Black Workers: Double Discontents," 53.

<sup>34</sup> Interview #12, 20 February 1995.

more blacks if they could have got 'em because that was where you were supposed to be — right there in the foundry.

Black working-class men had little choice but to accept these hot, hard jobs. Typically, prior to finding employment in the auto industry, these men worked as bell hops or elevator operators in local hotels, and general labourers on railroads, in carnivals, and on farms. They also washed cars by hand, peddled wares on the streets, and collected metal in alleyways for resale.<sup>35</sup> Most of this work was seasonal. Auto employment not only offered higher wages, but more importantly, it was comparatively steady work. The black community faced intense racism in the labour market, a situation that resulted in extreme economic hardship.

Compounding the labour force requirements of auto manufacturers and the dire economic straits of most black workers, employers upheld a particular vision of black masculinity that rested in part on the belief that a "coloured man" was most suited to hard, dirty, and physically demanding jobs.<sup>36</sup> Before foundries became highly automated, many of the operations required enormous physical strength (lifting castings and pouring iron, for example). And the dominant cultural image of a black man was that of a strong, robust, and muscular worker. Moreover, foundry work was performed at extraordinarily high temperatures and thus demanded tremendous physical stamina. Some company officials claimed that coloured men, in particular, could endure these excesses because of a genetic predisposition to withstand heat.<sup>37</sup> According to auto worker Cassell Smith,

At that time the foundry there was smoky and dusty and the workers they'd get in there wouldn't stay long ... So they decided, we [black men] could stand it ... that was the purpose of it because they figured, being black, you know, you could stand the heat ... that they're all the same ... people in Africa stand a lot of heat.

Exhibiting a racialized paternalism, some managers publicly showcased "their" hard-working black employees. In doing so, they presented black masculinity in a hyperbolic form — using a racial stereotype to magnify the image of the unskilled working man.<sup>38</sup> In the eyes of some observers in the plants, these men were little more than powerful, labouring bodies. GM foundry employee Richard Nicholson recounted,

<sup>35</sup>Richard Nicholson, Mahlon Dennis, Howard Olbey, John Milben, Clayton Talbert, Elmer Carter, and Howard Wallace all reported to have performed at least a couple of these jobs before securing auto employment. Many men had worked four or five such jobs.

<sup>36</sup>For a discussion of race and images of masculinity in the contemporary period, see among others, R. Staples, "Masculinity and Race: The Dual Dilemma of Black Men," *Journal of Social Issues*, 34, 1 (1978), 169-183.

<sup>37</sup>Interview #1, 18 October 1990; Interview #7, 3 August 1994.

<sup>38</sup>This idea was articulated by *Labour/Le Travail* reviewer #2.

...quite a few white people come over and watch you work. Take pictures. They've got pictures of me down there now. Take pictures of us doing this heavy job. And they'd just sit back and say, "Look at them guys work!" Visitors ... the foremen or the general foreman [would] bring people in and say, "Let's show you how we do it — how our boys do it." They all look at one another and they used to be taking pictures of us guys all the time — the kind of work we was doin.<sup>39</sup>

These men were highlighted for displaying manly brawn and to some extent they themselves expressed pride in their ability to perform work that involved remarkably high levels of physical exertion.<sup>40</sup> Yet at the same time, black men were objectified by employers. Managers who put the men on public display for performing hard, dirty, hazardous labour — work that they had little choice but to perform — paradoxically reinforced the notion that black males possessed a heightened masculinity while at the same time they emasculated these men in denying their "humanness," in constructing them as "beasts of burden." Employers contributed to the construction of a racialized masculinity, a masculinity that embodied racial and class subordination.

### *The Privileges of Manhood*

Being a man, however, did bring with it some privileges. It was because of their sex that these men were hired in the auto industry. As noted, even during World War II, black women faced formidable obstacles in finding any kind of factory employment in Windsor and elsewhere in Canada. Their sexual status furthermore ensured that black men would possess specific job rights, rights that were denied the small numbers of white women who had been allowed to work in some auto plants largely because of their privilege as a race.

Sexual inequalities were blatant in collective agreements between the UAW and auto manufacturers. Notably, contracts upheld sex-based job classifications and non-interchangeable, sex-based seniority. Moreover, it was not until 1954 that UAW leadership in Canada formally challenged company restrictions on the employment of married women.<sup>41</sup> Unlike their union sisters, men (of all races) were rewarded

<sup>39</sup> Interview #1, 18 October 1990.

<sup>40</sup> In his account of metal workers in Hamilton, Ontario during the early 20th century, Heron argues that the pride of moulders in steel foundries "fed on the physical demands of the work, which was notoriously heavy, dirty, and unhealthy." See C. Heron, "The Craftsman," 11.

<sup>41</sup> In the GM Oshawa plant, before, during, and after the war, most women were confined to either the sewing department or the wire and harness department. For the duration of the war, some women also worked in GM's aircraft division, a makeshift facility that was designed exclusively for the production of war materials. In McKinnon Industries, women worked in a wider range of departments. Nevertheless, they too were confined to far fewer jobs than men. In 1946, for example, women worked in only thirteen out of a total of 158

for being married. Assumed to be breadwinners, black men held departmental, and ultimately plant-wide seniority rights, received the same wages and piece rates, and in theory, could occupy the same job classifications as all other male auto workers. There is no evidence that during these years, any of the local collective agreements between the UAW and the Big Three auto makers in Canada openly made distinctions among workers on the basis of *race*. GM worker Richard Nicholson explained that in the past, differences in monetary rewards among the male workforce were based on an employee's family responsibilities only:

The white boys I worked with and the black boys, we'd always see one another's cheque ... We all get the same [pay] ... The only difference would be in deductions. If you have more kids than the other guy, you have a dollar or two more because they didn't take as much money off ya.

Married or single, male auto workers received higher than average wages for working-class men because of the successful efforts of the UAW to secure a family wage. The family wage demand was premised on the assumption that workers (men only) must be paid a relatively high rate because of their responsibility, as head of a household, for the economic welfare of a wife and children.<sup>42</sup> It was this ideology

---

occupational classifications in the firm. As a veteran trade unionist explained, in these years, "girls were girls and men were men." In both McKinnon Industries and GM's Oshawa plant, these sex-based job classifications furthermore provided the foundation for unequal wage rates for women and men, with local wage agreements invariably specifying lower rates to women. As well, union contracts established sex-based non-interchangeable seniority groups. While the seniority rule ensured that an employer would lay off workers according to the date they were hired, sex-based seniority groups ensured that the principle operated only *within* a sex category. The 1937 agreement between General Motors and UAW workers in Oshawa, for instance, stated that in any department in which both women and men worked, the sexes should be divided into separate and non-interchangeable occupational groups. In practice this clause meant that during a lay-off, women could move into "women's departments" only.

Moreover, although UAW International policy prohibited discrimination on the basis of marital status, women were penalized for being wives. Employers commonly placed married women on work shifts and seniority lists separate from those of other (male and female) employees. Before the Second World War, auto manufacturers had also demanded that women quit their jobs upon marrying. During the war, the company relaxed this policy but at the war's end, they reinstated it and laid off married women in massive numbers. As cited in P. Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, 22-26.

<sup>42</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the family wage, see B. Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto 1993), chapter 3; N. Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement*; M. May, "Bread before Roses: American Workingmen, Labor Unions, and the Family Wage," in R. Milkman, ed., *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History* (Boston 1985), 1-21; R. Milkman, *Gender at Work*; J. Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men, and Change in Two*

of the male breadwinner that in turn provided the rationale for women's lower rates of pay. In the words of Windsor-based auto worker Howard Olbey, in the Ford Motor Company, "it was all man to man."

Manhood, of course, is historically contingent. In the United States, black men encountered brutal and overt forms of racism both in the plants as well as within their own union locals.<sup>43</sup> Between 1944 and 1946 alone, the UAW International Fair Practices Department (IFPD) reported 46 complaints at 41 different American UAW locals throughout its jurisdiction. Rank and file members lodged 27 of these complaints against management exclusively. These centred around the company's refusal to hire certain persons. In addition, workers filed fourteen complaints directly against both management and the local union, for failing to act on grievances. They directed five complaints concerning racially-segregated meetings and the like, against local unions exclusively. Most Fair Practices cases were racial, with a few based on religion and political affiliation and one made on the ground of nationality.<sup>44</sup>

In Canada, however, the racialization of the automotive workforce did not have the same implications as it did south of the border. Because black men in both the

---

*Industrial Towns, 1880-1950* (Toronto 1990); B. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto 1992).

<sup>43</sup>American historians have documented a string of wildcat strikes against the hiring of blacks, cases of discriminatory layoffs, racially restrictive local seniority systems, "gentlemen's agreements" between local union officials and company representatives ensuring that blacks would not be promoted, upgraded, or transferred, the distribution of pay increases in such a way that black workers would not benefit, segregated washrooms, shopfloor harassment based on race, "Jim Crow" picnics and sporting events, segregated union meetings, the failure of local UAW leaders to pursue grievances which were filed by black members, and even the exclusion of blacks from union membership. See K. Boyle, "There Are No Sorrows"; K. Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Ithaca 1995); A. Meier and E. Rudick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*; B. Widick, "Black Workers: Double Discontents."

<sup>44</sup>ALUA, Emil Mazey Collection, Box 11, File 11-6, FEPC 1946-47-2, "First Annual Summary of Activities, International UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee" (15 October 1944 to 15 February 1946). See also, ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 18, File: Minorities, 1942-47, 2 of 2, "Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department," UAW-CIO to UAW-CIO International Board Fair Practices Committee (10 December 1946); ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 18, File: Minorities, 1942-47, 1 of 2, "UAW Fight Against Intolerance," Address by George W. Crockett (4 November 1945); ALUA, Emil Mazey Collection, Box 11, File: 11-6, FEPC, 2, "Fair Practices Committee Decisions" (1946-47); ALUA, UAW Fair Practices Department - Women's Bureau, Box 2, File: 2-17, Quarterly Reports (1946), "Report of UAW-CIO Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department to the International Executive Board, December 10, 1946; AULA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 11, File: 11-20, UAW Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department, 1947-58, "Summer School Course in Workers Education."

plants and in the wider communities of St. Catharines and Windsor were so few in number, employers did not use them to undercut white men by paying them lower wages or hiring them as strikebreakers.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the political and economic positioning of Canadian black men was significantly different than those in the United States. In the Canadian plants, white working men consequently did not seem to perceive black workers as a serious threat. One could surmise that white unionists opposed racially discriminatory contracts in an effort to ensure that employers never would use black men as a cheaper, politically docile labour source. There is no evidence though to suggest that management in Canada either attempted to use black men as such, nor that UAW leaders weighed this possibility in any kind of public forum. In this particular historic context, and specifically in this sphere of social life — the paid work setting — the social meaning of gender (manhood) and race (blackness), and their configuration, permitted the elevation of black men to the *formal status* of white working-class men.

*"We're All Brothers With the Union"*

The vehicle by which all male, auto workers secured various rights and entitlements in the workplace was the UAW, and there was a strong connection between belonging to the union and being a working-class man. Masculine bonds strengthened union ties and, in turn, union affiliation and masculinized class-based allegiances played an important part in reinforcing gender-based solidarities among these groups of men. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle unionism from "brotherhood" during these years. The industrial trade union was very much a masculine institution, not only because the vast majority of UAW members and leaders were men, but also because these men built their unionism around a place in the sexual division of familial labour, recreational pursuits, cultural forms of expression, strategies of resistance, and a political agenda that spoke to many of the shared experiences of working-class men.<sup>46</sup>

Women auto workers clearly expressed strong loyalties to the union. They played an important part in building the UAW. Though female members were underrepresented in the UAW leadership, seldom held an elected position, and rarely voiced their views in local union forums, they regularly attended union meetings and faithfully performed their duty as "foot soldiers" in the early strikes and sit-downs. Notwithstanding these loyalties, however, most women felt marginalized in union politics and subordinate to their UAW brothers. Women auto workers

<sup>45</sup>There is evidence that employers used black workers as "scabs" in some UAW plants in Canada. For example, at the Walker Metal Foundry, black men were first hired as a result of a strike by a white male workforce. Interview #5, 29 June 1993. However, these cases were rare. There is no evidence that this was a serious consideration at General Motors, Ford, or Chrysler during the period of study.

<sup>46</sup>See P. Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, chapter 2.



viewed the UAW of the 1940s as a distinctly masculine enterprise. "That was men," one woman worker matter of factly said about the union.<sup>47</sup>

Black men too had an ambivalent relationship to the UAW. Afterall, the upper echelons of the union bureaucracy were dominated by white men, few of whom challenged the informal discriminatory measures that kept black workers in perilous foundry jobs and out of the preferred skilled trades.<sup>48</sup> Yet black men's awareness of racist undercurrents within the labour movement did not diminish their strong commitment to industrial unionism and (unlike women members) they became actively involved in mainstream union politics at the local level. In fact, during World War II, their level of UAW office-holding was notably high in proportion to their numbers in the plants.

Of the twelve men interviewed for this study, nine had once held an official position in the local union structure. This finding is striking given that these men were not selected for study on the basis of union involvement.<sup>49</sup> While he was a foundry employee at Walker Metal Industries in the 1940s, Mahlon Dennis served as a UAW committeeman and therefore was on the UAW Local 444 negotiating committee. At Walker Metals, Dennis represented white UAW brothers only. During this same period, foundry worker Howard Wallace was a UAW vice-chairman representing employees at the Auto Specialties foundry in Windsor. He had been elected chairman but declined the position. While he worked at Ford, Elmer Carter was a sub-steward and sub-committee man for two or three years. Carter represented both black and white workers. Similarly, Lyle Talbot began work in the Ford Windsor plant in 1940 and immediately became a staunch advocate of the UAW. Talbot recalled,

the union started to organize and I was one of the first guys in Ford to sign up, and I became a union organizer. I carried an organizer's card for several years ... I signed up everybody I could get ... it just came natural to me to hear someone that's going to help me on my job.

Pudge Dawson, a black foundry worker at McKinnon Industries since 1938, was one of the most vocal and politically astute trade unionists from UAW Local 199. Ultimately, he also became a key figure in the struggle for the rights of black workers in the UAW Canadian Region. In addition to sitting on his local's Fair Employment Practices Committee, Dawson was a delegate to the Canadian Foundry Council and was the Council's chair for ten years. He also served as chair of the Local 199 bargaining committee, sat on the Local executive board for eight

<sup>47</sup> As cited in Sugiman, *Labour's Dilemma*, chapter 2.

<sup>48</sup> See K. Boyle, "'There are No Union Sorrows'" for a discussion of the opposition of skilled trades to African-Americans.

<sup>49</sup> The level of participation of workers of colour, however, dropped in the following decades. To this day, workers of colour remain underrepresented in the Canadian Auto Workers Union, especially in local office.

years, acted as alternate committeeman in the foundry core room, was chair of the UAW Local 199 education committee, secretary, vice-chair, and chair of the Local recreation committee, and played an active role in the St. Catharines and District Labour Council.<sup>50</sup>

The union allegiances of black men were strengthened by the UAW International's ideological commitment to racial equality as a basic principle of industrial unionism. For decades, the discussion of race among Canadian workers has been dominated, and perhaps inhibited, by this largely American discourse.<sup>51</sup> In response to the persistent demands of African-American rank and file workers,<sup>52</sup> heightened racial strife in UAW-organized plants, locals, and in American cities generally, as well as the passage of US federal civil rights legislation during the war and post-war years,<sup>53</sup> the UAW International office took a clear stand against racial discrimination.<sup>54</sup> During the 1940s, the union created an International Fair Employment Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department (FEPC), made local FEPCs mandatory, and appointed a (limited) number of women and black men on the International staff, mainly in fair practices, organizing, and education departments.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup>"Pudge Dawson Live Wire," *199 News*, 13, 6 (October 1975).

<sup>51</sup>Although racism was a reality in Canada, the experience of Canadian auto workers was distinctive. As noted, blacks constituted a tiny minority in Canadian UAW plants relative to American firms, particularly in comparison to US cities such as Detroit. Thus, in Canada, there was no strong and politically powerful contingency to fight for racial equality. Furthermore, this small group of workers was concentrated in a very narrow range of jobs. Likewise, they were minorities within their communities. Importantly, because of the hidden nature of the discrimination they faced, because racism in Canadian auto plants was less extreme and less overt than in the United States, many people believed that race discrimination was exclusively an American problem. See for example, L.E. Talbot, "The Distinctive Character of Racism in Canada," MA thesis, University of Windsor (1982); James W. St.G. Walker, *Racial Discrimination in Canada: The Black Experience*, Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet 41 (Ottawa 1985). UAW Canadian Region leaders therefore seldom addressed the issue of race. For this reason, the focus of this discussion is the resistance activities of rank and file workers themselves.

<sup>52</sup>See K. Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows...", 115.

<sup>53</sup>For example, on 25 June 1941, the US government issued Presidential Executive Order 8802 which reaffirmed the policy of full participation in defense programmes by all persons regardless of race, creed, colour, or national origin. See ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 9, File: 9-24, Discrimination Against Negroes in Employment, 1942-47, "Executive Order 8802."

<sup>54</sup>For example, ALUA, Emil Mazzy Collection, Box 11, File: 11-6, FEPC, 1946-47-2, "William Oliver to All Local Union Officers and Fair Practices Committees" (4 September 1947); ALUA, Emil Mazzy Collection, Box 11, File: 11-6, FEPC, 1946-47-2, "Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department Article 25."

<sup>55</sup>For example, ALUA, UAW Canadian Region Series III Collection, Box 70, File: 7, District Council, 1940, "Minutes, District Council 26 Meeting (13-14 January 1940); ALUA, George Addes Collection, Box 82, File: 82-24, "Order Creating UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee."

To the UAW, racial discrimination was a serious matter with clear moral, political, and economic ramifications. The union's critique of racial segregation and inequality rested on several interrelated themes, each of which highlighted the deleterious consequences of racism. First, UAW discourse on race was highly moralistic, and was expressed in passionate, emotional language. Appealing to workers' basic sense of right and wrong, and underscoring the moral authority of industrial unionism, official UAW statements espoused an essential immorality of racism in industry. In policy statements and public addresses, UAW International leaders posited racial discrimination as "cancerous," "evil," "infectious," a "poison," and "an act against humanity."<sup>56</sup> They argued that any good trade unionist should take a stand against racism as a matter of good conscience, and out of a commitment to one of the most fundamental philosophies of their union — that of "brotherhood."

Second, in statements about race, representatives of the UAW International often delivered an ideological message about the union's interests and responsibilities beyond the walls of industry. Reflecting the larger wartime political context, as well as their own factional interests, UAW President Walter Reuther and his caucus linked racism to Nazism and Communist influence on American society. They furthermore defined racial discrimination, especially segregation, as a threat to North American patriotism and standards of "freedom and justice." Proponents of racist attitudes and acts were often referred to as "defilers of democracy" and thereby "un-American."<sup>57</sup>

At the same time, the union addressed race as an economic/industrial relations issue, a view that had been promoted by Reuther since the late 1930s.<sup>58</sup> UAW records contain a series of diatribes by leaders asserting that it was "illogical"

---

Created in 1944, the overriding goal of the Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department was to unite workers, regardless of religion, race, creed, colour, political affiliation, or nationality. It was to accomplish this aim by addressing workers' complaints of discrimination, publicizing UAW no-discrimination policies and guidelines for handling discrimination cases, setting up and activating local FEPCs, conducting workplace audits to determine composition by sex and race in the plants, and educating workers through various programmes, conferences, radio addresses, and the Department's monthly publication, *Ammunition*.

<sup>56</sup>See for example, ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 9, File: 9-24, Discrimination Against Negroes in Employment, 1942-47, "R.J. Thomas to All UAW-CIO Executive Board Members and Department Heads, November 25, 1943"; ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 18, File: Minorities, 1942-47, 1 of 2, "UAW Fight Against Intolerance," Address by George W. Crockett, Director, UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee 4 November, 1945.

<sup>57</sup>For example, ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 18, File: Minorities, 1942-47, 1 of 2, "UAW Fight Against Intolerance," Address by George W. Crockett, Director, UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee 4 November 1945.

<sup>58</sup>See K. Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows," 109.

and "stupid" for trade unionists to foster or maintain racial divisions between workers because of the potential impact of such divisions on the economic security of white male workers, the future bargaining power of the union, and labour solidarity.<sup>59</sup> The doctrine of the UAW International was that racial discrimination and divisions were rooted in class-based economic inequalities and thus racial harmony necessitated a critical examination of the actions of employers. UAW statements on racial discrimination during the 1940s largely targeted the companies, if not in instilling racial hatred, then at least exacerbating, and profiting from it. Industrial strife and racial strife, according to UAW leaders, went hand in hand. One problem could not be solved apart from the other. Often, such arguments of economic and political expediency were used to reinforce appeals to workers' moral conscience. In a 1941 union publication, for instance, a black worker in the US stressed the value of unity among workers, if not for decency, then at least for the paycheck.<sup>60</sup>

Admittedly, the UAW was not an oasis of racial harmony. The UAW Fair Employment Practices Department had only limited authority to intervene in regional affairs,<sup>61</sup> the myriad UAW policy statements and public addresses of the war and post-war years were largely rhetorical and were in fact dismissed by many local and regional union leaders,<sup>62</sup> and in any case, these messages most likely conveyed far greater meaning in American plants than in the Canadian Region. When regional directors or rank and file members proved uncooperative, however, the UAW International could take decisive action and they did promote the general view that the United Auto Workers union stood in strong support of social justice — especially racial justice — and unequivocally opposed racial discrimination.<sup>63</sup> Notably, official UAW discourse identified racial discrimination, unlike sexual discrimination, as a social/economic/political problem rather than an unfortunate, but largely taken for granted, feature of the times. The official UAW position was that all *male* union members must be treated the same.

Importantly, in Canada, this philosophical commitment to racial equality was reinforced by contract clauses that were premised on a commitment to impartiality, and the broadly-defined goal of equal opportunity among male members. Many black workers were aware that their UAW representatives were likely to play out their own racial prejudices on the shopfloor and in the union. According to GM

<sup>59</sup>For example, ALUA, UAW Research Department Collection, Box 11, File: 11-20, Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department, 1947-58, "Summer School Course in Workers Education"; ALUA, Emil Mazey Collection, Box 11, File: 11-6, FEPC, 1946-47-2, "First Annual Summary of Activities of the International UAW-CIO Fair Practices Committee"; "UAW Seeks to Prevent Hiring Discrimination," *Michigan Chronicle*, 8 September 1945.

<sup>60</sup>"UAW Seeks to Prevent Hiring Discrimination," *Michigan Chronicle*, 9 August 1945.

<sup>61</sup>See K. Boyle, "There Are No Union Sorrows," 114.

<sup>62</sup>K. Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968* (Ithaca 1995).

<sup>63</sup>K. Boyle, *The UAW and the Heyday*, 118.

foundry worker Richard Nicholson, "there's a lot of things goes on behind your back." Nicholson believed that union reps would sometimes tell a worker that they had looked into a grievance when they clearly had not. In his view, such inaction made the grievant himself responsible for taking the initiative. Most interview informants, therefore, placed a strong emphasis on the theme of self-determination. At the same time, however, they highlighted the union's role in putting in place the machinery for equity. And this machinery, they believed, could be mobilized in attempts to secure either the hard won rights of black workers or racial justice on a collective-scale.

Many black men were aware of the limits of such contract clauses and as previously mentioned, they recognized the informal barriers to equal outcomes. This knowledge undoubtedly circumscribed their "choices" as auto workers. Over the course of many decades in the auto plants, most black men remained where they had started — in the foundry. According to former Ford and Auto Specialties employee Elmer Carter, "[T]heir idea was, 'well, the white man don't want you up there no how, so why ... put yourself in a position where you know you're not wanted.'"

A small number of men, however, protested vociferously about these hurdles and they turned to the *collective agreement* to support their claims. In particular, black auto workers in Canada attributed their ability to move out of a bad job and into a better one, to the UAW's commitment to the seniority principle, as well as union-negotiated rules about job posting and transfer rights. Elmer Carter further commented,

[W]hen I left Auto Specialties and I went to Ford's, there was a lot of different jobs that there was all white people on ... There was a lot of coloureds that worked at Ford's... I had a couple of jobs at Ford's that a lot of coloured fellas didn't have and they'd say, "How did you get that job?" I said, "Well, I just put in for it" and I got it because by then see jobs would have to be posted in the shop ... they went by seniority.

Lyle Talbot made similar observations about his thirty years at the Ford plant. He stated,

The only changes I saw were the changes the union brought about, like equal pay, equal opportunity. For instance, if a job came open, that's in the bargaining unit... If you had the qualifications, they had a phrase. The union had a phrase called "willing and able." If you were willing and able to do the job, the company had to give you a chance on it. I can think of ... four jobs that I got that the company said I wasn't able to do ... but the union insisted that they give me a chance.

Most black workers believed that the union contract could be used as a tool to protect their rights, in spite of the actions or inaction, prejudices or indifference, of individual men. The collective agreement was a tool for the achievement of a better

life, a measure of dignity, and equal opportunity at work — an instrument that, when pressured, some (white) union leaders would put to use. Given that the formal equal status that black auto workers had in the workplace did not extend into the community, it seemed reasonable to believe that the trade union was an imperfect but important ally. According to John Milben, a foundry worker for thirty-one years, “[t]he union was a hundred percent behind us... Fairness. We’re all brothers with the union.”

### *Race, Brotherhood, and Resistance*

The UAW, however, played a contradictory role. While the union served as an ally, its philosophy of *brotherhood* was restrictive in its emphasis on *sameness* among workers. Likewise, the UAW definition of *equality* was narrow, not accounting for (racial or sexual) *difference*. Like women members, black men thus faced many dilemmas. They recognized the need for a separate forum for organizing yet they feared ghettoization and accusations of fostering divisions within the working class and threatening worker solidarity. While class-based and gender-based solidarities were openly celebrated, bonds based on race remained unspoken. This workplace/union scenario had significant implications for race consciousness and black workers’ resistance.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, many black auto workers in Canada adamantly denied difference on the basis of race, and this clearly impeded efforts to mobilize in protest of racial discrimination. The denial of racial difference was most likely a means of coping with the hegemony of whiteness. Within a predominantly white setting, it represented an attempt to shield oneself from racist attacks, to avoid exacerbating racial tensions, and to assimilate (and thereby become invisible), or at least escape further marginalization in the plant and union. According to Richard Nicholson,

The blacks never all gathered together ‘cause we used to say to one another, “We’re not gonna all sit in a huddle - all of us together.” Like, it looks like you’re discriminating yourself. Like you’re all together. You know what I mean? I would talk to more white people than I did black people, really because I worked with white people and my boss was white.<sup>64</sup>

Living and working in communities in which racial difference and equality were dichotomized, and where “Canadians” were perceived as “white” and not foreign-born, many workers were caught in a dilemma between calling attention to their “blackness” on the one hand — something that must have been at the core of subjectivity — and being a Canadian, a good trade unionist, and equal to their white brothers on the other. Auto foundry employee Howard Wallace rejected the designation, “black,” equating it with American civil rights activists. Wallace

<sup>64</sup>This position stands in contrast to black immigrants, largely from the Caribbean, who began to secure employment in the auto industry during the 1960s and 1970s.

preferred to be called "coloured," something which he, in a seemingly contradictory way, associated with acceptance into mainstream respectable Canadian society. He remarked,

I never heard tell of no "black" man in the 1940s. Never heard tell of no black man. We always wanted the name of "coloured" man ... The only time you hear of 'em say a black man, it started in the United States. They started it. There's a lot of fellas over there the colour of you but they call themselves black men. Why? I do not know. Well, educated and everything ... I'm no black man... [A] lot of people like to call themselves black 'cause they call themselves black over the River... Either call me a coloured man or call me a Canadian. But I'm just what is anybody else in Canada.

Wallace's reflections make a potent statement about black identity in Canada.

It is impossible, however, for a "visible minority" to achieve invisibility or complete assimilation. Very few black workers escaped *informal* displays of racism within the plant. Some men recollected that supervisors and co-workers alike participated in a variety of overt racist acts, largely in the form of derogatory jokes and name-calling. In retrospect, though, these men minimized the importance of such acts in shaping their workplace experiences. Some even bragged about their ability, as individuals, to counter, and ultimately develop an immunity to such racist behaviour. According to Lyle Talbot,

....you could handle those guys. You know. I've had guys call me "black bastard" on the job. It didn't bother me at all because I knew that whatever my comeback was, it was just as good as their's... I had fellows that didn't like working with me, but there was nothing they could do about it. I knew it and they knew it.

Richard Nicholson likewise commented,

I had a little problem with some white people. Not no *real* problem, but some white people would ask me how I got a job like that... [*emphasis mine*]. Well, you know right away, he's puttin' a chip on my shoulder... So I used to keep them guys straightened out. And I'd use my temper and cuss them out. And then they'd say, "Oh, I didn't mean nothing!" No.

Individual resistance of this kind helped black workers to invalidate racial harassment and restore some dignity — dignity lost by a host of insults and injuries experienced both within the factory and in the wider community.

Racial prejudice was sometimes brutal and openly expressed, and racial boundaries were strongly upheld in the towns of Windsor and St. Catharines. Blacks faced blatant discrimination in housing, schools, churches, recreational facilities, the job market, and in intimate relationships. They were, for example, barred from certain residential areas and ghettoized in others, turned away from restaurants,

hotels, and bowling halls, and in some drinking establishments they were placed in a separate area called the "jungle room."<sup>65</sup>

Given the extent and impact of racism in their lives as a whole, it is striking that the men had so little to say about its effect on *workplace relations*. It is especially remarkable that most informants claimed that on the whole there were no racial tensions whatsoever amongst auto workers.<sup>66</sup> An Auto Specialties foundry worker for over thirty years, Howard Wallace, stated, "you'd see some white fellas or some foreign fellas. They all worked, you know. They all worked together... They all got along. What gets me is they all got along good together."

Many black men viewed the workplace as separate from the rest of the community, and claimed that the factory was one of the only arenas in which they could exercise their rights and even feel a camaraderie with white men. Auto Specialties worker John Milben related how he would "feel bad" when he was forced to drink beer in a back room, sit apart from white soldiers in a restaurant, and live on a "black street" in Windsor. Yet in contrast, "it was nice in the foundry

<sup>65</sup> For example, W.A. Head, *The Black Presence in the Canadian Mosaic. A Study of Perception and the Practice of Discrimination Against Blacks in Metropolitan Toronto*. Ontario Human Rights Commission (Toronto 1975); B.S. Singh and Peter S. Li, *Racial Oppression in Canada*. Second edition (Toronto 1988), chapter 8; W.S. Tarnopolsky, *Discrimination and the Law in Canada* (Toronto 1982); R. Winks, "The Canadian Negro: A Historical Assessment," *The Journal of Negro History*, 53, (October 1968), 283-300. Extensive accounts of racial discrimination in Ontario were also given in Interview #1, 18 October 1990, Interview #2, 30 May 1994, Interview #8, 5 August 1993.

<sup>66</sup> Among others, Rick Halpern documents a history of interracial cooperation among some groups of industrial workers. In his study of Fort Worth packinghouse workers between 1937 and 1954, Halpern notes that blacks and whites cooperated with each other in an effort to secure various material gains. He argues that shared workplace grievances tempered racial conflict. White workers supported the efforts of blacks to oppose economic discrimination as long as these struggles were couched in "traditional trade-union terms." However, when black workers challenged racist social customs, "the resulting strain ruptured the fragile alliance." See R. Halpern, "Interracial Unionism in the Southwest: Fort Worth's Packinghouse Workers, 1937-1954," *Organized Labor in the Twentieth Century South* (Knoxville 1991), 158-182. Likewise, in commenting on the intersection of the labour and civil rights movements, Bruce Nelson argues that there was an "undeniable accommodation" on the part of white workers to the presence of African Americans in industrial workforces and in CIO unions. Yet, he also points out that such accommodation rarely resulted in a "genuine integration of the workplace, the unions, and the neighbourhoods where workers lived." Rather, in his view, there was a "shifting of the boundaries of resistance and a refinement of the language and ideology that sanctioned the wages of whiteness." See B. Nelson, "Class, Race and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History*, 41 (1996), 351-374. Also see, B.A. Reed, "Accommodation Between Negro and White Employees in a West Coast Aircraft Industry, 1942-44," *Social Forces*, 26 (1947).



[he said]. Everybody was treated good. They had a cafeteria there. We sat and ate together... And we'd drink beer together."

Admittedly, direct racism on the shopfloor did not reach the same level of intensity in Canada as it did in the American auto plants. And it is likely that to these men, racial tensions in southern Ontario plants seemed insignificant in comparison to the racial strife they heard about through the American popular media and UAW International press. The scale and intensity of racism in the US most likely denied many black workers in Canada a sense of entitlement to public and collective outrage against the racism that touched their own lives. Given this, UAW leaders and local civil rights activists would occasionally remind Canadian Region members that while racial discrimination had taken a different form in Canada than south of the border, it nevertheless existed and should be challenged.

Moreover, the workers' descriptions of racial harmony within the plant underscore the fluidity of the concept of discrimination itself. Perceptions of discrimination are products of historical negotiation and as such are always changing. In the past, workers' conceptualization of racial discrimination did not encompass "workplace harassment." According to foundry employee Mahlon Dennis, during the war years and into the post-war period, racial harassment was simply "not an issue." Harassment is "more of a recent thing," explained Dennis. "I can't recall during the period I was involved in human rights, whether there was anything mentioned about harassment ... mostly ... it dealt with the employment situation and housing accommodation." Racial slurs, jokes, put-downs, even the occasional physical assault by another man, were not only part of the masculine culture of the auto plants, they were also endured as part of the everyday experience of people of colour in Canada — one of the hardships of the times. As Lyle Talbot's and Richard Nicholson's remarks suggest, it was up to individual men, manly men, to handle this.

Furthermore, the impact of the random racial attack by a co-worker or supervisor was softened somewhat by the men's formal equal rights and place in the industry. For the small group of black men who were "privileged" to find work in the auto plants, the outcomes of racism were not directly economic. Formal contract rights (which secured economic equality) mediated the informal, day-to-day experience of racial prejudice.

Many black workers lamented the unrelenting power of racist oppression but reasoned that in light of the small but significant gains that they had made in the course of their own lives, it was best to "turn the other cheek" to it. Getting a job in a car plant was among the most notable of these gains. Just as it mediated the impact of direct racial prejudice on the shopfloor, the "privilege" of auto employment and equal status as a UAW member, paradoxically, set limits on the racialization of black men's collective resistance. As Mahlon Dennis explained, coloured people couldn't complain about racial discrimination in employment during World War II because they were being hired. Former GM coremaker Cassell Smith stated,

nothing's happening, so don't go throwing your strength ... You're going to aggravate something that way ... Be prepared for it but as long as things are quiet, let them stay. That's my opinion. I'm not saying I'm right ... A person can go and stir up a lot of trouble where there isn't any ... So as long as it's quiet and all, leave it ... This fighting. They talk about equal rights. This fighting for equal rights is going to be a lifetime thing.

There were, furthermore, structural impediments to the politicization of race among auto workers. Due to the small number, and placement of black men in the auto plants, it was unlikely that a forum for separate organizing could take root in either the union or the workplace. Black men were sparsely scattered throughout large companies that employed predominately white workforces. Though most black workers were confined to foundries, these were big operations in which there were many workers whose ethnic origins included Armenian, Polish, Ukrainian, German, and Italian.<sup>67</sup> Ford employee Dennis Mahlon explained,

There wasn't a large number of blacks in the first place and those who were [in Windsor, were] working in the service industry such as hotels, some working for the various departments of the city. So that didn't leave too many people up there to complain about discrimination ... [T]hey're just like people who are out of a job. They feel somewhat isolated. They don't know anybody else unless they was laid off at the same time as somebody that they worked with... [I]t's difficult to identify with people who have been laid off or [who are] out of work. Blacks was the same way. When they weren't hired, if they didn't hear of anybody being refused ... seemingly they were the first ones to be refused so they ... had some problems in reporting this to anybody, even to their friends.

Thus, although the UAW International Office mandated the establishment of local Fair Employment Practices Committees,<sup>68</sup> few such committees were active in Canada.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, most local FEPCs were comprised solely of white men.

Though the auto industry was clearly racialized during the war and post-war years, collective anti-racism strategies by auto workers in particular, and Canadian

<sup>67</sup>Many of these workers were immigrants to Canada. Though each of these ethnic groups had experienced varying levels of discrimination based on citizenship and ethnicity, over time, they claimed a white identity. Blacks, however, did not [could not] achieve "whiteness." See discussion in D. Roediger, "What if Labor Were Not White and Male? Recentring Working-Class History and Reconstructing Debates on the Unions and Race," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 51 (Spring 1997), 72-95.

<sup>68</sup>Also, in April 1949, Canadian Region Director George Burt announced the appointment of Thomas MacLean, Assistant Regional Director, as Canadian Advisory Council member to the UAW International Fair Practices Department. ALUA, UAW Toronto Sub-Regional Office, Box 1, File: George Burt Correspondence, March - April 1949, George Burt to All Local Unions and International Representatives (13 April 1949).

<sup>69</sup>General Motors and Chrysler workers had local FEPCs, however, they were inactive. The Ford committee was known to be the most active of local FEPCs in the southern Ontario region.

UAW members generally, were thereby slow to emerge. And in striking contrast to their American counterparts, Canadian workers never engaged in factory-level protests against race discrimination. Moreover, during World War II and the post-war years, they did not develop a critique of the UAW's own record on racial privilege and oppression.

A handful of active UAW members in Canada did, however, become involved in efforts to challenge racial discrimination in the community — in housing, hotels, restaurants and drinking establishments, sports, and recreational facilities, and later in immigration policy, and the international human rights arena.<sup>70</sup> Like many "minorities" within the labour movement, they formed coalitions with social groups across the province. The Windsor Inter-Racial Committee and the Jewish Labour Committee on Human Rights were notable among these. Relying on a strategy, again typical of the labour movement as a whole, these groups took the legislative route to secure equality. Indeed, the coalition of small organizations contributed to the passage of both the Ontario Fair Employment Practices Act (1951) and the Ontario Fair Accommodations Practices Act (1954).

Though the level of interest in anti-racist activism was low among the UAW Canadian Region membership, and few organizational resources were devoted to this cause, such efforts do suggest that the issue of race was slowly emerging among a small number of black trade unionists in Canada. As with the civil rights and human rights movements as a whole, however, it would not mature until decades later.<sup>71</sup>

The position of black men in auto plants was ambivalent. While they recognized that UAW leaders often failed to advocate their specific concerns as a race, most black auto workers exhibited a strong commitment to the ideological princi-

<sup>70</sup>See for example, CAW Local 199 Private Collection, UAW Local 199 Fiftieth Anniversary Files: Private Research Notes of R. Olling (March 1944-1945); CAW Local 199 Private Collection, UAW Local 199 Fiftieth Anniversary Files, Private Research Notes of R. Olling, "Miscellaneous Minutes, 1944-1956; Steward's Meeting Minutes, September 28, 1943 to July 9, 1946;" CAW Local 199 Private Collection, Fiftieth Anniversary Files, Private Research Notes of R. Olling, "Executive Minutes, March 20, 1947 to July 28, 1948;" ALUA, George Burt Collection, Box 2, File: 2-4, District Council 26, Minutes, Burt's Reports and Related Materials (June-December, 1946; 14-15 December 1946); ALUA, UAW Region 7 Toronto Collection, Box 11, File: Meeting, June 1947 Minutes and Report, "District Council 26 Meeting Minutes, 20-22 June, 1947;" ALUA, UAW Local 199 Collection, Box 23, File: Executive Board Minutes, 1947, Local 199 Executive Board Meeting, Minutes, 18 August 1947; ALUA, UAW Canadian Region - Locals Collection, Box 85, File: 10, Local 195, Windsor, 1948, untitled report.

<sup>71</sup>In 1992, in response to challenges from a limited number of rank-and-file workers and national staff members, the CAW National Office officially created a Workers of Colour Leadership Training Programme. To date, the focus of this programme has been on politicizing and activating these workers to ultimately enter leadership positions within the union.

ples of industrial unionism. The UAW reinforced in them a sense of their own legitimacy in the union and industry, and this was something on which a handful of individual men would ultimately draw in their attempts to uphold their equal rights as *workers*. It was the UAW philosophy of social justice, class-based solidarity, and brotherhood, along with the privilege of holding a relatively well-paying automotive sector job, that furthermore bolstered unity among these male industrial workers. Most importantly, it was the union that provided black male workers the equity machinery (namely, the collective agreement) with which to challenge employers in their fight against multiple oppressions. The collective agreement, however, is an instrument that took white working men's experiences as the standard for the industry and it therefore left untouched and unremarked upon, the many elusive dimensions of racial oppression.

### *Conclusion*

From the beginnings of the auto industry in Canada, employers have contributed to the *construction of difference* within the working class. These differences were based on race, gender, and family status, as well as skill. While auto manufacturers hired white male breadwinners to fill the vast majority of jobs in the industry, they also recruited extremely small numbers of black men (and white women) to perform work that many white men either rejected or were temporarily unavailable to perform. While these two groups of workers met a need on the part of capitalists, management clearly regarded each as marginal to the industry, different, and unequal to the core workforce. Both black men and white women were defined as the "other," a socially-created category that was itself broken down along lines of race and gender.

The history of black men in auto work is one of many contradictions. Such contradictions are the outcome of the changing configuration of race, gender, and social class. While black men were intruders in the homogeneous white world of the auto plants, their status as wage-earning men/union brothers accorded them various rights and entitlements that were denied (white) women workers. Given their positioning in the industry during the war and throughout the post-war years, black men did not constitute a political or economic threat to white workers in Canada. There is no evidence that management attempted to use blacks to lower wage rates, replace white employees, or to act as "scab" labour during strikes. Moreover, racial segregation and exclusion were so pervasive and strictly upheld in the wider society — in intimate relationships, recreation, housing, education, and religious institutions — that the presence of scant numbers of black men in the foundries was not raised by white trade unionists as a matter of serious consequence. Race acquired a particular, distinctive meaning in man-to-man relations — in the masculine worlds of auto manufacturing and the UAW. The social and political implications of race in these settings permitted black men to be elevated to the

formal status of white men, a status that was based on gender privilege, and class, and gender solidarities.

Formal equal rights in union contracts (equal wages and equal seniority rights), though, did not shield black men from face-to-face indignities on the plant floor, nor did they protect the men from the hazards of working in bad jobs, or the economic impact of stunted opportunities within the firm. Gender and class shaped the content of the racism that these men experienced; they did not protect them from it.

Moreover, racialized and gendered experiences have played an important part in configuring the resistance strategies adopted by this group of workers. Black auto employees faced an elusive form of discrimination. At work, they possessed formal "equal rights," but found themselves confined to the worst jobs in the plants. As UAW members, they were committed to class-based struggles, relying heavily on equal opportunity and brotherhood as guiding principles, and the collective agreement as an instrument of justice. Yet at the same time, they participated in a union politics that at the local and regional levels, was lacking in racial content. In both spheres, black men denied racial difference, though daily they were confronted with the hegemony of whiteness. A tiny group of black auto workers thus concentrated their efforts in challenging racial inequalities outside the workplace, particularly in housing and recreation. These activists emerged from a workplace politicized by industrial unionism, yet their struggles were not factory-based, and thereby left unchallenged an important element of their oppression as workers. In a sense, within the factory, equal opportunity served a defusing, perhaps depoliticizing function.

Race and gender shape working-class experience. Whiteness and masculinity were undeniably central features of auto work. The primacy of one of these constructs over the others has sometimes been debated, but this is not at issue here for there is no neat formula that can be consistently applied to understand their alliance. It is more useful to observe how the racialization of gender and the gendering of race have changed over time, and have taken on meaning in different spheres of social existence. When we examine the ever-changing nexus of race, gender and class, we understand the relationship not merely as one of multiple oppressions, but as something more complex — one in which people can be simultaneously victims and agents; privileged and oppressed.

*This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, January 2-5, 1997. For comments on earlier drafts of this paper, I would like to thank Robert Storey, Joan Sangster, and Alice Kessler-Harris, and four anonymous reviewers for Labour/Le Travail. Thanks also to Hassan Yussuff, students in the CAW Workers of Colour Leadership Training Programme, and the many workers who graciously agreed to share with me their stories. This*

*research was funded by an Arts Research Board grant and a Labour Studies Programme research grant at McMaster University.*

## APPENDIX A

The following is a brief description of the informants who participated in this study.

Interview 1: Richard Nicholson, interviewed on 18 October 1990 in his home in St. Catharines, Ontario. Nicholson was employed in the General Motors St. Catharines' plant (McKinnon Industries) from 1938 to 1974 and was a member of UAW Local 199. Nicholson's father was a city worker, laying asphalt on roads. He later found employment in Hayes Steel. Nicholson's mother took in people's laundry for pay, in addition to working as a homemaker. Nicholson left school after completing grade eight. His first job was as a bell hop in a downtown St. Catharines hotel.

Interview 2: Lyle Talbot, interviewed on 30 May 1994 in his home in Kelowna, British Columbia. Lyle Talbot was an employee of the Ford Motor Company in Windsor, Ontario from 1940 to 1970. He was a member of UAW Local 200. Talbot was born in a small farmhouse in Dresden, Ontario. When Lyle was born, his father was a farmer. Later, his father became a lay preacher in the Baptist Church. Following this, the family moved to Windsor and Talbot's father became an associate pastor in the First Baptist Church in Windsor, in addition to working as an unskilled labourer in the Ford plant from 1919 to 1947. Except for a brief period as a paid housekeeper, Talbot's mother spent most of her adult life raising her eight children, without pay. Talbot's first steady job was as an elevator operator. At the time he was hired by Ford, he had a high school diploma. Later in life, he acquired a Master of Arts degree and after leaving the Ford Motor Company, he went to work for the federal Human Rights Commission.

Interview 3: Howard Olbey, interviewed on 4 April 1993 in his home in Windsor, Ontario. Olbey was employed by the Ford Motor Company from 1941 to 1981. He performed various jobs including: metal finishing, tool grinding, assembling, and machine operating. He was a member of UAW Local 200. One of eight children, he was born in Chatham, Ontario. His father worked as a "clean up man" at International Harvester and his mother was a homemaker and volunteer church worker. One of his first jobs was as a bell hop in a local hotel. When hired by Ford, Olbey had a diploma from the Chatham Vocational School.

Interview 4: Interview respondent wished to remain anonymous. He was interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 6 August 1993. He was employed in

the Ford foundry from 1941 to 1970. His father worked as a general labourer. His mother raised a family of six. This informant had a partial high school education.

**Interview 5:** Mahlon Dennis, interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 29 June 1993. Dennis worked in the foundry in the Walker Metal plant from 1940 to 1975. Prior to this, he held a job as a bell hop in a local hotel and worked in a "hand pull" car wash. Dennis' parents had a farm just south of Windsor. Unable to make payments, they lost their farm. After this, Dennis' father went house-to-house peddling produce and his mother did housekeeping for pay, in addition to raising six children. Dennis' son was the first black person hired to work in the Chrysler plant in Windsor. His brother was employed in the Ford Motor Company in 1940.

**Interview 6:** Interview respondent wished to remain anonymous. He was interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 3 July 1993. He was an employee in the Ford foundry in Windsor from approximately 1941 to 1970. Prior to obtaining auto employment, he was an agricultural labourer. He had attended high school for two years.

**Interview 7:** Gerald Johnson, interviewed in his home in St. Catharines, Ontario on 3 August 1994. Johnson worked in the General Motors foundry from 1938 to 1974. His father had also worked as a moulder in the foundry in the United States. Johnson's mother was a homemaker. Johnson's first job was as a fruit picker.

**Interview 8:** John Milben, interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 5 August 1993. Milben was employed in the Auto Specialties foundry from 1940 to 1971. He began as an unskilled labourer. Later, he became a moulder. His family was from Chatham, Ontario. He describes his parents as farmers. Prior to obtaining work in an auto foundry, Milben milked cows.

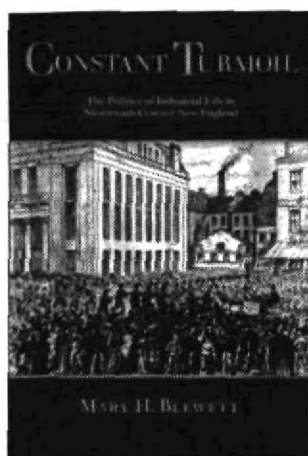
**Interview 9:** This informant wishes to remain unnamed. He was interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 5 August 1993. He was very frail at the time of the interview. Parts of this interview were difficult to transcribe. This individual was employed in the Ford Motor Company from 1942 to approximately the late 1940s. He engaged in various forms of peddling prior to finding auto employment.

**Interview 10:** Elmer Carter, interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 24 August 1993. In 1942, he worked in the Walker Metal foundry in Windsor. Following this, Carter found brief employment in the Auto Specialties foundry. From roughly 1951 to 1956, he was employed in the Ford Motor Company in Windsor. His parents worked their own farm. Prior to foundry employment, Carter worked as a labourer on the railroad.

Interview 11: Howard Wallace, interviewed in his home in Windsor, Ontario on 25 August 1993. Wallace was employed in the Auto Specialties foundry from 1943 to 1974. As soon as the plant was organized, he joined the UAW. Wallace grew up in Dresden, Ontario. His father, originally an American from Virginia, first worked as a farm labourer in the Windsor area and later laboured in the cement industry. Wallace's mother was a homemaker. On occasion, she found paid employment at a chicken slaughtering plant. Before finding work in the foundry, Wallace did agricultural labour, as well as a variety of "odd jobs."

Interview 12: Cassell Smith, interviewed in his home in St. Catharines, Ontario on 20 February 1995. Smith began his employment in the General Motors foundry in St. Catharines in roughly 1938 when he was a young man, most likely in his early twenties. He was unable to remember the year he left the company but noted that he was 68 years of age, upon retirement. Smith's mother died at the age of 23. He lived with his aunt and then joined his father in Buffalo, New York at the age of sixteen or so. Upon starting in General Motors, Smith had skills in the electrical trade, but found it impossible to find work as an electrician.





## Constant Turmoil

*The Politics of  
Industrial Life in  
Nineteenth-Century  
New England*

MARY H. BLEWETT

This complex history of the nineteenth-century textile industry in southeastern New England takes a fresh look at the struggles between management and labor using the categories of class, culture, and power. Highlighting contingency and human agency, Blewett examines the building of a textile empire to dominate the national market in print cloth and the labor politics of a workforce composed of immigrants from Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Quebec who brought new political and cultural traditions into the cotton mills of New England.

***"A magnum opus that will be a permanent feature of American labor history."*—Deborah Valenze, author of *The First Industrial Woman***

**\$40.00 cloth, 536 pp., 30 illustrations**



UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS PRESS

Box 429 • Amherst MA 01004

MasterCard & VISA 413-545-2219 • [www.umass.edu/umpress](http://www.umass.edu/umpress)