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**MAD: Conservative Mothers and the Political Transformation of the  
1970s in Detroit, Michigan**

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Submitted: April 2020

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## Introduction

On September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1972, parents on the northeast side of Detroit received a letter from a newly formed organization called the Northeast Mothers Alert (NEMA). The letter wrote, “we are...mothers who are very concerned about what is happening to our rights as mothers, individuals, and Americans. We decided to organize and see if, as a group, we could right some of the wrongs we see in our society.”<sup>1</sup> The “wrongs” that NEMA perceived in society were exhibited in the mounting efforts to integrate Detroit’s public schools. In the letter, NEMA staunchly asserted its commitment to stop desegregation busing, “not one child in this area [will] be bused against the will of his parents.”<sup>2</sup> NEMA fervently believed that busing undermined the rights of white parents to school choice, neighborhood autonomy, and child development. To right these perceived wrongs, NEMA stated its intention “to obtain better representation in local, state, and national levels of government.”

Within a few years after its founding, the Northeast Mothers Alert expanded into the citywide Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD), which became Detroit’s most prominent anti-busing voice. As a self-described educational research organization, MAD focused on a variety of issues pertaining to education within the Detroit Public Schools. Its objective was never exclusively anti-busing. Throughout its tenure, MAD took on sexual education instruction, gender reform initiatives in school textbooks and mill levy increases with the same conviction and vigor present in their anti-busing campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> Introductory letter sent to parents (9/23/1972), NEMA Correspondence 1973-1975, Box 1, Shirley Wohlfield Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

In this thesis, I will argue that the political activism of MAD was informed by a conservative gender ideology. Mothers comprised the organization's leadership and rank-and-file. These women were often members of single income-earning households, and considered motherhood their primary duty in society. Domesticity further informed MAD's concern for the socialization of their children and community-building. Busing, and other matters in education, contested the role that these mothers maintained in the processes of child-rearing and neighborhood cohesion. Mothers' role as symbolic upholders of the family structure added credence to MAD's critiques of the societal changes they saw unfolding. Furthermore, the conceptions of mothers as down-to-earth and moral figures, aided MAD in presenting themselves as representing the people in a fight government elites and bureaucrats. In each education dispute, MAD articulated their conservative politics through gendered concerns of child protection, the preservation of the traditional heterosexual family and the maintenance of the local white community.

In the 1970s, the issue of busing galvanized the nation, testing the depth of American's commitment to racial equality in education as outlined in *Brown v. the Board of Education*, and revealing racial tensions and inequalities particularly in the urban north. Opposition to busing became a central tenet to the white backlash against structural reforms embedded within Great Society policies.<sup>3</sup> This white backlash coalesced as the "silent majority" that signified the political awakening of Americans who were dismayed with the changing cultural and societal terrain of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The "silent majority" mobilized against notions of tyrannical

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<sup>3</sup> The Great Society was the domestic program launched by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s that instituted federally sponsored social welfare programs.

bureaucracy, wasteful redistributive policies, and a deteriorating state of culture. Busing became the catalyst for broader sentiments undergirding the political transformation of the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

Historians have identified the critical role of women in the fight against school desegregation. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae chronicles the gendered component of grassroots opposition to school desegregation throughout much of the twentieth century, particularly in the South.<sup>5</sup> McRae's work identifies the gender-specific approaches to massive resistance against the southern civil rights movement that were also present in the activism of MAD, particularly their use of color-blind rhetoric to defend segregation by emphasizing the neighborhood school and using rights-based language. McRae's study, however, is situated in the South. Other historians have briefly articulated the prevalence of women in anti-busing campaigns, including those located in the urban north.<sup>6</sup> But these works focus exclusively on busing, and do not explore the contemporaneous involvement of women-led anti-busing organizations in other local educational battles, and situate those political organizations into a larger conservative worldview or ideology.<sup>7</sup>

The conservative gender ideology informing MAD's politics reflects a history of female involvement in conservative political activism. Historian Michelle Nickerson details this history from early modern conservatism in the 1920s through the 1964 presidential campaign of Barry

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall, and Mary D. Edsall. *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 3-31.

<sup>5</sup> See: Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance. White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy*. (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> See: Ronald Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Matthew Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016); Julia Wrigley, "From Housewives to Activists: Women and the Division of Political Labor in the Boston Antibusing Movement," in *No Middle Ground: Women and Radical Protest*, edited by Kathleen M. Blee, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998), 251-88; David Riddle, "Race and Reaction in Warren, Michigan, 1971 to 1974: "Bradley v. Milliken" and the Cross-District Busing Controversy," *Michigan Historical Review* 26, no. 2 (2000), 1-49.

<sup>7</sup> Historian Gillian Frank explores the contemporaneous anti-busing, anti-gay rights, and anti-ERA political campaigns by the women-led Save Our Children (SOC) in Florida during the 1970s. See: Gillian Frank. "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013), 126-60.

Goldwater.<sup>8</sup> Nickerson importantly articulates the conservative symbolism of mothers as bulwarks of the family, home, and community against an expanding interventionist government. Throughout this period, conservative mothers reluctantly engaged in political activism to defend the sanctity of the family and home against perceived threats by the state and associated entities. However, their political activism maintained the boundaries of gender roles. MAD's involvement in education demonstrated a commitment to a gender-focused conservative ideology that viewed the state antagonistically. Lisa McGirr conducts a similar study of the central role of women in the conservative movement, however, like Nickerson, McGirr's history is situated in California in the period before Goldwater's election.<sup>9</sup> In detailing the history of MAD, a women-led conservative organization in Detroit, this thesis will provide a better understanding of the role of women in conservative political activism in the urban north.

I argue, however, that MAD's political activism aligned with a nationwide conservative ideology that emerged in the aftermath of Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign and commonly identified as the "New Right." June Melby Benowitz marks the differences between the "Old Right" and the "New Right" in her analysis of right-wing women's involvement in grassroots activism. The vestiges of the Old Right – explicit and overt racism, opposition to the New Deal, and anti-communism – evolved into using color-blind rhetoric to articulate opposition on race-based issues, expressing concern for taxes and spending, and emphasizing family values.<sup>10</sup> The most defining characteristic of the New Right, however, was the transformation of conservatism as a fringe movement into a powerful and legitimate political force. Benowitz's

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<sup>8</sup> See: Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See: Lisa McGirr. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> June Melby Benowitz, *Challenge and Change: Right-Wing Women, Grassroots Activism, and the Baby Boom Generation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2017), 9.

work is among those that directly situate women's role in the New Right, with particular focus on education, a site where right-wing women engaged in political activism out of concern for larger societal trends that undermined their worldview.

The emergence of the New Right is tied to the broader political transformation that characterized the 1970s. National politics underwent a broad shift toward conservatism after the fracturing of the labor-liberal coalition of the New Deal. The political transformation assumed an ideological component that resulted in the adoption of policies that retracted the size and scope of the welfare state, which manifested in greater electoral successes of the Republican Party. Historians note the processes undergirding this transformation, including the bipartisan sentiments of national decline, economic restructuring, and backlash to racial policies of Great Society policies.<sup>11</sup>

Historians have identified the role of women in the political transformation of the 1970s. Natasha Zaretsky situates women within the grassroots conservatism of the 1970s that was rooted in a narrative of national decline, and framed as an opposition to centralized authority. Mothers involved in grassroots conservative activism articulated anxieties about familial decline. Zaretsky argues that an emphasis on women, children, and fetuses were central to the formation of conservative political communities throughout the country.<sup>12</sup> My thesis will similarly situate mothers at the center of Detroit's grassroots conservative activism for their symbolic role as defenders of perceived threats to the family, community, and society – but also of particular

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<sup>11</sup> See: Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2005); Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven Life and Politics in the Working-class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> See: Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and the Political Transformation of the 1970s*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

significance within the context of desegregation busing and the feminist movement of the 1970s. Further, my thesis will demonstrate how conservative mothers' defense of the family represented a critical component to the political transformation and how concern for the family expanded into various political arenas in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

Detroit functions as an ideal site to study the political transformation of the 1970s. Historian Thomas Sugrue focuses on the urban crisis in Detroit originating in the 1950s and characterized by economic restructuring, white flight, racial backlash. These processes influenced the rise of modern conservatism in the urban north. Sugrue described the emergence of Detroit's homeowner's rights movement that articulated a populist, anti-liberal ideology that informed white racial politics in Detroit.<sup>14</sup> The usage of right-based language, white racial politics, and conservative populist sentiment characterized the national political transformation of the 1970s. Jeffrey Mirel focuses specifically on the decline of the Detroit Public Schools, noting how the highly politicized atmosphere of the late 1960s and early 1970s ushered in a new era in which various interest groups "sought to impose their particular orthodoxy upon the schools."<sup>15</sup> Mirel's work underscores how MAD's focus on activism within the context of education was politically motivated and aligned with city trends. In part, this thesis engages with this discussion about the political transformation taking place at a national level by revealing grassroots political transformation occurring within Detroit.

The history of the MAD is accessible through the Carmen A. Roberts Papers and Shirley Wohlfield Papers stored at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, Ann

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<sup>13</sup> See: Emily Suzanne Johnson, *This Is Our Message: Womens Leadership in the New Christian Right*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>14</sup> See: Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 369.

Arbor. Carmen Roberts served as the President of MAD and on the Regional and Central Detroit School Board of Education. In 1986, Carmen Roberts submitted her papers to the Bentley Historical Library. Her collection consists of biographical field notes, correspondence, speeches, and a wealth of newspaper clippings. Those newspaper clippings primarily came from the *Detroit News*, *the Detroit Free Press*, and *the Northeast Detroiter*. Shirley Wohlfield served as the Executive Secretary of MAD. Her collection consists of correspondence, legal briefs, meeting minutes, newspaper clippings, and a scrapbook consisting of newspaper clippings and photographs from 1972-1975. Wohlfield's collection includes documents from the Happiness of Womanhood, Inc., an organization that Wohlfield was connected to and ideologically aligned with MAD.

This thesis will solely rely on the Carmen A. Roberts Papers and Shirley Wohlfield Papers. These collections provide an extensive overview of the organization that allowed me to garner a strong sense of the ideology and worldview informing MAD's political activism. Furthermore, the extensive compiling of newspaper clippings by Roberts and Wohlfield capture the broader context of Detroit in the 1970s that helped me grasp the significance of MAD beyond its organizational operations. That being said, the Roberts and Wohlfield collections represent only a glimpse into the grassroots conservative political landscape of Detroit in the 1970s. Numerous organizations and individuals are mentioned in the Roberts and Wohlfield collections that I could not locate in online sources. It is therefore a gift that Roberts and Wohlfield chose to submit their papers to the Bentley Historical Library.

In my first chapter, I will focus on the anti-busing campaign of MAD. Opposition to school desegregation served as the catalyst for the formation of the organization. While MAD's anti-busing campaign failed to halt the busing order, the rhetoric utilized to incite participation in the anti-busing movement mobilized segments of the white community in Detroit and its suburbs to

participate in rallies and marches. I argue that MAD articulated a color-blind opposition to school desegregation through its defense of the neighborhood school, its repeated expressions of concern about school safety, and its discourse that raised conspiratorial fears of regional governance in metropolitan Detroit. The three mechanisms by which MAD opposed busing exemplified its gendered conservative political ideology.

In my second chapter, I will focus on MAD's confrontation with the broader women's liberation movement demonstrated in its opposition to gender-based reform efforts in the Detroit Public Schools. Throughout the 1970s, conservative women in Detroit fought against reforms related to gender, sex, and sexuality as part of their defense of the family, home, and community. This chapter will explore the grassroots conservative opposition to birth control instruction, textbook reform, and the Equal Rights Amendment. In each confrontation, MAD, alongside HOW (a nationwide anti-women's liberation organization), were informed by a conservative gender ideology that assailed populist anti-statist sentiment to curb reform targeted at transforming societal norms of sex and gender.

My third chapter will explore MAD's opposition to millage increases for the cash-strapped Detroit Public School. This chapter will focus on MAD President Carmen Robert's tenure on the Region and Central School Boards. In her time there, Roberts, alongside conservative school board member Gerald O'Neill, articulated a populist, anti-state tax ideology that undergirded their anti-millage campaign and selective spending regime. Robert's and O'Neill's tax ideology represented their skepticism of bureaucrats, and the public school system, and most importantly, a reluctance to fund programs aimed at addressing racial and social inequalities, deemed to not benefit Detroit's white community. Robert's opposition contained a specific focus on gender-based concern for

school safety and quality education, demonstrating the continuation of MAD's conservative gender ideology into Roberts's tenure on the Region School Board.

In my conclusion, I seek to explore how the grassroots conservative ideology underpinning MAD's opposition to specific city and state reform policies parallels the broader political transformation occurring throughout the US. This exploration seeks to showcase the influence of local actors steering education policy on a municipality level has implications far beyond the city limits.

## Chapter One: Anti-Busing Activism, 1972-1977

### Introduction: Decentralization, 1970

In an attempt to address problems plaguing the Detroit Public Schools (DPS), Michigan State Senator Coleman Young devised a politically viable and cost-effective plan that decentralized Detroit's central school board into various regional boards.<sup>16</sup> The seven-member school board, tasked with drawing the regional board boundaries, used the opportunity to pass a high school desegregation plan that shifted the attendance boundaries of 9,000 students, altering the racial composition most dramatically at three northeast and northwest high schools.<sup>17</sup> White parents in the affected schools quickly mobilized in opposition and formed the Citizen's Committee for Better Education (CCBE). The CCBE initiated a recall of the four members who voted in favor of the desegregation plan.<sup>18</sup> Within two months, the CCBE had collected over 130,000 signatures, more than the requirement necessary to place the recall on the ballot. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 1970, over 60 percent of voters approved the recalling of the four board members, with support most prominently from high-turnout in the white sections on the northeast and northwest sides of Detroit.<sup>19</sup>

The political fallout from the 1970 high school desegregation plan precipitated a much greater political confrontation over desegregation. On June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Judge Stephen J. Roth ordered a three-county, cross-district busing order that spanned fifty-two suburban school districts and Detroit, involving 780,000 students. Throughout the metropolitan region, anti-busing activism

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<sup>16</sup> For more information on the decentralization of the Detroit Board of Education, see: Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 326-45.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

rapidly intensified. On Detroit's northeast side, community members who had been propelled to political activism in the wake of the 1970 high school desegregation plan, grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of leadership and weak anti-busing stance of the CCBE.<sup>20</sup> In August 1972, a group of thirteen white mothers, self-described as the "Recall Mothers" for their involvement in the 1970 recall campaign, formed the Northeast Mothers Alert to combat the new busing order.<sup>21</sup>

This chapter focuses on the anti-busing activism of the Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD).<sup>22</sup> Opposition to school desegregation served as the catalyst for organizing MAD. For five years, MAD waged an anti-busing campaign that used powerful rhetorical tools to incite opposition to school desegregation, tools that enabled MAD to present its opposition to desegregation as motivated by issues other than race. I argue that MAD articulated a color-blind opposition to school desegregation through its defense of the neighborhood school, its repeated expressions of concern about school safety, and its discourse that raised conspiratorial fears of regional governance in metropolitan Detroit. The three mechanisms by which MAD opposed busing exemplified its gendered conservative political ideology.

### The Neighborhood School Concept

On the first day of busing in January 1976, MAD staged a mock-funeral commemorating the "death" of the neighborhood school in front of city hall.<sup>23</sup> The small demonstration emphasized the leading tenet of MAD's opposition to busing: that they wanted to preserve the neighborhood school. The neighborhood school signified a public school located within close proximity to the

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<sup>20</sup> Typed synopsis of Carmen Roberts's life (1986), Biographical Field Notes, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>21</sup> "Aims of Northeast Mothers Alert", Scrapbook 1972-1975, Oversize Volume 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>22</sup> For continuity, I will hereafter refer to the organization as the Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD), even in instances when the organization was officially and publically known as the Northeast Mothers Alert (NEMA). The organization adopted the name MAD in 1975 after expanding into a citywide organization, its leadership and membership continued to predominate on the northeast side of Detroit.

<sup>23</sup> "Busing Begins in Detroit: Will Statewide Desegregation Be Next?" from the *Sunday News* (2/5/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

residents living in a given neighborhood and whose boundaries typically aligned with a distinct community. MAD utilized the neighborhood school in its publications, bulletins, and letters to state and national politicians.<sup>24</sup> In flyers distributed before rallies and protests, MAD incited participation by invoking the neighborhood school – “if you believe in neighborhood schools.”<sup>25</sup> Despite frequent usage of the term, MAD never publicly defined the term or asserted the importance of preserving the neighborhood school, revealing the broad legibility of the term to white residents in Detroit.

The neighborhood school concept powerfully framed the issue of school desegregation. In the literature produced by MAD and in the public statements by anti-bussers, the “neighborhood school” served as a stand-in phrase to indicate one’s positionality on desegregation without directly mentioning “desegregation” or “integration”. Instead, the term “busing” functioned as the antithetical term to the “neighborhood school.” Historian Matthew Delmont notes that the deliberate construction of this dichotomy defined the parameters of desegregation in the urban north.<sup>26</sup> During anti-busing campaigns, white residents repeatedly characterized “busing” in the negative, as “forced” and a direct undermining of the sanctity of the “neighborhood school,” which was presented as unquestionably positive. In effect, the association between “busing” and “desegregation” signaled to white Detroiters the negative implications of such policies.

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<sup>24</sup> Letter from Michigan Congressman John D. Dingell to Shirley Wohlfield (10/5/76), MAD Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter from Michigan Congressman Bob Traxler to Shirley Wohlfield (10/14/1976), MAD Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter to President-elect Jimmy Carter from James A. Venema, Vice President of National Association for Neighborhood Schools (NANS) (12/2/1976), MAD Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter to Senator Robert Griffin from Shirley Wohlfield (2/14/1977), MAD Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter from Congressman John D. Dingell to Shirley Wohlfield (3/4/1977), MAD Correspondence 1975-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>25</sup> Flyer distributed by NEMA for a rally held on 10/27/1974, MAD Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Flyer for an anti-busing parade held on 6/8/1975, MAD Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Delmont, *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 3, 73.

The neighborhood school concept articulated a color-blind defense of school palpable to white homeowners. For an issue inherently racial, MAD's recurring usage of the "neighborhood school" provided the ability to discuss desegregation opposition without directly mentioning race. In the 1970s, sociologist Lawrence Bobo polled white racial attitudes and noted that white racial attitudes differed slightly by education, age, and region. More conclusively, Bobo found a significant discrepancy between whites' endorsement of the general principles of integration and equality and their simultaneous rejection of specific integrationist policies, most notably busing.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the rhetoric of the neighborhood school aligned with white American's support for equality-in-name, while opposition to programs that threatened their lifestyle and worldview. Historian Matthew Lassiter notes how color-blind rhetoric was necessary to garner support from white Americans increasingly turned off by overt racial signaling.<sup>28</sup> The "neighborhood school" implicitly articulated the meritocratic and individualistic values of white homeowners, who argued that "busing" undermined their hard-work and individual choice in selecting their home and neighborhood school.<sup>29</sup>

The ideology of white homeownership had deep roots in Detroit, amplifying the resonance of the "neighborhood school" to white urban residents. During the postwar period, white Detroiters formed exclusive neighborhood organizations. Historian Thomas Sugrue charted the development of neighborhood associations in the 1940s and 1950s, noting their particular importance in

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<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Bobo, "Whites' Opposition to Busing: Symbolic Racism or Realistic Group Conflict," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45 No. 6 (1983), 1208.

<sup>28</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4-5, 121-174.

<sup>29</sup> For further literature on the opposition to integrationist policy by white homeowners in the postwar period, see: Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 272-329; David Freund: *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Attitudes in Suburban America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 243-381.

maintaining the racial composition of Detroit's white working and middle class neighborhoods.<sup>30</sup> On Detroit's northeast and northwest sides, homeownership rates among working-class whites rose dramatically in the postwar period. Correspondingly, the quantity and strength of neighborhood associations were greatest within the working-class neighborhoods on the northwest and northeast sides. Neighborhood associations sought to protect the precarious status of white working-class homeownership through rigid and notably violent resistance to black movement into white neighborhoods. During the 1970s, school desegregation represented a new threat to the maintenance of the color line.

The historical and contemporary importance of neighborhood associations to MAD's anti-busing campaign were both logistical and ideological. Neighborhood associations spurred a homeowners' rights movement that represented the first grassroots conservative movement in Detroit, paving the way for grassroots organizations such as the CCBE and MAD. Throughout the 1970s, neighborhood associations worked alongside MAD in multiple ways, such as, with combined meetings, fundraising, attendance at rallies and marches, and endorsement of candidates for public office.<sup>31</sup> Most consequentially, as Sugrue argues, neighborhood associations and the homeowners' rights movement developed a populist, antiliberal ideology committed to bipartisan racial politics.<sup>32</sup> White homeowners learned "to use rights talk to express their political discontent

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211-229.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Northeast Mothers Alert to various homeowners' associations (9/18/1974), NEMA Correspondence 1973-1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter to Shirley Wohlfield from Detroit Councilman Ernest C. Browne Jr. (2/18/1975), NEMA Correspondence 1973-1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; General Meeting Minutes (10/10/1974), Mothers Alert Detroit, General Meeting Minutes, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Flyer for anti-busing parade for June 8, 1975, MAC Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>32</sup> Sugrue defined "antiliberal ideology" as against the liberal framework and policy orientation of the city's leadership and "bipartisan racial politics" as white opposition to policies, such open housing, due to racial resentment toward black Detroiters. This racial resentment cut across partisan lines, representing how broad-based white racism was in Detroit. See: Sugrue, 218-219.

and their political vision.”<sup>33</sup> During the two-decades-long open housing movement, the subjects of neighborhood associations’ discontent were liberal city officials, civil rights groups and black Detroiters.

MAD’s anti-busing activism represented a reiteration of the antiliberal ideology and racial politics originating in the homeowners’ rights movement. Elements of that ideology included an emphasis on self-help and individual merit, a rejection of city leadership’s efforts to enact redistributive reform policies, and a rights-based articulation of individualized rights for white constituents. The preservation of the neighborhood school rested on the values of merit and individual choice.<sup>34</sup> Anti-bussers articulated support for the neighborhood school within a rights-based language – right of parents to choose their school, and right of children to attend their neighborhood school. Liberal government officials and civil rights advocacy groups were chastised for supporting “busing,” that in their worldview, was an infringement on neighborhood school rights.

The neighborhood school concept, and the maintenance of segregation, was informed by specific class and gender dynamics. Neighborhood associations and MAD represented similar white working-class neighborhoods on the northeast and northwest sides. However, women comprised all of the leadership and most of MAD’s membership. White working-class women in Detroit long occupied a gender-specific role in the preservation of segregation. Particularly in white households with one male income-earner, stay-at-home mothers’ commitment to their roles in child-rearing and homemaking informed their participation in neighborhood resistance.<sup>35</sup> While neighborhood associations contained a distinct paternalistic element, the creation of the Mothers

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>34</sup> Lassiter, 4-5.

<sup>35</sup> Sugrue, 250-51.

Alert Detroit emerged from notions of maternal protection and community-building informing women's involvement in conservative politics.<sup>36</sup> A biographic description of Carmen Roberts, president of MAD, from an interview to archivists in the 1980s, provides insight into the gender politics of segregation:

Mrs. Roberts describes herself as a traditional housewife until court-ordered busing impacted her family. In 1971, her son was attending Denby High School...When her son came home with the news he might be bused, she immediately joined a protest group, of which she soon became head. She feared for her children's safety, being bused across town into high crime areas and exposed to cultural and family values different from their own.<sup>37</sup>

The rhetoric of the neighborhood school incited the political participation of white mothers because segregated schools played a central role in the socialization of children. The child-rearing process was considered an exclusive privilege of mothers and efforts by the state to undermine that incited conservative political reaction. Additionally, Roberts's quote demonstrates an increasing fear among white mothers that integrationist policies could harm the safety of their children. Roberts carefully avoids overt racial messaging by stating that her children's safety was at risk because they might be bused to high crime areas and exposed to different "cultural and family values." Both "crime" and "cultural and family values" are examples of color-blind defenses of school desegregation frequently employed by white conservatives.

### School Safety

While the neighborhood school concept galvanized conservative political reaction, it failed to halt the busing order. Carmen Roberts understood the difficulties MAD faced in stopping the

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<sup>36</sup> Michelle Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 13-14.

<sup>37</sup> Typed synopsis of Carmen Roberts's life (1986), Biographical Field Notes, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

busing order before a meeting of about 500 in February 1976.<sup>38</sup> Roberts urged those in attendance to get involved in politics, run for school board, and boycott the public schools. Twenty minutes into the meeting, Roberts kicked out a *Detroit News* reporter, who she accused of underreporting both the strength of the anti-busing movement and the extent of violence in newly integrated schools. Animosity toward the *Detroit News* was articulated by other members in the crowd, revealing the tension between anti-busing activism and established news media. This conflict was present throughout other national anti-busing movements, particularly during the early stages of busing, when anti-bussers criticized the coverage of “peaceful” integration.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the busing order, MAD would continue to criticize the role of established news media in publishing “false” stories that portrayed busing in a positive light.

MAD rejected Detroit’s mainstream news media as biased and MAD relied on the reporting of local, white-owned newspapers, most notably, the *Northeast Detroitier*, to argue that desegregated schools posed a danger to students. In late February 1976, several Denby parents contacted the *Northeast Detroitier* for information on an alleged gang-rape of a female student at Denby High School on Detroit’s northeast side.<sup>40</sup> Shortly thereafter, the *Northeast Detroitier* published a story on the rumored gang-rape of a white student by a group of six black students purported as fact.<sup>41</sup> The *Northeast Detroitier* contacted police and school authorities and learned that no such incident had been reported, which they interpreted as a pattern of underreported violence in schools. This underreporting, they charged, was a part of a concerted effort by school

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<sup>38</sup> “Leader Insist Cause Isn’t Lost: Bus Foes Face Uphill Fight” from the *Detroit News* (2/6/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>39</sup> Delmont, 190-206; Robert Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 155-157.

<sup>40</sup> “Another Cover-up: Denby Girl Attacked by Blacks?” from the *Northeast Detroitier* (2/26/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

authorities to cover-up violence and present an image of peaceful integration.<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, the *Northeast Detroiter* asked Carmen Roberts, currently a member on the Region 7 Board and President of MAD, to “check it out.” Upon investigating further, Roberts learned that the Denby principal did not file a report with school authorities or the police because the victim could not identify the perpetrators. Ultimately, the *Northeast Detroiter* concluded the incident was not a sexual assault, but an instance of “accosting” and “molestation.”<sup>43</sup>

The Denby incident underscored the interconnectivity of crime, conservative ideology and racial politics. MAD’s concern for rising crime, and distrust in school authority. Widespread anti-liberal sentiment conditioned white conservatives to be skeptical of reports of peaceful integration, evidenced by their reliance on the *Northeast Detroiter* instead of mainstream news sources. However, compared to other cities, notably Boston, Detroit did not experience widespread conflict in the wake of busing.<sup>44</sup> While reports of consistent violence by the *Northeast Detroiter* should be scrutinized, school violence posed a legitimate threat to the city’s public school system. Throughout the late-1960s, countless violent incidents occurred in the Detroit schools.<sup>45</sup> The uptick in school violence was often linked to non-student actors motivated by political agendas on the left and the right. By the mid-1970s, the source of school violence was less discernible, prompting Judge DeMascio to implement a stringent code of conduct that ultimately failed to decrease school violence.<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of the verifiable rise in school violence in the 1970s Detroit, and warranted concerns about it, perceptions of black criminality informed white resistance to desegregation. In

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<sup>42</sup> “Cover-Up is Charged in Columbus Incident” from the *Northeast Detroiter* (February 1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Formisano, 153-168; Mirel, 358.

<sup>45</sup> Mirel, 333-35.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

Detroit, the maintenance of the color line rested on racist beliefs that associated blacks with social disorder that the conditions within the urban ghetto seemed to verify.<sup>47</sup> Poor housing conditions and unemployment rates were attributed to individual, familial, and racial inadequacies, rather than the results of discriminatory housing and work policies. The increase in citywide crime rates since the 1950s further emboldened white Detroiters' assertion of black criminality, and their justification for segregated neighborhoods.<sup>48</sup> Entrenched beliefs of black criminality reinforced fears among white northeast residents that the integrating the schools would spur violent incidents.

These widely-held notions of black social disorder also formed the basis of a gender-informed concern for child safety exemplified in MAD's rhetoric. The constant reporting of school violence not merely confirmed notions of black criminality, but revealed MAD's concern about the threat black youth posed to school safety. Concern for the health and safety of children informed white women's resistance to neighborhood integration in the postwar period.<sup>49</sup> As education became the primary site of integration efforts in the 1970s, concern for school safety rose. MAD and the *Northeast Detroiter* held a mutually-reinforcing relationship, unsurprising given that the newspaper was the official source of the Northeast Homeowners Association. As a result, the constant reporting of school violence stoked particularly gender-based concerns over child safety, tapping into the gender-based racial politics that formed the basis of MAD's political mission.

In fact, historians have identified this theme in other mother-centered grassroots conservative movements in the 1970s.<sup>50</sup> The "image of the imperiled child" contained particular

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<sup>47</sup> Sugrue, 216-17.

<sup>48</sup> Sugrue, 216-17.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 251-252.

<sup>50</sup> Gillian Frank, "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22 (January 2013): 129, 159-60; Benjamin Strassfeld, "The Blight of Indecency: Antiporn Politics and the Urban Crisis in Early 1970s Detroit," *Journal of the*

resonance because of its cast liberal policies or policies aimed at social inequalities as harmful to children. In regard to busing, concern over child safety articulated broader concerns busing posed to the white family unit defined largely as it existed in segregated neighborhoods in Detroit. The trope of the imperiled child functioned as an important framing tool to signal to white Detroiters the impact that busing had on the racial exclusion many believed was sacrosanct.

In March 1976, a few weeks after the Denby incident, State Rep. Thaddeus Stopczynski introduced House Bill 6073 which would permit parents to remove their children from schools out of concern for their children's safety.<sup>51</sup> "I believe in the rights of parents," Stopczynski explained in his introduction of the bill. Parental rights "far outweigh the rights of school administrations, school boards, and the courts."<sup>52</sup> In promoting parental rights over bureaucratic entities through the rhetoric of the imperiled child, and conflating parents as white parents, Stopczynski demonstrated a reiteration of Detroit's white racial politics that formed the basis of conservative opposition to social change.

### The "Yellow Distractor"

Public institutions, namely bureaucracy, posed the greatest hindrance to the protection of parental rights and the preservation of the neighborhood school. On Sunday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1974, 400 residents joined MAD in a march that concluded at the Heilmann Field located on Detroit's northeast side. The march was held in solidarity with anti-busing activism in Boston and flyers distributed prior to the event stoked fear of what was in store for Detroit: "Boston Now! Detroit

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*History of Sexuality* 27 (September 2018): 430-31; Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and the Political Transformation of the 1970s*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 32-33.

<sup>51</sup> "Proposed Legislation Hits 'Unsafe' Schools" from the *East Side Community News* (3/18/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Tomorrow!”<sup>53</sup> Louise Day Hicks, leader of Boston’s anti-busing group ROAR, sent a telegram. In the message, Hicks asserted that parents have the “inherent right” to guide child development, and that “insensitive bureaucratic governmental system with unbridled powers spells the erosion of such a system and leads to the cessation of fundamental human freedoms.”<sup>54</sup>

Hicks’s attack on bureaucracy indicated the distrust in public institutions that had played a role in implementing busing. MAD’s fear of a regional government plan in metropolitan Detroit exemplified this same skepticism and hostility toward government. In March 1976, MAD’s executive secretary Shirley Wohlfield published a bulletin titled “The Yellow Distractor,” which alleged that busing – or the “yellow distractor” -- was the first step of an elaborate scheme to enact regional government in the Detroit metropolitan area.<sup>55</sup> To MAD, the implementation of busing allowed additional changes to education that undermined local control (the neighborhood school) and introduced additional bureaucracy and federal government aid into the education system. The bulletin is further skeptical of federal intervention in low-income housing, statewide tax sharing proposals, and a mass transit proposal.

The implementation of regional or metropolitan government posed a threat to anti-busing efforts in the event it dissolved and consolidated school districts. For years MAD researched the impact a potential regional government structure could have on school district boundaries.<sup>56</sup> MAD cited examples of county-based, or cross-county busing remedies as proof that school district

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<sup>53</sup> Flyer distributed by NEMA for a rally held on 10/27/1974, MAD Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>54</sup> Clipping from the *Northeast Detrioter* (10/31/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; “Mother’s Alert Plans Anti-Bussing March” from the *Northeast Detrioter* (10/24/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; “Fleming Parents Group Join Anti-Bus March” from the *Northeast Detrioter* (10/24/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>55</sup> MAD Bulletin #4: “There’s more to bussing than meets the eye” (March 1976), MAD: Newsletters 1976-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>56</sup> “Aims of Northeast Mothers Alert” from the *Northeast Detrioter* (date n/a), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

consolidation posed a legitimate threat.<sup>57</sup> In March 1976, Carmen Roberts spoke to a suburban audience to incite anti-busing fervor. Roberts concluded her speech with a warning that regional government served to undermine suburban school district's current exemption from Detroit's busing order.<sup>58</sup>

MAD's emphasis on regional government capitalized on a prominent fear held by suburban white residents. In 1967, Michigan formed the Southeast Michigan Council of Government (SEMCOG) to share resources and promote regional development.<sup>59</sup> Suburban Macomb County joined SEMCOG in 1970, but it exited the council in 1972. Concern that regional government could enact a busing order in Macomb County significantly influenced the decision to leave SEMCOG.<sup>60</sup> Even after Macomb County's departure, suburban residents expressed concern about proposed state legislation to create regional government structures.<sup>61</sup> MAD closely followed state legislation proposing regional government and incited fears about a mandatory re-entry into SEMCOG.<sup>62</sup>

Fear of regional government reflected anti-statist sentiment particularly resonant for conservative women. Historian Michelle Nickerson describes how conservative women firmly denounced the increased role of the state in matters considered exclusive to the private sphere.<sup>63</sup> Public education, due to its association with child socialization, was considered in the domain of

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<sup>57</sup> "Regional Government Linked to Forced Busing" and "A Recent U.S. District Court Decision in Indianapolis, IN" from the *East Side Community News* (2/12/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>58</sup> "Busing Foe Takes 'Crusade' to the Suburbs" from the *Detroit News* (3/9/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>59</sup> David Riddle, "Race and Reaction in Warren, Michigan, 1971 to 1974," *Michigan Historical Review* 26 (Fall 2000), 21.

<sup>60</sup> Riddle, 21.

<sup>61</sup> "Station Break" from the *Saturday Morning* (3/13/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>62</sup> "Regional Government Linked to Forced Busing" and "A Recent U.S. District Court Decision in Indianapolis, IN" from the *East Side Community News* (2/12/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>63</sup> Nickerson, xx.

the private sphere. In the conservative imagination, mother symbolize the earnest defense of the family and the private sphere from government intervention and encroachment. Embedded in the defense of the family was a defense of segregated neighborhoods that forged the definition of family and local community for these white mothers. As a result, evoking fear of government expansion through regionalization represented a specifically gendered concern about impact of government on long-held notions of child socialization as an exclusive responsibility of mothers.

MAD understood regional government as part of a larger effort of school desegregation to rectify the inequality of space. In a city long-defined by segregated neighborhood, postwar white flight and suburbanization exacerbated the inequalities in racialized urban space. The building blocks to regional government, as outlined in MAD's bulletin, included various state-funded programs aimed at remedying social and racial inequalities. Whether it was the construction of centralized education campuses instead of local schools, the subsidizing of low-income housing in non-integrated neighborhoods, or the construction of a mass transit proposal, restructuring urban space became the focal point of structural reform policies because urban space was starkly defined by race in Detroit.<sup>64</sup> Unlike other anti-busing organizations, MAD articulated an understanding of the implications of busing beyond the desire to attend a local school or fear of school violence – and recognized the benefits of unequal space to suburban municipalities that garnered independence from the jurisdiction of Detroit's social and racial reform efforts.

### Conclusion: Suburban Discontent

On April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1976 anti-busing groups from across the nation coalesced in Washington D.C. with the goal of promoting a constitutional amendment against busing and gaining the

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<sup>64</sup> MAD Bulletin #4: "There's more to bussing than meets the eye" (March 1976), MAD: Newsletters 1976-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

attention of President Ford. The organizers of the march envisioned between 40,000 and 70,000 attendees, however, only 2,000-4,000 actually attended.<sup>65</sup> Of those present, only about ninety-four were from the Detroit metropolitan area.<sup>66</sup> Carmen Roberts surmised that people were spending too much on private school tuition to have the funds to pay for the march.<sup>67</sup> However, turnout at an anti-busing rally in suburban Warren, Michigan designed for those unable to attend the march in D.C., was also underwhelming. A reporter from the *Macomb Daily*, known for promoting anti-busing material, noted an absence in “emotional fervor the had come to characterize these rallies.”<sup>68</sup>

The failure to mobilize a large attendance at the suburban rally demonstrated a degree of apathy among suburbanites. In January 1976, the United Pledge Organization, a coalition of suburban anti-busing groups in Macomb County, urged suburban parents not to partake in a school boycott as part of a symbolic show of solidarity with their Detroit counterparts, and argued for a hands-off approach in anti-busing activism.<sup>69</sup> In May 1976, school administrators forbade Carmen Roberts from speaking to a parents’ club at a suburban high school. Lake Shore Schools Superintendent Gordon Tanner feared that Roberts’ speech might negatively affect the passage of a school levy at an upcoming election and might hurt Lake Shore’s position in the cross-district

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<sup>65</sup> “Washington March Planned: Neighboring County Follows Anti-Busing Lead” from the *East Side Community News* (2/26/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; “Bussing Foes March on Capitol” from the *Sunday News* (4/25/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>66</sup> “Who’s Nervous in Washington?” from the *Macomb Daily* (4/27/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>67</sup> “Who’s Nervous in Washington?” from the *Macomb Daily* (4/27/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>68</sup> “Demonstrations Against Busing Fail to Get Expected Turnouts” from the *Macomb Daily* (4/26/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>69</sup> “Viewpoints Today: Cool Heads Needed” from the *Macomb Daily* (1/24/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

busing suit. Tanner stated he was concerned about her rhetoric supporting segregation.<sup>70</sup> Suburban opposition to busing appeared restrained.<sup>71</sup>

Even in Detroit itself, anti-busing activism appeared to wane by the mid-1970s. A June 1976 rally was attended by only over one hundred people.<sup>72</sup> Anti-busing Congressman Lucien Nedzi stated that the push for a constitutional amendment was no longer a realistic goal, citing apathy, and instead urged anti-bussers to petition US attorney general Edward Levi.<sup>73</sup> Additionally, moderate candidates dominated the 1976 Central and Region Board elections.<sup>74</sup> Despite the fact that busing was been implemented months earlier, no candidate ran on a pledge to end busing.<sup>75</sup> Roberts insisted that the low turnout at rallies reflected the decision by many white Detroiters to flee the city.

The lack of involvement of the suburbs outside of Warren demonstrated the degree of security that suburbia brought white residents opposed to desegregation. While Roberts continued to assail attempts by the federal government to impose cross-district busing through bankrupting Detroit and forming a regional government,<sup>76</sup> it became increasingly apparent that MAD lacked the capabilities to turn-over the busing order. Furthermore, the extremist behavior of MAD may have grown less appealing to suburbanites, who favored less overt racial signaling. MAD's extremism was made evident in the frequent attendance of Breakthrough, a racist and anti-

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<sup>70</sup> "Mrs. Roberts Asked Not to Come: Busing Talk Scrubbed" from the *Macomb Daily* (5/20/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; "Mrs. Roberts Asked Not to Come: Busing Talk Scrubbed" from the *Macomb Daily* (5/20/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* and footnote about Warren's intense anti-busing activism – cite

<sup>72</sup> "A Bid to Rekindle Protest: Few Join Anti-Bussing Show" from the *Detroit News* (6/7/1976), Clippings June-December 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> In Region Four, anti-busing and conservative board members were replaced by a moderate board. And other than Roberts, all other candidates in Region Seven were moderates. See: "Moderates Dominate School Board Vote" from the *Detroit Free Press* (5/20/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>75</sup> "Detroit School Ballots May Surprise Voters Tuesday" from the *Detroit Free Press* (5/16/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>76</sup> "Busing Foe Takes 'Crusade' to the Suburbs" from the *Detroit News* (3/9/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

communist group, at their rallies; their support for segregationist presidential candidate George Wallace; and instances of overt racist messaging contrary to MAD's general tendency to utilize color-blind rhetoric.<sup>77</sup> That being said, MAD succeeded in directing anti-busing activism throughout the Detroit metropolitan area, and established a city-wide presence that provided legitimacy to the organization in its subsequent political confrontations.

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<sup>77</sup> Flyer for the boycott of Farmer Jack Supermarket (May 1975), MAD Miscellaneous 1973-84, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; "Civil Jobs Upgrade Urged" from the *East Side Community News* (4/15/1976), Clippings 1975, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; Memorandum from Lila McMechan to Region Seven Board (11/21/1975), Correspondence 1973-76, 1981, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

## Chapter 2: Confrontations over Cultural Changes

### Introduction: NOW and WXYZ-TV

In 1973, Detroit's Channel 7 WXYZ-TV underwent a standard renewal process for their television broadcasting license. As part of the renewal process, Channel 7 entered into an agreement with the National Organization of Women's (NOW) Metropolitan Detroit Chapter that strived to enhance both the involvement of women at the station and the quality and content of programming discussing or directed at women. To achieve these aims, WXYZ-TV agreed to present programs portraying women "affirmatively or in non-stereotyping roles," air public service announcements concerning women's changing role and the women's movement, and granted NOW other broadcasting privileges.<sup>78</sup> But not all Detroit-area women were pleased with this partnership. In response, a coalition of several local "anti-lib" groups, including the Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD), formally asked the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to suspend Channel 7 WXYZ's television broadcasting license. According to their lawyer, James McKenna of the Center for the Public Interest, the agreement between NOW and WXYZ-TV violated "the public's right to protection from undisclosed bias."<sup>79</sup>

The formation of a coalition against the NOW-WXYZ-TV partnership demonstrated the organizing prowess of the grassroots conservative movement in Detroit. At the same time Shirley Wohlfield and Carmen Roberts were submitting MAD's amicus brief into the *Milliken v. Bradley* case, they were collaborating with other conservative women's groups to oppose the reform efforts

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<sup>78</sup> "New Battle of Sexes: Lib vs. Anti-Lib" from the *Detroit News* (10/2/1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM; "Ch. 7 Caught in Middle of Women's Fight" from the *Detroit News* (10/19/1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

of the broader women's liberation movement. Roberts and Wohlfield most frequently worked with the Detroit chapter of Happiness of Womanhood, Inc. (HOW). HOW was a nationwide anti-women's liberation organization primarily focused on the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). MAD and HOW interpreted efforts to enhance women's programming at WXYZ-TV as an affront to the nuclear family and women's role in the domestic sphere. And the partnership between NOW and WXYZ-TV as a concerted effort by a radical minority to undermine the sanctity of the family unit. Throughout the 1970s, conservative women in Detroit fought against reforms related to gender, sex, and sexuality as part of their defense of the family, home, and community. This chapter will explore the grassroots conservative opposition to birth control instruction, textbook reform, and the Equal Rights Amendment. In each confrontation, MAD and HOW were informed by a conservative gender ideology that assailed populist anti-statist sentiment to curb reform targeted at transforming societal norms of sex and gender.

### Sex Education and Birth Control Instruction

In August 1973, Alexander Mercer, a science teacher at a suburban high school in Redford, Michigan and Dr. Richard Goldfine, a doctor at Detroit's Sinai Hospital, filed a suit against the Michigan State Board of Education over two laws pertaining to sex education instruction in public schools.<sup>80</sup> The laws prohibited the inclusion of birth control instruction in sex education courses and permitted parents to withdraw their child from any sex or health education course. In July 1974, a district court in Michigan dismissed the action. Had *Mercer v. Michigan State Board of Education* passed, the outcome would have been significant given that most states had similar restrictive sex education laws, particularly in regard to the instruction of birth control. Even so, the

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<sup>80</sup> "Judges to Rule on Challenge to State Sex Education Law" from the *Detroit Free News* (3/25/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

efforts of Mercer and Goldfine galvanized a conservative political reaction. MAD adamantly supported the existing laws and argued that parental authority served as a crucial barrier against the undermining of the family and its moralizing qualities.

*Mercer v. Michigan State Board of Education* reflected an emerging concern of sex education policy by activists on both the left and the right. The 1960s birthed the modern sexual education movement.<sup>81</sup> Proponents of sex education believed that sex education courses in public schools could combat rampant sexual misinformation that posed a threat to the health of teenagers and young adults. However, opponents to sex education believed that it should remain within the domain of the private sphere. Further, sex education opponents were troubled with the perceived loosening of morals in broader American society. While pre-marital sex rates had remained at the same levels since the 1920s, the postwar sexual revolution increased the visibility of sex in public life and altered sexual attitudes. MAD's activism in defense of the existing sex education laws was informed by a conservative interpretation of the sexual revolution that saw liberalizing sexual norms as an indicator of national decline. Sex education represented a capitulation to a more permissive society.<sup>82</sup>

MAD opposed the plaintiff's claim in *Mercer* because the existing statute represented one of Michigan's only laws that enshrined parental rights."<sup>83</sup> Previously, MAD had defended "parents' rights" as part of their opposition to school desegregation – parents should have the right to choose the neighborhood school, or parents should have the right to remove their children from "dangerous" schools.<sup>84</sup> *Mercer* had the potential to weaken MAD's assertion of parental rights in

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<sup>81</sup> Janice Irvine, *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 18-22.

<sup>82</sup> For more literature on the "permissive society" and the 1970s, see: Robert Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2012), 189-218, 248-305.

<sup>83</sup> Clipping from the *Northeast Detroitier* (12/6/1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>84</sup> "Proposed Legislation Hits 'Unsafe' Schools" from the *East Side Community News* (3/18/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

other political confrontations. Securing parental rights provided a path for parents to circumvent public education reform that conflicted with their worldview. Parental rights also reinforced the conservative notion of the sanctity of the family from state intervention and social change and that parents must be awarded certain privileges. Sex education was characterized as an overreach of the state into matters of the family, or parents' concern, specifically child-rearing.<sup>85</sup>

Demands for parental consent in sex education courses confirmed a skepticism toward the public education system that was crucial to the formation of a populist opposition to reform. In a November 1973 op-ed in the *Northeast Detroitier*, Robin Schuster, a member of the liberal Equal Rights for Women (ERW) organization, contended that opposition to sex education prevented children from receiving objective knowledge about sex.<sup>86</sup> Shirley Wohlfield submitted a letter in response that questioned whether teachers and administrators could teach "objective" sex education topics. Wohlfield maintained that instruction of sex and sexuality must fall under the domain of parents, given that certain topics – namely, birth control – could introduce students to information that did not align with the beliefs of the local community. In effect, parental consent preserved the role of child-rearing to mothers, as opposed to educators.

However, MAD did not express outright opposition to sex education, but rather against the inclusion of birth control instruction in sex education courses. After the defeat of *Mercer*, proponents of sex education repeatedly lobbied for legislation that permitted birth control instruction. In response, MAD asserted that birth control instruction infringed on the "personal, moral, and/or religious beliefs of the majority."<sup>87</sup> To make this claim, MAD posited an expansive definition of birth control that included "abortion, lesbianism, homosexuality, oral sex, and

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<sup>85</sup> Re-election flyer for Carmen Roberts (November 1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>86</sup> Clipping from the *Northeast Detroitier* (11/29/1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>87</sup> Clipping from the *Northeast Detroitier* (12/6/1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

masturbation.”<sup>88</sup> Janice Irvine, a scholar of sex education history, notes that conservatives utilized the discursive power of vocabulary in steering debates on sex education.<sup>89</sup> Including controversial topics in their definition of birth control added credence to MAD’s claim that birth control instruction infringed on their belief system, and served as a way to try to incite conservative reaction in Detroit.

MAD’s expansion definition of birth control articulated their opposition to the transformation of gender and sexual norms, products of both the sexual revolution and the gender- and sexuality-based social movements of the era. In the 1970s, the “family” and “sex” became metaphors for perceived cultural, societal, and national decline.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, MAD’s concerns about the impact of birth control instruction on their children was indicative of their broader concerns about the impact of a permissive society on the traditional family structure. MAD’s fervent mobilization against repeated attempts to enact birth control instruction by the state legislature underscores how sex mobilized conservative reaction against a changing nation.

MAD’s campaign against birth control instruction adopted a conspiratorial anti-statist bent demonstrated in a focus on population control. When Linda Haerens presented MAD’s broad definition of birth control – “abortion, lesbianism, homosexuality, oral sex, and masturbation”<sup>91</sup> – she cited that those forms of birth control were also forms of population control. Coincidentally, Dr. Goldfine entered into *Mercer* motivated by the impact of Michigan’s birth control law on his lecture topics on population growth.<sup>92</sup> Goldfine’s occupation as an academic, alongside his

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<sup>88</sup> “Northeast Mothers Alert Fight Senate 211 on Sex” from the *Northeast Detroiter* (1/24/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>89</sup> Irvine, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Irvine, 42-44; Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 9-17.

<sup>91</sup> “Northeast Mothers Alert Fight Senate 211 on Sex” from the *Northeast Detroiter* (1/24/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>92</sup> “Northeast Mother’s Alert Discusses Sex Education” from the *Northeast Detroiter* (November 1973), Clippings 1973, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

commitment to securing the right to teach about birth control (not to mention his alleged membership to Planned Parenthood), fit perfectly into the populist conservative dichotomy of an academic elite undermining the values of the “people” and the “family.”

In the minds of conservatives, population control served as a tool for undemocratic governments.<sup>93</sup> Linda Haerens wrote: “The governments of some Asiatic countries, India for example, are now and will in the future use sex education in their schools to control their birth rate and population growth.”<sup>94</sup> This sentiment is furthered in two bulletins released by the Happiness of Women (HOW).<sup>95</sup> These bulletins contained an additional claim that birth rates in the United State were higher among affluent and middle-class whites. In a unique assertion, these women argued that birth control was a mechanism for population control that would have the greatest impact on middle-class and affluent white Americans. Embedded in this anti-statist population control conspiracy theory was another conservative concern about a changing nation and the perceived dislocation of white Americans.

### School Textbook Reform

MAD’s concern about changing gender and sexual norms also animated their opposition to proposed changes in school textbooks. In the aftermath of *Mercer*, the Mothers Alert Detroit demonstrated their legal capacity through another amicus curiae brief, this time into the *Milliken v. Bradley* case.<sup>96</sup> The seventeen-page document prescribed a broad range of remedies for the

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<sup>93</sup> Michelle Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), xx.

<sup>94</sup> “Northeast Mothers Alert Fight Senate 211 on Sex” from the *Northeast Detroiter* (1/24/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>95</sup> Document titled “House Journal No. 82” (7/5/1977), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter titled “Parents – Act Now!” from HOW (June 1977), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>96</sup> Civil Action No: 35257 brief submitted by Northeast Mothers Alert (4/17/1975), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

problems ailing Detroit's public schools, including problems from biased school textbooks. While the concern for biased school textbooks was embedded within a document focused on school desegregation, any subscriber to the MAD's quarterly bulletin would have grasped the increased relevancy of textbooks to conservative activists in Detroit.<sup>97</sup> Throughout the 1970s, MAD opposed Michigan's school textbook reform, adopting similar organizational and rhetorical skills they evoked in the debate over birth control instruction.

The perceived influence of certain social movements in promoting textbook reform stoked political reaction among Detroit's conservatives. In 1974, a task force, formed by the Michigan State Board of Education, concluded that the state's textbooks contained gender-bias. Public schools were subsequently instructed to revamp their libraries and instructional materials in-line with the recommendations by the Board.<sup>98</sup> The Board's decision reflected the perceived need for textbooks to no longer include stereotypes or implicit bias related to gender and race. Further, textbook reform also represented the influence of the postwar social movements, particularly women's liberation. Although women's liberation groups played no direct role in the task force, the move suggested their influence on Detroit's institutions.

MAD articulated their opposition to gender-based textbook reform through the rhetoric of morals and religiosity. In their *Milliken v. Bradley* brief, MAD wrote:

Teachers, as agents of the state, must be reminded that their role, in the area of religion, must be one of neutrality. The Michigan State Board of Education will soon be considering the guidelines for revision of textbooks so that books reflect the views of feminists even though some of these views conflict with the religious and/or moral beliefs of many in our society.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> MAD Bulletin #6: "What's happening to your schools, textbooks, money??" (December 1976), MAD: Newsletters 1976-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Civil Action No: 35257 brief submitted by Northeast Mothers Alert (4/17/1975), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

In an act of conflating irreligiosity with feminism, MAD constructed a dichotomy between presumably Christian beliefs and the views of feminists, invoking notions of Christian domesticity long-connected to American conservative ideology.<sup>100</sup> This dichotomy allowed MAD to argue against certain textbooks that supposedly undermined their moral or religious beliefs. Furthermore, Shirley Wohlfield evoked this dichotomy in her critiques of the teaching of secular humanism in public schools, which she charged as a form of religious instruction.<sup>101</sup> Secular humanism is the belief that humanity is capable of morality without belief in God. Wohlfield charged that secular humanism was a form of religious instruction. Irvine notes how conservatives characterized sex education proponents as supporters of secular humanism.<sup>102</sup> Both MAD's brief above, and Wohlfield's condemnation of secular humanism demonstrate conservative women's concern about the impact of transforming gender norms on their religious identity. Textbooks represented the primary mode through which elements of the permissive society could indoctrinate schoolchildren with ideas that did not align with the conservative community. As Michigan's HOW President Patt Barbour stated: NOW is "attempting to implement their philosophies through the public educational system."<sup>103</sup> Textbooks represented the primary mode through which elements of the permissive society could indoctrinate schoolchildren with ideas that did not align with the conservative community.

MAD's expressed concern for biased textbooks through discourse on pedagogy. According to MAD, schoolchildren in Detroit used textbooks that featured an over-emphasis on "open-ended

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<sup>100</sup> Nickerson, 13, 51.

<sup>101</sup> MAD General Meeting Minutes (6/3/1976) and (3/24/1977), MAD General Meeting Minutes, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>102</sup> For further literature on secular humanism, see: Irvine, 22-28.

<sup>103</sup> Letter from Patt Barbour of HOW to Michigan's state legislature (7/4/1975), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

questions” and “situation-ethics.”<sup>104</sup> Textbooks that promoted new pedagogy worried these mothers because they encouraged a questioning of authority. In the 1970s, conservative mothers concerned themselves with the influence of the public school system on the values and morals of their children. Images of rebellious student protests, and liberalizing social norms, incited fear that progressive pedagogy played a role in this generational divide.<sup>105</sup> Instead, MAD preferred what they described as the “basic education” approach. The basic education approach emphasized rule-following, and a mastery of basic skills. Embedded within the basic education approach is a focus on “proper” English, representing racial coding against other English dialects. MAD’s concern about pedagogy further demonstrated attempts to curb transforming gender and sexual attitudes.

#### Anti-Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

The Equal Right Amendment (ERA) galvanized conservative women across the nation because it represented one of the most significant implications of transforming gender and sex norms.<sup>106</sup> In November 1974, a Mrs. Halina Frizzelle penned an ironic “thank-you” to retiring Representative Martha Griffins of Michigan’s 17<sup>th</sup> Congressional District:

Thanks to your amendment, known as the ERA, I no longer have to spend my after-dinner hours doing homework with my children or giving them baths and maybe brushing the knots out of their hair... Thanks for the ERA, for allowing women such privileges, for making us equal counterparts of our men.<sup>107</sup>

Throughout the letter, Frizzelle described a potential reality in which women could no longer assume the exclusive role as housewife, and where men and women would share the

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<sup>104</sup> MAD Bulletin #6: “What’s happening to your schools, textbooks, money???” (December 1976), MAD: Newsletters 1976-1977, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>105</sup> June Melby Benowitz. *Challenge and Change: Right-Wing Women, Grassroots Activism, and the Baby Boom Generation* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2015), 12-15.

<sup>106</sup> Gillian Frank, “‘Civil Rights of Parents’: Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant’s Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22 (January 2013), 135-39.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from Patt Barbour of HOW to Governor Milliken (10/15/1973), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

responsibilities of home and work. Rep. Griffins understood a different worldview. During her twenty-years as a congresswoman of western Detroit and nearby suburbs, Griffins was instrumental in securing the prohibition of gender-based discrimination through Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and in fighting for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The codification of gender equality, however, undermined the worldview of Frizzelle and the mothers of the conservative backlash. Fear that gender equality would uproot the stability of the family, and the belief that it demeaned their identity as mothers mobilized a grassroots opposition against the ERA.

Conservative women opposed the ERA because it threatened their social identity as mothers. In 1974, the *Detroit Free Press* published a profile article of Carmen Roberts that was titled: “Diary of a Glad Housewife.” The article, focused on her anti-busing and anti-women’s liberation activism, describes Roberts as a “cheerleader-trim” woman who spoke “in a voice slightly younger than her years.”<sup>108</sup> The article’s emphasis on Roberts’s feminine traits reflected the centrality of femininity to Roberts’s political opposition to the women’s liberation movement: “They try to make ‘mom’ and ‘apple pie’ sound like dirty words.” Further, “The Equal Rights Amendment is going to take away my privileges if it passes. We don’t have the privilege of staying home as we do now if we’re responsible for bringing in 50 percent of the income.” Anti-ERA activists often emphasized unsubstantiated claims about the impact of the ERA and the validity of Roberts’s claim is questionable, but such claims informed a commitment to a worldview that was becoming challenged on an unprecedented level in the 1970s.

The opposing viewpoints in the ERA debate paralleled the opposing viewpoints in the abortion debate. Both issues demonstrated how women, as new political constituents, had a vested social interest in the outcomes of these policy disputes. Sociologist Kristin Luker, in *Abortion: The*

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<sup>108</sup> “Diary of a Glad Housewife” from the *Detroit Free Press* (1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

*Politics of Motherhood*, argues that abortion became such a defining political issue in the 1970s because the two sides of the debate reflected opposing worldviews that articulated different responses to women's increased demand for citizenship. For pro-life women, such as the Mothers Alert Detroit and the Happiness of Womanhood, abortion signified a rejection of motherly duties at the center of their social identity. Conversely, pro-choice women understood abortion to be a vital component to ensuring the longevity professional careers, for example, in a larger effort to guarantee equal or full citizenship. Both constituents had a stake in the abortion debate because their worldview and social identity were tied to the extent of citizenship for women. Luker's analysis provides a useful framework in understanding MAD's and HOW's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment. MAD viewed the women's liberation as a sinister effort to curtail their social identity as mothers and indoctrinate their children into an opposing worldview that accepted women's liberation.<sup>109</sup>

HOW and MAD depicted the ERA as a populist issue by casting proponents of the ERA, particularly NOW and women's liberation generally as elitist. HOW's newsletters featured a call to action, imploring members and supporters to communicate and organize with friends and lawmakers. They reminded readers that, despite what the media or liberal activists' depicted, women's liberation only comprised a minority of the population; indeed, HOW charged that "Women's Lib represents only 3 per cent of the women in the country."<sup>110</sup> This populist messaging, in a similar function to busing, sought to mobilize a nascent band of citizens against interests that undermined the family. HOW cast NOW as a fringe organization, comprised of

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<sup>109</sup> Kristin Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1984), 7-10.

<sup>110</sup> "Group Fights Ideological War: HOW or NOW?" from the *Macomb Daily* (9/8/1973), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

elements of the permissive society in order to suggest that it was not representative of the majority and to undermine its legitimacy.

HOW further built a populist opposition to the ERA by tapping into conservative opposition to the gay rights movement. In a letter to state legislators, Patti Barbour of HOW used homophobic language in her critique of NOW's inclusion of lesbians in their organization. The inclusion of lesbians, Barbour argued, was proof of NOW's radical politics. By conflating homosexuality with left politics, Barbour articulated a conservative politics of the family that proudly emphasized a white, heterosexual nuclear family aligned with traditional gender roles that faced repeated threats from a permissive society situated within left politics. This conservative politics of the family assumed a strong anti-statist orientation as it sought to preserve the sanctity of the traditional household from state-led reforms. The ERA, as a constitutional amendment, most visibly demonstrated the threat that the state posed to the family unit informing the worldview of MAD and HOW.

#### Conclusion: Public Funding and the Politics of the Family

In 1973, Patti Barbour mailed a copy of House Bill No. 4364 to Shirley Wohlfield. The bill at-hand would appropriate “the sum of \$50,000...for the purpose of employing a staff to perform work for the [Michigan women's] commission.”<sup>111</sup> Months later, national conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly commented on the role of status on women councils, akin to the recently-funded Michigan women's commission. In her famous “Phyllis Schlafly Report,” she described how these councils, although funded by public tax dollars, functioned as a lobbying arm for the women's

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<sup>111</sup> House Bill No. 4364 attached in letter sent to Shirley Wohlfield likely from Patt Barbour (3/8/1973), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

liberation movement.<sup>112</sup> Concern over the allocation of tax revenue became increasingly important for conservative opponents of women's liberation. Items as simple as a monthly newsletter – *The Capitol Women* – garnered scrutiny for holding a “feminist” bent.<sup>113</sup>

The conservative scrutiny of tax dollar allocation was not exclusive to the women's liberation movement. During MAD's anti-busing campaign, for example, they claimed that the NAACP received federal tax dollars.<sup>114</sup> This focus on taxes reflected conservative suspicions of the state's relationship to civil rights organizations and elements of the permissive society. The pivot toward the issue of public funding of certain organizations and viewpoints also offered groups like MAD a new opportunity to curb reform efforts that were, at-least partially, state-funded. The ability to regulate allocation of tax dollars awarded an equal, if not greater, potential for undermining the state's mission than an assertion of parental rights. Increasingly, MAD focused on how tax dollars were being spent in the public school systems, and to which programs they were being spent on.

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<sup>112</sup> “Are you financing women's Lib and ERA?” from the *Phyllis Schlafly Report* (February 1974), Happiness of Women, Inc. (HOW) 1973-1983, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Flyer for the boycott of Farmer Jack Supermarket (May 1975), MAD Miscellaneous 1973-84, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

### Chapter Three: Tax Ideology

#### Introduction: Residency

In March 1973, Carmen Roberts was appointed to fill the vacancy of resigning Detroit Region Seven Board of Education member Donald Krebs. Shortly after her appointment, Roberts demonstrated her conservative political bent by tabling a motion that would have forced teachers living outside of Detroit to move into the city within six months.<sup>115</sup> A residency requirement, proponents stated, could ameliorate the racial biases of teachers by decreasing the social distancing between white teachers and black schoolchildren. Opponents, including the Mothers Alert Detroit (MAD) and the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT), cautioned against the measure due to the potential loss of qualified teachers. They also questioned the legality of the rule. After much deliberation, the Central Board of Education voted against a residency rule that required the return of teachers living outside of Detroit, but passed a residency requirement for all new hires and employees seeking promotion.<sup>116</sup>

The demand for residency represented the pressure placed on the Detroit Public Schools to address racialized inequality. While a residency requirement offered the cash-strapped school district a cost-effective reform policy, the Detroit Public Schools would require far more revenue to enact additional reform measures and more critically, to compensate for rising budget shortfalls. However, conservative members on region boards played an integral role in preventing the accumulation of the necessary revenue by opposing tax mill increases. In this chapter, I will argue that conservative board members, Carmen Roberts of Region Seven and Gerald O'Neill of Region

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<sup>115</sup> “New Member Sways Board: Teacher Residency Tabled in Region 7” from *Detroit News* (3/13/1973), Scrapbook 1972-1975, Oversize Volume 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>116</sup> “Residency Rule Defeat Sparks Talk of Recall” from *Detroit News* (2/13/1974), Scrapbook 1972-1975, Oversize Volume 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

Four, articulated a populist, anti-state tax ideology that undergirded their anti-millage campaign and selective spending regime. Robert's' and O'Neill's tax ideology represented their skepticism of bureaucrats, and the public school system, and most importantly, a reluctance to fund programs aimed at addressing racial and social inequalities, deemed to not benefit Detroit's white community. Robert's' opposition contained a specific focus on gender-based concern for school safety and quality education, demonstrating the continuation of MAD's conservative gender ideology into Roberts's tenure on the Region School Board.

#### Anti-Millage Campaigns and the Audit

On July 1, 1976 the Central Board of Education adopted a \$320 million budget that included millions in cutbacks in order to accommodate the state's balanced budget law. Detroit Public Schools Superintendent Arthur Jefferson revealed that the district was "\$16 million short of the amount necessary to maintain programs at their 1975-1976 level and [was] \$39 million short of the original budget proposals for 1976-1977."<sup>117</sup> The budget cuts included placing first-graders in half-day sessions, moving over 500 teachers into the "substitute pool," cutting back on elective programs such as interschool athletics and instrumental music programs, cutting administrative costs, minimizing building maintenance plans and closing fifteen schools. However, an August 3<sup>rd</sup> millage referendum to approve a property tax increase of 5 mills<sup>118</sup> allowed the possibility for the Central Board to cancel the budget cuts. The continuous efforts to pass millage increases demonstrated the financial pressures plaguing the Detroit Public Schools.

Throughout the 1970s, the Central Board of Education proposed tax millage increases to generate the necessary revenue to fund the cash-strapped school district. Between May 1972 and

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<sup>117</sup> "Trims Will Stand if Millage Issue Fails" from the *Detroit News* (7/2/1976), Clippings June-December 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>118</sup> A mill is a \$1 tax increase for each \$1,000 of property tax.

November 1977, twelve millage proposals were sent to voters.<sup>119</sup> Without additional funding from the state, the Central Board of Education had to propose both the renewal of soon-to-expire prior millage increases, and propose additional millage increases to meet the rising expenditures. Of the twelve millage proposals between 1972 and 1977, only four passed. Historian Jeffrey Mirel notes that opposition to millage proposals was heaviest in the high-turnout, working-class white neighborhoods on the northeast and northwest sides of the city.<sup>120</sup> The campaigns against millage increase and millage renewal proposals were strongly supported by MAD. As a member of the Region Seven Board, Carmen Roberts articulated the anti-millage sentiment of MAD. In partnership with conservative Central Board member Gerald O'Neill, Roberts defended her opposition to tax increases by supporting budget cuts, demanding financial oversight through an audit, and stoking concern for child wellbeing.

Carmen Roberts asserted that reductions in expenditure could offset the shortfalls outlined in the budget. In November 1976, Detroiters cast their ballots for Proposition E, a millage proposal aimed at providing the tens of millions in revenue the school district needed in order to prevent cuts from its 1976-77 budget. Opponents of this budget, Carmen Roberts and Gerald O'Neill, outlined a list of potential cuts, totaling to \$9 million, in a letter to the Central Board of Education that they argued could help close the gap in the 1976-77 budget.<sup>121</sup> The cuts were largely aimed at administrative costs and a decline in instructional cost due to loss of students as a result of white flight. Yet even as Detroit experienced declines in enrollment, the smaller student body did not

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<sup>119</sup> Jeffrey Mirel, *The Rise and Fall of an Urban School System: Detroit, 1907-1981* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), Table 10 in Appendix.

<sup>120</sup> Mirel, 325.

<sup>121</sup> MAD Bulletin #6: "What's happening to your schools, textbooks, money??" (December 1976), MAD Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Letter from Carmen Roberts and Gerald O'Neill to the Board of Education of Detroit (11/7/1976), Correspondence 1973-1976, 1981, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

necessarily equate to a significant reduction in cost.<sup>122</sup> Most critically, their suggested \$9 million in cuts came nowhere near the \$55 million revenue shortage being experienced by the Detroit Public Schools.<sup>123</sup>

Roberts's and O'Neill's proposal, while fiscally unsound, underscored their conviction that the Detroit schools were wasting money on superfluous administrative spending. In an effort to avoid millage increases, Roberts, O'Neill and the Mothers Alert Detroit urged for the State Auditor General to conduct a management audit of the schools. The conservative duo surmised that an audit would unveil hidden expenditures resulting from excessive administrative spending and inefficient bureaucratic oversight of school funds. The two figured into an emerging conservative populism that juxtaposed the "people" against an educated and bureaucratic elite.<sup>124</sup> In pushing for an audit, O'Neill and Roberts characterized the administration as less committed to quality education than on "more money for chauffeurs, limousines, and nice vacations to warmer climates" – as the *Northeast Detroiter* alleged.<sup>125</sup> Roberts re-iterated this sentiment in other ways as well, including naming Superintendent Arthur Jefferson's high salary and emphasizing administrative costs. The impracticality of Robert's and O'Neill's budget remedy underscored how debates over millage were as much confrontations over ideology as they were commitments to fiscal responsibility.

Roberts and O'Neill further articulated opposition to millage increases through concern for student wellbeing. As the only two dissenting votes on the 1976 budget, Carmen Roberts and

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<sup>122</sup> "Trims Will Stand if Millage Issue Fails" from the *Detroit News* (7/2/1976), Clippings June-December 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 14; Thomas Byrne Edsall, and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 8-11.

<sup>125</sup> MAD Bulletin #6: "What's happening to your schools, textbooks, money??" (December 1976), MAD Miscellaneous 1973-1984, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

Gerald O'Neill, both contended that the Board were using the budget cuts as a “scare tactic” to incite voters to pass the mill increase.<sup>126</sup> Throughout her anti-millage campaigns, Carmen Roberts asserted that schoolchildren were being used as scapegoats by the Board to get the tax millage passed. Both pro- and anti- millage campaigns focused on the impact the budget crisis had on schoolchildren.<sup>127</sup> In radio ad campaigns, the Mothers Alert Detroit contended that schoolchildren were not only pawns for a mismanaged and self-interested school board, but that the overall quality of education would continue to decrease if millage increases passed because the root cause – administrative excess – would be ignored.

Concern for child wellbeing in anti-millage rhetoric represents another reiteration of a gender-specific trope of the “image of the imperiled child.” In MAD’s anti-busing campaign and across its gender-based reform oppositions, the group utilized the concern for child safety. Historians note the common usage of this trope in other conservative movements led by women in the 1970s.<sup>128</sup> The image of the imperiled child provided a powerful rebuttal to the city leadership’s and social movements’ efforts to enact reform policies in Detroit by characterizing reform policies as undermining the sanctity of a traditional, white family in general, and the motherly role in child-rearing in particular. The usage of this trope in millage opposition tapped into white distrust in Detroit’s public education that was perceived as focused on reform for minority students or as influence by women’s liberation, as opposed to the interests of the white, traditional family.

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<sup>126</sup> “Backers Accused of Using ‘Scare Tactics’: 2 on Board Call for Defeat of School Tax” from the *Detroit News* (7/13/1976), Clippings June-December 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>127</sup> Letter from Synka Curtis of WXYZ Radio to Carmen Roberts (10/15/1976), Correspondence 1973-1976, 1981, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>128</sup> Gillian Frank, “‘The Civil Rights of Parents’: Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant’s Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22 (January 2013): 129, 159-60; Benjamin Strassfeld, “The Blight of Indecency: Antiporn Politics and the Urban Crisis in Early 1970s Detroit,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 27 (September 2018): 430-31; Natasha Zaretsky, *Radiation Nation: Three Mile Island and the Political Transformation of the 1970s*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 32-33.

The anti-millage campaign's efforts to tap into white distrust of public education was aided by Detroit's decentralized school board system. Despite white conservatives comprising a minority in Detroit, decentralization emboldened conservative-majority boards to engage in anti-millage campaign efforts. Before a 1974 millage proposal, the Region Seven Board voted to withhold support for the proposed millage. Additionally, the board voted to ban employees from promoting millage on school time.<sup>129</sup> Despite condemnation from the Central Board at a special meeting, Carol Gore of the Region Seven Board member stated that the ban would continue to be enforced. Furthermore, Region Seven would continue to withhold support, until "there's tighter accounting of public travel funds spent by central board members."<sup>130</sup> Gore's call to restrict travel spending tapped into a familiar accusation of excess administrative spending that was symbolic rather than substantive – a decrease in travels expenditure could never accommodate for the lack of revenue of Detroit's schools.

#### Selective Spending and Redistributive Programs

The anti-millage campaign reflected the importance of taxes to conservative constituents. During Carmen Roberts's 1976 re-election campaign for the Region Seven School Board, the *Northeast Detroiter's* endorsement emphasized her commitment to taxpayers, rather than her staunch anti-busing stance – which most Detroiter's associated her with.<sup>131</sup> Roberts's anti-millage rhetoric tapped into mounting white distrust in the public education system by characterizing the Detroit Public Schools as poorly mismanaging their finances. Roberts asserted that tax money was being used for frivolous administrative spending rather than for quality education for school

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<sup>129</sup> "Region 4's Shortened Classes Rejected: Schools Told to Restore Hours" from the *Detroit News* (6/21/1974), Clippings 1974, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

children. Roberts's commitment to taxpayers and fiscal responsibility provided a color-blind opposition to racial reform in the Detroit Public Schools.

Debates over budget cuts exemplified the conservative opposition to funding programs aimed at addressing social inequalities. To Superintendent Jefferson, the 1976 budget cuts stalled improvements made in the past year on the high school level, "such as the planning for five vocational centers, the start of a new reading and bilingual, bicultural programs; and work on a study to determine the desirability of using competency tests for graduation."<sup>132</sup> Although not explicitly stated, O'Neill's and Robert's dissenting votes indicated apathy, at the very least, to the programs hailed by Superintendent Jefferson. However, given MAD's view of vocational centers as part of a regional government plot, its opposition to bilingual instruction, and its concern about the decline in school performance, Roberts's and O'Neill's dissenting votes were likely informed by a direct opposition to Jefferson's programs aimed at remedying social inequalities.<sup>133</sup>

A concern for taxpayers and tax dollar allocation had also been a component of MAD's opposition to busing. The amicus curiae brief that Carmen Roberts and Shirley Wohlfield had submitted in April 1975 in the *Milliken v. Bradley* case asserted that busing and other reform efforts only served to expand the existing bureaucracy of the Detroit Public Schools at the peril of taxpayers, evoking the narrative of a fiscally irresponsible bureaucracy.<sup>134</sup> The brief proposed that tax dollars for academic reform should be directed toward the renovation of school buildings, as opposed to busing. Historian Jeffrey Mirel argued that anti-millage votes functioned as part of the

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<sup>132</sup> Letter from the Pasadena Unified School District to Donald E. Elader of East Detroit (11/14/1974), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>133</sup> Civil Action No: 35257 brief submitted by Northeast Mothers Alert (4/17/1975), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>134</sup> Copy of House Bill no. 5044, MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM; Correspondence between administrators of the Detroit Public Schools (10/30/1975), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW papers, BHL, UM; Copy of House Bill no. 5044 (7/2/1973), MAD Brief re: Ronald Bradley v. William Milliken 1975, Box 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

white working class backlash against busing.<sup>135</sup> The trend Mirel identified aligns with national trends of white voters increasingly opposing the allocation of tax dollars to programs deemed fiscally irresponsible due to their focus on racial inequalities.<sup>136</sup>

Anti-millage campaigns reflected not an outright opposition to tax increases, but rather a tax ideology that supported allocation of tax dollars that benefited the white community. In the May 1976 primary elections, the ballot included Proposition A, a millage increase aimed at the creation of a jail due to overcrowding in the Wayne County Jail.<sup>137</sup> In the weeks leading up to the election, the *Northeast Detroit* released a list of recommendations for the issues on the ballot. “Considering the possible alternatives, we strongly recommend a ‘YES’ vote on [Proposition A].”<sup>138</sup> The paper assured voters that the revenue from the jail millage would not serve to “pamper” inmates – “the money is not for the installation of a color T.V. in every cell and a private inmate golf course” – but rather, to keep criminals off the street. Proposition A ultimately passed, while two subsequent tax millage increases for the school system would fail that same year. Despite a general conservative reluctance to accept tax increases, the support for the jail millage underscored the selective spending on issues deemed important to the white community such as crime.

As members on the school board, Roberts and O’Neill reflected this tax ideology by opposing programs that did not benefit the white community while supporting spending increases within their local communities. In 1974, Region Four Board had a conservative-majority composition, under the chairmanship of Gerald O’Neill. At a general meeting, Region Four Board

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<sup>135</sup> Mirel, 346-68.

<sup>136</sup> Edsall and Edsall, 11-14.

<sup>137</sup> “Jail Millage Passed Because It Had to” from the *Northeast Detroit* (5/27/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>138</sup> “Primary Election Recommendations” from the *Northeast Detroit* (5/13/1976), Clippings January-May 1976, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

announced a withdrawal from the “right-to-read” program.<sup>139</sup> Originally, each of the eight school regions had agreed to pay one-eighth of the \$22,000 annual salary of the right-to-read coordinator Barbara Burke. Region Four opted-out of the program citing that they did not need Burke’s services. A subsequent motion was passed by the other regional boards to assume one-seventh of the cost of the “right-to-read” program. At the same meeting, the conservative-majority Region Seven Board asked the central board for \$1,800 for the installation of a lighted scoreboard for Finney High School.<sup>140</sup> While these instances only provide narrow insight into selective spending practices, they align with an emerging conservative tax ideology that was supportive of programs beneficial to the local community and hesitant to allot money toward programs serving the collective community.

Selective spending regimes were likely supported by conservative constituents because of their skepticism of public institutions and centralized authority. While anti-state sentiment had long been a core principle of modern conservatism, historians note how large segments of the American population began to question the utility of government intervention during the 1970s.<sup>141</sup> Detroit’s anti-millage campaigns represented white distrust of their local public school system, however, similar tax sentiments propped up across the nation as white Americans reconsidered the allotment of their taxes to certain social programs. As a result, redistributive programs, such as busing, were increasingly perceived to benefit minority populations and deemed wastefully spent in the minds of white Americans. As Edsall and Edsall note, the racialization of redistributive programs prompted the retraction of the welfare state in the United States.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> “Region 7 Asks Funds for Finney Scoreboard” from *Detroit News* (10/15/1974), Scrapbook 1972-1975, Oversize Volume 1, SW Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 10.

<sup>142</sup> Edsall and Edsall, 11-14.

### Conclusion: White Flight and Quality Education

Carmen Roberts resigned from her position as president on the Region 7 Board in September 1981 out of frustration with the recentralization of the board system.<sup>143</sup> Despite Roberts's opposition, nearly 73 percent of Detroiters voted in favor of recentralizing the board system.<sup>144</sup> Shortly thereafter Roberts and her husband moved out of the northeast side of Detroit, following the pattern of many of her relatives and friends. In a converted cottage alongside a lake in a small town in Oakland County, MI, Roberts retired from her decade-long involvement in the Detroit Public Schools. In an interview from the 1980s, Roberts characterized her involvement as an effort "to preserve the quality of the Detroit schools,"<sup>145</sup> echoing the claims of the Mothers Alert Detroit, which had described previously quality education was one of the core missions.

Yet even as many whites were fleeing the city for the suburbs out of a concern for the quality of education their children were receiving, conservative activists like Carmen Roberts were instrumental in preventing the passage of numerous policies aimed at improving the quality of education in Detroit. In this way, Roberts's attempt to preserve the "quality of education" signified another discursive element to the tax ideology informing many white Detroiters. The fight to preserve quality education was really a fight to preserve the former status quo in a racially stratified Detroit. Roberts's inability to preserve "quality education" became the impetus behind her white flight. As thousands of white Detroiters abandoned the public school system, they brought "quality education" to their suburban locales.

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<sup>143</sup> Typed synopsis of Carmen Roberts's life (1986), Biographical Field Notes, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

<sup>144</sup> Mirel, 368.

<sup>145</sup> Typed synopsis of Carmen Roberts's life (1986), Biographical Field Notes, Box 1, CR Papers, BHL, UM.

### **Conclusion: Political Transformation**

By the time Carmen Roberts left Detroit in the early 1980s, the Mothers Alert Detroit had been inactive for nearly half a decade. The National Association for Neighborhood Schools – MAD’s nearest successor– remained marginally politically active through the 1990s. Due to its broad and nationwide focus, NANS never exerted the same influence in Detroit as MAD. More importantly, the national impetus to preserve the “neighborhood school” faded as countless white urban residents fled to suburban municipalities. The dismal state of Detroit’s public schools today serves as a reminder of the legacy of segregationist politics in the urban north.

MAD’s anti-busing activism served as the catalyst for their involvement in the public education system in Detroit. Busing has widely been acknowledged, as reiterated throughout this thesis, as a galvanizing force for the political transformation of the 1970s. Rather than understanding desegregation busing as an attempt to equalize racial disparities in education, white Americans considered busing an affront to their lifestyle and positions they thought they had earned in society. Moreover, segments of the white population perceived themselves as victims in the efforts to remedy residential and school segregation. Such individuals fostered contempt for public institutions that they saw as encroaching on their way of life.

Unlike other anti-busing organizations, MAD contemporaneously involved itself in other political arenas in the realm of public education. This is exemplified in MAD’s intervention in local and state educational disputes over efforts to enact reform reflective of changing gender attitudes. Similar to busing, MAD interpreted gender-based reform as an attack on their social identity as mothers. MAD harbored hostility toward the state for its perceived association with liberal segments of society, such as women’s liberation, bureaucrats, and educational figures.

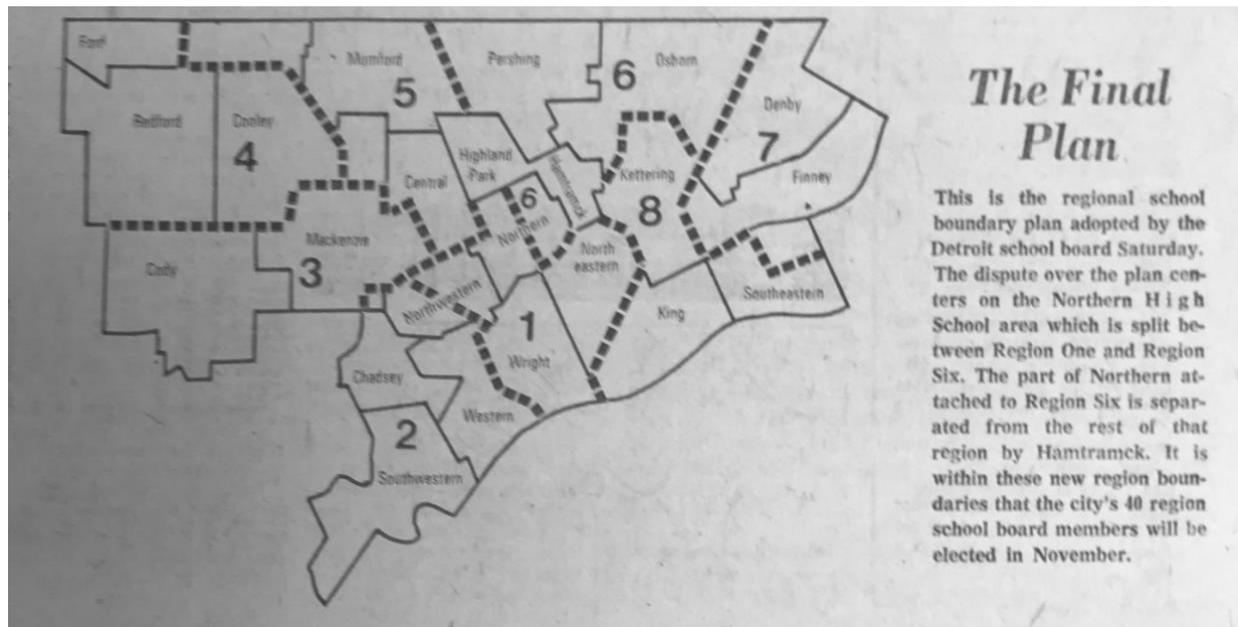
Notably, MAD, and ideologically similar organizations, turned to the allocation of tax dollars to de-funding certain gender-based reform programs. These debates over public expenditure on political issues once confined to the private sphere signified a critical feature of the political transformation of the 1970s: the reversal of the public and private sphere. And most consequentially, those debates informed conservative demand for the state to protect the family from public policy that threatened their worldview, and incited conservative efforts to retract the size and scope of the state to prevent the enactment or funding of public policy that threatened their conservative worldview.

MAD's anti-millage campaigns demonstrated a similar sentiment to the push to de-fund public policy perceived as threats to traditional gender roles and family structure. White opposition to re-distributive policies informed their decision to underfund the public school system. Busing generated increased distrust in the Detroit Public Schools, particularly because it was perceived to not benefit the white community and also undermine neighborhood segregation. In studying a women-led segregationist organization, it is clear that concern for family wellbeing was tied to the maintenance of neighborhood segregation. MAD's anti-millage campaign demonstrated a concerted response to the limits of MAD's anti-busing campaign. While white conservatives could not halt a court-ordered busing mandate, they could shape the size and scope of government through the allotment of tax dollars.

The grassroots activism of MAD demonstrates how local actors were critical in pushing the movement of modern conservatism to the forefront of the American political landscape. While MAD was connected to various like-minded conservative activist groups – such as, ROAR in Boston or HOW in San Diego – they did not situate themselves directly in the conservative movement. Nonetheless, MAD's rhetoric utilized in local educational disputes – populist, anti-

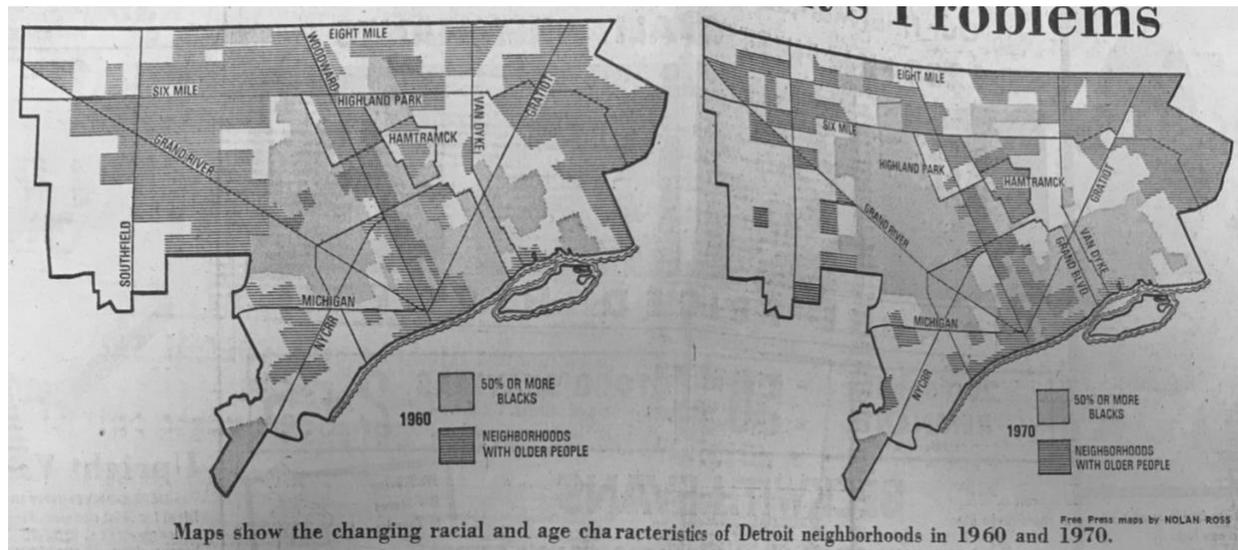
statist rhetoric, and color-blind rhetoric articulated through the family – would eventually be reiterated on the national level in similar form.

### Appendix A: Map of Detroit's Regional School Boards, 1970.



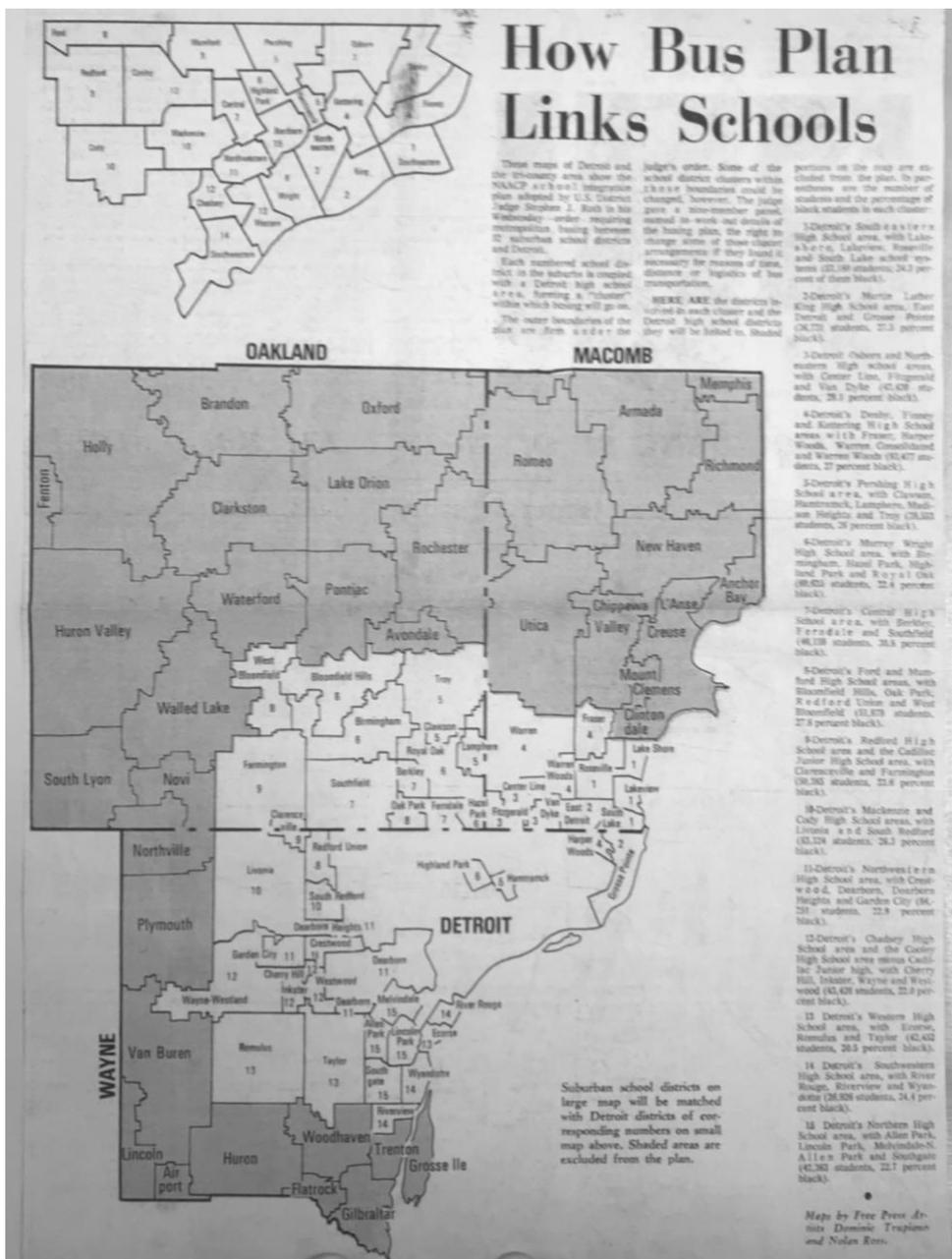
“Board Adopts Disputed School Boundary Plan,” William Grant, *Detroit Free Press*, Box 11, Bradley v. Milliken case files 1962-1976, 1970-1974, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

**Appendix B: Maps of Detroit's changing racial and age characteristics  
in 1960 and 1970.**



“Generation Gap Adds to Detroit’s Problems,” Michael Maidenberg, *Detroit Free Press*, Box 11, Bradley v. Milliken case files 1962-1976, 1970-1974, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

### Appendix C: Map of Judge Roth's 1972 Desegregation Plan, 1972.



"How Bus Plan Links Schools," *Detroit Free Press*, Box 11, Bradley v. Milliken case files 1962-1976, 1970-1974, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

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Shirley Wohlfield Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, 1972-1988.

### *Abbreviations in Footnotes:*

CR Papers      Carmen A. Roberts Papers

SW Papers      Shirley Wohlfield Papers

BHL, UM      Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan

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I affirm that I adhered to the honor code.

*Will Taylor*