

PROMISED LAND: THE POLITICS OF ABANDONMENT AND  
THE STRUGGLE FOR A NEW DETROIT

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sara Safransky: Promised Land: The Politics of Abandonment and the Struggle for a New  
Detroit

(Under the direction of Wendy Wolford)

This dissertation examines contemporary land-use and planning conflicts in Detroit where, in 2014, city officials classified 150,000 lots as “vacant” or “abandoned.” Bringing urban geography into conversation with critical race studies and property theory, the dissertation illuminates how private property, personhood, and racial difference have shaped and been shaped by postindustrial urban crisis. Based on 17 months of engaged research conducted between 2010 and 2012, I examine how different visions for Detroit’s future are enacted through black radical farming projects, a for-profit urban forestry venture, emergency management and bankruptcy, a tax foreclosure auction, and a citywide planning process aimed at repurposing Detroit’s highest vacancy (or least populated) neighborhoods as urban wilderness while withdrawing infrastructure and public services. The dissertation shows that despite the widespread discourse of vacancy, the neighborhoods targeted for “greening” were not empty, but home to more than 100,000 people. This contradiction points to the inequities of an ascendant urban planning ethos that integrates rationalities of environmental sustainability and fiscal austerity while ignoring histories of racialized uneven development. Even as the controversial abandonment and greening of certain neighborhoods proceeded, social movements articulated the right to a different future city by mobilizing around the concepts of the commons and community self-determination.

In addition to engaging with twenty-first century urban planning issues, the dissertation challenges historical narratives of the decline of Detroit and other postindustrial cities. Detroit’s

fall is typically narrated in relation to the global political economy of manufacturing, white flight, and capital flight. While these processes are important for understanding the spatial and economic predicaments Detroit faces, they are limited in two key ways. First, they cast urban abandonment as a past action, rather than an active process. Second, they elide community-based efforts to undo regimes of racial violence. I argue that the struggle for a new Detroit reveals the “settler colonial present” as a broader urban condition in the United States. The creation of more just and sustainable urban futures demands that we grapple with how the racialized history of property relations undergirds urban crisis and shapes the spatial imaginaries of those struggling for self-determination.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPP	Black Panther Party
BRTF	Blight Removal Task Force
DBCFSN	Detroit Black Community Food Security Network
DFC	Detroit Future City
DFPC	Detroit Food Policy Council
DLBA	Detroit Land Bank Authority
DWP	Detroit Works Project
FHA	Federal Housing Authority
HOLC	Homeownership Loan Corporation
LRBW	League of Revolutionary Black Workers
MVA	Market Value Analysis
RNA	Republic of New Afrika
UAW	United Auto Workers

## CHAPTER 1: INVISIBLE FRONTIERS

### Introduction

In December 2013, the Detroit Works Project, a foundation-funded public-private consortium, released a 50-year plan for the Motor City. Once the nation's fourth-largest city and car manufacturer for the world, Detroit had been in economic and population decline since the 1950s when the postwar exodus to the suburbs began. As white people filled the suburbs around an increasingly Black city, Detroit became a site of persistent racialized poverty with a land crisis unparalleled in a major U.S. city. City officials classified a staggering 150,000 lots, or one-third of Detroit's landed area and one-quarter of its properties, as "vacant" and "abandoned." The controversial plan, called Detroit Future City, aimed to fix the city's so-called spatial mismatch – the problem of too much land on the tax rolls and too little tax revenue – by reordering land use based on market-driven green urbanism.<sup>1</sup>

The Detroit Future City plan, arguably the most radical reimagining of a postindustrial city to date, reconceptualized urban infrastructure and the city government's role in providing basic services to its citizens. According to the plan, Detroit's highest vacancy neighborhoods deemed to have "no market value" would be repurposed as "urban wilderness," "carbon sequestration zones," "ponds," or "urban farms," and over time, traditional public services (water, street lights, transportation, garbage pickup) would be withdrawn from these areas. Yet

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<sup>1</sup> The figure of 150,000 as well as language of "vacant" and "abandoned" comes from Detroit Future City Strategic Framework (December 2013), 11. The words are often used in combination. A little more than half of these lots were in tax foreclosure and had reverted to city ownership; the rest were privately held mortgage foreclosures. The Detroit Future City Strategic Framework can be found here: <http://detroitfuturecity.com/framework/>.

their official designation as “vacant” was complicated by the facts on the ground. While Detroit had suffered from tremendous depopulation, the city was far from empty. More than 713,000 people still occupied Detroit and many of them – upwards of 100,000 – lived in the neighborhoods slated for disconnection. Moreover, countless lots, which officials had designated as unoccupied, had competing claims to them, some formal, others informal. On these same lots, neighborhood groups had been enacting their own grassroots plans to make a very different future city.

This dissertation focuses on the “greening” of Detroit and the political and ethical questions it raised about making and unmaking property relations. To whom did and should Detroit’s “abandoned” lands belong? Who decided and by what processes? How would the costs and benefits of green urbanism be distributed across space and social groups, particularly the city’s most marginalized residents? How did the Detroit Future City plan relate to other visions for the city’s future?

Struggles around Detroit’s “abandoned” land reflected larger tensions associated with a neoliberal shift in urban governance worldwide. By the time I arrived in 2010 to begin fieldwork, the city of Detroit had been in deep fiscal crisis for more than five decades. A reterritorialization was underway as public and private institutions worked aggressively, often in partnership, to attract transnational capital and residents to the city. It was a fateful time: Detroit was taken over by a state-assigned emergency manager in 2013 and declared bankruptcy in 2014. In spite (or perhaps, because) of Detroit’s myriad problems, many people saw the city’s “abandoned” lands as a testing ground for new approaches to urban planning. These included innovative private and foundation-led development, community activists’ and urban farmers’ more radical proposals for reimagining the city, and projects emerging through the everyday resourcefulness of residents.

The reterritorialization of Detroit was supported by racialized frontier narratives in the media that described its postindustrial landscapes as “empty” and “underutilized.” By the first decade of the twenty-first century, Detroit’s postindustrial landscape had become an object of national and international fascination, attracting filmmakers, photographers, journalists, and tourists to the city. “Greening” was also central to this urban imaginary. The iconic images of the abandoned factory as representative of the Motor City competed with a potent new imaginary of “urban wilderness”: houses ensnarled in vines (so-called feral houses), trees sprouting from the tops of deserted skyscrapers, dense groves of invasive Chinese “ghetto palms,” and wildlife sightings. Put simply, written and visual representations often rendered the city’s lands as “empty” and “wasted.” However, this style of documentation, referred to by some residents as “ruin porn,” fixated on and even celebrated the city’s reversion to nature, cleansed of its human inhabitants and the material residues of everyday life and history.<sup>2</sup>

The first time I glimpsed Detroit was from an airplane. At such a distance, it was possible to imagine the city as an “urban wilderness.” From above, it did not look like a city in any traditional sense. If not for the shimmering skyscrapers of the downtown skyline, the low-density city would have been indistinguishable from the surrounding suburbs that gave way to a patchwork of Michigan farmland. Yet, on the ground, it was more mixed. Vibrant city blocks of restaurants and bars gave way to crumbling, sprawling factories. Neighborhoods were pocketed with recently foreclosed homes, only their boarded windows disclosed their missing residents.

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<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars have analyzed how Detroit has become a spectacle, including: Jerry Herron, “Detroit: Disaster deferred, disaster in progress,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (2007): 663–682; Jerry Herron, “The Forgetting Machine: Notes toward a history of Detroit,” *The Design Observer* (2012); Jerry Herron, “Motor City breakdown,” *The Design Observer* (2013); Jonathan Patrick Leary, “Detroitism,” *Guernica* (January 15, 2011), [http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary\\_1\\_15\\_11/](http://www.guernicamag.com/features/leary_1_15_11/) (accessed May 7, 2013); Rebecca Kinney, “Longing for Detroit: The naturalization of racism through ruin porn,” *Media Fields Journal*, no. 5 (2012): 1–14; Nathan Millington, “Post-industrial imaginaries: Nature, representation and ruin in Detroit, Michigan,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37,1 (2013): 279–296; Emma Jean Slager, *Touring Detroit: Ruins, Representations, and Redevelopment* (Masters Thesis), University of Oregon, Department of Geography (2013).



Others blocks were unoccupied with buildings that had collapsed, their structural support removed by “scrappers” who scavenged useable materials. Some houses—even entire city blocks—had been leveled through demolitions and fires, replaced by trees, flowers, and prairie grass that made it hard to tell where one parcel began and another ended. Yet even these “empty” blocks were interspersed with signs of human life. In many neighborhoods, residents were reworking the urban property grid by claiming lots for farming, new parks, and theater spaces. They enclosed parcels adjacent to their homes through a process called “blotting.” They also collectively maintained vacant land.

The image of Detroit as an “urban wilderness” presented the city as a “blank slate” and “no man’s land,” which there was a moral imperative for outsiders to claim.<sup>3</sup> “If you visit Detroit, you’re an explorer,” one *National Geographic* journalist wrote.<sup>4</sup> Another writer beckoned settlers to cross the frontier: “A message is getting out there that there is free and open space available in Detroit – and that message is attracting people, many of them uncommonly creative and entrepreneurial. Detroit ... has become nothing less than a new American frontier. Once, easterners heeded the call to ‘Go West, young man,’ to leave behind the comfort and sophistication of the established citadels in search of adventure and fortune and to tame this great continent. Now, that same whisper is starting to build around Detroit.”<sup>5</sup>

During my fieldwork, residents often resisted descriptions of Detroit as a “frontier” awaiting inhabitants and transformation because such characterizations nullified the lives of the people who never left. Recognizing the power of these claims, residents developed counter-

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Safransky. “Greening the Urban Frontier: Race, Property, and Resettlement in Detroit.” *Geoforum* 56 (August 2014): 237–48.

<sup>4</sup> A. Nelson, “Rise and Shine Detroit,” *National Geographic Traveler* (March/April 2012), [www.travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/city-guides/detroit-traveler/](http://www.travel.nationalgeographic.com/travel/city-guides/detroit-traveler/) (accessed October 4, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Aaron Renn, “Detroit: A New American Frontier,” *Yes! Magazine* (2011).

abandonment discourses. Detroit-based poet jessica Care moore captured the sentiments of many when she said, “Somebody’s gotta tell them, we are not ghosts. We are here and we are alive.”<sup>6</sup>

This dissertation is about struggles taking place over Detroit’s “abandoned” lands. It begins from the premise that understanding the politics of abandonment and struggles for a new Detroit depends on a serious examination of the racial and cultural legacies that have fundamentally shaped property relations in the United States. In doing so it challenges explanations of urban abandonment that privilege deindustrialization by putting the racialization of space and struggles over land and property at the center of the story. The dissertation makes three key contributions. First, scholars of Detroit have produced a rich body of work on housing, unions, the Black power movement, violence, and race relations.<sup>7</sup> My dissertation builds upon this work through a geographical analysis of the racial and spatial dimensions of the struggles over land and resources associated with the reconfiguration of the city. Second, I contribute to a small, but growing literature on shrinking and postindustrial cities, particularly in the United

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<sup>6</sup> jessica Care moore in *We Are Not Ghosts* documentary.

<sup>7</sup> Many excellent histories exist on Detroit’s history, including Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1998); Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007). Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007); John Haritgan, Jr. *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

In recent years, scholars have begun to publish more on land and property issues in this city. Thus far, most of these works focus on policy-level analysis and everyday care of vacant houses and abandoned land in neighborhoods, but do not critically theorize property per se. For example, on care of abandoned land see: Margaret Dewar and June Manning Thomas, eds. *The City After Abandonment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013) and Kimberley Kinder, “Guerrilla-Style Defensive Architecture in Detroit: A Self-Provisioned Security Strategy in a Neoliberal Space of Disinvestment.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 5 (September 26, 2014): 1767–84. On urban decline and foreclosure policy see: Joshua M. Akers, “Making Markets : Think Tank Legislation and Private Property in Detroit.” *Urban Geography* 34, no. 8 (2013): 1070–95. On urban farming see: Monica M. White, “D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit.” *Environmental Practice* 13, no. 4 (2011): 406–17. Forthcoming ethnographic works include Alesia Montgomery’s book *Greening the Black Urban Regime* and Jessi Quizar’s dissertation on Black radical farming and food sovereignty.

States, by drawing attention to the deep histories of violence and racialized dispossession that undergird urban crisis but which are often elided in the prescriptive planning literature. Third, scholars in urban studies and urban geography have documented and theorized the emergence of global cities and world slums over the last 30 years due to global economic restructuring, the continued industrialization and consolidation of agriculture, the internationalization of the financial industry, and the attendant acceleration of capital flows.<sup>8</sup> And yet, in these fields, property is most often invoked in political economic terms (e.g., the uneven distribution of real estate), but the ways property works as a set of social and contested practices is examined less. Therefore, the dissertation contributes to these fields by developing a theoretical and methodological framework that opens up the everyday social practices of property making and unmaking as a critical, yet understudied site of urban land politics at which multi-scale processes—economic globalization, governmental problems, environmental crisis, and racial conflict—articulate.

Property regimes, in the words of geographer Nicholas Blomley, hang loosely on the land.<sup>9</sup> To study struggles over Detroit’s “abandoned” lands, the dissertation brings the projects of planners and government officials into the same frame as that of residents and community activists. It explores the dreams for Detroit that are sedimented in longtime residents’ memories and the city’s physical debris but invisible to many newcomers. It examines negotiations over debt, municipal autonomy, and the impact of credit rating agencies on urban governance alongside the multi-scalar institutional politics that lead people to lose their homes again and

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<sup>8</sup> For example, on global cities see: Sakia Sassen, *The Global City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); and slums, see: Mike Davis, *Planet of Slum* (New York: Verso, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Blomley. “Cuts, Flows, and the Geographies of Property.” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 7, no. 2 (2010): 203–16.

again. The dissertation highlights what it means for a city to have too much land while so many residents have too little. With its focus on the spatial transformation underway in Detroit, the dissertation speaks to issues at the heart of contemporary debates within U.S. cities about race, inequality, jobs, citizenship, governance, and the politics of abandonment.

## **Methodology**

The tension, indignation, and uncertainty surrounding the transformations taking place in Detroit during my fieldwork experience shaped what I studied and how I conducted my research. Over 17 months of mixed-method qualitative research in Detroit from 2010 to 2012, I asked people about the places where they lived – who the vacant houses and empty lots belonged to, who took care of the landscape, and how they felt about this work – trying to understand how people thought about, lived in, and laid claim to the “abandoned” landscape. These questions took me to city council meetings, emergency management and bankruptcy proceedings, neighborhood events, activist meetings, protests, planning charettes, community gardens, and sites of large-scale farming projects. Through my field research, I came to realize the complex and contested meaning of abandonment was central to struggles over the city’s future.

Histories of Detroit’s decline typically emphasize the invisible hand of global capital, offering a story that revolves around shifts in the political economy of the auto industry. These well-known narratives go something like this: Detroit was the fastest growing city in the 1930s. The booming car industry, Henry Ford, and the unions built the middle class. But starting in the late 1940s, the loss of manufacturing jobs due to automation, competition from nonunionized plants in the U.S. South and overseas, and white flight (especially after the 1967 race riots) eroded the city’s infrastructure. This was part of a larger wave of deindustrialization across the United States, but Detroit, the birthplace of Fordism, was particularly hard hit. These macroscale

explanations note white flight, but more than anything they assert that the natural movements of global capital have abandoned the city. While deindustrialization is important, these narratives often leave out how racial antagonisms are fundamental to the spatial organization of the Detroit metropolitan region.

A second narrative, often told by Detroit's white suburbanites, turns on the criminalization of Blacks. In newspaper op-eds, Internet forums, and casual conversations, some people argue that the city's demise is a result of Black cultural pathology and the ineptitude and corruption of the city's Black government. For example, critics claim that neither the city government nor residents know how to care for and maintain their neighborhoods; they prefer handouts to hard work. During my fieldwork, I was surprised by the intense feelings of ownership and nostalgia that older suburban whites expressed about Detroit and their animosity toward Black Detroiters, who, some said, drove them from the city.<sup>10</sup> If the narrative of global capital attributed Detroit's decline to macro-scale forces, this one emphasized cultural and personal irresponsibility.

During my fieldwork, when I asked Detroiters about the present and the future, their answers often recalled a different past —they talked about what Detroit had once been and the hopes with which people had come to the city and invested it with meaning. My interviews and observations of everyday life elucidated a landscape that was not “empty” but densely storied. People were more likely to define the landscape in terms of absences – focusing on the sounds,

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<sup>10</sup> One couple told me how they didn't want to leave to city but were “bumped” out by Blacks. Unfamiliar with the term, I asked them to clarify what bumping meant. They explained being physically bumped by Blacks on the sidewalk while shopping downtown, which for them meant the intentional brushing or knocking of shoulders when passing on the street.

scents, tastes, and feelings that conjure a place that once was -- rather than emptiness.<sup>11</sup> For them, strong feelings of historical loss and injustice haunt the region, infusing planning for the city's future with a political resonance and poignancy. It became clear to me that to understand Detroit's "abandonment" and the stakes of its redevelopment, it was imperative for my research to focus on how competing visions for the city's future are articulated, spatialized, and contested.

I centered my research on two broad and often competing social projects aimed at confronting Detroit's problems: market-based planning and grassroots planning. In this dissertation, market-based planning refers to wide-ranging top-down development efforts aimed at boosting real estate values and luring outside investment to Detroit. I use grassroots planning to draw attention to the various ways residents and activists have initiated their own bottom-up planning efforts outside the purview of government and market-sector support.<sup>12</sup> I see market-based and grassroots planning not as singular processes but in terms of what anthropologist Elizabeth Povenelli calls "aggregating practices," referring to the practices through which individuated projects that are more or less coordinated cohere into something recognizable. There is, of course, much heterogeneity across these aggregations or groupings, but the dichotomy is a useful heuristic for revealing how social projects turned on different theories and rationalities with distinct political and ethical commitments in their responses to urban crisis. With this in mind, I sought to understand how government officials and planners sought to remap and redevelop the city and how some residents—often self-described activists, but not

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<sup>11</sup> This framing of seeing landscapes in terms of loss comes from sociologist Alesia Montgomery. Alesia F. Montgomery, "The Sight of Loss." *Antipode* 43, no. 5 (November 21, 2011): 1828–50.

<sup>12</sup> On grassroots planning, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning." In *Engaging Contradictions*, edited by Charlie Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

exclusively—built worlds between the contours of the redevelopment maps and started to create their own maps.

During my fieldwork, I focused my research on sites where Detroit’s political and material landscape was being reconfigured, negotiated, and struggled over, including a tax foreclosure auction that offered 40,000 properties annually; a citywide planning process that involved disconnecting public works and service delivery in populated neighborhoods deemed to have “no market value”; emergency management and bankruptcy proceedings; and city council hearings about a proposal to build Hantz Woodlands, the “world’s largest urban farm.” To study these struggles, I engaged in participant observation at over 60 meetings, including planning charettes, city council meetings, municipal financial review board meetings about the city’s fiscal crisis, community meetings about how to better manage vacant land, and activist gatherings that focused on strategizing about how to build more socially just futures. I conducted over 40 interviews with city officials involved in decisions about the acquisition and distribution of city-owned land, urban planners involved in the citywide planning process, non-governmental professionals involved in sustainability and land-use planning, urban farmers who repurposed land as part of individual and collective projects, city workers who maintained vacant lots, and residents involved in neighborhoods groups that maintained landscapes and cared for their communities. I volunteered in community gardens where I helped weed, plant tomatoes, prepare beds, and pick vegetables. As I worked, I talked with other volunteers, garden members, and project coordinators about everyday life in the city and their motivations for farming. I studied policy audit reports, plans, and maps. I gathered media on Detroit from local, national, and international news outlets, documentaries and films, websites, and books. The combination of these approaches allowed me to analyze the dominant imagery used to describe Detroit, the

logics that undergirded redevelopment plans, and resistance to them. My analyses elucidated the differences between how actors categorized the city's land problem, made decisions about the use and ownership of "vacant" land, and presented solutions to the public.

### **Uniting Detroiters: Community-based research**

Soon after I arrived in Detroit, I had a chance encounter that altered my research approach in unforeseen ways. I met Linda Campbell at a conference in Detroit on "Reimagining Work" sponsored by the Boggs Center. Linda, a member of a national organization called Building Movement, had worked in Detroit as a community organizer since the 1970s. In the weeks before the conference, I had been meeting with local activists and urban farmers trying to figure out how my dissertation research might connect with local organizing efforts. As a white woman from "outside" Detroit, I faced a number of questions about what is meant to engage in ethical research and to conduct research in solidarity with residents, or if this was even possible. Originally, I was drawn to Detroit because I was interested in how the city's food justice movement had taken a vocal stand around race, class, and equity in a way that many others in the local food movement in the United States had been relatively silent about. I was particularly curious about how urban farms, community activists, and residents in the movement were making claims to the city's so-called "abandoned" land and their visions for development alternatives.

However, when I arrived in Detroit for pre-dissertation fieldwork, I found that the city's gardens were the focus of intense documentation by researchers, journalists, and tourists. In conversations, community activists and gardeners told me about their frustrations with the hyper-attention directed at Detroit, particularly "extractivist" journalism and research. Many others expressed concern about what was lost in translation, having stories told wrong, and never seeing what



was written. As a result of the way Detroit's story was being studied and narrated, some activists talked about developing models of research that empowered residents and benefited community work.

At the conference, Linda and I struck up a conversation and discovered we shared a number of common interests and concerns about land, property, and the commons. She told me that she and her community partners were in the beginning stages of conceptualizing a landscape analysis of Detroit that would, on the one hand, elucidate the significant political-economic changes that were rapidly reconfiguring the geography of place and power in the city and, on the other hand, document and lift up the work of progressive social justice and neighborhood-level groups pursuing alternative approaches to development. In a series of meetings over several months, we discussed how my dissertation might be strategically useful for and benefit from such a project. She invited Andrew Newman, an anthropology professor at Wayne State University, and me to be learning partners on the project.

In the months and years that followed, Linda, Andy, and I worked with other community activists to develop a participatory research project that came to be known as Uniting Detroiters. In what follows, I explain our research process, excerpting from writing that Linda, Andy, and I have done about the project (used with permission). The Uniting Detroiters project brought together residents, activists, scholars, students, progressive social justice organizations, and neighborhood groups from across the city. Its goals were to study and discuss the emerging development agenda in Detroit, how it fit into broader national and global trends, and identify local challenges to and opportunities for transformative social change. The project aimed to use research activities to strengthen the infrastructure of the city's long-vibrant grassroots sector (a

tradition that harkens back to both the birth of organized labor and the later civil rights era) and reassert residents' roles as active citizens in the development process.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of writing, we are currently completing two movement-building tools: a full-length video documentary<sup>14</sup> and a "People's Atlas" project.<sup>15</sup> Our methodological approach builds on various research traditions that coalesce around collaborative video-ethnography and counter-cartography.<sup>16</sup> The Atlas project is inspired by the Detroit Geographical Expeditions Institute, a community-level research and cartography experiment in the 1960s led by Wayne

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<sup>13</sup> Text here comes from Andrew Newman and Sara Safransky (2014), "Remapping the Motor City and the Politics of Austerity," *Anthropology Now* 6, 3.

<sup>14</sup> The *Uniting Detroiters* documentary features the voice of over 40 residents, activists and organization staff involved in progressive social justice work in Detroit. The feature-length film highlights their perspectives on neighborhood change, the contemporary political moment and the future of the city. It aims to provoke discussions in community meetings about strategies and tactics to build grassroots power, deepen democracy and foster good governance. Residents and community organizers involved in the *Uniting Detroiters* project have taken the lead in the production of the film, from conceptualizing questions to conducting videotaped interviews, shooting B-Roll, storyboarding and editing. Copies of the documentary will be distributed free of charge for community members to use, workshop, study and archive in the libraries of their organizations; it will also be available on the Internet. Text here comes from Andrew Newman and Sara Safransky (2014), "Remapping the Motor City and the Politics of Austerity," *Anthropology Now* 6, 3.

<sup>15</sup> The Atlas is a collective writing and mapping project; its contributors represent a diverse set of essayists, poets, photographers, cartographers and artists most of whom were participants in *Uniting Detroiters*. Created with the help of cartographer Tim Stallmann, the maps making up the Atlas are guided by the assumption that cartography is not merely about locating things in physical space, but also about re-situating communities and reimagining the limits of what a city can be as an urban, ecological, social and cultural space. In addition to insights into the current political moment by a variety of Detroiters, the Atlas will be a collection of divergent dreams and visions. It will combine maps of Detroit's past, such as the locations of Underground Railroad stations, with maps generated to aid current struggles related to water shutoffs and the Detroit Future City plan. It will serve as a directory to—and reference for—community organizations working to accomplish these goals. Text here comes from Andrew Newman and Sara Safransky (2014), "Remapping the Motor City and the Politics of Austerity," *Anthropology Now* 6, 3.

<sup>16</sup> The documentary adapts the "Community Voice Methodology." See Gabe Cumming & Carla Norwood, "The Community Voice Method: Using Participatory Research and Filmmaking to Foster Dialogue about Changing Landscapes." *Landscape and Urban Planning* 105, 4 (2012): 434-444. See also [www.communityvoicemethod.org](http://www.communityvoicemethod.org). Counter cartography is a movement premised on the assumption that a map is not a value-neutral, objective representation of a space, but a subjective depiction that is inherently political. Counter cartography seeks to unmask the hidden politics of mapping—namely that every map has an agenda—and redeploy map-making to serve the interest of those who are more often mapped themselves. In the process, the goal is to make the mapping process—and the language of power associated with cartography—more democratic and egalitarian. Text here comes from Andrew Newman and Sara Safransky (2014), "Remapping the Motor City and the Politics of Austerity," *Anthropology Now* 6, 3.

State University geography professor Bill Bunge and a young Detroit resident named Gwendolyn Warren.<sup>17</sup>

In order to develop the video documentary and “People’s Atlas,” we conducted 47 interviews and 19 oral histories with individuals involved in progressive social justice organizations and neighborhood groups. Our conversations focused on challenges facing residents and their visions for Detroit’s future. The Uniting Detroiters project aimed to build movement through the research process. Thus, we approached our interviews as “one-on-ones,” a community-organizing tool that aims to cultivate relationships and foster coalitions. To this end, we also held 3 workshops on development and land control, which approximately 150 Detroit residents attended in all. The aims of these workshops were to share our own research about the political-economic and territorial reconfigurations underway in the city and to create a space for discussing responses. With permission, we audio and video recorded (and later transcribed) conversations among participants and participatory mapping exercises in which they created their own maps of territorial reorderings underway in the city and articulated progressive land-use alternatives.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Bunge, William. 2011[1971]. *Fitzgerald: Geography of Revolution* (Athens: University of Georgia Press).

<sup>18</sup> My citation of interview material in the dissertation is somewhat unorthodox and requires explanation. I use a combination of interviewees’ real names and pseudonyms. I adopt this practice for several reasons. Social scientists generally use pseudonyms for the protection of interviewees. I use pseudonyms in any instance when I felt that interviewees were revealing information that might put the privacy of the speaker or others to whom they refer at risk. Whenever I use pseudonyms, I indicate them as such. In some instances, I use the interviewees’ real names, specifically when one’s identity cannot be easily masked or is central to the analysis. I also use interviewees’ real names in instances when they are engaged in their own deep theorizing about urban change and social transformation in Detroit. I feel their analyses should be credited to them like I would other academic scholars I cite.

As explained above, my analysis draws on interviews that I conducted as part of my individual research and interviews that my collaborators and I conducted as part of the Uniting Detroiters project. In the dissertation, I also draw on transcripts from a series of communities meetings that the Uniting Detroiters project hosted. In these meetings, we gained verbal consent from participants to audio record conversations for use in the project and research publications. In the instances that I draw on this material, I use pseudonyms and cite the meeting location and date. Those who were interviewed for the Uniting Detroiters project consented for their interviews to be used for the Uniting Detroiters documentary, atlas, reports, and scholarly publications. They also consented to having their interviews archived in a publically accessible community location for future research and educational use. We are

My dissertation shaped and has been shaped by the Uniting Detroiters project. Through my dissertation research, I was able to contribute to an analysis of the top-down planning and development changes in the city and rationalities and logics that undergird them. In turn, my participation in the Uniting Detroiters project facilitated my understanding of how social justice groups and neighborhood associations were making sense of the rapid changes underway in the city and responding through both resistance long-term grassroots planning. During my fieldwork, I met regularly with my collaborators, our community and student research assistants, and our Advisory Board members.<sup>19</sup> In our meetings, we talked about daily events, what we were learning in interviews, and how to make our research and community organizing processes more effective. These conversations deepened my understanding of the changes underway in the city, their impacts on people's lives, and social movement responses. In these meetings, I routinely shared what I was learning about planning and land governance in the city from my review of policy documents, plans, and personal interviews with planners and city officials. The synthesis of this material helped form the basis of our analysis that we shared in community meetings and have worked to widely disseminate through the Atlas and other collective writing projects. While my involvement in the Uniting Detroiters project shaped the form and content of this dissertation, I am solely responsible for the analysis of interviews and interpretation of events.

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currently working to publicly archive the material in Detroit. The goals of creating a local public archive of our interviews are threefold: First, it is a response to concern amongst some residents of "extractivist" research being conducted in Detroit, namely that stories were being taken from Detroiters yet often not repatriated or made available for local use. Second, and relatedly, one of the impetuses of the Uniting Detroiters project has been to rethink the way research is conducted in communities starting from the question of who benefits from the process and the outcomes. Finally, our interviews offer a ground-level perspective from residents and community activists of an important juncture in Detroit's history.

<sup>19</sup> The Atlas and documentary were completed with additional assistance from Danielle Atkinson, Heidi Bisson, Olivia Dobbs, Isra El-Beshir, Ayana Heumann, Jimmy Johnson, Gregg Newsom, Emma Slager, Denis Sloan, Justin Thompson, Jeremy Whiting, and the Uniting Detroiters Advisory Board which includes: Shea Howell, Shane Bernardo, Lottie Spady, Wayne Curtis, Aaron Timlin, Linda Campbell, Andrew Newman, Gregg Newsom, and myself.

Through my fieldwork, I began to see how the struggles around Detroit's "abandoned" landscape were shaped by multi-generational histories of displacement, dreams for different futures, and everyday life. They called up a city unmistakably different from the "blank slate" that it had been presented as. I learned that while everyone agrees that Detroit has suffered catastrophic population decline and that its residents confront massive land and labor problems, not everyone reads the landscape in the same way. Significantly, different ways of explaining the city's crisis also imply different solutions.

### **Shrinking Detroit: The politics of greening a Black city**

The jurisdictional lines that divide Detroit and its suburbs have been called the starkest racial divides in the United States. On one side, the pavement is pockmarked, on the other side, smooth. On one side, the grass in public spaces is uncut and wild. On the other side, it is well manicured. The difference in state maintenance is perhaps the most obvious indicator of a border. However, it does not elucidate what the border means for human life. When James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* was published in 1968, many U.S. cities, including Detroit, had been consumed by the flames of racial unrest. Baldwin, alive to the differences between Black and white worlds, described the experience of crossing what he called an invisible frontier:

I have crossed many a frontier ... have had my passport stamped, say, at the French-Swiss border, at the Swiss-Italian border; and I am beginning to believe that a landscape is not a landscape at all, merely a reflection of the sensibility of the people who live in it – certainly this is what one is watching as one crosses their forests and plains, vineyards and mountains, cities, tunnels, towns...the most dramatic, the most appalling, remains the invisible frontier which divides American towns, white from black ...<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned, Detroit – which is surrounded by predominantly white and relatively prosperous suburbs – has an 83 percent African-American population. By some estimates over

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<sup>20</sup> Baldwin, James. *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 183-86.

50 percent of working-age residents cannot find jobs and over 60 percent live in poverty.<sup>21</sup> The median household income in Detroit of \$28,000 stands in stark contrast to that in adjacent counties, where median incomes are more than twice as high.<sup>22</sup> The income gap grows even larger when Detroit is compared to its third- and fourth-ring suburbs, pointing to the fact that the city's myriad crises are largely due to racism and regional isolation and inextricable from the way racial hierarchies have and continue to structure space in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Detroit has suffered tremendously from home foreclosures. At the behest of credit-rating agencies, lenders, and multilateral institutions, the municipal government has responded to fiscal crisis by shedding property and outsourcing public services.<sup>24</sup> In March 2014, the city began an unprecedented bankruptcy process. This decision came after Michigan Republican Governor Rick Snyder's order that Detroit be placed under emergency management. Detroit was the sixth city in the state (all with predominantly Black populations) where Snyder had appointed an unelected emergency manager who had sweeping powers to balance cities' revenues and expenditures. After being appointed, emergency managers nullify the power of elected officials by assuming control of city finances and all affairs, meaning they can break union contracts,

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<sup>21</sup> Data Driven Detroit, "State of the child report," (2010) Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>22</sup> The median household income in Detroit of \$28,000 stands in stark contrast to that in adjacent counties, where median incomes range from \$54,000 (Macomb) to \$66,000 (Oakland). Data from U.S. Census (2010).

<sup>23</sup> On racial divides in Detroit see e.g., Darden, Joe, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1987); and Farley, Reynolds, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry Holzer. *Detroit Divided* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002); Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. On the racialization of space see, e.g., David Delaney, "The Space That Race Makes." *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002): 6–14; George Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race." *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1–07 (1994): 10–23.

<sup>24</sup> On "austerity urbanism" see Jamie Peck, "Pushing Austerity: State Failure, Municipal Bankruptcy and the Crises of Fiscal Federalism in the USA." *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 7, no. 1 (July 30, 2013): 17–44. On "minimal cities," see Michelle Wilde Anderson, "The New Minimal Cities." *The Yale Law Journal* 123, no. 1118 (2014): 1118–1227.

privatize public land and resources, and outsource public services.<sup>25</sup> Within this racialized neoliberal context, as Detroit's public infrastructure was dismembered and repurposed, urban "greening" became a new and contested approach to managing "excess" land, infrastructure, and stabilizing real estate markets.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, land-use planners, scholars, and the media had begun to pay increased attention to the phenomenon of urban shrinkage or "shrinking cities," a process of economic contraction and depopulation that had predominantly plagued postindustrial cities in the Global North, particularly in Europe, Japan, Canada, and the United States. By the time I began my fieldwork in 2010, members of the professional and academic urban planning communities had identified Detroit as the quintessential "shrinking city" and a test case for how municipal governments fiscally challenged by the management of infrastructures built to support large populations and embedded with the economic and political ideologies of Fordism, Keynesianism, and state socialism might reinvent themselves.

Urban shrinkage was, of course, not new but symptomatic of a wave of global economic restructuring. Cities have always experienced booms and busts – and even total population collapses. However, what was new in the first decades of the twenty-first century was how urban shrinkage as a conceptual frame came to diagnose a problem *and* present a suite of solutions. In other words, planning discourse about shrinking cities shifted from being descriptive (i.e., describing processes of shrinkage) to prescriptive (i.e., recommending the downsizing or rightsizing of cities). Accordingly, much of the shrinking cities literature to date has sought to shift planning discourses from lamenting urban decline to claiming it as an opportunity to reinvent planning, shifting the field's focus from a strong growth orientation to also emphasize

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<sup>25</sup> Peck, J. "Pushing Austerity," 2013.

de-growth or planned shrinkage. Moreover, scholars have cast shrinking cities as a laboratory for sustainable urbanism in an era of climate change.<sup>26</sup> One of the central approaches to planned shrinking is the revaluation of urban nature. For example, “emergent nature” on vacant lots with weak property markets has become a new arena for ecological planning and ecosystem services.<sup>27</sup> This kind of green redevelopment is attractive because it has environmental benefits. It is also a relatively inexpensive solution for dealing with vacancy. Moreover, it leverages emerging national and international markets around green infrastructure.<sup>28</sup>

Planned shrinkage and green urbanism are complicated by the way they dovetail with what geographer Jamie Peck calls “austerity urbanism.”<sup>29</sup> New forms of green urbanism, in particular, are laudable in ecological terms, but their redistributive and racial politics are often ignored. Indeed, the 347-page Detroit Future City plan only invoked the concept of racial economic disparity six times.<sup>30</sup> The plan framed Detroit’s land crisis as primarily a problem of spatial mismatch. In so doing, it obscured the historical conditions of production of the

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<sup>26</sup> Hilda Blanco, Marina Alberti, Robert Olshansky, Stephanie Chang, Stephen M. Wheeler, John Randolph, James B. London, et al. “Shaken, Shrinking, Hot, Impoverished and Informal: Emerging Research Agendas in Planning.” *Progress in Planning* 72, no. 4 (November 2009): 195–250; Karina Pallagst, “Planning Challenges from an International Perspective.” In *Cities Growing Smaller*, Vol. 2007. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University, 2008; Martinez-Fernandez, Cristina, Ivonne Audirac, Sylvie Fol, and Emmanuèle Cunningham-Sabot. “Shrinking Cities: Urban Challenges of Globalization.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36, no. 2 (March 01, 2012): 213–25.

<sup>27</sup> Justin B. Hollander, K. Pallagst, T. Schwarz, and F. J. Popper. “Planning Shrinking Cities.” *Progress in Planning* 72, no. 4 (2009): 223–32; Joan Iverson Nassauer and Julia Raskin. “Urban Vacancy and Land Use Legacies: A Frontier for Urban Ecological Research, Design, and Planning.” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 125 (May 2014): 245–5.

<sup>28</sup> On expansion of green infrastructure markets see: NRDC. “New Partnership Releases Path-Breaking Guide to Stimulate Private Investment in Natural Infrastructure Nationwide.” *Press Release*, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Peck, J. “Pushing Austerity,” 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Three references call for moving beyond racial and economic difference to develop a common vision for the city’s future. Two are statistical citations about the high incident of health hazards in Detroit and low rates of African American business ownership because of the legacy of racial policies. The final argues the city should work to attract and retain residents regardless of race or household need. That all are passing references with no critical analysis suggests the DFC plan is an explicit strategy of deracialization.



“mismatch” and consequently misidentified solutions. In Detroit, then, the landscapes emerging through new planning practices do reflect a particular sensibility, but not necessarily those of the majority of their inhabitants.<sup>31</sup>

According to the Detroit Future City plan, the city’s crisis revolves around the problem of excess land defined in the language of private property: the lot (i.e., the city has 150,000 “abandoned” lots). The most common way of thinking about property in the United States is as a thing that belongs to someone or some groups. Another frequent way of thinking about property is in terms of legal rights – the right to the possession, use, or disposal of something. To understand land politics and struggles over the future of Detroit, I draw analytical attention to what Nicholas Blomley has called the constant “doing” of property -- the multitude of everyday actions that reaffirm its sanctity.<sup>32</sup>

### **Property as social practice**

Property is not simply about land or land-use, but involves deeply moral and political questions of social order. Anthropologists Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey encourage us to ask: What are the effects of property? What kind of reality does property become?<sup>33</sup> In Detroit, where a property system is being recreated, such questions assumed a central place in debates over the city’s future. To engage these questions is to look at property as a process of “gathering” and “halting,” as Marilyn Strathern calls it, that leads to the fabrication of distinct persons and things. “Ownership gathers things momentarily,” she writes, “to a point by locating

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<sup>31</sup> See Safransky (forthcoming), “Greening urbanisms: competing visions for postindustrial futures in Detroit.”

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas Blomley draws on Carol Rose in talking about how property requires the constant “doing.” See: Nicholas Blomley, “Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid” 93, no. 1 (2003): 121–41; C. M. Rose, *Property as persuasion: Essays, on the history, theory, and rhetoric of ownership* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994).

<sup>33</sup> See Katherine Verdery and Caroline Humphrey, eds. *Property in Question: Value Transformations in the Global Economy* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004)

them in the owner, halting endless dissemination, effecting an identity.”<sup>34</sup> Put differently, to see property as relational means to see it not as a thing but a set of relationships and social practices.

My analysis of land politics in Detroit draws on the scholarship of critical property theorists and rests on three central claims. First, property regimes are active and constructed through practice rather than fixed. In the case of Detroit, the crisis in private property markets foregrounds how property systems are made, unmade, and remade. Moments of breakdown, like this one, make normally taken-for-granted processes and practices visible. In Detroit, as the dissertation shows, actors respond to the breakdown by attempting to restabilize the formal system and pursuing other goals through informal practices. Property claims take place in many different ways, for example, through violence, discourse, physical markers like fences, the development of standards, visualizations like plans, grids, and deeds, ceremonies of possession, eviction, squatting, and protest. These symbolic acts and artifacts are used to both establish – and challenge -- property boundaries. It is through dispersed practices that property boundaries and regimes become materially and culturally stabilized and recede to the background conveying a reality that seems inevitable, natural, and true.

Second, property is relational. To see property in this way is to recognize not only a political economy of land, but also the ways property systems and practices shape landscapes, subjectivities, and bodies. Not only is the land a witness to property lines, but people also bear witness to how cuts are made. This happens in several ways. Liberal real property shapes how we ethically deliberate and interact with others. The private property model of ownership presumes an individual legal, autonomous subject that promotes intersubjective severability. Such was the premise of Locke’s argument that private property created good citizens. Another

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<sup>34</sup> Marilyn Strathern, “Potential property: Intellectual rights and property in persons; what is intellectual property after?” In Marilyn Strathern (ed.), *Property, Substance, Effect* (London-New Brunswick, Athlone Press, 1999) 177.

example of this severability is heirs' property, which is particularly a problem in the African-American community. Heirs' property is land, often a family's home place that is passed down from one generation to the next without a will. According to law, the title to the property must be *individually* divided amongst the owner's heirs upon their death.<sup>35</sup> We are shaped by property in other ways too. Property shapes our physiology, the ways we access resources, and how we embody space as individuals and societies. Given this, inasmuch as we enact private property practices and move through a world conditioned by private property, a relationship of abandonment and severalty that is intrinsic to private property becomes a part of us.<sup>36</sup> I do not mean this statement in a deterministic sense, which brings me to my third point.

Given that property requires a constant doing, it can and is interrupted, reinscribed through new enclosures, and struggled over. Controversy suggests that title to land is not unitary, but burdened by other claims, demonstrating how land, as Blomley argues, is "distinctly unquiet."<sup>37</sup> Struggle elucidates domination and resistance. It brings into view, on the one hand, how governing practices target "disorderly" landscapes and power works through liberal property. For example, Detroit's citywide planning process uses devices of simplification to reconfigure territory and enroll people in new ways of seeing and being. It reimagines municipal territory (e.g., new market-based and ecological zones), identifies new subjects (e.g., entrepreneurs and citizen consumers), and deploys strategies of control (e.g., regimes of

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<sup>35</sup> Heirs property can become a problem because all the heirs needs to sign off before anything can be done to the property, such as selling it, getting loans, applying for insurance assistance after Hurricane Katrina for example.

<sup>36</sup> On abandonment and subjectivity under late liberalism, see Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). In her book review of *Economies of Abandonment*, Gabriella Valdivia frames abandonment in similar terms – "abandonment is us." See: Gabriella Valdivia, "Abandonment Is Us." *Dialogues in Human Geography* 3, no. 2 (August 02, 2013): 233–36.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Blomley, "Enclosure, Common Right and the Property of the Poor." *Social & Legal Studies* 17, no. 3 (September 01, 2008): 311–31.

participation). On the other hand, struggle shows how new property “cuts” do not entirely do away with prior patterns of use. For example, residents develop collective strategies for caring for and transforming “vacant” land in their neighborhood as a community resource and means of survival (e.g., community gardens, social centers). In holding this tension, we see that dominant regimes of private property often overshadow but do not eradicate alternative spatialities grounded in other common property claims that fail to fit neatly into the categories of private or state property. Importantly, these alternatives often reveal other ways of ordering reality. In this dissertation, I focus on both struggles and on spaces in which people are working to unmake abandonment and cultivate a new kind of relationality and mutuality. If private property is about severing relationship then these projects are rooted in a recognition that healing cuts requires reconfiguring the unstable assemblage that has linked abandonment to race, property, land, space – and us.

Many of the residents and community activists who I talked with in Detroit held deep concerns about Detroit Future City’s proposed territorial reordering of the city and felt it reinforced portrayals of the city as a “blank slate” in ways that made existing residents and their claims to land and alternative futures invisible. They expressed the idea that Detroit’s crisis was not as much about the problem of “abandoned” lots as it was the abandonment of *people*. Residents explained this abandonment was rooted in a history of racism and colonialism that orders space in the United States. As an ongoing process, it had recently been given new names like shrinking, “right sizing,” and redevelopment. In this sense, abandonment was neither the result of faceless political economic forces nor the cumulative actions of irresponsible people in the city (greedy politicians, culture of poverty). Rather, abandonment was an unfinished political project, an active process, and was tied up with practices of (un)making property relations.

This historical and active understanding of abandonment brought other relationships into view that are sometimes hard to see. First, Detroit's landscape was not "empty" but haunted by multigenerational histories of racialized dispossession.<sup>38</sup> Second, social groups had different capacities to make land into property because some kinds of property practices were considered more legitimate than others within existing governmental and economic structures, limiting certain claims to space. Finally, struggles around abandonment revealed alternative visions for not only Detroit's future but also the organization of social life. In the rest of this introduction, I draw out this way of seeing abandonment in relationship to race, land, and property.

### **A slow-motion Katrina in Detroit**

What does abandonment mean for struggles underway in Detroit and beyond the city?<sup>39</sup>

In Detroit, planners likened the city's half-century-long process of depopulation to a "slow

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<sup>38</sup> My approach is inspired by Avery Gordon's work on haunting. She proposes a "historical diagnostic" in which we recognize how things could have been and can be otherwise. In her words, a historical diagnostic "link[s] the politics of accounting, in all its intricate political-economic, institutional, and affective dimensions, to potent imaginations of what has been done and what is to be done otherwise." See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 18.

<sup>39</sup> I am influenced in my thinking by a number of scholars who have theorized abandonment, including Elizabeth Povinelli, Zygmunt Bauman, Henry Giroux, Ruth Gilmore, Joao Biehl. See especially Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belong and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Biehl (1998) has argued that coinciding with economic globalization, state reform, and the acceleration of claims over human rights and citizenship has been "a continuous local production of social death that remains by and large unaccounted for." Biehl is concerned with how technical-political dynamics make people invisible, how they are turned into absent things through bureaucratic procedures, informational difficulties, unresolved disputes over diagnostic criteria, sheer neglect, and moral contempt. He refers to these state procedures and actions as "technologies of invisibility." "Letting die," he writes, "is a technical and political action, contiguous with the scientific, medical, and pastoral power that makes live...Agamben points out that the determinant structure of our modern inherited ways of ordering public spaces and political relations is in relation to a ban....What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it – at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured" (109-110). Giroux (2006) argues, "Biopower in its current shape has produced a new form of biopolitics marked by a cleansed visual and social landscape in which the poor, the elderly, the infirm, and criminalized populations all share a common fate of disappearing from public view. Rendered invisible in deindustrialized communities far removed from the suburbs, barred from the tourist laden sections of major cities, locked into understaffed nursing homes, interned in bulging prisons built in remote communities, hidden in decaying schools in rundown neighborhoods that bear the look of Third World slums, populations of poor Black and Brown citizens exist outside the view of most Americans. They have become the waste-products of the American Dream, if not of modernity itself" (186). See: Biehl, Joao, "Technologies of Invisibility," in *Anthropologies of Modernity: Foucault, Governmentality, and Life Politics*. Blackwell Publishing, Chapter 10; and Giroux, Henry (2006) "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the

motion Katrina” that left a bigger impact. Hurricane Katrina, which struck the Gulf Coast in 2005, exposed a politics of abandonment endemic in the United States. The flooding from the storm precipitated intense depopulation and land vacancy in New Orleans, which planners were hard pressed to manage. In 2014, approximately 150,000 parcels are “vacant” in Detroit; 45,000 in New Orleans.<sup>40</sup> This geography of comparison went beyond demographics. I discovered during my fieldwork that planners and city officials often traveled between the two cities trading redevelopment solutions. These meetings led to a discursive reframing of crisis as an opportunity and “visionary” models for reusing vacant land, among them greening “empty” areas to raise property values. These comparisons depoliticized or naturalized abandonment through plans and policies that failed to confront the conditions of its production.

For many people, Katrina, deemed a “natural disaster,” revealed something quite unnatural. For Black studies scholar Clyde Woods and geographer Katherine McKittrick, it exposed uneven geographies and how the wretched of the earth have long occupied the underside of democracy.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, cultural critic Henry Giroux argued that the staggering indifference to human suffering displayed in the storm’s aftermath typically attributed to incompetence and failed leadership, revealed something systematic. Like Detroit, it suggested a link between an apartheid past and what he calls a “new biopolitics of disposability” in which the most

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Biopolitics of Disposability”, *College Literature* 33, 3, Summer, pp. 171-196. Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. “Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning.” In *Engaging Contradictions*, edited by Charlie Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>40</sup> The figure of 150,000 comes from Detroit Future City Strategic Framework (December 2013), available here: <http://detroitfuturecity.com/framework/>. According to the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center’s analysis of data from the United States Postal Service (USPS), in September 2010, New Orleans had approximately 43,755 “blighted homes” and “empty lots.” Coupled with 9,356 “vacant but habitable housing units,” they estimate that nearly 25% of residential homes and addresses in New Orleans were “blighted” or “vacant.” See report here: [http://www.nola.gov/getattachment/Performance-and-Accountability/Initiatives-and-Reports/BlightSTAT/Blight-Report\\_web.pdf/](http://www.nola.gov/getattachment/Performance-and-Accountability/Initiatives-and-Reports/BlightSTAT/Blight-Report_web.pdf/)

<sup>41</sup> Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2007).

vulnerable amongst us are rendered invisible and to fend for themselves.<sup>42</sup> Geographers Bruce Braun and James McCarthy argued that Katrina brought into view the racialized nature of the sovereign “ban” (drawing on Giorgio Agamben) namely that an entire population of poor, mostly Black residents were simultaneously abandoned by law and subject to it.<sup>43</sup> Katrina, at least momentarily, made visible what has for the most part been elided in planning for Detroit’s future: the racialized abandonment of people.

If Katrina revealed how the racialized demarcation of space makes it possible for many of us to ignore abandonment, it also raised an important set of questions about the projects being pursued by people on the “underside” of democracy – alternative worldviews, emancipatory strategies, and other ways of producing and perceiving space. In other words, post-Katrina New Orleans like Detroit elicited a question posed by Elizabeth Povenelli about how within zones of abandonment people create new forms of life so that they can persevere. “How can new social worlds,” she asks, “endure the ‘wavering of death’ that defines these spaces?”<sup>44</sup> Katrina (real or the metaphorical slow-motion one) did not cause the “abandonment” of New Orleans or Detroit, it only laid it bare. As Braun and McCarthy argue no sovereign power to let die exists, without its “scandalous genealogy.”<sup>45</sup> There are multiple ways to trace such a scandalous genealogy. One way is through an etymology of the word abandonment, which points to its foundational relationship with private property.

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<sup>42</sup> Giroux, “Reading Hurricane Katrina.”

<sup>43</sup> Bruce Braun and James McCarthy. “Hurricane Katrina and Abandoned Being.” *Environment and Planning D Space and Society* 23, no. 2003 (2005): 795–810.

<sup>44</sup> Povenelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Braun and McCarthy, “Hurricane Katrina and Abandoned Being,” 803. They draw on Adam Sitze for the term “scandalous genealogy.” See: Sitze, Adam. “Denialism.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103 (2004): 769–811.

## The changing meaning of abandonment

The word abandonment is traced to the eleventh and thirteenth centuries in Middle French as *metrè à bandon*, meaning to put under anyone's jurisdiction or domain, to proscribe, to release from proscription, to banish. *Ban* refers to a restriction or obligation under feudal or church law. Sociologist Roger Salerno writes, "Originally, it was an interdiction, sometimes a proclamation or edict; frequently an excommunication. There is a close association between *abandonment* and other derivatives of ban, such as French *au ban*, meaning to outlaw, or the English 'band' meaning something that binds, fetters, or restricts; or bandit – one who is outside the law, unrestricted."<sup>46</sup> Thus, in its earliest uses, abandonment described submission to authority, control, or jurisdiction of another. It denoted servitude and complete and utter surrender, for example, the submission of the serf to master or priest to church.

However, by the fourteenth century, abandonment was also used to describe disregard for social obligation or "an abdication of one's rights or obligation to another person, place, value, or thing."<sup>47</sup> By the time new land tenure arrangements and enclosure policies in England forced tens of thousands of peasants from common farmlands as part of the emergence of agrarian capitalism, the meaning of abandonment had expanded to include the severing of feudal ties, alienation of property, homelessness, and loss of fixed place in the world. These new meanings signified a rupture in social ties, obligations, attachment to place -- in short, in relationality.

The private property system we have inherited in the United States has roots in this historical and geographical structure of dispossession filtered through the racial reordering of colonialism. The degeneration of medieval fealty and familial and patrimonial loyalties to which

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<sup>46</sup> See Roger Salerno, *Landscapes of Abandonment* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3-4.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



Salerno refers coincided with the beginning of colonialism in the 1400s, which was predicated on a racial demarcation of space. It involved seeing disorder and drawing a line to create order, an inside and an outside. A line was drawn between Europe and the rest of the world. The line established a division between who was seen as capable of ruling and who was not.<sup>48</sup>

As historian Cedric Robinson and other scholars have shown, capitalism and slavery grew together.<sup>49</sup> Thus, racism is not derivative or epiphenomenal to capitalism but fundamental to its evolution. In his etymology, Salerno describes how, with the rise of free-market capitalism, the Reformation, and Enlightenment, abandonment started to connote something new – *freedom*. Within this context, abandonment was used to mean, “at one’s own discretion,” “at one’s own will,” and “without interference.” As Salerno writes. “These were eventually joined by ‘unrestricted freedom,’ and ‘free without responsibility.’”<sup>50</sup> Under liberalism, then, abandonment took on a double meaning, referring to both individual freedom and the abdication of obligation to another person or place.<sup>51</sup> In the next section, I situate the changing meaning of abandonment within the context of U.S. settler colonialism.

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<sup>48</sup> Alvaro Reyes and Mara Kaufman. “Sovereignty, Indigeneity , Territory : Zapatista Autonomy and the New Practices of Decolonization.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>49</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983; Gordon, Avery. “Cedric Robinson’s Anthropology of Marxism.” *Race & Class* 47, no. 2 (April 01, 2005): 23–38; Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>50</sup> Salerno, *Landscapes of Abandonment*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Liberalism represented a new way of thinking about economic affairs. While the term *laissez-faire* capitalism (free-market capitalism) suggests non-intervention, as Perelman has noted, the early political economists systematically engaged in projects to make society more market-oriented by urging measures to deprive people of any alternatives to wage labor. They advocated simultaneously for *laissez-faire* ideology and for policies that were at odds with *laissez-faire* principles. These policies were focused on undermining people’s ability to provide for themselves and keeping people from finding alternative survival strategies outside the system of wage labor. People were driven to wage labor through brutal discipline. If the poor were taken to not be sufficiently industrious, their want of discipline was criminalized and medicalized. Thus, the violent dispossession of the people and the creation of free-market economics was a dual, complementary project. In other words, the rhetoric of individual liberty was dependent on the hard work of common people. The invisible hand only operated in the framework of contrived law and order. The puzzle of liberalism was when to intervene and when not to intervene. See, e.g., Michael Perleman,

## The settler colonial present

Anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that a “key feature of the frontier” is that it asks “participants to see a landscape that doesn’t exist, at least not yet. It must continually erase old residents’ rights to create its wild and empty spaces where *discovering* resources, not stealing them, is possible. To do so, too, it must cover up the conditions of its own production.”<sup>52</sup>

Postcolonial theory elucidates the ways places and people live in the shadows of colonialism, but it is less often directed “home.” In the case of the United States this lacuna may be an artifact of the success of a settler colonial project that has been so complete that it is often not recognized as such, as anthropologist Jessica Catellino, among others, has argued.<sup>53</sup>

What is settler colonialism? Settler colonies are places where settlers come to stay displacing previous residents and establishing their own governments. Examples include the United States, South Africa, Canada, Australia, and Israel. Settler colonialism turns on the acquisition of land and territory.<sup>54</sup> Historically, the state used private property rights as a tool to extend its power over territory (the frontier) and make responsible and productive subjects who improved the land. Property rights and uneven development in the United States are rooted in a racial grammar of citizenship in which native people were eliminated and dispossessed of land

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“The Secret History of Primitive Accumulation and Classical Political Economy” in *The Invention of Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 68.

<sup>53</sup> Jessica R. Cattellino, “Anthropologies of the United States,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (October 21, 2010): 275–92; Jessica Cattellino, “Thoughts on the U.S. as a Settler Society (Plenary Remarks, 2010 SANA Conference).” *North American Dialogue: Newsletter of the Society for the Anthropology of North America* 14 (2011): 1–6; M. Mikadashi, “What is settler colonialism (for Leo Delano Ames Jr.),” *AICRJ* 37, 2 (2013), 23–34; Alyosha Goldstein, ed. *Formations of United States Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>54</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Patrick Wolfe, “The Settler Complex : An Introduction.” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 37, no. 2 (2013): 1–22; Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race” 106, no. 3 (2001): 866–905; Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (Cassell, New York, 1999).

and Black bodies as slaves were used to settle space. Representations of uninhabited nature or “empty” landscapes were central to European settlement in the Americas because, as Anna Tsing observes, they reframed theft as discovery. This way of seeing is deeply cultural, sometimes opportunistic. One is able to see a landscape as abandoned when its historical inhabitation is unknown or existing ways of life are unrecognized or not considered legitimate.<sup>55</sup>

This dissertation approaches settler colonialism as a historical structure of dispossession and form of productive and normalizing power that continues to structure society in the present.<sup>56</sup> By attending to the “colonial present,” to borrow geographer Derek Gregory’s term, I do not mean to suggest that nothing has changed since formal colonialism ended in the United States, but that settler colonialism is embedded in and works through institutions, discourses, culture,

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<sup>55</sup> See William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). To be sure, Native Americans had a variety of property systems. Yet they were not based on private property and therefore often not recognized by settlers as legitimate. As Cronon argues, Native Americans owned things because they were useful and people possessed usufruct rights. As evidenced by place names, land use was not about possession or ownership but rather about where herbs, plants, and animals could be found.

<sup>56</sup> Much of the existing literature on settler colonialism in the United States emerges from indigenous studies and focuses on the Native American experience. I build on a small but growing body of scholarship that draws attention to how settler colonialism also shapes anti-Black racism and Black displacement. For example, Frank Wilderson uses the ontological category “settler-master,” arguing that the master and settler were the same person. (See: Wilderson, Frank. *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2010]). Andrea Smith theorizes indigeneity, settler colonialism, and white supremacy together (See: Smith, Andrea. “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, and White Supremacy.” In *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Daniel Martinez HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Pulido. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012]). Jeanette King argues that settler colonialism enacts genocide against native people and structures anti-Black racism. She writes, “Settler colonialism’s use of the slave body to make settled space (the plantation) also produces Black bodies as property. Post emancipation, settler colonialism seeks to eliminate the Black body from the Settler’s landscape...Black bodies are contained (mass incarceration), killed and on rare occasion assimilated into settler civil society.” (See: Tiffany Jeanette King, “In the Clearing: Black Female Bodies, Space and Settler Colonial Landscapes.” University of Maryland, College Park, 2013, 19). Katherine McKittrick writes about the afterlife of slavery in a similar way, although she does not use the terminology of settler colonialism. She proposes the concept of “plantation future,” which she describes as a “time space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors and, consequently, brings into sharp focus the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death that can no longer analytically sustain this violence. For those of us interested in addressing race, space, and premature and preventable death, plantation futures demand decolonial thinking that is predicated on human life.” (See: McKittrick, Katherine. “Plantation Futures.” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 342 [November 20, 2013]: 1–15).

and spatial practices in the twenty-first century.<sup>57</sup> Therefore, my aim is to deepen our understanding of the processes of neoliberalism and gentrification underway in Detroit by situating them in relationship to a racist history of settlement in the United States and resistance efforts aimed at capacitating more ethical forms of societal organization.<sup>58</sup>

In Detroit, as I showed above, recycled frontier discourses of decline and romantic settlement have been used to claim urban space. The discursive and technical treatment of land as “empty” and open to settlement and private property as a civilizing mechanism on the frontier has been imbricated in contemporary imaginaries of the city and extended through market-based planning practices. Images of Detroit as an “urban wilderness” and “no man’s land” have been accompanied by a frontier lexicon of “urban frontier” that betrays a disturbing willingness to repeat the error of seeing settled landscapes as though they were empty and free for taking. On the historical settler colonial frontier, *terra nullius* discourses negated Native American claims to land. Today, in Detroit they function as anti-Black racism by making current residents invisible and eliding their claims to space. New settlers deploy old rural justifications for appropriation in a new urban context, including claims that existing residents are not able to make use of the land because there is too much of it; they have failed to “improve” the land because they are lazy; they squander resources and their poverty is a result of their waste.<sup>59</sup> Geographer Neil Smith’s work on gentrification elucidates the productive power of urban frontier discourses: “[It] treats present-inner populations as a natural element of their physical surroundings. The term ‘urban pioneer’ is therefore as arrogant as the original notion of ‘pioneers’ in that it suggests a city not

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<sup>57</sup> Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property.” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (2012): 1707–91.

<sup>59</sup> See Safransky, “Greening the Urban Frontier,” 2014.

yet socially inhabited; like Native Americans the urban working class is seen as less than social, a part of the physical environment ... the frontier discourse serves to rationalize and legitimate a process of conquest, whether in the eighteenth or nineteenth-century West, or in the late-twentieth [or twenty-first] century inner city.”<sup>60</sup>

On the historical U.S. frontier, private property was a key mechanism of settlement, which was thought to spread progress, economic prosperity, and the virtues of improvement and civic mindedness.<sup>61</sup> The frontier is a space of abundance, and yet only certain people and forms of labor have ever been recognized and legitimated. On the nineteenth-century U.S. Western frontier, the legal capacity to claim property rights was contingent upon race. New lands and new (white) blood for nation building were produced through enclosure and severalty. The practice occurred most violently through the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887, a prime example of how the private property model of ownership presumes an individual legal, autonomous subject. Modeled on the first Homestead Act, it was the centerpiece of Native American assimilation programs. “Severalty” is defined as the quality or condition of being separate or distinct. In property law, it expresses the tenure of property, especially land, as an individual right, not to be jointly held with another or others.<sup>62</sup> Tribal lands were divided into allotments for which Native Americans could then apply for individual title. However, one had to first prove their “Indianness.” To be

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<sup>60</sup> Smith, Neil. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. (New York: Routledge, 1996), xvi.

<sup>61</sup> Once land is left “wholly to nature,” as the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke argued in *Two Treatise of Government*, there is a moral imperative to claim it through labor and secure it as private property. He argued that once people became property owners they also became civilized and rational subjects who seek to “improve” (i.e., productively use) their land. A host of other assumptions followed. If wealth derived from the proper use of property, then poverty was the result of individual mismanagement. Thus, creating private property not only necessitated marking boundaries on the land, but between people considered eligible and ineligible for ownership and, by extension, citizenship. Our whole system of government and taxation is inextricable from private ownership. Locke, John. *The Second Treatise of Government*. (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1950 [1690]).

<sup>62</sup> American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, “Severalty.” Def. Houghton Mifflin (New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 2006).

eligible to apply for land, Native Americans were subject to blood quantum testing. The state racially classified African Americans and Native Americans in opposing ways. The one-drop rule meant that the category “Black” withstood unlimited admixture, whereas the category “red” was created for dilution.<sup>63</sup>

Historical race-property categories -- intended to legally augment slave populations for labor and reduce the populations of Native Americans who had a legal claim to territory – persist in our present geographic order. While racial formation – the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created – varies over time and place, the U.S. landscape remains deeply racialized as geographers have pointed out.<sup>64</sup> Black studies scholar George Lipsitz argues “[M]ore than four decades after the civil rights activism of the 1960s, and nearly one hundred and fifty years after the abolition of slavery, race remains the most important single variable determining opportunities and life chances in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than in the racialization of space.”<sup>65</sup>

To call attention to the racialization of space is to emphasize the role of space in maintaining structures of domination, subordination, and inequality. More specifically, it elucidates the geographic afterlives of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and redlining – affective and material.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*.

<sup>64</sup> David Delaney, “The Space That Race Makes.” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002): 6–14; Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake. “Racism out of Place : Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New Millennium.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 2 (2000): 392–403; Lipsitz, George. “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race.” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1–07 (1994): 10–23; Richard Schein, ed. *Landscape and Race in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Peake and Kobayashi define racialization as “material processes and ideological consequences of the construction of ‘race’ as a means of differentiating and valuing ‘white’ people above those of color.” (See: Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake. “Racism out of Place : Thoughts on Whiteness and an Antiracist Geography in the New

## The wall

I had a difficult time finding the Birwood wall in Detroit. It was easy to miss even though it is six feet tall and a foot thick and extends for half a mile. Hidden in the backyards of modest middle-class homes just south of Eight Mile Road, the “wailing wall,” an infamous physical and symbolic racial dividing line between Detroit and its northern suburbs, was built in the 1940s by a developer seeking a loan to build an all-white subdivision on Detroit’s northwest side. The Federal Housing Administration denied the developer financing because his proposed development was adjacent to a Black neighborhood. The FHA, which mandated racial homogeneity in housing developments and denied mortgage insurance in mixed race neighborhoods, considered the development too risky of an investment. The FHA would only guarantee financing and insurance if the developer built a wall to separate future white residents from their Black neighbors.<sup>67</sup>



**FIGURE 1.** Detroit Wailing Wall in 1940s (Source: Library of Congress).

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Millennium.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90, no. 2 (2000): 393). To be clear, geographies of race are also embedded in other geographies of economic, cultural, and political power.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 63 – 72.

When hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated north from the segregationist south seeking to escape the caste system and racial violence, they encountered similar, if less visible, racial barriers in their new homes.<sup>68</sup> In the south, a “separate but equal” built environment had emerged in the aftermath of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896, including separate water fountains, swimming pools, railcars, and telephone booths. In Detroit, the Birwood wall was perhaps the most obvious physical correlate of Jim Crow laws, even though it was an artifact of a different variant of state racism: a nefarious political economy of housing that entrenched a preexisting separate and unequal property regime.<sup>69</sup>

Today, parts of the Detroit wailing wall are colorful. Murals and graffiti mask its grey concrete exterior. An entrepreneurial social service agency has started marketing coasters made from photographs of the wall’s artwork, packaged in boxes made from salvaged wood from abandoned houses in Detroit. A set of four costs twenty-five dollars. The coasters, the agency’s director claims, not only provide jobs in tough times but should also lead to some great conversations about race in Detroit and the United States.<sup>70</sup>

Forgotten to many is the role the federal government through the Home Ownership Loan Corporation (HOLC) – and its outgrowth, the FHA – played in fundamentally reshaping urban space in the United States by legally codifying a racist logic that if land was to be made investible and valuable, Blacks had to be kept “in their place.” In 1933, the HOLC was

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<sup>68</sup> Isabelle Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York, Random House, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> In the mid-1870s when the North withdrew its oversight of Southern integration, whites in the Southern states began to reinstitute the racial caste system. *Plessy v. Ferguson* resulted from a lawsuit that emerged in Louisiana when Homer Plessy (considered to be “colored”) protested being told to move seats to the colored car. The Supreme Court ruled 8 to 1 that “equal but separate” was constitutional, a ruling that held until *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954.

<sup>70</sup> AP reporter, “Detroit’s wall of racism: Six-foot barrier that kept black children away from middle-class whites in a chilling reminder of segregated America,” (May 1, 2013), <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2317537/Detroits-wall-racism-Six-foot-barrier-kept-black-children-away-middle-class-whites-chilling-reminder-segregated-America.html#ixzz34XG6Mz67>



established with a mandate to protect urban homeowners from foreclosure. To this end, it issued long-term self-amortizing mortgages, growing U.S. homeownership exponentially. It also established the first countrywide appraisal system. For the first time in U.S. history, property values were commensurable across distance.<sup>71</sup> The HOLC hired appraisers to assess the “quality” of neighborhoods in cities with at least 40,000 people across the country. In 239 cities, appraisers assigned every city block a rating from A to D. First-grade or A-rated areas were considered “hotspots” and showed room for growth, whereas D-rated areas were considered high risk zones and characterized by “lower homeownership rates, poor housing conditions, ‘detrimental influences in a pronounced degree,’ and ‘undesirable population or an infiltration of it.’”<sup>72</sup> The assessments were then translated into a series of color-coded risk assessment maps with A ratings coded in green, B in blue, C in yellow, and D in red. The redline was the HOLC and FHA’s most damning legacy. As a technology of governance, it systematically pegged property values to race while providing cover for planners and developers who insisted that new urban orders were technical products of unregulated free-market activity, not racism. And yet, between 1930 and 1950, 60 percent of homes purchased in the United States were FHA financed, but less than 2 percent of these loans went to nonwhites.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> As historian Kenneth Jackson writes, “The element of novelty did not lie in the appraisal requirement itself – that had long been a required real estate practice. Rather, it lay in the creation of a formal and uniform system of appraisal, reduced to writing, structure in defined procedures, and implemented by individuals only after intensive training. The ultimate aim was that one appraiser’s judgment of value would have meaning to an investor located somewhere else.” (See Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.)

<sup>72</sup> FHLBB Division of Research and Statistics 1937 quoted in Amy E. Hillier, “Residential Security Maps and Neighborhood Appraisals: The Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the Case of Philadelphia.” *Social Science History* 29, no. 2 (2005): 207–33.

<sup>73</sup> Hillier, “Residential Security Maps,” 33. See Hillier’s argument here on not over-privileging HOLC maps and other ways that redlining happened. Also see Freund’s powerful argument: “Through its involvement in both zoning and mortgage politics, the federal government put considerable force behind the theory that racial segregation was driven not by white racism but by economic necessity, that exclusion was a ‘market imperative,’ required solely by the principles of land-use science...Not coincidentally, this shift occurred as older narratives about racial hierarchy and biological difference were being challenged and, eventually, abandoned by most white people .... federal

Blacks and whites in the Birwood neighborhood are no longer separate because the neighborhood is almost all Black. Detroit, south of Eight Mile, is 83 percent Black and consistently rates as the poorest large city in the United States. By contrast, Oakland County, the suburb to the north, is 78 percent white and among the richest counties in the country. As a material manifestation of the redline, a border that creates value, and a concrete manifestation of the enduring structures of state racism, the wall demonstrates how the past is a burden that makes ethical demands in the present. In order to recognize how the entangled histories of race, property, and value shape the abandonment of people today, we must, as Saidiya Hartman writes, “unleash freedom from the history of property that secured it.”<sup>74</sup>

To call attention to the racialization of space flags both historical alienation from land (of Blacks and other subaltern communities) and alternative land and property practices (e.g., slave plots on the plantation, kilombos, heirs property, land cooperatives) and different classificatory systems (e.g., debates in Detroit over the naming of “vacant” land). These counter-spatial imaginaries, as George Lipsitz points out, are frequently based on use value rather than exchange value, carry a sense of mutuality, and are locations from which people fight for social justice. To recognize these quotidian practices of claiming space and making property upon contested landscapes is to consider how things can be otherwise.

We often think of “no man’s land” as unoccupied land, but American essayist Eula Biss writes that it also means “debatable land.” In its earliest usage “no man’s land” identified a place

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interventions were instrumental in popularizing a powerful and quite paradoxical myth: that neither suburban growth nor new patterns of racial inequality owed anything to the state’s efforts. The federal government insisted that the new metropolitan order was a product of unregulated free-market activity ... the process by which whites came to be invested in free-market narratives.” In the so-called post-racial era, the Birwood wall serves as a reminder of the structures of racism and the ways that redlining practices started by HOLC and perpetuated by the FHLBB and the FHA continue to shape homeownership opportunities in U.S cities and life chances across racial lines.

<sup>74</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 119.

on or between boundaries. It later signified “an indeterminate state, a state of confusion or uncertainty.” Biss observes that the double meaning of “no man’s land” underlines the ill-gotten gains that white Americans have reaped and the attendant guilt and fear. She opens an essay on the theme by revisiting Laura Ingalls Wilder’s book *Little House on the Prairie*, reading it not as a frontier fantasy, but a reflection on the author’s ethical struggle with how to respond to the dispossession all around her – the construction of railroads and frontier towns, homesteaders and farmers taking possession of land in unsettled country. For Wilder, property practices and personal politics were inseparable. “Up until her death,” Biss writes, “Wilder would not allow a fence to be built around her house. She loved the land enough to know exactly what had been stolen to make her world.”<sup>75</sup>

Wilder’s refusal to put up a fence was a small act that symbolically challenged private property and racialized abandonment, reminding us that refusal can be action. Her refusal is also a reminder of how the sanctity of property is reaffirmed through everyday actions. Indeed, the act of drawing a line, severing the land, creating an inside and an outside, brings into being a whole set of complex social relations that confer value by dictating who can reap the benefits of material and immaterial extraction from it. Yet it also reminds us of how the act of drawing a line not only mediates the distribution of land. Property lines are intimately involved in shaping our political subjectivities, our emotional and affective attachments to land, how we understand belonging in place and in relationship to one another, and whose lives are valued and whose are not.

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<sup>75</sup> Eula Biss (2009), “No Man’s Land” in *Notes from No Man’s Land*, (Minneapolis: Greywolf Press, 2009), 201.

## **Map of the dissertation**

The following six chapters examine struggles over land and property in the reconfiguration of Detroit's postindustrial landscapes. In chapter 2, I reread the history of Detroit's abandonment focusing on the postwar struggle for Detroit and how it transformed perceptions of urban space and place. Stories of Detroit's decline are typically told from the vantage point of flight. White flight and capital flight are no doubt central to understanding the city's depopulation and the spatial and economic predicaments it faces today. Yet narratives that privilege them as sole explanatory drivers of present day crisis overlook the ways racial antagonism is fundamental to the spatial organization of U.S. cities and thus contemporary urban problems. Therefore, the chapter elucidates how the city's abandonment -- and processes of suburbanization and deindustrialization more broadly -- were not merely the result of global economic forces but also a response to radical Black nationalists' and Black power movements' efforts to counter white supremacy and racial state abandonment by staking a claim to urban space and challenging frameworks of liberal justice. The rest of the chapters show how this history continues to shape contemporary city politics and ongoing Black struggles for land, property, citizenship rights, and liberation today.

Chapter 3 shows how dreams of Detroit as the promised land -- a place where African Americans could make a home -- have been undermined through systematic disinvestment, devalued property markets, foreclosures, and a state drained of financial resources. It examines how residents care for the city's "vacant" lands, claim them as a commons, and develop grassroots strategies to empower communities. It contrasts these spatial practices with state efforts to remake private property markets in the city to render it legible for investment. Within this context, private property is often taken for granted as is the work that goes into stabilizing

property markets. Even in the wake of the subprime crisis, private property has remained a relatively stable category. The chapter examines three key sites of land governance – an annual tax foreclosure property auction, a land bank, and a new blight authority and demolition effort – to understand the logics, rationalities, and everyday work involved in making markets. I argue that an enduring set of expectations that whiteness has a value as property shapes contested efforts at the state and city level to remake private property markets.

In chapter 4, I examine how debt became grounds to displace democratically elected governments of majority Black cities in Michigan. Drawing on observations of the state takeover and bankruptcy proceedings and interviews with residents, this chapter shows how Detroiters grappled with the meaning of debt and the challenges posed by financialization to community organizing. Planning in an age of austerity is the subject of chapter 5. It examines the origins of the Detroit Future City plan and how it works through regimes of participation to reterritorialize the city into market-based zones, emphasizing the stakes of the plan for residents. It argues that the Detroit Future City plan deploys green infrastructure as a key strategy to repurpose abandoned land in a way that attempts to co-opt the more radical aspects of the activist-led food justice and food sovereignty movements in the city. The chapter elucidates the spatial reorganization of Detroit in an era of austerity, analyzing who will benefit and lose from the remapping of the city.

Chapter 6 builds on chapter five to explore the racial politics of visibility and invisibility related to urban greening. Specifically the chapter examines resistance to a controversial project to build the world's largest urban farm on the east side of the city and the way the struggle turned on different racialized conceptions of property. It analyzes how Detroiters are resisting abandonment by cultivating common spaces to practice new forms of property and personhood.

Finally, chapter 7 serves as a conclusion and revisits the themes introduced here and expounded upon in the following chapters.

## CHAPTER TWO: A DREAM DEFERRED

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore-  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over-  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.  
Or does it explode?  
Langston Hughes, "Harlem," 1951

### Introduction

On July 23, 1967, the events that later came to be called by some the Detroit Rebellion erupted. It was neither the first racial riot in Detroit nor the last, but it had the most lasting effects on the geography of the metropolitan region, the material landscape of the city, urban governance, and the collective conscious of residents. Within a week, 17,000 armed officials patrolled the city, including the city and state police, the National Guard, and the 103rd Airborne. More than 7,000 people were arrested, most of them African-American. Many were incarcerated in makeshift jails for no other reason than being young and Black. Many more were arrested after the riot was over. Forty-three people died – 33 were Black and 10 were white; 30

were killed by law enforcement personnel.<sup>1</sup> The 1967 uprisings signaled a profound transition in Detroit as a struggle ensued for the control of land, resources, and political power.

This chapter focuses on the postwar struggle for Detroit and how it transformed perceptions of urban space and place. The chapter draws on secondary sources and oral history interviews that I and my research partners conducted in Detroit between 2010 and 2012 to chronicle the dreams of a better life that brought hundreds of thousands of migrants to the city, the often-racist state programs and policies that encouraged white and capital flight from the city, the radical visions of Black liberation and territorial control that reshaped urban landscapes, and the Black political establishment's successes and failures. In so doing, I analyze historical events in terms of their changing meaning and their impact on present-day conflicts over who has a right to the city. Three prominent narratives are used to explain the city's decline. As I argued in the introduction, struggles for Detroit's present and plans for its future are inseparable from interpretations of its history. The two most prominent accounts of Detroit's decline are a political-economic narrative that privileges deindustrialization and a racial narrative that blames Blacks. In both accounts, the riots are understood to have played a pivotal role in the decline by accelerating white and capital flight from the city. While shifts in regional demography and economic geography are central to the predicaments Detroit faces today, histories of Detroit that privilege "flight" as the key explanation of the contemporary crisis overlook how racial

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about the 1967 uprising in Detroit. See in particular these excellent sources: John Hersey, *Algiers Motel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998 [1968]); Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1989); June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013); and Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 1998).



antagonism and resistance are fundamental to the spatial organization of U.S. cities, urban problems, and proposed solutions.<sup>2</sup>

Oral history is an invention, but, as Alessandro Portelli argues, it is not an arbitrary one. He writes, “the interest it arouses is rooted in the interests of the teller.”<sup>3</sup> The meaning of the 1967 riots changed over time for Blacks in Detroit. Directly afterwards, Blacks preferred to call the civil disorders a “riot” by a four-to-one margin (48 percent to 13 percent). However, within a few months, the numbers reversed and the majority of Blacks – 56 percent (compared to 19 percent) – chose to call the violent week in July a “rebellion.”<sup>4</sup> Interviews conducted at the time suggested that those who chose to call the riots a “rebellion” understand them to be about fundamentally liberating the city, or to open that possibility. Some residents explained they served as a way to claim space that they had felt was largely closed off to them. In this sense, the uprisings rearticulated African-American dreams of exodus in that they provided an escape route to a new land by “freeing space.”<sup>5</sup>

This distinction in historical explanation of the uprisings remains important to explanations of crisis in Detroit nearly a half-century later. The meaningful gap between “riot”

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<sup>2</sup> I am drawing on Robert Self’s argument about postwar “flight” from U.S. cities. See: Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Hans Mangus Enzenberger quoted in Portelli, Alessandro, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1991). He says, “History is an invention which reality supplies with raw material. It is not, however, an arbitrary invention, and the interests it arouses is rooted in the interests of the teller” (2).

<sup>4</sup> See especially Sydney Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, Chapter XV on “Meaning of violence.” For survey data, Fine is citing Campbell-Schuman survey. Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, Black File, No. 232, Detroit data for Angus Campbell and Howard Schuman, “Racial Attitudes in Fifteen American Cities” in *Supplemental Studies for the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders* (Washington: GPO, 1968). On different meanings people attribute to riots also see: Luke Bergmann, *Getting Ghost* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2008). On the participation of whites in rioting see: John Haritgan, Jr. *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Historian Robin Kelley talks about African-America dreams of exodus and the meanings of the 1960s uprisings across the United States. See Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 2002).

and “rebellion” in oral histories – like the distinction in the meanings of “abandonment,” which I discussed in the introduction – points to a different story of Detroit’s decline. The advocates of this third narrative, typically long-time African-American residents of the city, suggest that the decline was not an inevitable outcome of deindustrialization but inextricable from an active process of racial state building and parallel struggles for Black self-determination. Therefore, this chapter seeks to elucidate the city’s abandonment by analyzing histories of suburbanization and deindustrialization as not merely the result of global economic forces but also a response to Black radical efforts to counter white supremacy and racial state abandonment by staking a claim to urban space and challenging frameworks of liberal justice.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the histories I tell here came up in my conversations with Detroit residents about contemporary city politics and ongoing struggles for land, property, citizenship rights, and liberation. This chapter should thus be read as not merely historical background for the ones that follow because the histories shared herein transgress neat division between past and present. They live on in the present for they have fundamentally shaped the Detroit metropolitan area’s social and physical landscape and it is through them that people situate their analyses of urban problems and potential solutions.

The chapter is organized in four parts. The first part situates the 1967 rebellion in relationship to the deferral of hopes and dreams with which African Americans and other migrants moved to Detroit. The second part examines the state policies and programs that contributed to urban crisis in Detroit. I demonstrate how whites did not just flee the city but were drawn to the suburbs by material and ideological incentives (i.e., federal homeownership programs). I build on the work of Robert Self and other historians who argue that the metaphor

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Self, *American Babylon*.

of flight diverts attention away from the politics of taxation, the provisioning of the welfare state, and the distribution of social costs.<sup>7</sup> Denaturalizing flight shifts our attention to a politics of racial state abandonment that produced segregation and resistance efforts. The third section turns to Black radical movements in Detroit in the 1960 and 1970s, framing their visions around land control as attempts to counter abandonment and foster self-determination. The final section examines how hopes associated with the rise of Black political power in Detroit in the 1970s became another dream deferred.

### **Labor and housing in the “promised land”**

For many southern African Americans and other immigrants, Detroit, like other northern rapidly industrializing cities, was considered a “promised land.”<sup>8</sup> In my interviews, residents’ affective attachments to the city were intimately bound to their own arrival stories or those of their ancestors. In these narratives, Detroit was often rendered as a place where migrants’ dreams, which were at quite basic -- the ability to have a home and provide for one’s family – could be realized. Importantly, such dreams did not arise independently but formed in relationship to promises: promises of escaping the racial strictures of the Jim Crow South, promises of Ford’s worker-as-middle-class consumer, promises of being able to own a home, and later the promises of the Great Society, and then those associated with Coleman Young’s Black Detroit.

Gabriela Lopez whose grandfather came from Mexico to Detroit to work for Ford in 1920 put it this way, “We called it the promised land because you could come here and change your life... I come from people who were peasants who got to be promoted to working

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (New York: Random House, 2010).

class...Everybody that I've ever talked with in Detroit, and I do this, I talk to everybody right, came from somewhere where they didn't want to be servants or slaves or hopeless and they knew they'd have a chance. It's a whole city with an entire history of people that said, 'I'm going to go there. I'm going to try that.'"

By 1910, Detroit was an industrial powerhouse. The low and wide city fanned out from the Detroit River where signature items from ships to cast iron stoves made in the steel mills, chemical plants, and factories were shipped across the world. Factories, shops, and residential homes formed a tight urban grid bisected by an intricate web of train lines. By the early 1900s, confronting natural resource exhaustion, Michigan capitalists started channeling money into the auto industry then spreading from New England to the mid-Atlantic and the mid-Western states.

Migrants streamed to Detroit. Many came to work for Henry Ford whose "low cost, high volume" production lines opened in 1908. His assembly system became not only a system of production but also model for social discipline and economic development – Fordism. In 1914, in response to worker dissatisfaction and the organizing efforts of the Industrial Workers of the World, Ford instituted the Five Dollar a Day Plan in his Detroit-area factories. He offered workers five dollars for an eight-hour workday (a lot at the time, given that the average wage in the industry was \$2.34 for a nine-hour shift). However, Ford workers only received the full \$5 if they met certain conditions. Workers earned a regular wage for working a full day -- \$2.34; they would earn an additional \$2.66 if Ford determined the worker was living "right."<sup>9</sup>

To determine who was living "right," Ford established a Sociological Department. A project of civic reform and surveillance, the program aimed to Americanize immigrants and

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<sup>9</sup> Hooker, Clarence. "Ford's Sociology Department and the Americanization Campaign and the Manufacture of Popular Culture Among Assembly Line Workers c.1910-1917." *The Journal of American Culture* 20, no. 1 (March 1997): 47-53.

mold “good Ford men.” Ford assumed a sound home environment produced an efficient worker and good citizen. If the worker were living in an “unsound” home environment, he would bring a bad attitude and habits to work. Under the auspices of the Sociological Department, hundreds of inspectors studied and kept tabs on Ford workers across the Detroit region. They took inventory, asking questions pertaining to bank accounts, debts, marriage status, and how workers spent their income. Agents discouraged drinking, smoking, and gambling and encouraged wholesome lifestyle habits, including cleanliness, sleeping in beds, and thriftiness. They also advised workers against spending money on “trunkery and trinkets” and advocated instead the consumption of vacuum cleaners, washing machines, houses, and Model Ts. It is this focus on consumption that best distinguished Fordism as a model of economic development. Ford’s philosophy was that if workers were able to consume the goods they produced, their consumption would help stabilize and stimulate supply and demand.<sup>10</sup>

By 1920, a dozen firms dominated the formerly decentralized U.S. auto industry. The large-scale production model of this period was manifest at Ford’s River Rouge plant located in adjacent Dearborn, which employed an astounding 100,000 laborers under one roof. This concentration had important ramifications for labor migration. From the early nineteenth century to the Great Depression, migrants flocked in droves to Detroit. Between 1820 and 1930, the city’s population increased thousandfold.<sup>11</sup> With the onset of World War I, domestic immigration increased. People from Appalachia, the Black Belt, and many other places flooded the city. Between 1915 and 1925, the percentage of all U.S. autoworkers who lived in Michigan increased

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Also see Gregg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford’s Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Picador, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Census data.

from 23 to 55 percent.<sup>12</sup> Immigrants at Ford plants were required to attend English and civic classes mixed by race and country with the goal of, as historian Gregg Grandin writes, “impress[ing] upon these men that they are, or should be, Americans, and that former racial, national, and linguistic differences are to be forgotten.”<sup>13</sup> While Ford was lauded for hiring African Americans when other factories refused, the company often gave them the worst jobs as janitorial workers and laborers in the furnaces and foundries.<sup>14</sup> Ford colluded with pro-Republican and anti-union ministers to recruit a “docile” Black labor force. From 1937 to 1941, Ford employed almost half of all Blacks in the industry. He separated them from whites by plant, employing almost 99 percent of them at the River Rouge plant.<sup>15</sup>

In our interview, Gabriela Lopez narrated the story of the promise of industrial capitalism in Detroit which was, of course, uneven, but from which, as she and many others pointed out, emerged the American Dream of being able to have a pension, healthcare benefits, and a stable life that people imagined would last for generations. Unsurprisingly, in my interviews, Detroiters frequently talked about their families being displaced from elsewhere and the dream of having a home. Noteworthy though was the way they talked about homeownership, not in the sense of being “good Ford men,” striving for upward mobility, or making money from the sale of property but in the importance of, as Lopez put it, being able to “be someplace and not be run out.”

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<sup>12</sup> See Joe Dardin, Richard Hill, June Manning Thomas, and Richard Thomas. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Grandin, *Fordlandia*, 38; also see Hooker, “Ford’s Sociology Department.”

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 25.

<sup>15</sup> As mentioned, over 100,000 laborers were employed at the River Rouge plant.

In moving to Detroit, migrants often left behind rural land, but their connections to the land persisted, nonetheless. Historians of Detroit have documented the importance of land control for many African Americans growing up in the South. For example, historian Thomas Sugrue quotes an Arkansas-born Detroit minister who explained, “One of the things that was inbred in us in the south is that land is extremely important – a home and some land. My parents used to say to me ... ‘get you a piece of land because that’s the only thing nobody can move you off.’”<sup>16</sup> In our my own and our Uniting Detroiter project interviews, the importance of home and land was repeatedly emphasized in conversation with African Americans whose families migrated from farms in the South to work in factories in the North. For example, Glen Lewis explained it this way in an interview, “That migration pattern echoes through my family who came off of land in the South and retired back to that land, never letting it go. They retained ownership of their land in the South. That has become indoctrinated in our family that you are not the owners of the land, you are the stewards of that land for the next generation. And I see that as part of my legacy and my heritage is that I am not an owner of, to dispense as I see fit, but I am a caretaker for the next generation that is coming after me. I think that we have allowed somebody else’s vision of success cloud that historic mandate to us. And once upon a time it was ‘don’t sell the farm.’ Right? Never sell the farm. Never ever, ever, ever ...I mean that was like a mantra.”

That so many African Americans were able to buy homes in Detroit – a trend that increased in the 1960s and 1970s, but distinguished the city before – was a huge point of pride. Michelle Morris in our interview recalled her family’s trek to Detroit in 1966, the year before the riots, in this way:

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 34.

When we were coming here on the bus, on the Greyhound bus, we did not know what we were coming to. But we were coming from Chicago and everybody on the bus was just so enthusiastic to be coming back to Detroit, they were saying, “That’s Detroit, that’s my town.” We could not figure out why. As we drove into the city, the bus passed Oakman Boulevard, went past Outer Drive and people were pointing saying, “That’s my auntie’s house, that’s my grandma’s house” and I’m thinking all of these big and beautiful homes belong to Black people. That was really astounding because I had come from Buffalo, New York, and Chicago. In Buffalo, Black people did not own houses like these and in Chicago, everyone was living in apartment buildings, so that was really different. But, the other thing that was really impressive about Detroit was the way the teenagers use to harmonize on the street corners. I used to love that. And everybody would get involved with it, even my mother would yell out the window, “That was good, baby. Sing it again, you got it.” Detroit has a small town flavor to it and it’s a big city. People speak to each other on the streets and they are personable and they really care.

The time of Morris’ memory is striking because in the late 1960s while many African American did own homes, many more did not and their only option was the segregated, crowded, and high priced rental market. Yet regardless of homeownership, in my interviews, many others repeated Morris’ description of Detroit’s tight-knit African-American communities as places where people cared. During the first waves of migration to the city in the early twentieth century, Black migrants were largely confined to a neighborhood called Black Bottom and its central business district called Paradise Valley, which was destroyed during urban renewal (discussed further below). Black Bottom was cramped but residents’ needs were met by more than 300 Black-owned businesses and it boasted a vibrant cultural scene with many nightclubs and theaters.

As Herb Boyd, who moved to Black Bottom from Alabama when he was four years old, recalled in a oral history: “This was the real womb for Black people in Detroit. We were blues people, born and nurtured in the South, who still retained that vital culture of the earth... We brought our culture with us: the love for music, that feel for the earth, the spirit of adventure, and the oppression that was down there.”<sup>17</sup> Like Boyd, other Black Detroiters in our interviews often conjured a city intensely segregated along racial lines, but one in which the Black community

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<sup>17</sup> See Herb Boyd interview in Mast, Robert. *Detroit Lives*. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1994, p. 77.



took care of one another and had what they needed to get by. “We had everything you needed in the community, from a poultry store, you had the liquor store, the cleaners, the beauty shop, the doctor, the butcher, you had the pawn shop, the laundry mat, you had clothing stores, you had furniture stores all right in your community,” Gloria Smith said. Others distinguished neighborhoods of today in Detroit that are segregated more rigidly along class lines than racial lines to the Black neighborhoods of the past in which African Americans from different incomes, for example, teachers, professionals, and very poor people, all lived together. In interview after interview, longtime African-Americans residents vividly recalled Black theaters, a Black hospital with a library in it, houses on every lot, access to public transportation, cooperative living in housing projects, and churches with full congregations.

Thus, when contemporary African-American residents discussed the “abandonment” of Detroit in interviews, they referred not only to the proverbial abandoned factory, but also to the loss of the physical and social infrastructure in Black neighborhoods that grew out of mutual aid and forced segregation. This loss is captured poignantly by Rashida Foster who said in interview, “We don’t have no fire station. We don’t have no police station. You don’t have a bunch of things. It just no longer exists. I’ve watched it deteriorate on the level to where I was on a bus and I said when I was a little girl one day I would like to own my own shop up on Woodward because I watched this Black woman have an alteration shop and I look back now and there’s so many abandoned buildings and so many burned up houses, I was like how do you just ... *how does the economy allow a live community like this to die?*” Her question demonstrates the inadequacy of “flight” as the main explanation of Detroit’s decline and points to the racialized organization of polices, programs, and the built environment that precipitated “death.” It also

points to how despite the growing middle-class Detroit that Michelle Morris calls up, for many claiming a space of one's own and exercising self-determination were dreams deferred.

### **The fire next time: Violating the boundaries of “place” and property**

From 1964 to 1967, every major central city in the United with a sizable Black population experienced civil disorders. There were 329 major rebellions in 257 different cities. Following Martin Luther King Junior's assassination on April 4, 1968, there were another 200 uprisings in 172 cities. Whereas before the riots, urban political contests frequently turned on how to distribute the benefits of postwar economic growth, afterwards they increasingly focused on the inequalities it had created and who would control land, resources, and political power.<sup>18</sup>



**FIGURE 2.1 (left).** July 23, 1967. Twelfth Street descends into chaos on the first day of the civil unrest of 1967. At rear, center, the Blind Pig, whose raid by police officers sparked the conflict, can be seen behind the Economy Printing sign. In the distance a photographer snaps pictures of the scene. (Source: Detroit Staff News. Reuther Library Wayne State, Photo ID: 318.) **FIGURE 2.2 (right)** July 24, 1967. Arson, 1967 Rebellion. Fires from burning buildings on Detroit's West Side light up the early morning sky on July 24, 1967. Spectators watch from a distance despite the late hour. (Source: Wayne State Reuther Library. Photo ID: 25990).

Out of all the race riots across the country, Detroit's was by far the largest. The city was considered “long overdue” for a riot – people said, “you could feel it coming.”<sup>19</sup> It was a

<sup>18</sup> Self makes this argument about Oakland, check here.

<sup>19</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 1989, 163.

sweltering early Saturday morning when the Detroit police conducted a routine raid on an after-hour illegal bar in the Twelfth Street area, where many Blacks had moved after Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were destroyed during urban renewal. At 3:45AM, two plainclothes policemen entered the second-floor apartment-turned-bar where a celebration was underway for two returning servicemen from Vietnam. As police made arrests and began loading prisoners into wagons, a crowd formed outside that quickly grew from twenty to over two hundred people despite it not yet being dawn. It was not uncommon in exceeding summer heat for people to have trouble sleeping in crowded upstairs apartments that abutted the congested 24-hour Twelfth Street. When police began roughing up prisoners, the crowd became incensed. One young man incited the crowd to action yelling, “Black Power, don’t let them take our people away; look what they are doing to our people ... Let’s kill them whitey motherfuckers ... Let’s get the bricks and bottles going.” Eventually many others started crying out for a riot too.<sup>20</sup> Violence, looting, and arson spread rapidly across the city taking on a “carnival atmosphere.” One author described it as “a giddy sense of release from the oppression of routine, white-dominated life in the ghetto.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 160.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 165.



**FIGURE 2.3 (left).** A bird's-eye view of Twelfth Street during the first day of the civil unrest of 1967. "Black Power" is painted in the center of the street. The Chit Chat Lounge is in view at upper, right corner (Source: Reuther Library Wayne State Photographer: Detroit News Staff. Photo ID: 26470.) **FIGURE 2.4 (right).** A bird's-eye view as the block at Twelfth Street and Linwood is reduced to rubble by fires during the second day of the civil unrest of 1967. (Source: Reuther Library Wayne State. Photographer: Detroit News Staff. Photo ID: 26471.)

Oppressive policing tactics set off the uprising, but in the ensuing days the riots turned into an assault on those who controlled housing and commerce in the community. Rioters for the most part did not direct violence at people. Rather they targeted their rioting, as historian Ahmad Rahman argues, against “the most visible symbols of capitalism and racism: first, property, and second, the firefighters and policeman who protected it.”<sup>22</sup> Property – both in landed buildings and commercial goods – embodied unequal power relations and segregation in the city and the spatial isolation of African Americans. The property damage after the riots was extensive and radically reshaped the physical landscape of the city. During the course of the five days of riots, over 2,509 buildings were looted, burned, or destroyed by the rioters, including 611 supermarkets, food, and grocery stores; 537 cleaners and laundries; 326 clothing, department, and fur stores; 285 liquor stores, bars, and lounges; 240 drug stores; and 198 furniture stores. Seventy-five million dollars was claimed in property insurance and many more millions were lost on properties that were not insured. The local, state, and federal governments incurred over

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Rahman, “Marching Blind: The Rise and Fall of the Black Panther Party in Detroit.” In *Liberated Territory*, edited by Yohuru Williams and Jama Lazerow (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 184.

\$16 million in riot costs.<sup>23</sup>

The 1967 uprising was a defining moment in Detroit's history. But to say the rebellion began on July 23 is misleading. As Detroiters will tell you, the riots were not just spontaneous protests, but a response to a multitude of factors making life in the Black community increasingly untenable, notwithstanding the widespread care and mutual aid described above. They were a response to the racism and brutality of the white, racist police force frequently referred to in Black communities as an occupation army.<sup>24</sup> In 1967, the police force of Detroit was 95 percent white. The riots were a response to the murders of key leaders of the freedom struggle and civilians alike, including Malcolm X in February 1965. They were a response to the promise and failure of the Great Society era and urban renewal – dreams deferred that had intensified already poor housing conditions. And they were a response to increasing unemployment as car companies tended toward automation, outsourcing, and moving outside the city. Between the late 1940s and the mid 1970s, Detroit lost approximately 130,000 manufacturing jobs. Not only were Blacks ghettoized within the auto-industry and given the worst jobs but by 1960 Black unemployment rates were double those of whites.<sup>25</sup> They were in response to being denied the dream of holding ground, claiming space, and making a home. “Black Detroiters had always had a ‘place,’ and white policeman had confined and controlled them there, in their traditional role as protectors of the security and safety of whites and their property,” as Rahman explains. “The 1967 rebellion had been, in effect, an extremely destructive attempt by the Black community to violate those boundaries of ‘place,’ raising the question of

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<sup>23</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

<sup>24</sup> In July of the same year, California passed the Mulford Bill (aka the “Panther Bill”), which criminalized the open displays of firearms.

<sup>25</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis*, 143.

who would rule, and under what condition.”<sup>26</sup> In short, the rebellion was an expression of deep racial antagonisms and Black people across the country striking out against oppression, discrimination, and demanding change.

### **Roots of crisis: The work of maintaining white property**

The racial tensions that led to the 1967 uprising in Detroit were not new. Rather struggles over the policing of racial boundaries in housing and in the factories had been simmering and boiling over in Detroit and across the country for centuries. Many excellent histories exist on racial and labor politics in Detroit. I draw on this literature to foreground the racialization of space and property relations within Detroit that preceded suburbanization and then became displaced to a sharp division between city and suburb, particularly in the years after the uprising. The best way to concisely narrate this history is through struggles that took place over racist property practices. They trace the way racial discrimination exercised through federal, state, and local housing policy morphed in the postwar years into a new kind of discriminatory marketplace for housing.

As discussed in the introduction, the private property system we have inherited in the United States is rooted in a historical structure of racialized dispossession that is reified and stabilized through the everyday social practices of property making -- from the creation of property standards to acts of physical violence when unequal property norms are transgressed. In the early 1900s, in Detroit and other cities facing rapid population growth, whites justified housing

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmad, “Marching Blind,” 189. Also see Hartigan’s argument that the riots were more about class than race. Hartigan, *Racial Situations*. It was an interracial riot with both Blacks and whites directing violence against property and its defenders. While some argue that the riot was not a classic race riot, because both Blacks and whites participated, many of the people I spoke with in Detroit interpreted the riots and the subsequent political machinations along the lines of Rahman’s argument that “Black Detroiters had always had a ‘place,’ and white policeman had confined and controlled them there, in their traditional role as protectors of the security and safety of whites and their property. The 1967 rebellion had been, in effect, an extremely destructive attempt by the Black community to violate those boundaries of ‘place,’ raising the question of who would rule, and under what conditions” (188-189). Rahman, “Marching Blind.”

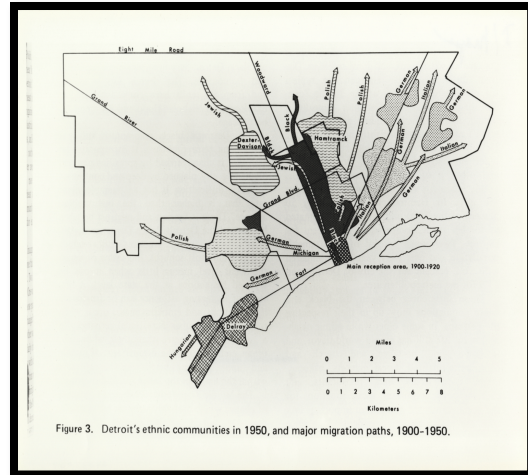
segregation by appealing to racial science rooted in biological arguments about why Blacks and other racial minorities were inferior.<sup>27</sup> They formed property associations and vigilante groups to protect neighborhoods from the “Negro invasion.” In Detroit, neighborhoods instituted racially restrictive covenants that defined a “‘Negro’ as any person with ‘1/8 or more of Negro blood.’”<sup>28</sup> By 1910, these color lines were further enforced by real estate developers and economists who had started to standardize guidelines for government appraisals and construction practices and the subsequent emergence of all white real estate boards in most major U.S. cities (see Figure 2.5). These boards codified rules about race and property and policed racial boundaries by threatening to expel realtors who sold to Blacks in all-white neighborhoods, claiming a home sale to a Black family would deteriorate property values.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> At the time, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were not seen as white. Understood as racial threats, they were also barred from native-born white neighborhoods. Yet, they still had more mobility than African Americans. Whereas ethnic enclaves formed across the city, Black migrants’ housing options were limited to two concentrated neighborhoods on the downtown eastside called Black Bottom and Paradise Valley. See Freund, David. *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. On racial classification see pages 4-5.

<sup>28</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



**FIGURE 2.5:** Detroit Real Estate Board, 1914. (Photo courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Identification no. DPA4982). **FIGURE 2.6.** Detroit’s ethnic communities in 1950, and major migrations paths, 1900-1950. (Image courtesy of the Burton Historical Collection, Identification no. bhoo6569)

Transgressions of these rules often led to violent protests on the part of whites. One of the most well known cases in Detroit is that of Ossian and Gladys Sweet, an African-American couple who in 1925 bought a new house in a white neighborhood on the city’s eastside. Though the Sweet’s economic standing afforded them a degree of mobility that most Blacks did not have – Ossian was a Howard-educated physician -- their purchase prompted threats. On moving day, a small group of whites tried to scare them away. By evening, the group grew to a mob of 800. The mob dispersed the next day and returned in the evening, stoning the house and chanting, “Niggers! Niggers ... Get the Niggers!” As the crowd advanced, two shots were fired by Ossian’s brother and a police officer. Two white men were shot, one died, and the Sweet family was arrested.<sup>30</sup>

The public began passing judgment immediately, including the mayor of Detroit who laid down his color-line policy in no uncertain terms, “any colored person who endangers life and

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



property simply to gratify his personal pride, is an enemy of his race as well as an incitant of riot and murder.”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Blacks were a danger to the property values in white neighborhoods. That the Sweets were eventually acquitted makes their story exceptional. However, the hostility and retribution they faced for buying a house in a white neighborhood was not unique. At the time, the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Legion, an offshoot of the KKK, boasted thousands of members in Detroit and tens of thousand in Michigan.<sup>32</sup> Together, they exerted a tremendous force on urban politics and municipal elections, shaped anti-unionist and racist sentiments of factory managements, and were active in housing debates. Consequently, it was not uncommon for Blacks moving into white neighborhoods to be confronted with mobs of upwards of 2,000 people.<sup>33</sup>

With continued migration to Detroit during World War II, housing continued to be a hot-button issue; white hostility increased as more Blacks moved to the city. Between 1940 and 1950, Detroit’s Black population doubled and the practice of “block busting” became common amongst real estate brokers. While the Detroit Real Estate Board could not legally change the racial character of neighborhoods through home sales, other brokers, both Black and white, could and did. Block busting – a social practice of property formation – referred to opportunistic brokers who sold homes to Blacks in white neighborhoods and then bought homes from whites who lived in close proximity taking advantage of their racial fears. As property values deteriorated, whites would take what they could get for their homes, eager to salvage equity.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> The Black Legion was in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky. In the mid-1930s, the organization claimed 60,000 to 100,000 members. See Peter Amann, “Vigilante Fascism : The Black Legion as an American Hybrid.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 25, no. 3 (1983): 490–524.

<sup>33</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*.

Brokers then profited doubly by reselling homes to Blacks at higher prices.<sup>34</sup>

The Double V campaign – a call to defeat enemies abroad and at home -- symbolized the national duty and hypocrisy that defined the war era.<sup>35</sup> While wartime production created new opportunities for Blacks with many shifting from service sector jobs to manufacturing, they did not reap the same prosperity as whites. In Detroit, escalating racial tensions were marked by the phenomenon of “hate strikes.” When Blacks were hired at all-white factories, workers would go on strike. In 1941 alone, hate strikes were held at Curtis Aircraft, Hudson Motors, and the Packard Plant. In 1942, vicious protests erupted when Blacks tried to move into the new Sojourner Truth Black public housing development in a historically white neighborhood. And on June 22 of the following year, one of the nation’s worst race riots to date took place on Detroit’s Belle Isle, leaving 34 dead – 25 of whom were African Americans, 17 killed by white police officers. An additional 675 people were seriously injured and 1,893 arrested. Federal troops came to quell the disorder.<sup>36</sup> Like 1967, Blacks were blamed for instigating the riots by stepping “out of place.” The state attorney general had the audacity to argue that FDR could prevent future rioting if he simply barred Black urban migration using the same emergency war powers exercised to intern the Japanese.<sup>37</sup>

### **The postwar struggle for Detroit: From racial covenants to a discriminatory marketplace**

With the end of World War II, millions of soldiers returned home, and in cities across the country, struggles around workplace and housing discrimination increased. Detroit reached its population peak in 1952 with 1.85 million residents. Before the war, the spatial division between

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<sup>34</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

<sup>35</sup> Self, *American Babylon*, 25.

<sup>36</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Rahman, “Marching Blind,” 181-82.

Blacks and whites in the city was firmly embedded.<sup>38</sup> After the war, segregation only became further sedimented with cold-war anxiety and racist federal housing policies that contributed to already existing trends of disinvestment, white flight, and the decentralization of factories, leading to the underdevelopment of the Black city center. In response to unions and competition from auto-manufacturers in other countries, many car companies closed up shop completely in Detroit. Others sought to retool with new automotive techniques and it was easier to construct new factories in other countries, the U.S. South, and, for some, Detroit's suburbs, where there was more space. One after another, Detroit's auto plants closed – the Packard Motor Car plant, the Hudson plant, the United States Rubber plant, the Studebaker plant. Meanwhile, from 1947 to 1955, the Big Three – GM, Chrysler, and Ford -- constructed twenty new plants in the suburbs. Metal and machinery industries clustered around them, followed by residential growth, services, and all major shopping areas.<sup>39</sup> A striking and visible color line started to emerge around Detroit as jobs and wealth moved to the suburban fringe and the Black central city neighborhoods faced underdevelopment.<sup>40</sup>

Flight from Detroit was accelerated by the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 – one of the largest public works project in U.S. history when it was enacted. The Highway Act, in combination with the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954, ignited “urban renewal” and reshaped the material and political terrain of American cities. Detroit, like other cities whose centers were hurt by flight, began to receive federal redevelopment funds for highway construction and slum clearance. Across the country, homes and businesses were demolished to make way for

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Sugrue has noted that at the outbreak of the war, approximately 90 percent of whites would have had to move census tracts for Black and white populations to be equally distributed across the city. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Darden et al., *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 5-6.

expressways. African Americans and others in poor communities faced extensive dispossession under these new development schemes. James Baldwin famously and aptly called the federal government an “accomplice” to an urban renewal that, in practice, meant “Negro removal.”<sup>41</sup>

Ironically, the federal government was simultaneously allocating large sums of money to restore property values and reclaim urban downtowns as sites for capital accumulation as its policies encouraged the abandonment of cities. Federal intervention in housing markets started before World War II when the government standardized and popularized restrictive covenants but arguably had its greatest impact afterwards when the government provided insured mortgage financing and subsidies for housing for returning veterans and families of soldiers. In combination with rising incomes, cheaper construction costs, car ownership and the development of highways, federal housing programs were the death knell of American cities. Before the war, most whites could not afford to move out of the city. Afterwards, not only did most whites leave the city, but home ownership increasingly came to be seen as a prerequisite for cultural citizenship.<sup>42</sup>

Approved mortgage applicants could purchase new single-family detached units on private lots in Detroit’s expanding suburbs – the majority of postwar construction – with low monthly payments. However, the suburban dream was not accessible to all. Institutional and quotidian forms of racism continued. While rates of homeownership rose 18.7 percent for whites between 1940 and 1960, Blacks only saw a 14.7 percent increase for the same period. Moreover, while in the post-war years, a broad range of whites (including those of “foreign stock”) were welcomed into the suburbs, Black families continued to be excluded. Despite the 1948 Supreme Court

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<sup>41</sup> James Baldwin. *Conversations with James Baldwin*. Edited by Fred Standley and Louis Pratt (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), 42.

<sup>42</sup> Freund, *Colored Property*, 10.

ruling that courts could not uphold restrictive covenants, real estate brokers and banks continued racist lending practices based in large part on appraisal maps generated through the federal Home Owner Loan Corporation Program and the guidelines of the Federal Housing Administration Underwriting Manuals it used from the 1930s through the 1950s (see chapter 1). The manuals insisted upon racially homogenous neighborhoods and prohibited personnel from introducing “incompatible groups” into white neighborhoods. In doing so, they relied on racial steering to get around the scrutiny of the Supreme Court ruling. By 1968, when the Fair Housing Act made redlining illegal, 16 of Detroit’s richest suburbs had no Black homeowners and most of the others had very small Black populations. The color line, postwar, remained entrenched, but the discourses that justified it shifted.<sup>43</sup>

Before the war, whites barred Blacks from property ownership by appealing to racial science. Afterwards, when racial science was discredited, whites began to justify the exclusion of Blacks by using the more subtle language of property “rights” and “responsibilities.” Whites began to claim the right to protect their property investment, rather than themselves. As historian David Freund argues, “Rhetorically, at least, whites focused not on the threat that Black people posed to white people but on the threat that Blacks’ presence posed to white-owned property, white neighborhoods, and other supposedly white ‘places.’”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, whites claimed that Black people were incapable of becoming good, responsible home-owning citizens because they perceived them as having an inability to care for their neighborhoods and achieve ownership without “government handouts.” In other words, whites argued that Blacks were incapable of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 18.

functioning in the free market – an argument, as historian David Freund writes, that reflected “their fundamental misunderstanding of the forces driving metropolitan change.”<sup>45</sup>

The effect of postwar development politics was that it simultaneously prohibited nonwhite people from entering the housing market in particular neighborhoods, while at the same time encouraging whites to think that property had no racial politics. The Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration worked in combination with other programs that subsidized and regulated conventional mortgage markets (not covered by the FHA or VA insurance), creating a secondary mortgage market that enabled investors to trade home finance debt. The important thing to understand here is that postwar suburbanization was, in the words of Freund, part of a broader transformation in the mechanics of American capitalism. Suburbanization represented a shift in the socialization of consumer debt as a driver of economic growth. “Because the programs that subsidized the mortgage market systematically excluded racial minorities,” Freund writes, “suburban growth and its corollary prosperity were not just state managed but also inherently discriminatory. Federal housing policies did not merely ‘embrace . . . [t]he discriminatory attitudes of the marketplace,’ as the FHA’s critics have long argued. Selective credit operations created a new *kind of* discriminatory marketplace.”<sup>46</sup>

By 1960, Detroit’s population had fallen to 1.67 million from its mid-century peak of 1.85 million in 1952. Due to residential, industrial, and commercial flight, Detroit’s share of the region’s jobs and wealth plummeted. Despite worsening job prospects in Detroit, Blacks continued to arrive from the south. In 1940, Blacks made up 9.2 percent of the city population. By 1960, they made up 28.9 percent. With automation and factory closures, employment

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 36, quoting Jackson, Kenneth. *Crabgrass Frontier* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

opportunities for Black workers (often considered “unskilled”) were few and far between. Liberal reformers who attempted to ameliorate the economic conditions in the city often misunderstood the structural conditions that created racialized economic disparities, focusing instead on creating programs that personalized poverty. Within this context, new struggles erupted over the control of the city and its resources.<sup>47</sup>

### **From riot to rebellion**

In the aftermath of the riots, analysts sought to explain them, turning to social science explanations from agitator theory to frustration-aggression and blocked-opportunity models. There was widespread agreement that the riots were unplanned, but not irrational or meaningless. Most agreed that the riots were a form of “Negro protest,”<sup>48</sup> a claim so banal as to reveal nothing

The rioters were mostly Black, but some whites did participate, particularly in looting.<sup>49</sup> Authorities issued statements that no clear racial pattern to property destruction could be established. However, in retrospect, it seemed that protestors targeted their assault on business establishments widely perceived to be extorting ghetto residents with high prices. Whites, Chaldeans, and Jews, who dominated store ownership in Detroit’s Black communities, suffered quantitatively more losses than Black-owned businesses. Moreover, a number of properties with the words “Soul Brother” painted on them were conspicuously spared (leading non-Black shop owners to try to deter rioters with such signage). While federal investigators found no evidence of premeditation by Black militants, they did find that some low-level forms of organization emerged during the riots in terms of directing arson and looting. However, the rioters did not

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<sup>47</sup> Self, *American Babylon*.

<sup>48</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

<sup>49</sup> Hartigan, *Racial Situations*.

make demands nor try to negotiate with city officials. And as many commentators pointed out, a large number of Detroit's Black radical leaders were not even in Detroit at the time the riots started, but in Newark for the National Black Power Conference, which was held from July 20 to 23, 1967, to discuss pressing African-American issues of the day.<sup>50</sup>

One of the earliest critical commentaries on the Detroit rebellion came from Jaramogi Agyeman, formerly Albert Cleage, Jr., the founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church – a key center for Black nationalism in Detroit. In contrast to analyses that reduced the uprising to “orgies of criminality,” he argued that they were a “logical” outgrowth of the Black power movement. In a sermon following the uprisings, he said:

There is a difference between a riot and a rebellion. A riot is a little group perhaps more interested in looting than in freedom. But a rebellion is a community that has decided that it will no longer tolerate the kind of racial oppression that it has been forced to tolerate ... People look around and say, we are tired of these slums. We are tired of all the conditions that we have to put up with. We are tired of the whole situation and we are not going to tolerate it any longer. And then a whole community erupts ....That is a rebellion....As long as we had a place and we knew where it was (the man had made it for us), and we were afraid to get out of it, there was no possibility of a riot or a rebellion ... If not knowing our place leaves us for the moment confused so that we do some things that are not constructive in the sense of planned campaigns for freedom, then that is a part of the struggle, an inevitable part of the struggle ... In a rebellion or riot, a lot of people are concerned about things other than self. I am not talking about the looters now — those who are trying to steal what they can and get it home for themselves. They are just like the middle-class. I am talking about those who are outraged, whether it is a sensible outrage or an irrational outrage, outraged at the indignities that black people have to live with...<sup>51</sup>

Agyeman's argument that the riots should be claimed as a rebellion echoed a resolution that was passed at the National Black Power Conference just before violence erupted in Detroit. The

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<sup>50</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*.

<sup>51</sup> These quotes come from a Sermon called “Samson” that Agyeman delivered. The full sermon is published as “No Halfway Revolution” in his first book called *The Black Messiah* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and McNeed-Universal Press Syndicate, 1968). I am quoting from the republication of parts of the sermon in the *Michigan Citizen*. See “Rare testimonies and reports on the '67 Rebellion,” part 8 of a series on the Detroit Rebellion called “Uprising,” *Michigan Citizen*, edited by Paul Lee (2007).



conference, as one journalist at the time put it, “was clearly not just a small, secret meeting of burning eyed radicals, but a gathering of over 1,000 registered delegates from 38 states, representing a cross-section of Black America. There were old women from Rochester on welfare, Mississippi cotton pickers, municipal judges, Black Muslims, Black Catholics, broken down ex-boxers, Black Republicans, and a police captain from Harlem. Every major Black organization in the U.S. was represented.”<sup>52</sup> On the first day of the conference, a mere 3 days after the riots in Newark – where 26 people were killed, 725 injured, and 1,500 arrested – and 3 days before the violence in Detroit broke out, the delegates adopted a resolution that the nationwide rebellions were necessary for the freedom movement to advance.<sup>53</sup>

On the afternoon of July 20, the young program director of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Ralph Featherstone, took the floor. “In order that our Black brothers in Newark have not died in vain,” he said, “I have a resolution I want to read.” The resolution called for “the nation of Black people which lives in the United States” to “join the endless legion of Freedom Fighters by the fighting and dying for their freedom.” “Be it resolved,” Featherstone proclaimed, “that this National Conference on Black Power on July 20, 1967, hereby goes on record as strongly endorsing the Black revolution. Further, that it proclaim its approval of the rebellions in cities from Watts to Newark as necessary to achieve nationhood.”<sup>54</sup> The resolution – while not officially adopted – was approved “in spirit” on the spot amongst cheers and shouts. The only resolution to be officially adopted by conference delegates was the

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<sup>52</sup> In the October 20, 1967, issue of the *Inner-City Voice*, Sherman Adams wrote, “Every major black organization in the U.S. was represented: H. Rap Brown of SNCC, Floyd McKissick of CORE, Watts’ nationalist leader Ron Karenga, Dr. Martin Luther King’s top troubleshooter Rev. Jesse Jackson and representatives from the Urban League were all official delegates. The delegates emphasized the role of Black Americans in the international struggle for human rights, a theme which earlier was developed by the late Malcolm X” (4).

<sup>53</sup> The Newark riots lasted from July 12-17, 1967.

<sup>54</sup> Adams, *Inner-City Voice*, 4.

“Black Power Manifesto,” which “condemned ‘neo-colonialist control’ of Black populations worldwide and called for the circulation of a ‘philosophy of Blackness’ that would unite and direct the oppressed in common cause.”<sup>55</sup>

The point to emphasize is that the resolutions passed at the conference supported the perspective that the riots were, of course, about more than “Negro protest.” Rather, they were an attempt by the Black masses to achieve political objectives that had not been gained through other means, including breaking white control over Black territory and exercising autonomous power over that territory themselves. As mentioned above, interviews conducted after the riots revealed a shared feeling that the uprisings were about claiming space. As one man who lived in the riot-area explained afterwards, “I work in Detroit [and] live in Detroit but I don’t Feel Free .... There are so many places closed to me.”<sup>56</sup> A post-riot survey found that 75 percent of adult Blacks expected to have more autonomy over their neighborhood because of the riots.<sup>57</sup>

The “first gunshots of the rebellion,” Jaramogi Agyeman argued, began decades before with court cases to outlaw segregation in the South, with the school desegregation decision in 1954, the bus boycotts in Montgomery from 1955-56, the Freedom Riders beginning in May 1961, and the Freedom March in Detroit when over 200,000 people marched down Woodward Avenue on June 23, 1963 – a prelude to the March on Washington that took place later that summer and where Martin Luther King Jr. initially gave his “I have a dream” speech. “When Stokely Carmichael screams ‘Black Power,’” Agyeman preached, “he is only putting into a phrase the change which has been going on for almost fifteen years. Things had reached the

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Altman (1997) “Black Power Conference of Newark,” The Encyclopedia of African-American Heritage. See [http://www.aaregistry.org/historic\\_events/view/black-power-conference-newark-held](http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/black-power-conference-newark-held)

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 359.

point where the change could be put into a phrase. And so Stokely said ‘Black Power,’ and everybody screamed ‘Black Power,’ and the white man said — ‘uh-uh’. Then the white man began to ask, ‘What is Black Power, what do you mean? What is the philosophy of Black Power?’”

### **Black liberation and the struggle for Detroit**

As Agyeman noted the urban uprisings between 1964 and 1968 were about “getting out of place,” by which he meant that an increasing number of Blacks were no longer tolerating the social and spatial order of white supremacy. They were in this sense about acting out long-held dreams of exodus that had been further deferred in the “promised land.” Black nationalist movements frustrated with the pacifist approach and limited success of the Civil Rights movement were developing new strategies and tactics for liberation. In a prophetic essay that circulated widely in the *Crusader*, a pan-African journal, Black radical Robert Williams, exiled in Cuba, had even predicted the riot storm before it started. “This year, 1964, is going to be a violent one,” Williams wrote, “the storm will reach hurricane proportions by 1965 and the eye of the hurricane will hover over American by 1966. America is a house on fire – FREEDOM NOW! – or let it burn, let it burn. Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!!”<sup>58</sup> Thus, Black liberation movements both claimed and were catalyzed by the uprisings. Given that these movements positioned themselves in solidarity with global decolonization struggles in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the uprisings symbolically dovetailed with an “international rebellion against imperialism.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Quoted in Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

Following World War II, a global period of decolonization ensued with 40 former colonies gaining independence between 1945 and 1960. Shortly after the United Nations formed in 1945, the Civil Rights Congress under the legal leadership of William Patterson and Paul Robeson filed a petition entitled “We Charge Genocide: The Crime of Government Against the Negro People” (1951) charging the U.S. government with Black genocide under the Geneva Convention.<sup>60</sup> A decade later, after the non-aligned movement took place in Bandung, Indonesia (1955), the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization was formed in China (1957) and the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) – the first Maoist-influenced organization in the United States – was founded in Cleveland in 1961, inspired by Robert Williams’s experiences in China. During the March on Washington in 1963, Mao issued a statement against American racism and characterized the African-American freedom struggle as part of global struggles against imperialism, the anti-colonial struggles in Africa, and the Cuban Revolution. Black activists in the United States had been advancing similar arguments. The alliances forming from Detroit to Cuba to China signaled not only the freedom movement’s commitment to international solidarity but also a growing understanding among African-American intellectuals and activists that the urban ghetto was a colony and that liberation required new tactics.<sup>61</sup>

The uprisings, historian Robin Kelley explains, were thus “not tragedies but celebrations, temporarily freed spaces akin to liberated zones in which the oppressed are ‘Dancing in the Streets!’”<sup>62</sup> That some African Americans discursively claimed that the uprisings “freed space” -- or as the Detroit residents in the survey noted created conditions in which they could have

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<sup>60</sup> U.S. state officials kept the UN from considering the petition, which was filed in both Paris and New York at same time.

<sup>61</sup> Self, *American Babylon*, 217.

<sup>62</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 78.

more autonomy over their neighborhoods -- rearticulated a deep and widespread desire to break out of place and escape to a new land. These dreams of exodus, as Kelley argues, shed light on how African Americans have imagined real freedom. Such dreams have manifested in various geographies from maroon societies to the “exodusters” who fled the South for Kansas and Oklahoma in the 1870s to back-to-Africa movements. By the late 1960s, many Black radicals and nationalists had started to call the U.S. city Babylon. “Babylon,” historian Robert Self writes, “captured the profound cynicism engendered by decades of liberal failure as well as the remarkable optimism belied in rebirth, in beginning again.... In Babylon, black power advocates found an *urban* referent – albeit one that stretched deep into the history of the black church – through which to conceive the plight of the black nation.”<sup>63</sup> Babylon signified that Blacks were not going to stand by as victims of urban crisis but engage in developing solutions.

Before the 1967 rebellion, Detroit had begun to emerge as a hotbed of Black radical thought, social movements, and cultural production. While established organizations like the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Trade Union Leadership Council boasted large memberships, they were increasingly out of touch with a generation of young activists who mostly organized through affinity groups rather than traditional political channels.<sup>64</sup> For example, a number of Detroit-based initiatives emerged under the ideological leadership of Reverend Cleage and his church the Shrine of the Black Madonna (later renamed the Black Madonna Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church), including the City-wide Citizens Action Committee that aimed to foster Black-owned businesses and at times attracted over 2,000 people to meetings. Milton Henry and his brother Richard Henry organized the Group on Advanced

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<sup>63</sup> Self, *American Babylon*, 14-15.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas, June Manning. *Redevelopment and Race*, 128.

Leadership (GOAL), which was eventually directed into the Freedom Now Party. In 1963, the Freedom Now Party mounted a statewide slate of candidates for political office, including Rev. Cleage who was to face off against George Romney in the Michigan gubernatorial election.

The West Central Organization, an active multi-racial neighborhood group, used Alinsky's model of community organizing to protest redevelopment around Wayne State University. Meanwhile, Black students at the university, inspired by the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions, formed a revolutionary Black nationalist/socialist action cadre called UHURU (meaning "freedom" in Swahili) and studied the work of Marx, Lenin, Mao, Fanon, Malcolm X, Robert Williams, Che Guevara, among others. They attended Socialist Worker Party forums, listened to members of the Communist Party, and studied with CLR James, who in the 1950s, made Detroit his base for intellectual and political activities.<sup>65</sup> James and Grace Lee Boggs, who worked with CLR James' Facing Reality group, became important political activists in the city. In collaboration with James they produced a newsletter called *Correspondence* that sought to synthesize Black nationalism and socialism (a project they continued after they broke with James).

In addition to these organizing efforts, radical labor alliances emerged from the confrontation between Black workers and white unions. In 1968, the Marxist Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) was founded after Blacks were overwhelmingly punished for a general walkout strike of 4,000 workers over assembly-line speedups and work quality issues at the Dodge plant. They demanded that Chrysler (Dodge's owner) rehire the fired

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<sup>65</sup> UHURU was led by Luke Tip, John Williams, John Watson, Charles Johnson, General G. Baker, and Gwen Kemp. Some member of UHURU later went on to join the Revolutionary Action Movement. In 1965, they reformed as the Afro-American Student Movement and put out a journal called *Black Vanguard*, edited by John Watson and distributed to Black workers in plants. See, e.g., Angela Dillard, *Faith in the City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

Black workers and staged a wildcat strike at the plant, forming a picket line that they did not allow their Black coworkers to cross. Most whites entered the plant, although some went home. Approximately, 3,000 Black workers joined the strike and production fell 1,900 cars short. While neither the local union nor Chrysler met the group's demands, the organizing effort created solidarity amongst Black workers and precipitated Revolutionary Union Movements at other plants – Ford, Cadillac, General Motors – and non-automotive facilities in Detroit and beyond, like the U.S. Postal Service. In June 1969, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was incorporated in an attempt to centrally organize these efforts. Ultimately, the League became divided over the question of how organizing should happen – on the shop floor or beyond the point of production, reflecting a central question at the time for the African-American freedom struggle about whether struggling for citizenship rights and integration through state reform was an adequate response to racial inequality or whether Black separatism was needed. While the League was only in existence until 1973, it made an indelible mark on Black organizing beyond the factory.<sup>66</sup>

For example, members of the League, in collaboration with other activists, including James Foreman of SNCC, took over the Black Economic Development Conference in the spring of 1969 in Detroit, where they issued the “Black Manifesto,” the first systematic plan for reparations to come out of the Black Freedom Movement. The “Black Manifesto” called for Black socialism and demanded \$500 million in reparations from white churches to be used to strengthen Black political and economic institutions. Land topped the list for funding as drafters of the manifesto earmarked \$200 million for a Southern Land Bank, which aimed to help “people

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<sup>66</sup> James A. Geschwender, *Class, Race, and Worker Insurgency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Georgakas and Surkin. *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*.

who want to establish cooperative farms but who have no funds.”<sup>67</sup>

Debates over reparations and Black nationalism turned on questions of how best to achieve autonomy and self-determination, particularly when an urban condition of permanent unemployment was emerging. It was this growing group of unemployed workers that Detroit autoworker and Black radical Jimmy Boggs had in 1963 termed “the outsiders.” Automation, he argued, required social movements to reconsider their strategies for revolutionary change. Boggs offered one of the early critiques of “surplus labor.” He argued that the American economy was being sustained through war contracts and stopgap measures that failed to offer solutions for the large numbers of people who literally had no place in the economic order. Radical concepts were needed, according to Boggs, but he didn’t see them coming from organized labor. The Black struggle for rights and citizenship was increasing in intensity and had usurped the American working class as the agent of revolution. Thus, according to Boggs, the central question facing the Black struggle was how to confront the new economic order, organize and build a political base, and provide a way for “the outsiders” who would never be given a chance to work to develop their creative abilities.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, the struggle for Detroit in the 1960s and early 1970s was not simply about the dreams of having a house and a job; it was a struggle to radically transform racist society. Freeing people required liberating space. The year that Jimmy Boggs raised the question of “the outsiders,” he and his wife, Grace Lee Boggs, helped organize the Grassroots Leadership Conference in Detroit where Malcolm X delivered his famous speech “Message to the Grassroots.” The speech called for Blacks to put aside their differences and unite against a

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<sup>67</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 120-121.

<sup>68</sup> James Boggs, *The American Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2009 [1963]).



common enemy (whites) as African countries had done against Europeans when they met in Bandung in 1955. Throughout the speech, Malcolm X also emphasized the importance of land to liberation struggles: “Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.”<sup>69</sup>

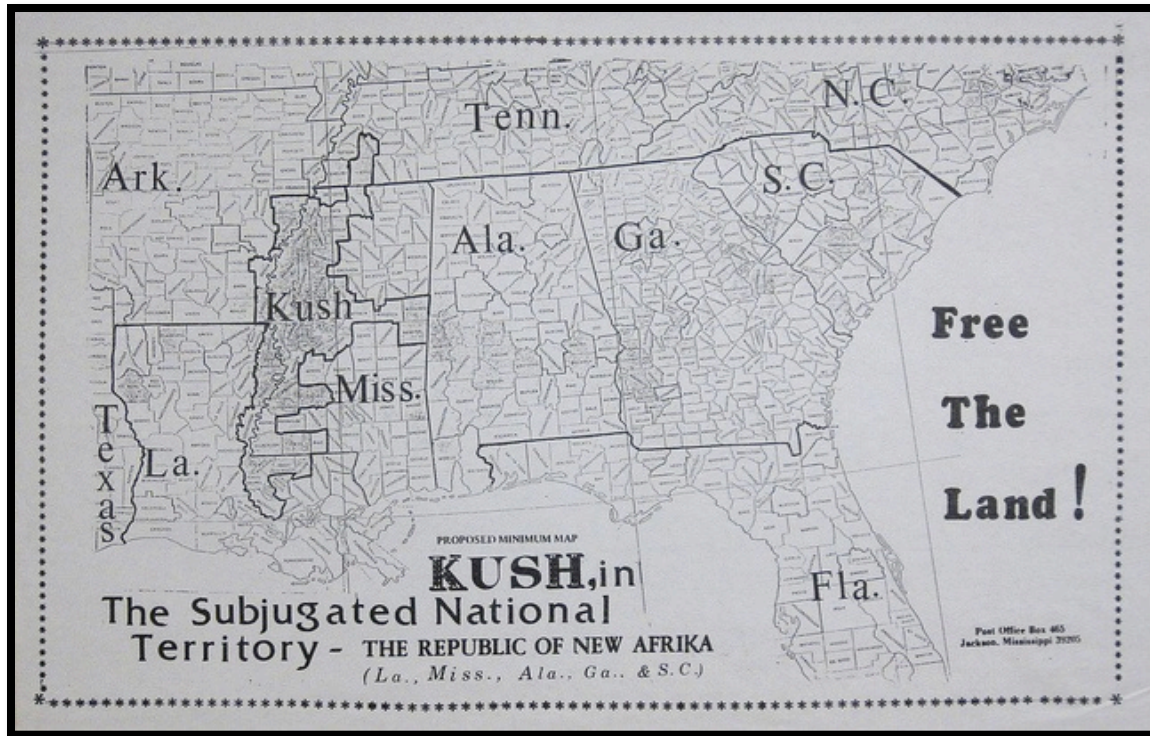
### **Black man’s land**

Calls by Malcolm X and others to establish a territorial base for the Black freedom struggle were taken up in different ways by Black radicals. The uprising raised the challenging question of how to work to institutionalize “freed space” in the North and the South. In 1968, 500 Black radicals convened at the Black Government Conference held at the Shrine of the Black Madonna church in Detroit and signed a Declaration of Independence with the aim of creating the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) -- an independent Black nation that would occupy five southern states within the United States (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina). Building on the “Black Manifesto,” the RNA, based in Detroit until 1970, demanded \$400 billion in reparations for the project.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots,” November 10, 1963, available here: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/message-to-grassroots/> (accessed November 12, 2014).

<sup>70</sup> Robert Williams Papers, Bentley Historical Library Archives, 1948-2008.



**FIGURE 2.7.** Republic of New Afrika’s map of reclaimed territory for independent Black nation (Source: Robert William’s papers 1959-1997, Bentley Historical Library).

The RNA rearticulated the Back to Afrika movement – rerouting the desire to escape to Africa into a project that aimed to reconfigure U.S. territory and create a space where a New Afrikan citizenship could be realized.<sup>71</sup> Early RNA members included: Imari Obadele and Gaidi

<sup>71</sup> Berger, Dan, and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. “‘The Struggle Is for Land!’: Race, Territory, and National Liberation.” In *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism* (Township, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 59. They write, “The RNA argued that black people in the United States constituted a new political subject: The New Afrikan, an identity born within the confines of the United States as a result of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the ensuing centuries of white supremacy ... the New Afrikan could only achieve independence here through claiming the territory that slaves had built and that therefore had been historically home to large populations of black people ... [like the American Indian Movement, established in the same year, the RNA] viewed land reclamation as essential to dismantling the US empire from within its domestic colonial boundaries.” AIM and RNA were just two social movements struggling for territory at the time. Others groups also advocated for the redistribution of land – land was the fulcrum of struggle for groups such as the Crusade for Justice (Chicano); the Movimiento de Liberacion Nacion (Puerto Rican and Chicano groups); and Prairie Fire Organizing Committee (whites). As Berger and Dunbar Ortiz write, “These groups, independently and sometimes in coalition, argued that radicalism in the United States must contend with and ultimately overturn the country’s settler-colonial roots” (75, notes 53 and 54). In 1972, the RNA unveiled an “Anti-Depression Program” – they demanded 1) that the U.S. government cede land and sovereignty to the RNA in places where Black vote for independence through a plebiscite; 2) that they pay \$300 billion in reparations; and 3) that a procedure be established to determine payments. In March 1974, the RNA held elections in Mississippi in over thirty counties. Over 5,000 Blacks voted for reparations.

Obadele (co-founders, formerly known as the Henry brothers), Robert Williams (president elect), members of RAM, Amiri Baraka, H. Rap Brown of SNCC, Betty Shabazz (Malcolm X's widow), and members of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Support for the group grew when at a meeting the following year at the New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit, the police fired on the crowd and arrested almost 150 people. Reverend CL Franklin (the father of Aretha and head of the church) declared afterwards that he shared the goals of the RNA, if not their methods. The group expanded, establishing consulates in New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Baltimore, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C. In an attempt to garner international support, they also met with foreign governments including those of the Soviet Union, Tanzania, Sudan, and China.<sup>72</sup>

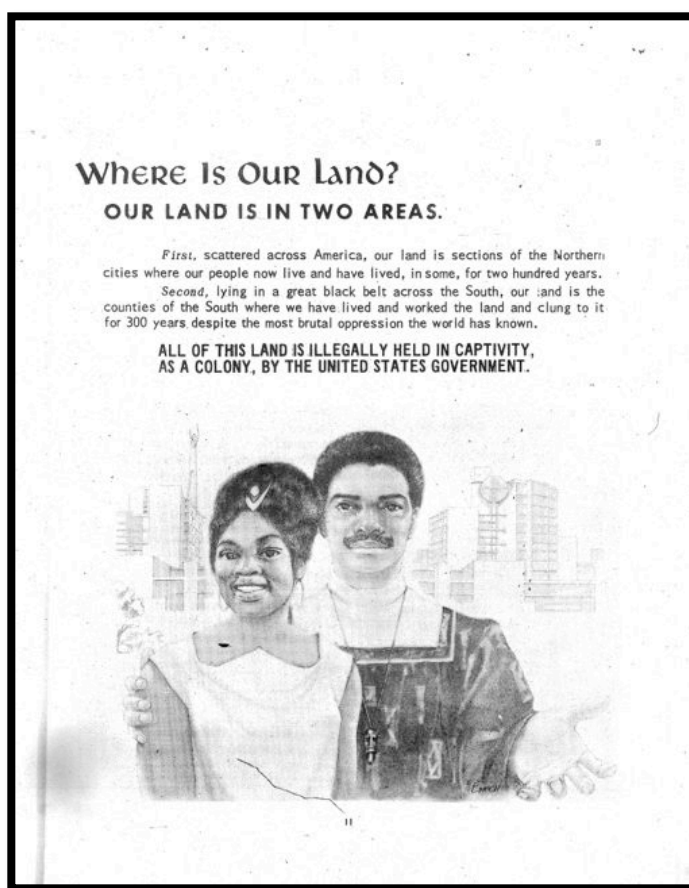
The RNA rejected U.S. political structures and citizenship and sought to develop their own independent sovereign government on "liberated" land. The Obadeli brothers explained the RNA's reasons for choosing territory in the South as follows: "our claim to this southern landmass as national territory arises from an observance of those criteria which civilized people have always held to be the test of peoples claim to land, to national territory. These criteria say that a people may claim land as theirs if (1) they have lived on it traditionally, (2) they have worked and built upon it, and (3) they have fought to stay on it. This is the civilized rule of land possession, sanctioned by international practice, and it is quite clear that Black people in many northern cities, but especially in the Black Belt of the South, meet all these criteria."<sup>73</sup> Their focus on land and sovereign government emerged in part from the non-aligned movement and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Kwasi Densu (2011) *Patchin: Towards a Theory and Political History of Africana Agrarianism*. Dissertation. Department of Political Science, Clark Atlanta University. Source for quote: Imari Abubakari Obadele, *Yes- An Independent Black Nation In Our Tune, in This Place* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press LLC, 1972). 158.

national liberation struggles to overthrow colonial rule. While the main goal of the RNA was to establish an independent sovereign nation for Blacks in the rural south – to operationalize Amiri Barka’s assertion “Black is a country” -- they also sought, at least rhetorically, to claim land in “the Northern cities where our people now live and have lived, in some, for two hundred years” (see Figure 2.8). Moreover, the uprisings across U.S. cities had put the “urban” on the revolutionary agenda in a new way.



**FIGURE 2.8.** Republic of New Afrika’s Newspaper  
(Source: Robert William’s papers 1959-1997, Bentley Historical Library).

A year before the Detroit rebellion, James and Grace Lee Boggs published a prescient article in the *Monthly Review* entitled, “The City is the Black Man’s Land.” They argued that

with many of country's largest cities soon to be dominated by African Americans, Black movements should focus on urban political power. The Boggses proposed a rewriting of the rural "Black belt thesis" in light of Black urbanity. They called for not only community control within Black areas but for Blacks to claim control of cities as a whole. This meant taking over administration functions of cities so that city government and life could be reorganized from "top to bottom." "The war is not only *in* America's cities," they argued, "it is *for* these cities."<sup>74</sup> "The essay," African-American studies scholar Stephen Ward writes, "[was] an attempt to deepen the movement's theoretical basis by formulating a revolutionary theory of Black urban struggle that would reorganize not just Black communities but American society."<sup>75</sup>

The Boggses were among a number of radical activists who had started to embrace the city as the "Black man's land" – a site for organizing a radically different vision of society. In Northern cities, where de-facto rather than de-jure segregation was the norm, urban Black radicals organized for community control and self-determination rather than integration into white communities. In the spring of 1968, a local Black Panther Party (BPP) chapter was founded in Detroit two years after Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale founded the organization in Oakland. The party deployed a territorial strategy, seeking to develop solidarity networks (global in reach) and locally dispersed centers of power. The Detroit chapter was one of forty chapters, including international chapters in England, Israel, Australia, and India.<sup>76</sup>

The BPP drew on ideas of Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Mao Tse-tung.

The Panthers applied Fanon's theorization of the relationship between colonial settlers and

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<sup>74</sup> James Boggs and Grace Lee Boggs. "The City Is the Black Man's Land (1966)." In *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 162–70.

<sup>75</sup> Stephen Ward, "Introduction." In *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, edited by Stephen Ward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 22.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmad, "Marching Blind."

colonized peoples in the French colony of Algeria to the situation of African Americans. They approached self-defense, as described by founding BPP member David Hilliard, in terms of political empowerment, which meant the protection of communities against unemployment, homelessness and poor housing conditions, predatory business practices, inadequate schools, and racist policing.<sup>77</sup>

The Detroit chapter was founded as an ideological and militant response to the conditions of deprivation and racism that caused the 1967 uprising. In a symbolic move, the Detroit BPP chapter established their headquarters two blocks from the epicenter of the rebellion.<sup>78</sup> The Detroit Panthers – like other party chapters – instituted survival programs, which included programs to feed children, clothes families, and provide for medical needs. While the party became best known for their Free Breakfast Program -- which garnered the most attention from the FBI and later became a federally mandated state program under Reagan in an attempt to co-opt the power of the party – they organized many other programs. As their name denotes, the programs at their root were about survival – they provided food, shoes, health care, education, legal, plumbing and electrical services, among others. The programs were envisioned a way to escape the oppression of U.S. empire through everyday social reproduction, mutual aid, the establishment of a political base of resistance, and production of alternative forms of community. An indictment of the Keynesian welfare state, which failed to provide basic services to the increasingly large numbers of unemployed Blacks in inner cities, the survival programs reoriented flows of capital to the needs of the people.<sup>79</sup> As Huey P. Newton wrote, “In order to

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<sup>77</sup> David Hilliard, “Introduction.” In *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, edited by David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>78</sup> Ahmad, “Marching Blind.”

<sup>79</sup> Hilliard, “Introduction,” *The Huey P. Newton Reader*.

exist we must survive ... if the people are not here revolution can not be achieved, for the people and only the people make revolution.”<sup>80</sup> While the BPP eventually sought to move beyond the survival programs and eliminate dependency on businesses for their survival by redistributing the ownership of production, the programs were critical in providing much needed sustenance for the permanent army of unemployed that was emerging in tandem with the post-industrializing economy.

The BPP 10-point program, first released in 1967, raised questions about land twice. One of the land-focused points was historical in its orientation, the other forward-looking:

3. We want an end to the robbery by the white man of our Black Community. We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules. Forty acres and two mules were promised 100 years ago as restitution for slave labor and mass murder of black people. We will accept the payment as currency that will be distributed to our many communities. The Germans are now aiding the Jews in Israel for the genocide of the Jewish people. The Germans murdered six million Jews. The American racist has taken part in the slaughter of over twenty million black people; therefore, we feel that this is a modest demand that we make.

10. We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace. And as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held throughout the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate for the purpose of determining the will of black people as to their national destiny.<sup>81</sup>

Like the RNA, the BPP made demands for reparations. They were also both interested in territorial control, but their approaches differed. The BPP in point #3 called for the overdue debt of “forty acres and two mules.” In point #10, that called for “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace” and for an UN-supervised referendum for the “black colonial subjects” to determine their “national destiny.” In contrast to the RNA, the BPP’s demand for land was not based on agrarian ideas that the land belongs to those who worked (or traditionally

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<sup>80</sup> Huey P. Newton, “Speech Delivered at Boston College: November 18, 1970.” In *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, edited by David Hilliard and Donald Weise (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 160-161.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Kwasi Densu, *Patchin*.

worked) it. Rather, they called up the unmet promises of land redistribution following Reconstruction as justification for their claim, but stated that they would accept currency in lieu of land. Moreover, they did not seek nationhood.

The Black Panther Party survival programs were based on a recognition that spatial scales of world capitalism had changed and that the new imperialism was no longer reliant on territorial possessions. In 1971, Huey P. Newton argued, “Blacks in the U.S. have a special duty to give up any claim to nationhood now more than ever. The U.S. has never been our country; and realistically there’s no territory for us to claim. Of all the oppressed people in the world, we are in the best position to inspire global revolution.”<sup>82</sup> Newton understood calls for nation to be liberatory only when they were de-linked from the project of sovereignty. He argued that new forms of constituent power and systems of governance needed to be developed. Thus, rather than seeking to establish a national land base, the BPP focused on reclaiming institutional spaces – for example, housing projects, schools, community centers, and prisons – and developing what they thought of as city-center communes with the goal of making liberated territories.<sup>83</sup>

That the riots were thought of as “freeing space” speaks to this impulse for territory in both the BPP and the RNA. As Robin Kelley writes, “The impulse for territory, then, is not just a matter of land; it is a matter of finding free space.”<sup>84</sup> The importance of “finding free space” as articulated by Black radicals in the 1960s and 1970s remains a challenge in Detroit today where land and property are highly regimented and controlled not only by the operations of capital, but

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<sup>82</sup> Huey P. Newton quoted in Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> Reyes, Alvaro. “Can’t Go Home Again: Sovereign Entanglements and the Black Radical Tradition in the Twentieth Century.” Dissertation. Literature Program in the Graduate School, Duke University, 2009; Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 126.



by state policies and programs that may not seem racial on the surface, but have all kinds of uneven consequences across social groups (as I show in the subsequent chapters).

### **American apartheid**

In the aftermath of the Detroit rebellion, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to investigate urban uprisings nationwide and make recommendations on how to “prevent or contain such disasters in the future.” The commission issued a report that argued the United States “was moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal ... Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions create it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”<sup>85</sup> Following the Kerner report, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was passed, which prohibited discrimination in the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, and sex, although white flight only continued to grow.

Detroit’s change from a prosperous white city to a poor Black one was the fastest and most complete of any other major American city. After the 1967 uprisings, racial hysteria set in. In the suburbs, some whites bought guns, hired private guards, and cut economic and social ties with the city. The nearby city of Warren went as far as forming a militia. A far right-wing white organization called Breakthrough emerged with the explicit mandate of arming white residents and encouraging them to remain in the city. The organization’s founder argued that police had failed to protect whites and if Detroit became Black, “guerilla warfare” would ensue in the suburbs. The John Birch Society made similar claims through a front organization called Truth

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<sup>85</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (The Kerner Report), 1967.

About City Turmoil.<sup>86</sup> However, what Mayor Jerome Cavanagh described as “an arms race in Detroit” was not the most enduring response to the riot.<sup>87</sup>

White flight from Detroit was underway prior to the uprisings – between 1964-66, 22,000 whites left. However, in the years following the riots, outmigration increased almost eight fold. In 1967 alone, 47,000 whites left the city.<sup>88</sup> One author described the changing landscape in this way: “For sale signs sprung up in every white neighborhood, seemingly in front of every house. There had always been a lot of vacant land outside the city, and Detroit’s suburbs had been expanding slowly since the fifties; now developers threw up houses, schools and shopping malls beyond Eight Mile Road. Some people were so panicked they spent the winter of 1967-68 sleeping on their relatives’ couches or shivered in half-completed tract homes. The riot touched off an exodus that left Detroit with a black majority within five years.”<sup>89</sup> In 1968, 80,000 residents left. And in 1969, another 46,000.<sup>90</sup> “For the two and a half million whites who lived in America’s most segregated suburbs, Detroit became ... an alien, threatening wreck, a place to drive through, if at all, with the windows rolled up and the doors securely locked. Whites not only left the city physically, they abandoned it emotionally as well.”<sup>91</sup>

In the ensuing years, the booming white suburbs formed an economic, psychological, and physical ring around Detroit. And yet residential segregation became the “forgotten factor” in

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<sup>86</sup> Joe Darden and Richard Thomas. *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 387.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>89</sup> Ze’ev Chafets, *Devil’s Night: And Other True Tales of Detroit*. (New York: Random House, 1990), 21.

<sup>90</sup> Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 384.

<sup>91</sup> Chafets, *Devil’s Night*, 23.

race relations as academics, policymakers, and the media emphasized cultural explanations of the poor minority “urban underclass.”<sup>92</sup> The culture of poverty thesis was used to support claims that minorities are poor because they have a defective culture and that the unemployed should be required to show “good citizenship” before being supported by the state. Ignored was how – as the Kerner report pointed out – a series of well-defined public policies and institutional practices created the Black ghetto and the spatialization and racialization of poverty.

### **The Black political establishment**

The uprisings from Newark to Detroit presaged the rise of African Americans in political office. Between 1969 and 1974, Black elected officials across the United States increased to include 16 congressional representatives and 104 mayors.<sup>93</sup> In 1973, Coleman Young was elected mayor of Detroit, a position he would hold for the next 20 years. While Young’s platform included housing and education reform, his main campaign promise was to establish a “people’s police department.” Once in office, one of Young’s first initiatives was the dismantling of a special undercover police unit called STRESS (“Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets”) that had been terrorizing the Black community since 1971. In its 33 months of operation, STRESS was responsible for 400 warrant-less raids and the death of 22 citizens. Young sought to refashion the Detroit Police Department as a more “citizen-friendly” organization. With

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<sup>92</sup> Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton. *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>93</sup> Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 2013, 150.

Executive Order number 2, which he announced directly after taking office, Young set about integrating the 5,500-member police force, which was 85 percent white as late as 1972.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the police department, Young worked to change the racial configuration of city government by facilitating the hiring of African Americans to head and staff numerous agencies. By his second term in office, 40 percent of his appointees and senior management were Black.<sup>95</sup> As the federal government dismantled Great Society initiatives like the Model Cities Program for urban development, Young, building on voter enthusiasm, continued former mayor Jerome Cavanagh's local Great Society programs with more attention to racial equality.<sup>96</sup> He built new parks, recreation centers, and low-income housing. Yet, Young could not stem the tide of economic divestment from the city, despite an ambitious urban renewal agenda and generous corporate welfare incentives.

The Young administration was, due to its attention to social welfare and racial discrimination, celebrated by many, but Black radicals felt "jettisoned" post-election and were increasingly dismayed as Young forged pragmatic alliances with corporate and suburban power structures, rather than publicly embracing their more radical visions of social change.<sup>97</sup> The rise of Black political power in Detroit coincided with an attack on Black radical activists through the FBI's Counter Intelligence Program, which targeted "subversive" groups, and an offensive against organized labor. With union leaders working to discredit Black revolutionaries and auto

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<sup>94</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001). She writes: "By 1981, 1,126 out of 5,013 police officers were African American, and 10 of the 20 police commanders were black as well. Whereas women comprised only 2 percent of the department in 1967, by 1987 they made up a full 20 percent of the force and, in addition, there were three female commanders and a female deputy chief" (204).

<sup>95</sup> Susan Fainstein and Norman Fainstein, "Urban Regimes and Racial Conflict," Mimeo (paper presented at Fulbright Colloquium: Managing Divided Cities, 1993).

<sup>96</sup> Thompson, *Whose Detroit*, 205.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

companies attacking the bargaining power of the United Auto Workers, Detroit's labor movement suffered a steep decline in membership, for which workers paid greatly. In 1969, 1,530,870 union members worked for the Big Three. By 1979, membership was reduced to 840,000 and by 1983, to a mere 477,000 workers.<sup>98</sup> Historian Heather Thompson summarizes the stakes of this period: "African Americans finally had real power in Detroit, and liberalism had survived a conservative attack. But because the national conservative war against liberal, and particularly African American, power never ended, Detroit was doomed to experience severe economic distress and social isolation."<sup>99</sup>

During Young's tenure, conservative whites' disdain for him grew with Detroit's "racial estrangement."<sup>100</sup> After his election many who had the financial means led a "virtual stampede" to the suburbs that dwarfed earlier rushes. While the post-1967 flight to the suburbs was staggering, 891,000 whites still remained in Detroit in 1969. However, by 1976, as Young began a second term, 348,000 of them had left. Between 1970 and 1990, the percentage of Black residents in Detroit increased from 44.5 percent to 78.4 percent.<sup>101</sup> The mass departure threw Detroit into economic turmoil, which was only compounded by the fact that the country was entering an economic recession and a new phase of multinational capitalism. As the city's tax base continued to shrink, its fiscal deficits mounted.<sup>102</sup> Aging auto plants and factories were not

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 216.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>100</sup> Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Darden et al., *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. They write: "Metropolitan industrial investment targeted to Detroit fell from 44 percent in 1958 to 22 percent in 1977 – a decline of 50 percent in just two decades" (p. 24). At the same time, Detroit's share of commercial sales generated by the region's major shopping areas decreased from 65.7 percent to 9.8 percent (p. 26). They continue, "In 1968, 10 of the region's 20 major shopping areas were located in the city of Detroit. By 1977 that number had dropped to 1, and with the closing of Hudson's in 1983, the central city – with a population of 1.2 million people – was no longer home to even 1 major shopping area" (26).

replaced. Commercial firms and department stores went bankrupt or abandoned their Detroit locales. Inner-city services and jobs were displaced to the suburbs. Detroit sunk deeper and deeper into poverty.

During the 1970s, Detroit lost almost a quarter-million jobs, leading to harrowing conditions in the Black communities.<sup>103</sup> One-third of residents lacked any earned income. Sixty percent received some sort of public assistance.<sup>104</sup> Public services were curtailed and municipal employees were laid off. Public schools faltered and gun violence intensified. Fiscal crisis, poverty, and unemployment became chronic. In 1960, Detroit contained half the region's property wealth. By 1980, the city's share had shrunk to 16.5 percent.<sup>105</sup> During these decades, as Detroit's economy plummeted, property values in nearby suburban counties of Oakland and Macomb County rose tenfold.<sup>106</sup> In 1983, the Detroit region had the widest household income gap of any large metropolitan area in the United States.<sup>107</sup> In 1990, Arthur Johnson, longtime NAACP leader and former deputy superintendent of the Detroit public school system, summed up the dynamic that had developed between the city and the suburbs: "whites don't know a god damned thing about what's gone wrong here ... It's Apartheid. They rape the city and then they come and say, 'look what these niggers did to the city' as if they were guiltless."<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. Those living below the poverty line increased from 14.9 percent in 1969 to 21.9 percent in 1979.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 206. In 1983, the gap was \$11,685. For overall Metro Detroit average household income was \$33,241 whereas in Detroit it was \$21,556.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Thompson, *Whose Detroit*, 209.

## Post-racial times

The 1967 riots led to widespread physical destruction of Detroit. However, as many residents who stayed on in the city argued, the major destruction came *after* the rebellion when drugs were pumped into Detroit. As job opportunities in Detroit became scarce, the crack industry came to be seen by many residents as a career choice. Before, high school graduates could reasonably expect to find a well-paying factory job, they now were being recruited into drug rings. The drug culture was pervasive and violent. In 1986, alone, 43 children were killed in the city from street violence and 365 were shot, many seriously injured. Moreover youth detention became a tremendous financial drain on local governance. In the mid-1980s activist organizing began coalescing around reclaiming neighborhoods from drugs and gang violence with the formation of two key organizations called Save Our Sons and Daughters and We the People Reclaim Our Street.

As the drug trade was sweeping urban communities and welfare retrenchment continued unabated, industrial labor restructuring and financialization gave rise to cities oriented around the service economy and permanent unemployment. In 1994, after 20 years as mayor, Coleman Young was succeeded by Dennis Archer, a successful lawyer and Michigan Supreme Court justice. Deploying the discourse of multiculturalism and regional cooperation, Archer promised to “transcend old racial divides, work with a Republican governor, and spur new business investment.”<sup>109</sup> His de-racialized campaign infuriated many Black Detroiters, but he won by a narrow margin. For many, particularly the political and corporate leaders in the suburbs, Archer’s election marked the dawn of a new day in Detroit. By the end of his second term, Archer’s neoliberal development ideology had transformed Detroit’s downtown landscape with

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<sup>109</sup> Shaw, Todd. *Now Is the Time: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 166.

the construction of Comerica Park (baseball stadium), Ford Field (football stadium), three casinos, Compuware corporate headquarters, Campus Martius downtown park, GM takeover and \$500 million redevelopment of Detroit's Renaissance Center, and several new downtown condominium developments. Marking the bolstered corporate confidence in the city, credit ratings rose from junk to investment-grade levels during Archer's administration.<sup>110</sup>

When Archer decided not to run for re-election in 2001, Kwame Kilpatrick, a thirty-one-year-old state congressman, became the youngest mayor ever elected in Detroit's history. The centerpiece of Kilpatrick's campaign platform was demolition, which in the beginning resonated with residents because they associated it with a local war on drugs, but later found troubling because there were no redevelopment plans in place and many neighborhoods were left pockmarked with upturned dirt where houses sat before.<sup>111</sup> While Kilpatrick was seen as an up-and-coming Black politician – and being eyed by national Democratic leadership – his political career began to unravel at the start of a narrowly secured second term when he became caught up with his chief of staff in a sex scandal. Detroit became politically paralyzed as the mayor bungled his way through the controversy, refusing to resign for almost a year and reinforcing perceptions of the city government as corrupt and inept.

When David Bing, former NBA basketball star, took office in 2009, his administration pledged to restore the public trust in city government. While Bing only served one term, the changes that occurred over his four-year tenure were pivotal for the present and future of the city, including Detroit falling under the power of an emergency manager, declaring a historic bankruptcy, launching a master planning process that territorially reconfigured the city, and

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>111</sup> Bergmann, *Getting Ghost*, 81.



finally, being succeeded by the city's first white mayor in thirty years. The rest of this dissertation analyzes the everyday politics of this transformative period and competing visions for the future of the city.

### **Conclusions: To rise and rise again**

What happens to a dream deferred, asked Langston Hughes. Does it dry up, does it fester and stink or sag, or does it explode? The deferred dreams that led many African Americans to migrate to Detroit – dreams of a promised land where they would escape the racial strictures of the Jim Crow south and realize new dreams born with Fordism of a house, car, steady job, and upward mobility – exploded in the hot summer of 1967. The Detroit Rebellion took place almost a half-century ago. Yet the struggles over basic needs, the right to space, and limited emancipation that precipitated the uprising continue today in different ways. The Detroit metropolitan area remains one of the most segregated in the country.

Although the story of postwar Detroit was in many ways about decline and abandonment, it was also, as I have tried to show here, about a struggle to realize a different future for the city and for people's lives – a liberated space. That struggle continues today and is defined by the dreams deferred that do not dry up, fester, stink, sag or explode but endure and get passed down through generations. I learned during my fieldwork that for many people Detroit is about the primacy of resistance. It is about the will to rise, and rise again.

## CHAPTER 3: LANDSCAPES OF SPECULATION AND CARE

One of the beautiful things about Detroit ... we were known for our houses. I don't care if you rented, whatever you did, you kept your outside up. You swept the dirt. We had beautiful, beautiful homes. Beautiful basements. Beautiful parties, places that you could go in and just exchange information. That is gone.  
--Gloria Smith, Detroit resident, 2011

They're going to focus on the fact that "Detroit's so dangerous everything's on fire." Not paying attention to why was that house set on fire? It's because no one was living there and it's because someone wasn't living there because they couldn't afford their house payments, they couldn't afford their house payments because they got a predatory loan from this bank or they just got laid off from a job that doesn't exist anymore and these factors are out of their hands. That's why this whole city is up in fucking smoke.

--Jose Rivera, Detroit resident, 2011

### Introduction

Each December, the *Detroit Legal News*, a daily print newspaper, publishes a supplement listing notices of all the properties in Wayne County subject to tax foreclosure. The appearance of a property in the newspaper marks its first official step toward foreclosure. According to Michigan Public Act 123, properties that are delinquent in taxes for three years are foreclosed upon and put up for auction. Residential properties in Detroit, which makes up much of Wayne County, dominate the listings and, eventually, the auction rolls.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, the county foreclosed on 42,000 properties. In 2014, the number increased to 80,000. When the astronomical number of tax-foreclosed properties is added to the estimated 70,000 properties that have gone through mortgage foreclosures since 2005, we can see that approximately one-quarter of all of the landed

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of area, Wayne County is 614 square miles and Detroit is 143 square mile, meaning the city is about ¼ the size of the county. Detroit's population is approximately 40 percent of Wayne County's total population of 1.775 million in 2013. While the City of Detroit issues property tax bills, Wayne County is responsible for collecting the delinquent taxes.

properties within the city of Detroit are in some state of foreclosure. It's hard to imagine the situation worsening, but with the doubling of foreclosures at the time of writing that is precisely what is happening. In 2014, the county issued 80,000 foreclosures notices, which means an estimated 142,000 people, or 1/5 of Detroit's population, could be displaced from their homes. The scale of foreclosures elucidates how the struggle persists for many to claim a right to space in the city.

The *Detroit Legal News* foreclosure supplement is a gauge of the city's housing crisis. At 188 pages and over 3 inches thick, its heft seems at first to confirm popular perceptions of Detroit as a sink of dead capital and surplus land yet a closer analysis of the supplement and the property auction that it precedes reveals a more complex story. It provides a window onto how Detroit's "abandoned" lands are caught up in complicated inter-scalar governmental politics, increasingly long circuits of finance capital, and a historical continuum of redlining that cause poor people, particularly African Americans and Latinos, to lose their homes, again and again. The auction is an example of how human abandonment is enacted and justified vis-à-vis the constant process of making private property markets.

How did Detroit go from being a place as the epigraph above suggests of "beautiful, beautiful homes" to a "city up in fucking smoke?" What are the contemporary processes of property unmaking and unmaking that continue to turn Detroit from "a home of our own and land of our own" to a place marked by homelessness and people without land? This chapter explores these questions by examining the development of the auction and other racialized technologies of abandonment that are profoundly reshaping neighborhoods and the ways residents navigate the landscapes that emerge, including reclaiming "vacant" lands as a commons. I argue that, ironically, the auction of Detroit's tax-foreclosed properties produces

landscapes that may undermine some of its intended goals, including the stabilization of urban neighborhoods and real estate markets. By encouraging speculation, the auction gives rise to demanding environments that require greater care and effort by residents at the block and neighborhood level resisting blight.

Struggles around landscapes of speculation and care—often the same places—orient this chapter. First, I examine how home foreclosures impact neighborhoods, emphasizing how residents respond by caring for “vacant” land or, working at the margins of the private property system, discursively and materially claiming it as a commons. Second, I show how the Wayne County tax foreclosure auction has its roots in the U.S. property rights movement and a national conservative organizing campaign that politically prioritizes the privatization of public land at the state and municipality levels. I also examine the reasons that government officials decided to fast-track the foreclosure process, the complex logistics of foreclosing on so many properties, and the small ways local officials (enacting state policy) exert autonomy and try to keep residents from losing their homes. Third, I look at how neighborhoods impacted by the auction become demanding environments requiring increasing maintenance by residents. By way of conclusion, I examine three responses to the demanding environments created by the auction. I look the Riverfront East Congregation Initiative, a collaboration of diverse faith-based communities engaged in grassroots planning on the city’s east side, an area where foreclosures are among the highest. I contrast their effort with those of the Detroit Land Bank Authority and the Blight Authority Task Force, two quasi-public entities that work in concert to mitigate the auction’s negative effects on real estate values by refurbishing foreclosed homes, recruiting new residents to “stable” neighborhoods, and demolishing homes in areas “where there is no market.”

## **To lose your home**

An encounter at the beginning of my research highlighted the importance of the auction as a critical and contested technology of abandonment and site of research. For several weeks, I'd been meeting with community activists and urban farmers to find out about how they claimed land in the city. I'd learned that many people had grave concerns about the land tenure situation of existing projects. A group called Moratorium Now was active in fighting bank foreclosures through court cases and protesting evictions, but no organized movement existed to secure community land control. On this particular day, I was finishing up a visit with an environmental justice activist in a community meeting space called "the Commons" when an African-American woman named Glenda whose house had just gone on the auction block entered the room.<sup>2</sup> She was fuming after a meeting with the Wayne County Treasurer. The woman I was meeting with left and I found myself engaged in a long conversation with Glenda about her precarious housing situation. City officials had wrongly designated the tax bracket for her house, where she lived with seven of her family members. Glenda rummaged through her things and pulled out a bill that showed she owed \$6,000 in back taxes, which she argued was wrong because her house had been assigned a "flipper tax" -- the rate for an investment property, not the rate for one's primary residence -- which she described as not a uncommon error. On the verge of tears, Glenda described how people were cruising her neighborhood, stopping in front of homes listed on the auction roster, and taking pictures.

The Wayne County tax foreclosure auction takes place every fall and is comprised of two bidding sessions. During the first session, held in September, the opening bid is the sum of the delinquent taxes and fees. The second session is held in October. The opening bid is \$500,

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<sup>2</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy.

however a \$2,000 deposit is required to bid on a single property and thus enter the auction.<sup>3</sup>

When the auction began, there were not as many properties being sold. In 2010, due to the sheer number of tax-foreclosed properties being auctioned, the auction was moved from its former physical location in the ballroom of the county building to online. Since then, an online auction company called Bid4Assets has run the auction and the capacity for investor speculation has increased.

Glenda's plan was to buy her house back through the second auction. She explained it would be cheaper, if riskier, to bid on her house than pay the back taxes, which she could not afford. Glenda emphasized that her family was not alone in their predicament. "Five thousand people will be out of their homes in the wintertime," she told me. Research conducted by planning scholar Margaret Dewar confirms Glenda's estimate. Dewar found that in 2002 and 2003, 27 percent of the tax-foreclosed properties in Detroit were owner occupied and 23 percent were renter occupied.<sup>4</sup> The number of foreclosures had increased over six-fold since her study. If the ratio has stayed the same, approximately 21,600 of the 80,000 properties foreclosed on in 2014 would be owner occupied. To be clear, not everyone who is foreclosed on loses their home, but the figures are nonetheless startling.<sup>5</sup>

Residents facing tax foreclosures who can't afford back taxes deploy a number of tactics to try to keep their homes. Glenda's plan to buy back her house was a common one. Others facing tax foreclosures attempted to scare off potential buyers by making their homes undesirable. For example, in September 2012, Kelly Parker, an unemployed cancer patient who

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<sup>3</sup> A deposit of \$5,000 is required to bid on more than one.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Dewar, "The Effects on Cities of 'Best Practice' in Tax Foreclosure: Evidence from Detroit and Flint," CLOSUP Working Paper Series, Number 2 (2009), <http://closup.umich.edu/files/closup-wp-2-tax-foreclosure.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> An organization called the United Housing Coalition helps people buy their houses back through the auction, therefore avoiding costly registration fees by bidding as a group and forgoing taxes owed.

owed \$12,000 in back taxes and whose two-bedroom home was for sale through the foreclosure auction, covered its outside in graffiti. In red, she spray painted, “We will keep our house,” “We will NOT be Moved,” and “THIS IS OUR HOME.” A sign in the yard was scrawled with black marker: “Sick, Single Mother’s Home.” Parker’s case was unique because her tactics received national attention and she was able to keep her home, but it was by no means exceptional in terms of “fiscal disobedience.”<sup>6</sup>

Stories abound of property defacement. It’s not uncommon for homeowners facing the loss of their property to strip it of metal piping, doors, hot water heaters, and other valuables. Some homeowners channel their pain and rage over losing their homes into property destruction: pouring concrete down drains, bashing out support beams, tearing down interior walls, and sealing doors shut with superglue and bolts. As Glenda put it, “People are getting desperate. People have hit rock bottom. I’m afraid they will start torching their houses.” In some cases, landlords strip houses of their valuables (e.g., water heaters and doors) without informing their tenants that the property had sold. If the property owners don’t do it themselves, scrappers quickly identify recently vacant houses. One person in an interview described it this way: “You know so the house was immediately vacant and then two days later somebody would come in and steal the furnace ... people would drive around and look for moving vans. They marked the house when the moving van was there. The next day, they’d come in, break in, and steal all the copper out of the basement ... it just devastates our community. The shell of the house is still there. The quality of the house is still there. But you need somebody living in it. We need neighbors.”

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow the term “fiscal disobedience” from Janet Roitman (2005), *Fiscal Disobedience: An Anthropology of Economic Regulation in Central African* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).



**FIGURE 3.1.** Advertisement for Detroit Land Bank Authority auction  
(Source: Author)

The need for neighbors was a common refrain in Detroit. Bureaucrats and planners used it to recruit new residents to the city (e.g., see Figure 3.1). However, long time residents often talked about need for neighbors in qualitatively different terms. They focused less on recruiting new neighbors than keeping old ones. They saw foreclosures in general, and the Wayne County land auction specifically, as unjust and exacerbating outmigration. Moreover, the displacement of residents from their homes created a ripple effect through what might be described as the neighborhood ecology. Detroit residents often talked about houses in their neighborhoods as not simply structures that provide shelter to a single household but rather as part of a complex network of socio-ecological relationships.



## Race and debt

The first page of the annual *Detroit Legal News* supplement explains the tax foreclosure process in Wayne County. In the pages that follow, foreclosure listings are organized by township with properties appearing in a three-column ledger listing property number, address, and interested parties. The third column, “interested parties,” refers to creditors who have taken out liens on a property, meaning that the property owner owes more money than just back taxes. Some properties have more than a dozen interested parties listed, including phone companies, banks, nurseries, window repair companies, funeral homes, and the IRS (see Figure 3.2).

PAID SUPPLEMENT TO THE DETROIT LEGAL NEWS DECEMBER 3, 10 AND 17 2013								
Prop No.	Address	Interested Parties	Prop No.	Address	Interested Parties	Prop No.	Address	Interested Parties
City of DETROIT Ward 22			City of DETROIT Ward 22			City of DETROIT Ward 22		
22013036	16317 W MCNICHOLS	PEGGY FOSTER PEGGY	22013624	20224 W MCNICHOLS	TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME INC REC CURTIS C WILLIAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY CCP REV CURTIS C WILLIAMS	22013922-3	16244 W MCNICHOLS	LEWIS BROOMFIELD LEWIS S BROOMFIELD CARRIBBEAN AND AFRICAN TROPICAL FOOD INC CARIBBEAN/AFRICAN TROPICAL FOOD ALFRED BROOMFIELD LOUIS BROOMFIELD
22013038	16335 W MCNICHOLS	ISSAC ROY BELMONT PROPERTIES OF MI LLC CHEROKEE LAND LLC ROBERT LEE WATERS WATERS, ROBERT LEE & ISSAC, ROY	22013625	20222 W MCNICHOLS	CLAUDE ADAMS DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY CCP REV CURTIS C WILLIAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME INC REV CURTIS C WILLIAMS STATE FARM MUTUAL AUTOMOBILE INS CO SEAN M TAYLOR	22013946-9	16030 W MCNICHOLS	PREMIER PROPERTIES & INVESTMENT SAM MIGLIORE PREMIER PROPERTIES CROCIFISA MIGLIORE PREMIER PROPERTIES AND INVEST INC
22013039	16345 W MCNICHOLS	ANGELA SMITH DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY - IRS CCP INDEPENDENCE RECEIVABLES CORP WOLPOFF & ABRAMSON LLP JOHN JOHN SMITH DANIEL FINDLING UNIFUND CCR PARTNERS ALAN S GRAFF MICHIGAN DEPT OF TREASURY - COLLECT	22013634	20038 W MCNICHOLS	BOBSON CONSTRUCTION CO CURTIS (REV) WILLIAMS CFC FINANCIAL LLC THOMAS D HOCKING MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY CURTIS WILLIAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME	22013953-6	16000 W MCNICHOLS	MR B'S CARPET CLEANING INC LUBAVITCH FOUNDATION MR BS CARPET CLEANING INC
22013102-4	17607 W MCNICHOLS	MOHAMED SOBH RICHARD A SABO JR MOHAMED A SOBH MOHAMAD SOBH INDEPENDENT BANK MICHIGAN DEPT OF TREASURY DEE CO LLC AMBER L SABO MOHAMED N SOBH MIDLAND FUNDING LLC MARY JANE M ELLIOTT	22013634	20038 W MCNICHOLS	STATE FARM MUTUAL AUTOMOBILE INS CO SEAN M TAYLOR DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY CFC FINANCIAL LLC THOMAS D HOCKING CURTIS (REV) WILLIAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME BOBSON CONSTRUCTION CO CLAUDE ADAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME INC REV CURTIS C CHAPMAN REV CURTIS C WILLIAMS TRINITY CHAPEL FUNERAL HOME INC REV CURTIS C WILLIAMS MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY	22013957	15944 W MCNICHOLS	NOEL FELTON YVONNE FELTON JOHNNIE WALDON CROMER ENTERPRISES INC
22013140-3	18211 W MCNICHOLS		22013634	20038 W MCNICHOLS	MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF TREASURY CPS DETROIT INC	22013958-9	15940 W MCNICHOLS	WOLPOFF & ABRAMSON, L L P MIDLAND CREDIT MANAGEMENT INC LVNV FUNDING LLC AMANDA M BREWSTER STENGER & STENGER, P C MICHIGAN DEPT OF TREASURY-COLLECTIONS TISHA JOHNSON JOHNSON, MELIS & TISHA INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE - CCP ALLY FINANCIAL INC CRAIG S SCHOENHERR SR MELIS JOHNSON

FIGURE 3.2. *Detroit Legal News* foreclosure listings 2013 (Author photo).

The ledger indexes the scope, urgency, and kinds of indebtedness that precipitated 80,000 foreclosures in 2014 alone, even as it obscures the struggles that people go through to try to pay their debts and keep their homes. As a document that precedes the property auction, it only hints at the unintended reverberations of the foreclosure process. This disjuncture struck me in an oral history that we conducted as part of the *Uniting Detroiters* project with a community activist

named Maria who lived in in Southwest Detroit. Maria described the block where she lived in this way: “Every single house on this block has a very specific story and is a story of struggle,” she said. Although the heavily Latino neighborhood was one of the few in the city experiencing a population gain, her block’s trajectory did not reflect this trend. Like other Detroit neighborhoods, it was unclear which of the middle-class wood-sided homes were unoccupied. She went house-by-house explaining how each one came to be empty or in a precarious tenure situation. Her story illustrates how the impacts of foreclosures extend beyond families to ripple across blocks and neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> Neighborhoods are not just made up of individual properties that are comparable values, but are better understood as ecologies.

A Latino family owned the house on corner, Maria said. They had been renovating it little by little when an elderly woman living next door became the victim of a home invasion and then a tax foreclosure. Shortly after she left, her house burned down. Foreclosed houses are more prone to arson because they are often empty. Jose Rivera’s exclamation (with which I started the chapter) that Detroit is “up in smoke” is not a metaphor. Approximately 65 fires take place a day in Detroit. Their causes vary. In some cases, faulty or rigged electrical wiring (common across the city) is the culprit. However, in many instances they are intentional – both as a “weapon of the weak” (i.e., neighborhood residents destroying drug house), but more often a “tool of the elite” (i.e., owners trying to squeeze the last bit of capital from their investments through insurance payouts or developers clearing areas for capital investment).<sup>8</sup> Over the years, fire has remade the geography and ecology of the city, particularly the widespread fire damage from the 1967 uprising and the rashes of “Devil’s Night” fires, which in the 1980s, routinely reached

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<sup>7</sup> Name has been changed to protect privacy.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, *Flammable Cities* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 15.

between 600 to 800 fires over the 3-day period Halloween period. Whereas Detroit's neighborhoods were once defined by rows of single-family homes, fire – and concomitant demolition – has created a patchwork pattern of houses interspersed with vacant lots; planners call it a “syncopated” landscape.<sup>9</sup>

The house fire in Maria's neighborhood charred the side of the house that the Latino family had been renovating as well as the house on the opposite side. All three houses were now vacant as a consequence of a single foreclosure. The next house down the block belonged to another Latino family, who had moved out when the father was deported. (Southwest Detroit, abuts an international border crossing and is notoriously patrolled by U.S. Immigration, Customs and Enforcement Agency officials who conduct frequent raids and deportations.) Another family on the block was struggling to keep their house together financially. They had a tarp on their roof as they waited to get enough money to fix it. Another family had a small struggling business out of their garage.

“A lot of the stories on this block are a microcosm of what's happening all over Detroit,” Maria said. “It's the displacement. It's the violence. It's the gentrification. It's the loss of property because of finances.” New people were starting to move into the neighborhood, she

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<sup>9</sup> The fire damage during the riots was extensive, however, the majority of fire damage in Detroit has happened since 1967. The number of intentionally set fires in the 1980s in Detroit dwarfed the fires of the 1960s. While the urban blazes of the 1960s are etched in the collective consciousness, it was the fires directly after the riots and in the subsequent decades that have had their most devastating impacts on the city. Insurance companies, subsidized by the Federal Riot Insurance Act of 1968, were less than vigilant as the property losses mounted. In 1983, Devil's Night fires began in large numbers. Six hundred fires raged over three days. In 1984, there were 810 fires over the three-day Halloween period. Detroit's fire chief described it as “the worst fire season I've seen since 1967.” The dramatic increase in fires was attributed to the recession and decreased protection.

In 1985, Mayor Coleman Young established the Anti-Arson Initiative Steering Committee, popularly referred to as the Devil's Night Task Force, which aimed to reduce arson, raise community awareness, and increase community involvement in fighting arson. In 1990, Young ramped up anti-arson campaign activities to combat negative images of the city. Fighting fire in Detroit has been in part about managing outsider's perceptions of the city. Since the 1967 riots, Detroit has been seen, particularly by suburban whites, as a place to fear. In 1994, the Archer Administration renamed Devil's Night community policing efforts Angel's Night. The night of Halloween mobilizes upwards of 40,000 people for community watch.

explained, which was becoming an increasingly desirable place for development in large part because the tight-knit Latino community had stabilized it over the last hundred years. On the other corner, a young white man bought the house of a Latino family that was displaced by foreclosure. Between it and the next house down was a lot where a house once stood. The neighbors had co-maintained the lot as a shared space for decades. When the young man moved into his house, he put up an eight-foot opaque fence around his house and the side lot, creating tension because he removed the lot from the neighborhood commons. The next neighbor down owned a house that had been in his family for almost a hundred years. Since his parents passed, he maintained the house, but did not live in it and was struggling to keep it. Then another young family rented a house until the father lost his job around the same time the landlord was foreclosed on and told the family they had to move. Maria's story of her block reminds us what the foreclosure ledger misses: the fact that its individual lines make up a neighborhood ecosystem. In other words, foreclosures are not isolated, but relational events. They do, as the ledger illustrates well, unmake financial entanglement that accumulate as part of property ownership and recoup tax dollars for the city. However, they also sever relationships between people and places, the negative impact of which is arguably greater than the city's lost tax dollars.

In December 2012, I interviewed the chief deputy treasurer of Wayne County, David Szymanski, about the auction. He explained, "Publication [of foreclosures] goes back to the days when you'd go down to the town square, give notice, tack it up on a board, and people would say, 'Oh my goodness, John Deer didn't pay his taxes, shame, shame. And then he'd run in and pay his taxes. Eventually, they went to newspapers and it continues to this day.'"

When I interviewed Szymanski the county was foreclosing on 42,000 properties, the same number as the year before. Yet even at that time, he told me that of the city's 380,000 land parcels, more than 90,000 – or, over one quarter of Detroit's residential properties -- were in some state of tax foreclosure (roughly the number the county is foreclosing on in 2014 at the time of writing). In the years prior the county didn't foreclose on the actual number of homes in arrears because of logistics: "We physically can't handle that many," Szymanski said, "so we have to determine how many we can handle and which ones we'll go after." They decided to go after properties on which more taxes were owed, where people were likely living, and where there was likely improvement on the property. If \$200 was owed on a property, Szymanski said, it was likely vacant and "not hurting anybody," a poignant choice of words that begged the question of how residents who lived amongst foreclosed properties saw and laid claim to "vacant" lands.

The foreclosure ledger has become much more than a means of shaming non-payers. Off the page and out on the street, it represents the uneven development of urban landscapes. Redlining in the twentieth century involved denying financial services for housing based on race. In the twenty-first century, subprime mortgage lending functioned as a process of "reverse redlining." Researchers have found that home foreclosures disproportionately affected low-income people of color. Latino and Blacks received subprime loans at rates that were respectively 2.5 and 3 times higher than whites.<sup>10</sup> This is linked to predatory lending – what

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham, "Creating Liquidity out of Spatial Fixity: The Secondary Circuit of Capital and the Restructuring of the US Housing Finance System." In *Subprime Cities: The Political Economy of Mortgage Markets*, edited by Manuel Aalbers. (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012). Michelle Anderson finds similar figures about racial unevenness of subprime loans in poor communities: "Among low-income households of all races living in low-income communities, 10% of home purchase loans were subprime, compared to 18% of loans for equivalent African-American households in low-income neighborhoods. These contrasts were even more stark for refinance loans: 27% of refinance loans to low-income borrowers in low-income neighborhoods nationwide were subprime, but 42% of the loans sold to low-income African-American borrowers living in low-income

Clyde Woods calls “asset stripping” – which exacted a total loss of wealth for people of color between \$164 and \$213 billion from 2000-2008.<sup>11</sup> The Wayne Country land auction represents a kind of asset stripping too. Many of the people who lose their homes have had them in their families for generations. Yet the exchange of property titles does not necessarily extinguish competing claims to land.

### **Detroit’s commons**

At the beginning of my research in Detroit, two things quickly became clear. First, “vacant” land is often not actually vacant. Second, while it’s common for residents to privately claim adjacent lots to their homes through a process called “blotting,” many community activists, urban farmers, and residents also lay claim to “vacant” land in the city as a commons. Not everyone shared the exact same definition of the urban commons, but people often deployed the term to challenge privatization and dispossession and to assert their “right to the city.” They also used it to make existing commons visible and to point to alternative development possibilities that free the land from the multiple legal and juridical layers in which it was entangled and that lead to dispossession.<sup>12</sup> For these reasons, many of the urban farmers, community activists, and residents with whom I spoke resisted words that described the landscape as “empty” (e.g., “blank slate,” “empty canvas,” “urban prairie”) because they discursively elided the hundreds of thousands of people living across the city and their claims to it. One food justice activist

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neighborhoods were subprime” (1141). Michelle Wilde Anderson, “The New Minimal Cities.” *The Yale Law Journal* 123, no. 1118 (2014): 1118–1227.

<sup>11</sup> Clyde Woods, “Les Misérables of New Orleans: Trap Economics and the Asset Stripping Blues, Part 1” 61, no. 3 (2014): 769–96. Wood is quoting the following report on loss of wealth: Amaad Rivera, Brenda Cotto-Escalera, Anisha Desai, Jeannette Huezo, and Dedrick Muhammad, “Foreclosed: State of the Dream 2008, United for a Fair Economy,” January 15, 2008, vii, available at [http://www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/StateOfDream\\_01\\_16\\_08\\_Web.pdf](http://www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/StateOfDream_01_16_08_Web.pdf) (accessed May 15, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Efrat Eizenberg uses the term “actually existing commons.” See Efrat Eizenberg, “Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City.” *Antipode* 44, no. 3 (June 25, 2012): 764–82.

explained it this way, “We don’t call it vacant ... we say, ‘open space’ ... land that is open space is held in the commons, held by the people.” Likewise another person argued for informal rights, “It’s not abandoned, I mean because there’s not a house there doesn’t mean that someone said, ho, I give forth this land to whoever wants it...I think that abandoned land belongs to the people in the community. I think we have to talk about it like that. Land ownership doesn’t have to mean that I signed a paper saying I own rights to this land.”

Others echoed these sentiments. A primary way that Detroit residents staked claims to the city’s de-facto commons (mainly tax-foreclosed land) was by emphasizing the land’s use value rather than exchange value. At a community meeting about land use, one person put it this way, “I see a lot of land that many people in power would consider vacant or unproductive or abandoned, land that does not have capitalist economic value...but a lot of that land is being used by people because it’s there, because it’s in the community. There’s a ton of land in the city that people are using but it’s not officially being used.” Such statements were frequently followed by examples, which I discuss in more detail later, of how communities were repurposing land in the absence of formal rights (e.g., agrarian production) and working to collectively maintain neighborhood lands that they did not own (e.g., mowing).

A second way that many justified claims to the commons was through their labor -- the act of caring for the landscape. A resident described collective work in her neighborhood: “We take a collective effort. If there’s a vacant lot in our community and none of us know who the owner is, we come together as a collective and clean it up. So it really belongs to us ... the owner, he’s not being responsible for his land, so ultimately it belongs to people who surround this land.” Likewise another person made a similar claim but bolstered it by appealing to global peasant struggles for food and land sovereignty. Movements in the global South have it right, she

said, “the land belongs to those who work it.” Such transnational comparisons have become more pronounced in Detroit as city officials and planners solidified what might be described as a 50-year planned ruralization scheme for the city and various actors proposed large-scale, for-profit farming ventures (see chapters 5 and 6, where I discuss urban agriculture in Detroit, smallholder struggles for land tenure, and the content of alternatives being proposed by people involved in the food justice movement).

Yet others articulated a third way of staking a claim to the commons, which had less to do with work and more to do with a land ethic that stressed the importance of non-human and ancestral life. A community activist put it this way, “Lands are in a public trust that belong to the people ... and not just working class but also the people that inhabited the area before any of us were even here. There’s this idea of historical ownership.” It was also common for people to want to acknowledge different temporalities of the land or that which had come before. One person in a community meeting said: “I was thinking about this term ‘abandoned’ – I just hate the terms ‘abandoned’ and ‘vacant’... I think about who has not abandoned the land ...the chickaree and sweet clovers .... acknowledging the people who lived here before ... we need to acknowledge the care that has been given by those who have no voice, or a voice we chose not to listen too.” This proposed land ethic suggests two things: first, finding a new way to live with nature rather than against it; and second, identifying an alternative concept of time that breaks up the linearity of past, present, and future and holds a plurality of times together in the present. For example, some interviewees evoked an ethical stance to time’s heterogeneity vis-à-vis the concept of *sankofa* from the Akan language of Ghana, which means to “reach back and get it” and suggests a process of reclaiming the past to deepen understandings of how we can to be



where we are today. In invoking *sankofa*, they grappled with what it would mean to reclaim traditions of collective care rather than private property.

A fourth and related way that people rhetorically claimed common land was through appealing to multigenerational histories of displacement from land and care for it. In my interviews, residents frequently shared stories about why their families migrated to Detroit, as detailed in chapter 2. They argued that this history was important both in terms of understanding repeated trauma and loss, but also as a way to remember historical alternatives that emerged through resistance movements. For example, one man said that the ideology of land speculation was “dangerous.” He said the way that people in the community, particularly African Americans, valued land needed to be lifted up. “There has been a progression of divorcing us from the land from the time we came to Detroit. That process needs to be looked at, looking at our values in a different way.” Appeals like this one to remember African American’s southern roots in connection to agriculture and collective land practices was common. Another way this was discussed was in terms of land loss and refuge. For example, one person put it this way: “I think a lot of people in Detroit have the same story. I think that story has been told over and over where people came from the South to the North to find opportunity because of displacement, because of war, because of slavery, because of the legacy of what happened in the South and American colonialism – that has a huge impact on why people left ... the wars that were waged over land. We come as a generation or multiple generations to Detroit, or to any place, cities, looking for opportunities to work and work becomes our home. We have less of any idea of how land is our home because we’re displaced from that idea itself.” Put simply, laying claim to a just and common future necessitated undoing structures that facilitated displacement across multigenerational and remembering and creating new ways of being in relationship with land and

one another.

If homeownership is a proxy for economic advancement, the Wayne County tax foreclosure rolls signify a significant rollback of the gains African American made in the late twentieth century. When African Americans talk about growing up in Detroit in the 1940s and 1950s (see chapter 2), they often recall a city intensely segregated along racial lines, but one in which the Black community took care of one another and had what they needed to get by. Later after most whites left Detroit, Black homeownership became a defining feature of the city. By the 1960s, Black homeownership had increased but whites still owned homes at almost double the rate of Blacks.<sup>13</sup> By the 1970s, Detroit boasted the highest Black ownership rate of any city in the country. Since 2000, however, Black homeownership rates in Detroit have steadily fallen. Thus, residents I spoke with emphasized concerns over African-American land loss, particularly the ways the economic recession and foreclosure crisis were stripping Blacks of homeownership and other assets. This transition from the late-twentieth to early-twenty-first centuries is aligned with sociologist Loïc Wacquant's argument that the conditions of the urban "Black Belt" have undergone a transformation from the "communal ghetto" of Fordist-Keynesian era to a contemporary "hyperghetto" marked by a social structure and cultural climate akin to prison.<sup>14</sup>

Bernadette Smith, an environmental justice activist, explained in an interview: "a lot of retirees, homeowners, are still out there, but a lot of them are dying off and are leaving property to the kids. The kids don't have a job so they're losing the property." This concern was

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<sup>13</sup> Todd Shaw, *Now is the Time: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2009), 40-42.

<sup>14</sup> Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (n.d.): 95-134. He writes: "The resulting symbiosis between ghetto and prison not only perpetuates the socioeconomic marginality and symbolic taint of the black subproletariat, feeding the runaway growth of the carceral system. It also plays a pivotal role in the remaking of 'race,' the redefinition of the citizenry via the production of a racialized public culture of vilification of criminals, and the construction of a post-Keynesian state that replaces the social-welfare treatment of poverty by its penal management" (95).

articulated in a different way by Louisa Brown, a longtime resident and community organizer. She argued that the loss of homeownership dovetails with a feeling that residents have lost some voice and control in their communities. “We were a community of block clubs,” she told me. “I think at one time, we were at 300 plus block clubs across the city. A lot of that was getting my sidewalk fixed and beautification, but it was a way that people felt connected to their neighborhoods and their communities – and felt power around that.”

Residents echoed her perspective, some expressing concern about not understanding exactly how displacement worked and therefore, not feeling equipped to fight it. One woman whose family had lost their home through foreclosure put it this way: “I’ve always looked at my mother, like why did we have to accept our house being taken away? Most of the time, we just don’t know what to do or what to ask ... It’s really, that’s what my community lacks... we lack that legal authority or that representation.” Indeed, few people understand the complex foreclosure and auction processes, which are the outcome of a specific political and legal history.

### **History of the auction**

During the 1950s and 1960s, Black power and civil rights movement actors pushed against invisible and physical redlines that kept Blacks out of white spaces. At lunch counters, on buses and city streets, and in public schools and courtrooms, they made the connection between discriminatory public policy and private profit visible, whether through government sanctioning of commercial proprietors’ exclusionary practices or the direct benefits to whites that came from Federal Housing Authority redlining.<sup>15</sup> Demands for Black inclusion – particularly in the form of state redistribution -- gave rise to a sustained and well-organized oppositional movement that focused on privatizing the public sector. As historian Elizabeth Blackmar writes, “If the civil

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Blackmar, “Appropriating ‘the Commons’: The Tragedy of Property Rights Discourse” in Setha Low and Neil Smith, eds. *The Politics of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 57-58.

rights movement's greatest victories came with claiming public authority to pry open the private sector – the housing market, the job market, [then] the political reaction against democratization focused in on the public sector, where access was less readily regulated by price and where all forms of public finance implied a transfer out of the pockets of the wealthiest taxpayers, whether corporate or individual.” We need to understand the emergence of the Wayne County land auction in relation to this history.

The auction was defined by the property rights movement, which came of age in the 1990s, but was rooted in the conservative push to limit the expansion of the public domain and reestablish market dominance that dated to the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>16</sup> The Wayne County land auction is mandated by PA123, a revision of Michigan's tax reversion law, which became law in 1999. The critical change associated with the law was the acceleration of the residential tax foreclosure process from seven years to three years. On the face of it, PA123 seems like public interest legislation – a reasonable way for public officials to more efficiently address problems of tax evasion and community blight. However, closer scrutiny of the legislation's intellectual and political genealogy reveals different ambitions. As geographer Joshua Akers shows, a network of conservatives circulating between government and free-market think tanks crafted PA123 and pushed it through the Michigan legislature. Seen in this broader political context, the Michigan bill had less to do with helping distressed neighborhoods in Detroit than using the city as a test case for legislation that might become a model for the property rights and states' rights movements to privatize public property and simultaneously discipline the poor.

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<sup>16</sup> The history in this section largely draws on an excellent paper by geographer Joshua Akers about the auction, which is the only extensive research that exists on its history. For a more nuanced political history of the auction and to better understand the stake of market-centric policy transfers through think tanks see: Akers, Joshua M. “Making Markets : Think Tank Legislation and Private Property in Detroit.” *Urban Geography* 34, no. 8 (2013): 1070–95.

The property rights movement – one of the most significant land-use and environmental movements in the United States in recent decades – is a diverse coalition of people concerned with what they perceive to be the erosion of private property rights.<sup>17</sup> Broadly speaking, movement adherents advocate limiting eminent domain and privatizing public property. Free-market and libertarian think tanks, which draft market-centric policies for elected officials, have been at the forefronts of the property rights movement.<sup>18</sup> Over the last 20 years, the number of state-level think tanks across the United States has expanded from 12 in 1986 to 59 in 2006. The biggest is the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Michigan, founded in 1987 and considered a model by conservatives for other states. “It might be an exaggeration,” Akers writes, “to suggest that state and national think tanks are engaged in a coordinated conspiracy to change the specific workings of local property markets and other regulatory structures; but it is undeniable that the overlapping goals and agendas coalesce to produce a package of laws at the state level that create a systemic bias in favor of deregulation and private investment. These processes are most pronounced in declining, deindustrialized cities.”<sup>19</sup>

PA 123 was one of 14 bills that the Hudson Institute, a free-market think tank located in Washington, D.C, crafted for the Michigan legislature between 1997 and 1999. PA123 was bundled with the Michigan Urban Homesteading Act. Together they were intended to privatize public housing and transfer property from public to private ownership. Imagined as inseparable and complementary, the auction would generate stability by increasing market demand for

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<sup>17</sup> Other names include the “land rights movement” and the “wise use movement.”

<sup>18</sup> From movement adherents see Steven Eagle (2001), “The Birth of the Property Rights Movement,” *Policy Analysis*, June 26, No. 404, see <http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa404.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2013). Also cf. Harvey Jacobs and Kurt Paulsen. “Property Rights: The Neglected Theme of 20th-Century American Planning.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 75, no. 2 (March 27, 2009): 134–43.

<sup>19</sup> Akers, “Making markets,” 1074-1075.

housing in the city. Vacant houses would be give to the poor to homestead, moving property out of public coffers and into private hands.<sup>20</sup>

A team of four out-of-state Hudson fellows researched and drafted the PA 123 legislation with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Mott Foundation, the Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation, and the Kinship Corporation of Chicago. At the helm was John C. Weicher, a University of Chicago-trained economist who had spent two decades moving between HUD and free-market think tanks where he pushed for privatization of public housing. He argued that HUD interfered with the private housing market and that Section 8 restrictions should be eliminated and replaced with a voucher system. His proposal became an instrumental part of the Home Ownership Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE) legislation when he worked under HUD secretary Jack Kemp, a fiscal conservative (and former NFL quarterback) who was developing an urban homesteading plan to privatize public housing. Kemp's implementation of HOPE, which was continued by the Clinton Administration (under HOPE VI), marked a pivotal shift in U.S. housing policy toward vouchers and lower-density housing projects and the demolition of notorious "projects" like Cabrini-Green in Chicago (a trend started by Nixon in 1972 with the dynamiting of Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis Missouri).<sup>21</sup>

When the Michigan Urban Homestead Act was presented to the state legislature in 1999, it was celebrated as a "fresh take" on the federal Homesteading Acts aimed at settling the American West that began in 1862.<sup>22</sup> As Republican politician Bill Schuette (then a Michigan state senator, now state attorney general) put it, whereas the "challenge" in the nineteenth

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Kemp killed HUD's other urban homesteading program which since the mid-1970s had focused on housing for the poor; its history was rooted in squatter campaigns and organizing by ACORN.

<sup>22</sup> Akers, "Making Markets," 1079.

century was “a wild and lawless West; today it is Cabrini Green and South Central Los Angeles.”<sup>23</sup> Conservative think tanks and government officials promoted urban homesteading as public interest legislation to lift up the urban poor. The Michigan Urban Homestead Act, like its antecedents, prescribed private property ownership to remedy social ills (violence, poverty, blight, disrepair) and “build real neighborhoods” in the inner city. However, “state-enforced moral strictures” blocked many from participating.<sup>24</sup> As before, private property creation necessitated categorizing civil and uncivil people. On the nineteenth-century frontier, would-be settlers could apply for a “homestead,” which normally included 160 acres, at little or no cost by simply filing an application for land, improving it, and registering a deed. Although it was widely celebrated as the “great equalizer” in land relations, not everyone could receive a homestead. The fact that democratic participation in the United States depended on the systematic exclusion of certain populations extended to homesteading. The 1830 Indian Removal Act made available 270 million acres, or 10 percent of U.S. land by area, to mostly Euro-Americans settlers participating in the Homestead Acts. While nonwhites could technically apply for a homestead, eligibility required citizenship, which African Americans did not gain until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1866 and Native Americans until 1924. Even then comparatively few became homesteaders because of the initial outlay of capital needed.

On the contemporary frontier of urban Michigan, homesteaders would also have to fulfill moral requirements. As Schuette, a sponsor of the 1999 act, explained, “Just as Lincoln’s homesteaders were required to fulfill certain minimal conditions, Michigan’s Urban Homestead Act has a similar message tailored to the problems of a new era: keep your kids in school, make

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<sup>23</sup> Schuette quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1079–1082.

sure that they learn to read by the fourth grade, stay crime- and drug-free, and make a good-faith effort to improve your public housing unit. A homesteader invests courage and commitment and receives a home and a chance to break the cycle of despair.”<sup>25</sup> Potential homesteaders were to be subject to strict review on these conditions: “Convicted felons and parolees were excluded. Drug tests were required. Proof of school attendance was to be provided each term. Credit counseling would be mandated for some participants. In addition, tenants were expected to pay 80% and 90% of the market rate for rent while homesteading and bring houses up to code within 18 months.”<sup>26</sup> Senator Schuette concluded, “If staying off drugs is a hardship, if continual employment is not your bag, or if you don’t care if your kids stay in school, this isn’t for you.”<sup>27</sup> Weicher and other fellows argued that the foreclosure process needed to be fast tracked because after seven years most of the houses were not livable and would not be suitable for homesteading because they’d need too many repairs.

The Urban Homesteading Act became law but was never implemented. PA123, by contrast, has played an important role in shaping a speculative and exploitative landscape of property ownership. The auction is a major obstacle for Detroiters being able to manage space in the city. Because the laws governing the auction operate at the state level, local officials’ hands are largely tied and they are forced to work around it.

### **The racial politics of taxation**

The number of tax foreclosures in Detroit is exceptional. When we spoke in 2012, Szymanski drew a comparison to emphasize the point: The population of Cleveland, he said, has

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<sup>25</sup> Bill Schuette “Urban homesteading: An urban policy for a new century,” *American Outlook* (1998): 1–3.

<sup>26</sup> Akers, “Making Markets, 1080.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.



declined at a rate proportionally equivalent to Detroit, falling from about 900,000 in 1930 to just under 400,000 today. Szymanski said he talked to the treasurer in Cleveland who said, “I hope you’re sitting down. We’re auctioning 4,500 homes. How many are you doing?” Szymanski replied, ‘I hope you’re lying down. We’re doing 42,000.’ We’re doing almost ten times as many.”<sup>28</sup> In 2014, it would be twenty times more.

“Our laws on foreclosure were written back when we were told if you have money invested in property, it will never lose its value,” Szymanski told me. “We have seen property values decline 90 to 95 percent in some homes. We have some that are still assessed by the city at \$60,000 to \$70,000, but I can’t sell them for \$500.”

Detroit’s housing crisis is, of course, not just about taxes, per se, but macroeconomic trends. Detroit’s housing market was significantly impacted by the 2007-2008 subprime crisis. In 2014, with mortgage foreclosure endemic, it was common for houses to be assessed at 18 times their sales value. Szymanski pointed to an even more dire devaluation with auction property: the assessed value of house sold on the auction could sometimes be more than 120 times the amount for which it was ultimately sold.<sup>29</sup> As has been well documented, the housing market fallout across the country had a distinct racial topography, demonstrating, as geographers Joe Darden and Elvin Wyly argue, “that market innovation and capital investment remain deeply racialized in America.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> According to U.S. Census (2010), New Orleans has a similar number of vacancies as Detroit – 42,299 out of 189,836 properties are vacant or 27.5 percent.

<sup>29</sup> Christine MacDonald, “Half of Detroit property owners don’t pay taxes,” *Detroit Free Press*, (February, 21, 2013). Available at: <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20130221/METRO01/302210375>

<sup>30</sup> Joe Darden and Elvin Wyly, “Cartographic editorial – mapping the racial/ethnic topography of subprime inequality in urban America,” *Urban Geography* 31, 4 (2010): 425.

Syzmanski concluded, “When they drew up the law, they thought, the worst thing that happens is someone doesn’t pay their taxes. We put on an 18 percent interest rate, which is usurious, other than the fact that the government is involved and it’s not a crime... the idea back then was that’s the hammer to get people to pay their taxes. The economy declined so powerfully and people just couldn’t pay.... credit became really difficult and we became the only bank in town. People had to make a choice between feeding their family and paying their taxes.”

In 2012, almost half of Detroit’s property owners didn’t pay property taxes. Nonpayment may be the result of a number of factors, including unemployment, artificially high property assessments, a high city tax rate, and frustration with city services. Moreover, the outmigration of white and upwardly mobile Black residents created a situation in which the tax burden falls on fewer, poorer residents, leading to higher taxes and poorer public services, if there were services at all.

Detroit’s property taxes are among the highest in the nation for large cities, even though its median household income was the lowest.<sup>31</sup> For example, in 2012, Detroit had millage rate of 67.74, meaning that a residential owner of a house assessed at \$60,000, would owe \$4,064 annually in property taxes.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, if a house were assessed at \$150,000, taxes would be \$10,161. By comparison, Portland, Oregon, which is roughly the same size as Detroit by area

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<sup>31</sup> Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and Minnesota Center for Fiscal Excellence, “50-State Property Tax Comparison,” (March 2014), See: [http://www.lincolninst.edu/subcenters/significant-features-property-tax/upload/sources/ContentPages/documents/Pay\\_2013\\_PT\\_Report\\_National\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.lincolninst.edu/subcenters/significant-features-property-tax/upload/sources/ContentPages/documents/Pay_2013_PT_Report_National_FINAL.pdf) (accessed November 11, 2014). The city’s high tax rate is the product of a number of factors, but is largely attributable to the downward spiral that comes with population loss. Simply put, originally the flight of business and whites led to new taxes to cover city services. Higher taxes led to more outmigration followed by a further reduction in the quality of services and then more people leaving. Moreover, one-fifth of the city’s land area is not taxable, including schools, colleges and universities, religious and charitable organization, nonprofits, and a sizable number of properties with tax abatements. The point being, with few entities paying taxes, the burden falls on a smaller number of payers. In 2013, Detroit had the 9<sup>th</sup> highest property taxes in the country for a large city according to a report by Market Watch -- <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/10-us-cities-with-the-highest-taxes-2013-03-02> (accessed November 8, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Millage rates are tax rates that are applied to the assessed value of real estate. The rate is the amount of tax, in dollars, on every \$1,000 of taxable value, meaning in the example above, \$60,000 is multiplied by 0.06774.

(133 square miles versus 139 square miles) and has fewer residents (584,000 compared to Detroit's 714,000) has a millage rate of 16.40, meaning that the homeowner of the \$60,000 house would only pay \$942 annually and the owner of the house assessed at \$150,000 would pay \$2,460 annually.<sup>33</sup> Atlanta, also comparable in area to Detroit with a population of 420,000, has a millage rate of 33.634. The 2012 median household incomes in Portland (\$51,238) and Atlanta (\$49,605) were significantly higher than Detroit (\$26,955), demonstrating that lower income cities often have higher tax rates.<sup>34</sup> High taxes in Detroit are compounded by an entrepreneurial approach to urban development, which includes an “eds and meds” redevelopment strategy (institutions that generally do not pay taxes) and corporate tax breaks (see chapter 4).

To be clear, high property taxes in Detroit, at least for most, do not lead to better services. Many residents complain about excessive taxation, particularly given the lack of public services in some neighborhoods compared to downtown. As one resident named Ruby Jones said, “We pay more taxes than anybody in the United States of America and do not receive the type of service, just everyday regular service... The fact that the lights are out, the fact that they don't pick up the trash in a timely fashion, the fact that they don't cut the grass, all of these things that we've paid for over and over and through the nose. ... We see them constantly and steadily building up downtown and neglecting the community and the neighborhoods. And we the people, we have to suffer.” The foreclosure process, which ostensibly is supposed to put

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<sup>33</sup> The millage rate listed here is for the portion of Portland in Multnomah County. The other half of Portland is in Washington County and has an even lower millage rate.

<sup>34</sup> Median household income data for all three cities comes from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2008-2012. Even though property taxes are high in Detroit, they comprise a small percentage of city's general fund revenues compared to other cities. In 2012, property taxes in other U.S. cities constituted between 48 percent and 77 percent of general fund revenues. In Detroit, they made up a mere 13 percent. The general fund is used to account for general municipal operations and activities, for example, police, fire, parks, planning, community development, and administrative support services. Cf. Gary Sands and Mark Skidmore. “Making Ends Meet: Options for Property Tax Reform in Detroit.” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 00, no. 0 (October 28, 2013): 1-19.

properties back in private hands and on the tax rolls, ultimately seems to lead to further depopulation.

### **The foreclosure process**

The foreclosure process works like this: the city assesses and determines how much a property is worth. Property taxes are assessed twice per year by different taxing authorities (e.g., the City of Detroit, the public schools, and at the County level, the Detroit Institute of Art and the zoo). In 2012, for example, if property owners didn't pay taxes due in August and January by March 1, the city reported them to the county. While the City of Detroit issued property tax bills, Wayne County was responsible for collecting delinquent taxes. In 2011, the City of Detroit turned over \$167 million in delinquent taxes to the county. Wayne County then went to Wall Street and borrowed money for the city to operate. For delinquent properties, the county levied a 4 percent administrative fee, interest accrued at 1 percent each month, and they charged a \$15 collection fee. After a year of nonpayment, the property was forfeited to the county treasurer. The treasurer's office recorded a certificate of forfeiture. They charged \$175 for a title check. After two years of nonpayment, the interest rate went from 1 percent to 1.5 percent monthly, or 18 percent annually, which was "usury," as Syzmanski suggested.

In 2011, Wayne County foreclosed on 24,000 properties. In 2012, they foreclosed on 42,000 properties, and in 2013, another 42,000. Some were "recycled properties," meaning it was not their first time on the auction block. In a two-year period, 10 percent of all the properties in Wayne County had gone through foreclosure. Syzmanski said foreclosures jumped 40 percent between 2011 and 2012 because the treasurer's office decided they were "not doing anyone any favors by giving them an extra year. The earlier you can get the tax payer's attention, the more likely they will pay their taxes, stay in their homes, and stabilize the community."

Foreclosing on tens of thousands of properties was a logistical nightmare. The treasurer's office rented out a sprawling ballroom on the eighth floor of the county building to allow delinquent property owners one last opportunity to pay their back taxes before the county foreclosed on them. "I hate to use the term warehouse, but it's the best way to say it. We take them upstairs to a waiting room," Szymanski said, "We give them numbers. We take them as they are available. We have fifteen cashier stations. They work as fast and hard as they can." Afterwards, the treasurer's office sent out notices and published the forfeited properties (those that were not paid for at this final opportunity) in the *Detroit Legal News*. In March, the county started doing title searches. They hired three companies that went through all the legal records to see who had an interest in a property. Did someone perform work and take out a lien? Was there a mortgage? Who owned it? At the end of November, they notified everyone who had an interest in (or lien on) the property. It could be one person or fifteen. Someone might put a lien on a property for nonpayment of a bill. If there was a lien, it meant the property had a "cloud" on the title.

In January, the treasurer's office held what was called a "show cause" hearing. They rented out Cobo Hall, a convention center downtown, and held two hearings per day for a week. Anywhere from six hundred to one thousand people show up at each hearing. The point of the hearing was to show cause – or prove -- why the county should not foreclose. For example, a property owner might demonstrate that the county recorded the wrong parcel or that they'd paid their taxes. By state law, the county was not allowed to reduce taxes, fees, or assessments. However, they could set up payment plans that allowed homeowners who proved they were in financial distress to delay payment an extra year. The next month, they held court dates where some people came with lawyers. In 2012, they took judgment against 19,000 properties.

Judgment meant that the county took ownership of the property. The county then offered the state the right of first refusal to pay the market value on the property or the amount of back taxes owed, whichever was greater. If the state didn't want the property, the county had the right to purchase the property for the back taxes owed; then, the same offer was extended to the city. Finally, if the state, county, and city all passed on the property, it was put up for auction.

In 2010, the treasure's office moved the Wayne County Auction online. "We had too many properties," Szymanski told me. "People could not physically get into the room to bid. It became unwieldy to say the least. We went online. Some say it became impersonal, but it created a way for everybody to participate on an equal basis." While open access was one way of putting it, arguably the more important thing about moving the auction online is that it created more opportunity for speculation.

### **Landscapes of speculation and care**

Speculation has long been a feature of urban development. Speculation – defined, for example, by an investor putting money into something (in this case a house) and sitting on it until prices rise -- is about the extraction of value.<sup>35</sup> The movement of the auction online made it possible for more Detroiters to participate in the auction, but it also facilitated extra-local speculators' efforts to snatch up numerous properties. The majority of auction buyers were Michigan residents, however, the movement of the auction online had attracted national and international participants. During the 2013, 18,897 properties went up for auction.<sup>36</sup> One quarter of the properties (2,612) went to bidders known as "bulk purchasers" who bought more than 100 properties. Bulk purchasers tried to profit from their investment in a number of ways ranging

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<sup>35</sup> See Doreen Massey, "Vocabularies of the economy," *Soundings*, <http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/journals/soundings/pdfs/s54%20massey.pdf> (accessed November 8, 2014).

<sup>36</sup> Of them, 10,543 were sold to 2,343 bidders for \$52,536,800.

from flipping properties to holding them to store value. Others became landlords or scammed the system through Section 8 subsidies from the state and federal government to rent to needy families. In 2014, one in four Detroit landlords were paid to rent to poor families through the State Housing Choice Voucher program. However, the guidelines did not require landlords to pay taxes and the delinquency rate among landlords receiving Section 8 subsidies was 26 percent. Out of 2,914 Section 8 housing units in Detroit, 757 were tax delinquent and landlords owed \$5 million in back taxes.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the auction created a precarious rental climate that had serious consequences for Detroit residents. As mentioned before, it was not infrequent for landlords to fail to pay taxes and have their houses sold on the auction unbeknownst to the tenants living in them.

The movement of the auction online has also created an opportunity for international investors and private investment funds to package auction properties in Detroit as an “ethical” investment. A number of UK firms touted Detroit as a virtuous investment that not only helped the underprivileged in the United States but also recycled foreclosed homes. Generally, these groups offered “turnkey” programs in which they listed the property, oversaw the refurbishment, sourced the tenant, dealt with managing the rental, and paid property taxes. One company, Detroit Property UK, offered three-bedroom detached homes for \$45,000; the houses came with 3-year rental agreements connected to HUD housing. The managing director of Crystal Investment and Real Estate, a similar company, commented: “Properties in Detroit not only offer a great investment opportunity, but they provide a chance to help thousands of working families to find a clean, safe, affordable home. As a perfect win, win for everyone, these investments are backed by the U.S. government who pays up to 70-90 percent of rent. Monthly rental income is

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<sup>37</sup> Christine MacDonald, “Detroit land lords cash in on rent aid, ignore tax bills,” *Detroit News* (March 28, 2014). See <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20140328/METRO01/303280040> (accessed November 11, 2014).

paid to the investor through the government Housing Choice Voucher scheme which ensures tenants get quality, maintained and affordable housing and landlords get a quality tenant who wants to live and take care of their property.”<sup>38</sup> These “virtuous investments” bring into stark relief the way the auction (especially its movement online) creates what might be described as contradictory economies of “care.” The auction aims to move de-facto public property back into private hands and stimulate property markets. Yet property values may actually be reduced due to its unintended consequences, particularly the logic of large-scale speculation.

The landscapes of speculation produced by the auction became demanding environments that created a tremendous amount of work for residents who wanted to keep their neighborhoods nice looking and real estate values up. It was common for residents to develop elaborate systems to maintain vacant land and houses in their neighborhood. In 2011, I attended a public community meeting on managing vacant land. Residents from the Grandmont Rosedale neighborhood shared their neighborhood maintenance and surveillance system. Grandmont Rosedale is a historic district. In the aftermath of the foreclosure crisis the average value of homes in the neighborhood decreased from \$100,000 to \$25,000. The neighborhood representatives at the meeting emphasized that their main concern was maintaining property values.

Toward this end, the group began their work by surveying the neighborhood and mapping the vacant houses. They printed out a Google map and color-coded it. A neighborhood “patrol team” used the map to organize work teams who did regular upkeep to make vacant houses look inhabited. They planted flowers in front of empty houses, drove up and down their driveways

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<sup>38</sup> “Detroit for the ultimate ethical investment opportunity,” Easier property website (January 25, 2013) <http://www.easier.com/111407-detroit-for-the-ultimate-ethical-investment-opportunity.html> (accessed November 11, 2014).



when it was snowing, and mowed their lawns. Other houses, they boarded up to keep away squatters and scrappers and painted the plywood. In addition to physical maintenance, they designated point people to contact the property owners. They made phone calls asking them to cut their grass and deal with abandoned cars. If a bank owned the property, they would usually send someone to do maintenance. When property owners did not respond (most did not), their next course of action was to send them a bill for the work done (no one had ever repaid them for upkeep). They also designated people to watch houses for suspicious activity and foster relationships with the police in order to deal with squatters and people stealing electricity. Finally, they sent property owners letters in which they documented blight violations and listed fines, stating that if an owner did not pay they would turn them in to the authorities.

Neighborhood-level efforts like those in Grandmont Rosedale coalesced into the Detroit Vacant Property Campaign, which pressured the government to do more to mitigate vacant property. Ella Taylor, who directed the program in 2012, told me their meetings tended to generate a crowd of 20 to 40 people, mostly homeowners in their 50s. When I met with Ella, the group was working on a campaign to get the city to keep up with maintenance and create an openly accessible parcel database so that neighbors could contact owners of blighted property. As Ella put it, “they want more teeth to blight tickets and more enforcement.” However, she added, enforcement needed to be thoughtful. “Criminalizing blight could hurt grandma more than the slum lords.” Vacancy alone, she argued, does not make a neighborhood stable or unstable. “There are high vacancy neighborhood where there is a strong sense of community and togetherness, where there is a sense of collective efficacy, the kind where there is a neighborhood patrol and people care enough to call the police.” However, she emphasized, “in general vacant land is not seen as an asset to most people in Detroit... Vacancy is a dangerous

liability because residents suffer the consequence of vacant land. For others, the outside, they are part of the problem, they view vacant land as an opportunity to vandalize, tear up, and turn a quick profit and destroy communities without any remorse. Speculators see it as something to sit on and let it go into tax foreclosure. And our government views it not as an opportunity but something to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible.”

### **Three responses to the problems the auction created**

In the rest of this chapter, I compare and contrast three responses to the problems created by the auction. I first look at the entwined strategies of the Detroit Land Bank Authority (focused on raising real estate comparables) and the Detroit Blight Removal Taskforce (focused on eliminating blight through demolition). I then look at a community-based planning effort called the Riverfront East Congregation Initiative. The comparison of these projects demonstrates how, on the one hand, local officials who enacted the state-mandated auction (which deepens the very problems they would like to solve, i.e., distressed property markets) tried to mitigate its effects by remaking private property markets sans speculators.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, it shows that community-based groups developed different response to the problems associated with foreclosures and speculation. Their efforts turned on what might be described as commoning strategies. Like the Grandmont Rosedale initiative (described above), these groups engaged in practices of landscape care. Yet their end goal was not increasing private property values but rather building more participatory and empowered communities.

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<sup>39</sup> Pundits from the Mackinac Institute opposed the formation of land banks, sometimes referred to as public real estate developers, arguing that the very existence of land banks sends “a chilling message to property owners as well as potential real estate investors.” See Russ Harding, “Analysis: Genesee County Land Bank Threatens Property Rights,” Michigan Capital Confidential, (August 5, 2012). See: <http://www.michigancapitolconfidential.com/13297> (accessed November 11, 2014).

## **Making private property markets**

Private property markets are made through everyday practice. The policymakers behind the auction viewed tax-reverted, de-facto public property as a liability. As Ella Taylor said, the Detroit city government also saw “vacant” land as something to be disposed of quickly, however, they approached the disposition process differently. Left to contend with the externalities of the state-mandated auction, city leaders founded new institutions to create more robust real estate markets. In 2008, the Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA) -- a quasi-governmental organization with foundation backing -- was founded to empower local officials to respond to the landscape of speculation created by the auction.<sup>40</sup> Land banks are defined by their unique authority to acquire tax-reverted public parcels, clear them of “cloudy titles” or conflicting claims, give them an exchange value, and broker deals to transfer them to the private market. While their form and function differ from state to state and city to city, generally these public or quasi-public entities are mandated to convert abandoned lands to *productive* use. But productive for whom and for what? The way land banks formulate policies around this question – how that is they value and prioritize some uses and groups over others – is what makes them distinct from one another.

Sociologist Michel Callon argues that economic theory should not be analyzed in terms of the reality it represents, but how it is performed and the social reorganization it helps to produce. Building on Callon, political scientist Timothy Mitchell argues the idea persists that the market has a boundary, outside of which stands the non-capitalist, non-market world.

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<sup>40</sup> Land banks are a community development tool that date to the 1970s. Whereas land banks were originally seen as a way to fight blight (early banks were in St. Louis and Cleveland), more recently in light of the subprime crisis, they have become an increasingly popular mechanism for cities to curb speculation and protect land for community use. However, the philosophies of individual land banks vary widely. There are approximately seventy-five land banks in operation across the country that “bank” or hold land for short and long periods.

Development economics uses technical mechanisms to extend market rules into those other spaces. In the case of Detroit, the DLBA and the Blight Removal Task Force (BRTF) work together to cultivate markets through refurbishing homes in areas where a “market already existed” and extending its boundary through demolition of homes in areas that were currently “outside” of it.<sup>41</sup>

In July 2012, I met with DLBA’s first executive director, Aundra Wallace who explained that their goal was to “stabilize Detroit’s neighborhoods *where there is a market ...*” Wallace said that when he assumed directorship of the DLBA, the city did not yet have a development plan and it was up to him to figure out where to direct investment. He started by analyzing the sales comparables in the market to determine what type of sales had been taking place in Detroit’s neighborhoods, if any.<sup>42</sup> Next, he looked at how many abandoned houses different neighborhoods had and the number of REOs already on the market (REO is a real estate owned property possessed by a bank or lender as the result of foreclosure or forfeiture). Finally, he reviewed the Wayne County tax foreclosure list. After analyzing these indicators, he drove Detroit to determine the stability of neighborhoods, the speed of blight encroachment, and the status of abandoned houses. He asked himself, “If I began to purchase and rehab houses where would I begin? Would I be able to go in and buy up other houses to make sure the blight did not encroach on where I’d just invested.” His framing of blight is important for understanding the DLBA’s relationship to the BRTF.

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<sup>41</sup> Michel Callon, “Introduction: The Embeddedness of Economic Markets in Economics.” In *Laws of the Markets*, edited by Michel Callon (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Timothy Mitchell, “The Properties of Markets.” In *Do Economists Make Markets?* Eds. Donald MacKenzie, Fabian Muniesa, and Lucia Siu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Comparables (or comps) is a real estate appraisal term that refers to properties with characteristics that are similar to a subject property whose value is being sought.

Real estate markets, as mentioned, are produced through everyday property practices that transform land into a commodity and make it scarce. Wallace selected two neighborhoods, with “market value” for DLBA investment -- Boston Edison and East Indian Village.<sup>43</sup> Unsurprisingly, they were both historically wealthy neighborhoods that boasted grand homes on big lots that once housed white auto executives and the city’s elite. When Wallace chose them they had been officially designated as historic districts and were home to a decidedly more diverse population, including many of Detroit’s Black middle- and upper-middle-class residents. As part of his development scheme, Wallace paid \$40,000 to \$50,000 for homes, which was more than market value. He explained that his “main project in Detroit” was to address how to build property values. “We want to raise the comparables in the market,” he said. “We need to get people who will lend back into the city.” To this end, in 2014, the DLBA launched its own auction, selling houses in target neighborhoods. After buyers secured a bid, the DLBA required them to sign a contract agreeing to fix up the houses within six months of purchase. Like the Wayne County property auction, participation in the DLBA was limited to those who could access capital quickly.

### **Blight removal through demolition**

Building markets in particular neighborhoods required demolishing other ones. Wallace explained the dual strategy. “We just need to ask different questions [of non-target neighborhoods],” he said. “What is the definition of an investment? What type of investment? I may not be able to invest rehabilitation dollars, but I can invest *demolition* dollars ... I don’t think the city is abandoning neighborhoods. It’s just considering what type of investment it is making in an area based upon its current condition and where it has the opportunity to go. ...

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<sup>43</sup> These determinations were made based on Wallace’s assessment of the city, described herein, and the NSP districts targeted for the city as well as the Detroit Work Project’s Market Value Analysis – see chapter 5.

Everyone has to get comfortable with that.” Finding value, or lack there of, in the built environment is an arbitrary and inconsistent process. To reconcile demands for liquidity, states work to make the built environment more flexible and responsive to investment (e.g., post-war urban renewal funding, deregulation of financial markets, commodifying debt), absorbing the risks and costs of land development. However, this process is not straightforward. The creative destruction of Detroit’s built environment is a highly politicized and contested process. It is also materially complicated. Struggles ensue when the value of place is conceptualized and experienced differently by those with attachments and those without. It is because of such contestations that those seeking justifications for destruction, urban planning scholar Rachel Weber argues, “draw strength from the dual authorities of law and science in order to stabilize inherently ambiguous concepts like blight and obsolescence and create the appearance of certitude out of the cacophony of claims about value.”<sup>44</sup>

In early 2014, 180 surveyors fanned out across Detroit to document and assess the blight status of property in the city. Their work was part of the Blight Removal Task Force (BRTF), a new partnership between the federal, state, and city governments, foundations, and Rock Venture, the umbrella corporation for a family of companies owned by Dan Gilbert that he moved downtown in 2010, including Quicken Loans. Since then, he had acquired over 40 buildings and become a downtown real estate titan. With a net worth of \$3.9 billion, Gilbert was one of the richest people in the country, ranking 118 on Forbes’ list of 400 in 2013.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>44</sup> Rachel Weber, “Extracting Value from the City.” In *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban Restructuring in North American and Western Europe*, edited by Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.

<sup>45</sup> For Dan Gilbert’s Fortune 500 listing, see here: [http://www.forbes.com/fdc/welcome\\_mjx.shtml](http://www.forbes.com/fdc/welcome_mjx.shtml) (accessed November 11, 2014). Roy Roberts, previously emergency manager for the Detroit Public Schools was appointed Chief Land Officer of Detroit, an appointment made by the Obama Administration to manage the aid fun and report to the Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr. The first task of the BRTF — funded with a different pot of money, \$1.5 million from Skillman and Kresge Foundations, Michigan State Housing Development Authority, and Rock

leadership and financing of the BRTF was illustrative of the corporate, philanthropic, state, and federal assemblage that has in many ways supplanted public government in Detroit.

The surveyors spent three months coding 380,217 parcels. Driving Detroit in teams of three, each car was outfitted with a strobe light on top and a large magnetic sign on the side that read “official business” in big block letters. At each parcel, the team snapped a picture of the structure and conducted a “windshield inspection.” Gazing from their car windows, their tablets prompted them to answer a series of questions about the building’s condition. Is it occupied? Vacant? Does it appear in use by anyone? Is it in good, fair, or poor condition? Should it be demolished?

Definitions and assessment of “blight” have a long and contested history in urban development. The origin of the word “blight” is related to the human body, denoting the inflammation of the skin. Another common usage of blight refers to the harmful act or spread of agricultural disease. In the late 1920s and 1930s, the term “blight” became part of urban planning lexicons, providing a “scientific” explanation based on botanical epidemiology for urban decay. As legal scholar Amy Levin argues, “Just as the destruction of all possible host plants within a given geographical areas was considered to be an appropriate governmental response to the outbreaks of plant disease, planners and sociologists claimed that slum clearance was necessary to prevent the spread of urban blight.”<sup>46</sup> Detroit carried out its first survey of blight in 1946 as a precursor to a citywide plan called the Detroit Plan. Following the passage of the Housing Act of 1949, the state began widespread slum clearance to make the city more attractive to real estate capital.

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Ventures — was a comprehensive blight survey of the entire city. The project supervisor for the survey is also the executive associate of Rock Ventures.

<sup>46</sup> Amy Lavine, “Urban Renewal and the Story of *Berman v. Parker*.” *The Urban Lawyer* 42, no. 2 (2010): 423–75.

Much like today, the justification for demolition and redevelopment turned on the stigmatization of properties. Stigmatization involved finding fault in the condition of a property and relating it to the welfare of the broader public. Fault was found in blight. Under urban renewal, blight became a discourse in its own right. Moreover, blight was indistinguishable from the bodies that occupied the space and was linked to racial prejudices that severely constrained African American's housing options. As more Blacks moved north with the Great Migration, housing conditions worsened. "Scientific" theories of blight were bolstered as the impacts of redlining and discrimination were often ignored.

Blight did not enter the vernacular of law as an adjective to describe property or as a noun to describe neighborhood decay until the 1950s.<sup>47</sup> The 1954 *Berman v. Parker* U.S. Supreme Court case marked a turning point in legal definitions of blight. In short, the court upheld the government's use of eminent domain, arguing that they could claim blighted properties and turn it over to private developers for the purposes of abating public nuisance as long as a large-scale redevelopment plan was in place. It also ruled that the government could take non-blighted properties if doing so prevented the spread of blight. The ruling provided the legal justification for the racial and socioeconomic discrimination that became embedded in urban renewal programs. Lavine argues that the Supreme Court's "extreme deference" enabled urban renewal to proceed with "an astonishing lack of attention" to people's welfare who were supposed to benefit from the programs. Under urban renewal, neighborhoods were bulldozed, communities scattered, and low-income families relocated to segregated public housing (see chapter 2). In 2005, the Supreme Court extended the ruling in *Kelo v. City of New London*, ruling

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<sup>47</sup> Frank Alexander, "Louisiana Land Reform in the Storms' Aftermath." *Loyola Law Review* 53 (2007): 727-61.



that the municipal government could take unblighted private property for private development as long as it economically benefitted the city.<sup>48</sup>

In May 2014, Detroit's BRTF released its assessment report, which is worth quoting a passage from to underscore the way epidemiological-inspired theories of blight persist, giving agency to blight while ignoring the systemic causes of it:

Blight is a cancer. Blight sucks the soul out of anyone who gets near it...Blight is radioactive. It is contagious...Blight is also a symbol ...of all that is wrong and has gone wrong for too many decades in the once thriving world-class city of Detroit... Just like removing only part of a malignant cancerous tumor is not a real solution, removing only part of incremental amounts of blight from neighborhoods and the city as a whole is also no real solution. Because, like cancer, unless you remove the entire tumor, blight grows back. This is a unique time in Detroit. There is a real convergence of forces and timing on several fronts that is giving the city and all those who live and/or work in it, a once in a millennium opportunity to get it right...Downtown and midtown is experiencing the most productive period we have seen in recent memory, if not longer. There is hope and optimism in the air...."<sup>49</sup>

According to the report, Detroit had 84,641 blighted properties that would cost approximately \$1 billion to remove.<sup>50</sup> The approximate cost of a single house demolition was \$10,000. The report predicted that it would take a mere three years to remove all the blighted structures. A formidable task given that if demolition teams worked every day for 3 years, they'd need to disassemble 84 structures per day. "Blank slate" representations of Detroit it seemed were set to become a material reality. Celebrating this possibility, Dan Gilbert described the implications of the BRTF's planned demolitions this way, "For probably the first time in Western civilization in a major metro area, you're going to have a large parcels of vacant pristine

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<sup>48</sup> Lavine, "Urban Renewal and the Story of *Berman v. Parker*."

<sup>49</sup> "Time to End Blight" Report can be found here: <http://report.timetoendblight.org/> (accessed November 11, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> According to the report, of these, 73,035 are residential structures, 6,135 are vacant lots that require clearing, and 5,471 non-residential structures (commercial, civic, church).

land that have paved streets, utilities of sorts, cable, phone, water, sewer – everything at affordable land prices.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusions: Empowering communities and creating the commons**

Whereas the DLBA and BRTF responded to the demanding environments created by the auction through efforts to increase real estate comparables, some neighborhood groups, like the Riverfront East Congregation Initiative (RECI) took a different approach. They sought to support what they called the “economy of the community” through building social relationships not property values.

RECI, which began in 2010, is a collaboration of 17 diverse faith communities with 26,000 congregants who seek to shape the future of Detroit’s east side, an area of the city with some of the highest foreclosure rates. The group was engaged in what they called “asset-based organizing” and “place-based ministry” in the neighborhoods surrounding their collective congregations. Their work was illustrative of the common property practices and landscape care that were widespread in Detroit.

In May 2012, we interviewed three members of RECI as part of the Uniting Detroiters project who offered a perspective on land vacancy that contrasted sharply with that of the DLBA and BRTF. A woman named Ada described how when RECI began, they went out to take photographs of community assets on the east side. What was most surprising she said was that “folks came back with these picture of abandoned houses, but not as you see it in the news, but as this house can be rebuilt or rejuvenated in some way.” After they documented their neighborhoods, representatives from each congregation began meeting one Saturday a month to

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<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Tom Walsh, “Thrills and danger ahead in Detroit’s wild bankruptcy ride,” *Detroit Free Press* (December 28, 2013), <http://archive.freep.com/article/20131218/COL06/312180153/Tom-Walsh-Dan-Gilbert-blight-removal> (accessed November 20, 2014).

talk about how to proceed with their collective work. They decided to organize 10-week intensive “academies” for congregation members in which they learned about community assets on the east side, including, an organization that helped citizens returning from prison, a group focused on teaching young people trades, community gardens, and restaurants, community book stores, and other businesses that gave back to the city and did so “humbly.” When the state made welfare cuts, they made a resource guide – “a list of folks who were providing resources to the community” -- and encouraged congregation members to make use of their services and also support them.

In addition to the Saturday meetings, they had “cluster group” meetings. For example one called “Education and Social Action” organized an educational forum to help congregation members better understand the process and policies that the city had around land acquisition and disposition. They saw empowering their congregations with knowledge as the first step to gain more control over the future of their community. Toward that end, they also invited various people who had an interest in land on the east side to come meet with them to tell them about their development plans. Congregation members then discussed the effects projects would have on their community, if developers had their best interest at heart, and if the project was something the congregants really wanted. Another RECI member named Vanessa explained that These conversations empowered the community to “not accept” that there was only one way to do development in the city, namely developers coming in from the outside without the consent of the community. RECI was practicing a form of common governance and collective decision making about “who we are and what we want for ourselves.”

One of RECI’s goals was to develop neighborhood networks of mutual aid that supported congregation members. For example, one family was “burned out of their house.” Within a

week, they'd found them a new home with furniture – “it was a collective effort,” Ada said, “but it was the relationships that had been built that provided the network of support.” Another woman described the common property practices in her neighborhood as evidence of relationship building happening in neighborhoods that might otherwise appear blighted. “There are vacant lots, there are vacant houses, however, nobody is burning anything now ...we cut the grass where there are vacant houses, board up different properties, and keep the fronts looking like people still frequent them.” In contrast to Grandmont Rosedale residents' organized maintenance schedule, she explained that they don't schedule grass cutting or other shared labor. “You could call it pride,” she said, “people just do what needs to be done.” She described how people gardened and shared vegetables. Homes in her neighborhood were often “family houses” – she explained how her family house passed from her parents to her sister to another sister to a niece and finally her brother, sister, and niece were all living there. As a further sign of the collective nature of property in her neighborhood she said, “We don't even have a fence between my yard and my neighbor's yard.....everybody looks out for each other.” As mentioned in the introduction, the decision to put up a fence or not is a small act that symbolically challenges private property and racialized abandonment. It reminds us of how the sanctity of private property is reaffirmed through everyday action. Ada's decision not to put up a fence, to create an inside and an outside, signaled the kind of neighborhood ecology RECI was cultivating.

## **CHAPTER 4: AUSTERITY AND THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF DEBT**

### **Introduction**

On April 4, 2012, more than a year before Detroit filed for bankruptcy protection, I arrived at the city council meeting room on the 13th floor of the Coleman A. Young municipal building – named for the city’s first Black mayor – and tried to find a seat. After weeks of meetings, back room deals, protests, and legal injunctions aimed at stopping the contentious Financial Stability Agreement, more frequently called the Consent Agreement, the nine members of the city council had assembled to vote. The small room was packed with protestors, reporters, and security guards. The guards would not allow anyone to stand but the press, so after the 50-odd seats filled, they ushered late arrivals to a separate spillover “listening” room. The city council, made up entirely of African Americans, three women and six men, sat around an oval table in the front of the room. Positioned at the head of the table was council president Charles Pugh, who pounded his gavel in an attempt to bring the crowd to order and start the session. After an hour of public comment—overwhelmingly frustrated, angry, and indignant—the council approved the agreement by a vote of five to four, giving the state of Michigan sweeping power over the city’s budget and finances.

The approval of the Consent Agreement was the prelude to a massive structural adjustment of Detroit’s government that would transform the city over the next two years. On March 14, 2013, less than a year after its approval, Detroit entered “emergency management” at the behest of Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, who appointed bankruptcy lawyer Kevyn Orr to the post. In

Michigan, emergency managers like Orr are given sweeping powers over city government finances and operations, including the authority to negotiate, modify, or terminate labor contracts; impose pay cuts; hire and fire employees; sell, lease, or privatize assets; change budgets without legislative approval; and, significantly, initiate municipal bankruptcy proceedings. Less than four months after he was appointed, Kevyn Orr recommended that the city file for bankruptcy. On July 18, 2013, Governor Snyder approved Orr's recommendation, making Detroit the largest U.S. city to ever declare bankruptcy. The city's debt at that time was an estimated \$18 to 20 billion.<sup>1</sup>

The situation in Detroit exemplifies how the racialized geography of debt in the contemporary United States can be reinforced by political processes. When Snyder appointed Orr in 2013, Detroit was the sixth city in Michigan to fall under emergency management. All of these cities, except one, had majority Black populations, in a state where only 14.3% of the population identified as Black or African American.<sup>2</sup> The process effectively strips citizens of their democratic rights for two reasons. First, Michigan's governor appoints emergency managers without the approval of elected city officials or voters. Second, the decision-making power of emergency managers supersedes that of elected city officials. Thus, 47 years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act prohibiting racial discrimination in voting, the appointment of an emergency manager for Detroit meant that more than half of African Americans in Michigan effectively lost their voting rights.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Turbeville, "The Detroit Bankruptcy," Report by Demos (2013) contested debt calculations as being inflated. The bankruptcy case dealt with a figure of \$12 billion and settled \$7 billion of that.

<sup>2</sup> Demographic data from the 2010 U.S. Census: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26000.html>

<sup>3</sup> While extraordinary use of emergency management in Michigan is notably, the exceptional legislation it not unique to Michigan; at least two-thirds of states in the United States have some form of voter suppression policy on the books. In June 2011, a team of attorneys including the Sugar Law Center of the National Lawyer's Guild filed a lawsuit representing twenty-eight plaintiffs from cities under emergency management across Michigan that

What does it mean to be indebted? To live in a city transformed to accommodate its creditors and, indeed, the algorithms of credit rating agencies? Who, exactly, is in debt in Detroit? Who should pay that debt? Why? These are difficult questions and, as struggles around the Consent Agreement, emergency management, and the bankruptcy revealed, the answers are far from obvious. In this chapter, I argue that debt is multiple. The chapter examines competing ways of conceptualizing and responding to debt in Detroit. Austerity in Detroit means divestment and targeted reinvestment and is leading to “two Detroits.” In other words, the burden of financial debt is borne unevenly. Residents opposing the Consent Agreement expected it to deepen this unevenness and staked claims to a different political future by appealing to a historical debt to the Black freedom struggle.

The chapter is organized in three parts. First, I explore public dissent over the city’s loss of home rule, an idea common among residents who saw the Consent Agreement and emergency management as an unlawful “takeover” and civil rights issue. I analyze how opposition was frequently framed in terms of a historical debt to the Black freedom struggle. Second, I situate Detroit’s public debt crisis in its global political-economic context, showing how the fallout of the subprime crisis has been exploited to privatize public resources. I argue that over the last 40

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challenged PA4 as a violation of the MI State Constitution. While at least 80 communities in Michigan had faced deficits, predominantly white communities have by and large not faced threats of emergency management. Whereas emergency management has impacted all of Michigan’s mostly Black local units of government, only one white city has been taken over by the state. While Michigan’s emergency management system has been in place since 1988, PA4 was the centerpiece of Michigan Republicans fiscal program when they took over the state legislature and governorship in 2011. It greatly strengthened the power of emergency managers over local governments, which proponents argued was necessary to be able to respond quickly and efficiently to the problems affecting local governments as a result of the foreclosure crisis and near collapse of the auto industry. A statewide petition drive in 2012 put the legislation on the ballot and it was successfully repealed after overcoming a number of Republicans roadblocks, including challenging the size of font on the petition. When PA4 was repealed by popular vote in 2012, the state legislature (dominated by Republicans) immediately passed another emergency management law (PA 436) that upheld most of the power of PA 4 but put time limits on the tenure of an emergency manager. Under PA 4, emergency managers served without term limits. The emergency management process in Michigan is similar to the Municipal Assistance Corporation established in New York City during its 1975 fiscal crisis, however, in Michigan oversight is by *one person* not a board.

years, bond-rating agencies have come to exert increasing influence over the autonomy of cities, including the spatiality of targeted investments and security apparatuses to protect them. The final part of the chapter explores how residents and activists negotiated living in a place marked by “unpayable debt” and grappled with the challenges that financialization poses to community organizing.<sup>4</sup>

### **Let us live on our own ground**

While sitting in the buzzing city council room on the afternoon of the Consent Agreement approval vote in the spring of 2012—before the emergency manager arrived and the bankruptcy began— someone passed me a sign with “NO” stenciled in black. Pugh, the council president, managed to quiet the room and invited public comment before the vote. He stressed that speakers would be limited to two minutes and that he would keep time strictly. Reverend Jesse Jackson, who had traveled from Chicago to address the city council, began the comment period calling for the reconstruction of the city. He said, “Detroit must live again ... You’ve done too much to have anything less than your own dignity and appropriate resources.”

Following Jackson’s comments, residents filed in and out of the rows of chairs as they were called to the microphone. They shamed council members. They begged them to remember the constituencies that had put them in power in the first place. They pleaded with the council to not give away their home rule, their power, their beloved Detroit. Asserting their rights to the city, they also tried to convince council members to vote “No” by invoking histories of

Reconstruction, civil rights, and Black Power, warning of the Agreement’s potentially

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<sup>4</sup> See Paula Chakravarty and Denise Ferreira Da Silva, “Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—An Introduction.” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 3 (2012): 361–85. I build on their argument that “unpayable debts” were triggers for the foreclosure crisis that operated through postcolonial/racial subjugation and the state as a crucial actor in ensuring the “health of global capitalism.” They argue, “the subprime crisis facilitated [the] exacting of profits from *places* and *persons* produced as unsuitable economic subjects ... by shifting the focus on to how conquest and slavery, along with the postcolonial apparatus of raciality, produce places and person by a debt ...cannot be settled even with death” (365).



devastating impacts and expressing raw anger and pain at its fundamental injustice. Speaking with passion, many of those who commented exceeded their allotted two minutes, holding the floor until they were threatened with expulsion. The following quotes illustrate the structure of feeling, unresolved tensions, and possibilities put forth in the Coleman Young municipal building on April 4, 2012.

An African-American man in his 50s said: “It is obvious that we have completely forgotten our history....My heart really is aching. I think just about everybody in the room can feel what’s about to happen...It is a disgrace and it is an outrage. In signing this, you are forever changing the city of Detroit. I pray that God will forgive you all. It’s certainly going to be hard for the people to forgive you.”

Her gray hair peeking out from underneath her white faux fur hat, a petite 99-year-old African-American woman who regularly attended and prayed during city council meetings called out in a moaning voice, “Let Detroit be Detroit. Let us live on our own ground.”

Speaking haltingly through tears, a middle-age white woman from the nearby city of Pontiac, under emergency management since 2009, said, “It’s not going to be easy for you. People are going to have to be cut, cut, cut. No one person should have this much power.... You’re not just going to be given money. You’re going to have to issue bonds, loans ... that’s going to make you deeper. We need to stand tough.... You are going to have depression, oppression, you are going to have jobs taken away...”

Jerome Goldberg, a tireless advocate for people whose homes were being foreclosed upon, became increasingly worked up as he spoke, screaming that the ratings from the subprime mortgage crisis had devastated the city. By the end of his two minutes, he was pumping his fist.

A local historian, Paul Lee, came bearing a 1966 photo of Stokely Carmichael, then

chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was delivering an address at a campaign rally in Detroit in support of two Black candidates running for city council. Two weeks before, Carmichael had called for Black Power, redirecting the course of the modern Civil Rights movement from an emphasis on racial integration to self-determination. While there was an emphasis on registration drives in the south, Lee said, Carmichael also recognized “a need for Black Power in such Northern urban centers as Detroit.” At the time only two members of Detroit’s city council were African American despite the city having a nearly 50 percent Black population. Both candidates lost in the election. However, Lee’s point was that they -- along with the broad coalitions, encompassing Black nationalists to Black moderates, that formed in the wake of the 1967 Detroit Rebellion to wrest political power from the “white power structure” -- helped lay the groundwork for those on city council today to hold their positions. “History shows,” Lee said, “that our community was strong when it remained united. Once division was allowed to creep it, outsiders were able to exploit this to their advantage and our community’s disadvantage.”

During their comments, a number of speakers invoked national and local Black freedom fighters.<sup>5</sup> Their two minutes at the microphone seemed as much about waging a protest against forgetting the past as it was the Consent Agreement. Why did they respond to the Detroit’s fiscal debt and impending state-mandated emergency management by invoking histories of African-American struggle? “We are not merely what we remember,” critical race and literary scholar Saidiya Hartman writes, “but also what we forget.” The speakers invoking freedom fighters were highlighting a form of politics based on community self-determination, racial equality, and

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<sup>5</sup> Among the leaders mentioned were Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Coleman Young, Erma Henderson, Paul Robeson, Malcolm X, Hon. Elijah Muhammed, Rev. Albert Cleage, Dr. Imari Obadele, Rev. Gaide Obadele, Richard Henry, Rev. Milton Henry, Ray Jenkins, General Baker and Marian Kramer, and James and Grace Lee Boggs.

rectifying past wrongs—a politics that seemed directly opposed to that of signing a Consent Agreement.

The events around the city council vote were striking in two ways. First, residents protested structural reforms to resolve fiscal debt by invoking historical debts, specifically obligations to the Black power and civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In so doing, their framing of the relationship between citizenship and debt diverged from debt as monetary, instead embracing debt as a non-economic, moral, and subjective force.<sup>6</sup> Second, despite the feeling that something momentous had happened in the Coleman Young building that day, the actions that some protestors had threatened the week before – invoking the riots or rebellion of 1967 by saying, “we will burn the city down again” – never happened. The streets were quiet in the days and weeks following the vote, reflecting the intentionally depoliticized naming of the Consent Agreement, which implied a sense that there was already agreement, but also, perhaps, the fact that many actions to combat emergency management were talking places through referendums and court cases rather than street protest. Yet the quietude also seemed to represent the myriad challenges facing movement politics that activists often speak about in Detroit and beyond: apathy, despair, the consuming struggles of meeting basic needs, a new type of DIY urbanism, or a lack of empathy, and importantly, debates over whether to invest time and energy into organizing via electoral politics or developing new institutions and systems of governance that would serve the people.

Debt is often defined as an obligation to pay a creditor a certain sum of money. In *Debt*:

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<sup>6</sup> See Maurizio Lazzarato whose writing I have just begun to explore, which seems initially to resonate in some interesting ways with the ways debates over debt were framed by Detroiters during the takeover and bankruptcy. See e.g., Maurizio Lazzarato. *The Making of the Indebted Man*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012; and Charbonneau and Hansen. “Debt, Neoliberalism and Crisis: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato on the Indebted Condition.” *Sociology* 48, no. 5 (October 14, 2014): 1039–47. Also see Fred Moten and Stefano Harney. “Debt and Study.” *E-Flux*, 2010. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/debt-and-study/>

*The First 5,000 Years*, anthropologist David Graeber shows that debt has had a central place in history and class struggle from debtors' revolts in six-century BC Athens to modern times. For Graeber, debt in precapitalist, mutual aid societies was indistinguishable from morality. Yet when debt was quantified, it became distinct from other obligations because it became impersonal and transferrable. This historical observation is salient in the twenty-first century because we have entered what some have called the new "debt economy." The post-Fordist era of indebtedness, according to Maurizio Lazzarato, is defined by a shift in control of money creation from the state to private creditors, the transcendence of the capital-labor relationship by one of creditor-debtor, and the transformation of the welfare state into a redistributive system towards those who already have wealth. Today, debt is central to a variety of new socioeconomic enclosures and the neoliberal project of dismantling the social contract.<sup>7</sup>

In U.S. working-class communities between the nineteenth century through the post-World War II era, the Marxist scholar Silvia Federici argues, that debt functioned as a sort of "mutual aid" with people borrowing from each other to make ends meet and maintaining tabs with shopkeepers until payday.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, loans were available (e.g., see chapter 2 for a discussion of homeownership loans), however, her point is, as Lazzarato also argues, that during the Fordist period, the creditor-debtor relationship which was once "relegated in the background" has now become central to social reproduction.<sup>9</sup> During the Fordist period, "reproduction" – securing food, water, shelter, medical care – was part of the social contract. Today, Federici argues, the "debt lending machine" – a faceless entity, rather than a known person – has become the central

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<sup>7</sup> David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2012); M. Charbonneau and M. P. Hansen, "Debt, Neoliberalism and Crisis: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato."

<sup>8</sup> Silvia Federici, "From Commoning to Debt: Financialization, Microcredit, and the Changing Architecture of Capital Accumulation." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 113, no. 2 (May 02, 2014): 231–44.

<sup>9</sup> Charbonneau and Hansen, "Debt, Neoliberalism and Crisis: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato on the Indebted Condition."

means of ensuring one's reproduction. "Instead of work, exploitation, and above all 'bosses,' so prominent in the world of smokestacks," she writes, "debtors now confront not an employer but a bank and confront it alone, not as part of a collective body and collective relation, as was the case with wage workers."<sup>10</sup> The implications of this change for worker resistance in Detroit and other places have been enormous as are the challenges it poses for building movement solidarity.

So, what does it mean to live in an indebted city? My research in Detroit suggests that it depends on whom you ask and how you define debt. More specifically, I found that residents contested fiscal debt—impersonal and transferable—in the language of relational and historical debt, which was different than analyses in the mainstream media that for the most part fell into a two-sided debate. On the one hand, some analysts approached Detroit's debt as a crisis of responsibility at the scale of the city and the individual – the impetus and rationality for restrictive emergency management -- and cast blame in several directions. Unions were to blame because they forced municipal leaders to make impossible pension promises that sunk the city's budget and destroyed the auto industry. These analysts argued that the city had fallen precipitously since the 1967 riots and the rise of Black governance. In addition, the Black political class was to blame for a culture of corruption, misrule, and fostering a racially hostile environment that inhibited capital investment. According to this discourse, this irresponsibility combined with everyday violence to drive evermore residents from the city. These factors – unions, Black governance, violence – were responsible for creating an emergency situation that necessitated extraordinary intervention. The Consent Agreement (and later emergency management and bankruptcy) would ameliorate the city's imminent cash flow shortage and its long-term debts.

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<sup>10</sup> Federici. "From Commoning to Debt," 235.

By contrast, other analysts drew attention to global political economy and structural drivers at various scales and raised moral questions about who should bear the burden of the city's debt. They argued, first, that big business (not unions) and corporate tax incentives were responsible. Second, that macro-economic shifts and international policy failures must be accounted for, including trade pacts written by corporations. Third, Detroit's 19,000 or so retirees received only modest monthly stipends that were miniscule in comparison to corporate welfare. Finally, Detroit's crisis was deep-rooted and systemic. Budget cuts would only exacerbate joblessness, high poverty, low education rates, and isolation of city residents. Some called for a bailout for Detroit like the banks and the automakers had received. Others argued that Detroit residents were no more responsible for the city's fiscal woes than those who lost their homes and businesses during Hurricane Sandy (which struck the northeastern United States in 2012).

While these two discourses largely framed the mainstream terms of debate around Detroit's debt, many of the protestors at the city council meeting ascribed different meanings to the city's debt, focusing on the racialization of debt, the threat the takeover posed to Black self-determination, and how the Black political class had "forgotten where they came from." Municipal debt, as their comments and those of residents and community activists during my interviews suggested, cannot easily be separated from the history and relationships that produced indebtedness. In listening to Detroiters make sense of the city's fiscal crisis, I found that many inverted common assumptions about debt asking questions that echoed that posed by Black studies scholar Fred Moten, "What debt do we owe the subprime debtor?"<sup>11</sup> In doing so, they invoked an alternative definition of debt delinked from credit. This debt was not quantifiable, but

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<sup>11</sup> Fred Moten, "The Subprime and the Beautiful." *African Identities* 11, no. 2 (May 2013): 237–45.

qualitative: it was debt as historical obligation. They argued not only that the suburbs had a debt to Detroit but also that African Americans had a debt to their ancestors that could never be repaid through money alone. Rather, the debt was an obligation to carry on the liberation struggle. It was a kind of debt that recognized the inadequacy of how care and moral obligation are built into the legal and economic structures of liberalism and that the people who came before them had dreams that went beyond “limited emancipation,” to use Saidiya Hartman’s words again.<sup>12</sup> Honoring this debt meant refusing the state takeover as a force that was antagonistic to Black power and self-rule. It also meant channeling indignation into plans to invent the commons, which necessitated the cultivation new relationships, infrastructures, and community-organizing strategies that would support them. This was one of the main goals of the Uniting Detroiters project, which I became involved in just before serious structural adjustment measures related to emergency management and bankruptcy were imposed in the city.

### **The challenges of resisting austerity**

“It’s a sad day in Detroit,” Linda said the morning after the Consent Agreement was signed. We were having a Uniting Detroiters community meeting (see chapter 1). Linda shook her head in dismay about the disintegration of the city’s obligation to its citizens and the diminished social movement organizing capacity in Detroit since she had first arrived in the city from St. Louis in the early 1970s. “Everybody had a uncle, a cousin, or someone who was either a committee man in the labor movement inside a factory or they were active in their churches,” she later said in an interview.

The industrial labor structure, Linda argued, created an infrastructure for political organizing as well as local leadership at the grassroots level. “There was a give and take. There

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<sup>12</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

were strikes. There was agitation. There was tension,” she said, describing how the pressures the labor movement put on management not only led to gains for factory workers and public service sector employees but benefitted those who lived in the community by generally raising standards of living and quality of life. In the 1960s, approximately 30 percent of all U.S. workers (public and private) were in unions. By 1983, this figure had fallen to 20 percent and, by 2010, to a mere 11.9 percent. Falling numbers coincided with a decline in direct action nationwide. From 1950 to 1960, laborers staged 3,517 work stoppages compared to 201 between 2000 and 2010.<sup>13</sup> The point Linda was making was how the labor and other social movements pressured employers and the state to adopt economic policies that carried ideas of social uplift. “There was this social contract,” she said. “We’re not talking about a utopian society, but when you look at the severe cuts that have happened, and not all those are effected by the city for sure, but we’ve got hundreds of women and children in the city right now who’ve been cut off assistance, who have timed out, will no longer receive basic stipends to pay rent and have cash money to buy clothing for their children or pay for transportation. It’s unconscionable.”

Given this historical context, the Consent Agreement and expected budgetary cuts highlighted, as Linda observed, the distance between today and an era when unionized workers received healthcare, pensions, and a decent wage, were able to buy homes, create businesses, and put their children through school. Yet it also called up a different history. Linda’s arrival in Detroit coincided with a tumultuous period in the city. As recounted in chapter 2, the period between 1967 and 1973 marked a critical period of urban realignment and labor retrenchment

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<sup>13</sup> Figures here comes from Kris Warner. 2012. *Protecting Fundamental Labor Rights*. Report. Center for Economic and Policy Research, Washington, D.C. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/canada-2012-08.pdf> (accessed September 12, 2014) and Tayyab, Mahmud, 2013. “Debt and Discipline: Neoliberal Political Economy and the Working Classes.” *Kentucky Law Journal* 101 (1): 18-19, footnote 117. In the private sector, the decline in unionization rates has been even more dramatic, falling from 25 percent in 1975 to 6.9 percent in 2010.



that had dramatic consequences for Black politics in Detroit. The unions resembled the city's riot zones, as labor liberals (i.e., the UAW) and labor radicals (i.e., the League of Revolutionary Black Workers) vied for power. Moreover, the FBI had launched an attack on activists deemed subversive through COINTELPRO.<sup>14</sup>

When African Americans gained political control of the city for the first time in 1973 with the election of Coleman Young, the city's first Black mayor, this dynamic played out in the civic realm, as well. The distance between liberal and radical visions for the city's future that defined this earlier period continues to shape different political visions for the city today. After the 1960s uprisings, the 1970s signified a sort of golden age for Black electoral politics with more African Americans entering political office than any period since Reconstruction. However, for Black radicals there was never a "golden age of capitalism," nor was that the goal. As the 1970s progressed, labor and civic liberals quashed rather than harnessed the groundswell of radicalism around Black self-determination, and many radicals, as mentioned in chapter 2, felt "jettisoned."

The assault on Black and labor radicals, combined with the decline of manufacturing in Detroit, diminished the infrastructures of social movement organizing and created a challenge, as Linda put it, to think about, "what structures need to exist outside of electoral politics to strengthen our neighborhoods and communities."<sup>15</sup> For her, thinking outside of electoral politics

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<sup>14</sup> As historian Heather Thompson writes, "As a result of [UAW] leadership decisions in the tumultuous period between 1967 and 1973, between 1973 and 1985, Detroit's labor movement suffered a tremendous setback at the hands of management for which workers paid dearly" (193). Heather Ann Thompson. *Whose Detroit: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. See Chapter 8 ("Urban Realignment and Labor Retrenchment") for a specific history of this period.

<sup>15</sup> Lazzarato makes a similar argument about resistance and debt. He writes: "The power of debt in neoliberalism represents a highly efficient mechanism of control and capture, more efficient than the modes of resistance put in place by the workers' movement. While the latter still focuses on dynamics located within the productive space, power is now exerted on a broader social scale. Hence, there is an asymmetry between capital and forms of resistance... workers have not yet created forms of struggle and resistance specifically aimed at the issue of indebtedness." See Charbonneau and Hansen. "Debt, Neoliberalism and Crisis: Interview with Maurizio Lazzarato on the Indebted Condition."

did not mean abandoning democratic government for DIY urbanism, which she saw as creating a vacuum for private capital to assume more power in the city and, as a result, made it even more difficult for residents to meet their basic needs. Instead, recognizing the urgency of this situation entailed rethinking government structures and accountability to disperse power and decision-making throughout the community. On the ground, this also meant fighting for living wages, community benefit agreements, welfare rights, quality schools, and parks and recreation centers.

Of course, not all activists in Detroit share Linda's emphasis on reclaiming government for community purposes. Like the city itself, social justice work is diverse in terms of key issues and theories of social change. As the plurality of voices expressing outrage and consternation around the Consent Agreement illustrated, sometimes activist projects and theories are aligned and at other times they create friction. Yet that a statewide referendum overturning the emergency manager law had been successful but that the Republican-dominated legislature immediately enacted new emergency management legislation pointed to the importance of developing an organizing infrastructure to foster solidarity amongst groups working for social justice in Detroit's new economy of debt so that urban governance could eventually be reorganized.

The awkward position of residents during the bankruptcy proceedings further evidenced the need for such infrastructure. Though factionalized and only a shadow of their former power, public labor unions emerged as the central oppositional force. Whereas creditors (be they pensioners or bondholders) were able to quantify Detroit's economic obligation to them through contracts and legal judgments, by contrast, as legal scholar Michelle Anderson argues, "residents [had] no such legal instruments to monetize their share of the city's revenue ... They [had] no legal entitlements to police and fire protection, no regulations governing emergency response times, no enforceable right to water and water infrastructure, and no mandate for sanitary

services like solid waste or wastewater disposal.”<sup>16</sup> In the next section, I situate Detroit’s fiscal crisis within a national context.

### **Insolvent cities**

Detroit’s fiscal crisis unfolded during a moment of municipal restructuring for insolvent cities in the United States as a result of the subprime crisis. While Detroit’s bankruptcy declaration was exceptional as largest in U.S. history, Detroit was actually the twenty-eighth U.S. city to enter receivership for fiscal crisis or declare bankruptcy since late 2008. In the fallout of the subprime crisis, dozens of other municipalities – from Scranton, Pennsylvania, to San Bernardino, California – have also undergone market-oriented structural adjustment in response to insolvency.<sup>17</sup>

In this section, I want to do three things. First, I look at how the number of cities in fiscal distress highlights the ongoing traumas of the 2008 financial crisis despite optimistic reports of recovery. Second, I examine the way the crisis is being used to restructure municipal government. Finally, I consider how the racialization of space shapes not only which cities face the most drastic budgetary cuts, but also who bears the brunt of them. The social and political implications for U.S. cities, particularly cities with large populations of marginalized residents, are immense. Despite global protest (from Wall Street to Cyprus) and growing criticism that austerity will not help grow the economy, austerity programs continue to be rolled out and intensified. As the Pew Charitable Trust reported in 2012, “This is not a passing moment. What one recent assessment has called the ‘local squeeze’ will be felt ‘for years to come.’” The report

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<sup>16</sup> Michelle Wilde Anderson. “The New Minimal Cities.” *The Yale Law Journal* 123, no. 1118 (2014): 1223.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Anderson, “New Minimal Cities.” These 28 cities were in 10 states. City in this case is defined by having a population of over 15,000. Also note that while the specific causes of any municipal’s insolvency are a mixture of different factors, Judge Rhode’s ruling in Detroit’s bankruptcy case that municipal pension are not protected by the Michigan constitution could be used as precedent in future Chapter 9 bankruptcies.

went on to delineate how property tax receipts would not return to 2009 levels until 2039. The resulting “fiscal gap” meant that absent radical policy changes (e.g., debt forgiveness), local governments would bear the brunt of these losses, particularly poor cities. If the gap was to be closed, the report argued, local governments would have to reduce their budgets by 12.7 percent per year, every year for the next 50 years.<sup>18</sup> What is important here is how the “fiscal gap” is being used to dismantle social programs at an unprecedented pace. Austerity is not about solving fiscal “crisis.” It is about exploiting it to downsize government, promote “free markets,” and create what geographer Ruth Gilmore has called an “anti-state state.”<sup>19</sup>

The Consent Agreement, of course, was not the beginning of austerity in Detroit (though it did entail the displacement of democratically elected officials). Rather it built upon neoliberal policies of decades earlier. In this way, it represented how contemporary austerity regimes are particularly damning because they are happening atop earlier government rollbacks since the Reagan and Thatcher era. Many people have experienced the ripple effects of the subprime crisis. However, its effects are uneven across racial and economic difference.

In a detailed survey of insolvent U.S. cities with populations of more than 15,000, Michelle Anderson found that they share a distinct commonality: individual poverty. In all but 2 of the 28 cities she studied, poverty rates were at least double the national average.<sup>20</sup> Anderson also reported that that “majority-minority” cities (meaning cities composed of less than 50 percent non-Hispanic whites) have been more prone to insolvency, a finding that is, perhaps,

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<sup>18</sup> Pew Charitable Trust. *The Local Squeeze: Falling Revenues and Growing Demand for Services Challenging Cities, Counties, and School Districts*. Washington, DC, 2012.  
[http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2012/06/Pew\\_Cities\\_Local-Squeeze\\_report.pdf](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~media/Assets/2012/06/Pew_Cities_Local-Squeeze_report.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “What Is to Be Done?” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2011): 245–65.

<sup>20</sup> In 2010, the federal poverty line for a one-person household was \$11,239 and \$22,113 for a family of four.

unsurprising given that subprime mortgage lending, which was explicitly racialized, precipitated fiscal crises for many cities.<sup>21</sup> As discussed already, poor majority-minority cities like Detroit have been hit the hardest by mortgage foreclosures where predatory modes of financialization exacerbated legacies of redlining, hallowing out municipal tax bases and causing additional social service burdens. Researchers have found that Latinos and Blacks received subprime loans at rates that were respectively 2.5 and 3 times higher than whites.<sup>22</sup> According to a 2013 report by the Hass Institute, Detroit ranked 5th in “underwater” mortgages among all U.S. cities with populations over 100,000. “Underwater” means home loan balances are higher than the properties’ market value. In 2013, 47 percent of the city’s homes were underwater and 4,830 went into mortgage foreclosure or default.<sup>23</sup> When tax debt and foreclosures are added to mortgage figures, Detroit moves to the top (or, perhaps, bottom) of the list (see chapter 3).

Important to emphasize is that the subprime crisis has manifested most acutely in the

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<sup>21</sup> Michelle Anderson argues that racial segregation was also a factor – or cause -- in cities facing insolvency. While 21 percent of the cities she studied (6 of the 28) had populations that were 75 percent non-Hispanic white, most of them – 57 percent or 16 of the 28 -- were majority minority cities; 39 percent (11 of the 28) were hyper-segregated minority cities, meaning they had a less than 25 percent non-Hispanic white population. See Anderson, “New Minimal Cities.”

<sup>22</sup> Kevin Fox Gotham. “Creating Liquidity out of Spatial Fixity: The Secondary Circuit of Capital and the Restructuring of the US Housing Finance System.” In *Subprime Cities: The Political Economy of Mortgage Markets*, edited by Manuel Aalbers. Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2012, 24. Moreover, according to Rivera et al, the subprime crisis exacted a total loss of wealth for people of color between \$164 billion and \$213 billion for subprime loans taken from 2000-2008. See Amaad Rivera, Brenda Cotto-Escalera, Anisha Desai, Jeannette Huevo, and Dedrick Muhammad, *Foreclosed: State of the Dream 2008, United for a Fair Economy*, January 15, 2008, vii, available at [http://www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/StateOfDream\\_01\\_16\\_08\\_Web.pdf](http://www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/StateOfDream_01_16_08_Web.pdf) (accessed May 15, 2009). Michelle Anderson finds similar figures about racial unevenness of subprime loans in poor communities: “Among low-income households of all races living in low-income communities, 10% of home purchase loans were subprime, compared to 18% of loans for equivalent African-American households in low-income neighborhoods. These contrasts were even more stark for refinance loans: 27% of refinance loans to low-income borrowers in low-income neighborhoods nationwide were subprime, but 42% of the loans sold to low-income African-American borrowers living in low-income neighborhoods were subprime.” See Anderson, “New Minimal Cities,” 1141.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Dreier, Saqib Bhatti, Rob Call, Alex Schwartz, Gregory Squires, Rob Call, Alex Schwartz, and Gregory Squires. *Underwater America: How the so-Called Housing “Recovery” Is Bypassing Many American Communities*. Berkeley, CA, 2014.

poorest urban neighborhoods because of “downward pressures,” in the words of geographer Jamie Peck. The federal government cuts funding to state governments, the states do it to cities, and cities do it to their poor neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the radical restructuring taking place in insolvent cities needs to be understood within the broader political economic moment in which intermediary institutions like bond-rating agencies play an outsized role in shaping urban governance.

### **Rating cities**

In the last 40 years, bond-rating agencies (the big ones are Standard & Poor’s, Moody’s, and Fitch – all private entities with no government oversight) have come to exert increasing influence over the autonomy of cities, affecting the quality, quantity, and geography of local investments.<sup>25</sup> Public bonds have long been a way to raise money. However, corporate bonds are a newer invention dating back to the early twentieth century when they were used to fund the expansion of U.S. railroads. As corporate bonds increased, bond-rating agencies formed to provide lenders risk assessments (Moody’s was the first). Later as municipal bonds came to constitute a significant portion of the bond market, these private rating agencies assumed the responsibility of assessing the risk of municipal bonds. At the start of the 1970s, leading agencies only employed a handful of analysts. For example, Standard & Poor’s grew from 30 professionals in its industrial groups to 40 in 1986 to 800 analysts and a total staff of 1,200 in 1995. The number of bond issuers receiving ratings has also grown tremendously. In 1990, Moody’s maintained 40,000 ratings and in 2003, 90,000, of which 22,500 were for municipal

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<sup>24</sup> Jamie Peck, “Austerity Urbanism,” *City* 16, no. 6 (2012): 626–55.

<sup>25</sup> Jason Hackworth, “Local Autonomy, Bond-Rating Agencies and Neoliberal Urbanism in the United States.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26.4, no. December (2002): 707–25.

issuers.<sup>26</sup> Their power over municipalities has grown for three main reasons, as delineated by geographer Jason Hackworth: first, federal government funding for cities has decreased; second, more wealth is generated through finance capital, including pension funds, insurance, et cetera, increasing outside surveillance; and third, whereas in the past municipalities borrowed money from commercial banks (historically considered to be the most stable kind of loan), today bonds and notes sold on the capital market are the primary way municipalities fund their long-term operating costs as well as their day-to-day functioning.<sup>27</sup> Thus, cities go to great lengths to maintain and gain better credit ratings because they can be redlined from the bond market if a handful of bond-rating agencies judge them fiscally inept. Outlooks matter because if a municipality's credit rating is downgraded it can have trouble functioning on a day-to-day basis and providing public services. This means cities have little choice but to enter into increasingly risky financial deals to provide services or seek private management.

Political economist T.J. Sinclair, among a number of other scholars, argues that rating agencies have come to significantly discipline the thinking and action of municipal leaders. In Sinclair's words they have "epistemic authority."<sup>28</sup> What this means is that the creation of ratings depends on value-laden algorithms to assess and minimize investor risk, which has a disciplinary effect on sovereign governments and other borrowers. Detroit's credit rating debacle in the 1990s is a studied case in how such power works. By the 1980s, Coleman Young had fostered a business friendly environment in Detroit and earned the city a much-celebrated Baa credit rating. In 1992, Moody's downgraded Detroit's debt from investment grade to speculative

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<sup>26</sup> Timothy Sinclair. *The New Masters of Capital: American Bond Rating Agencies and the Politics of Creditworthiness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Hackworth, "Local Autonomy, Bond-Rating Agencies, and Neoliberal Urbanism in the United States."

<sup>28</sup> Sinclair, Timothy J. "Passing Judgment : Credit Rating Processes as Regulatory Mechanisms of Governance in the Emerging World Order." *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 133–59; Sinclair, *The New Masters of Capital*.

grade (Ba1), a change that would significantly raise interest rates on borrowing. At the time, mayor Coleman Young's finance director expressed frustration with the downgrade, arguing that it was unfair given the city had been working to respond to Moody's concerns over the previous two years, exacting "fiscal surgery" on Detroit; they were committed to keeping "a scalpel in hand," the financial director said.<sup>29</sup> Two years later, when Denis Archer won the election for mayor against Young (see chapter 2), he immediately went to meet with Standard and Poor's. According to Joe O'Keefe, a managing director at Standard and Poor's, "[Archer] wanted to understand our concerns and he wanted to incorporate them into his strategic plan ... He was very open to our comments, and he was very concerned about what our feelings were."<sup>30</sup>

For many, particularly the political and corporate leaders in the suburbs, the election of Archer signaled a new day dawning in Detroit. Archer framed his deracialized campaign as a departure from Young, who supporters saw as a "fiercely independent politician who would guard against the 'hostile' forces in the predominantly white suburbs."<sup>31</sup> Deploying the discourse of multiculturalism and regional cooperation, Archer, who won by a narrow margin, promised to "transcend old racial divides, work with a Republican governor, and spur new business investment."<sup>32</sup> Marking the bolstered corporate confidence in the city, credit ratings rose from junk to solid investment-grade levels during Archer's administration.<sup>33</sup> Between 1996 and 1998,

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<sup>29</sup> Sinclair, *The New Masters of Capital*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson and Henderson, n.d. quoted in Joe Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas. *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1987), 121.

<sup>32</sup> Todd Shaw, *Now Is the Time: Detroit Black Politics and Grassroots Activism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, 166.

<sup>33</sup> Sinclair, *The New Masters of Capital*, 106.



Moody's, Standard and Poor's, and Fitch upgraded Detroit's credit rating five times.<sup>34</sup>

To be clear, governmental restructuring does not always guarantee increased ratings. For example, when Coleman Young's finance director expressed frustration with the downgrade and protested that they'd done "fiscal surgery," officials at Standard and Poor's acknowledged the positive changes they'd made, but cited the city's declining population and demographic characteristics of the existing inhabitant as a reason for the downgrade with clear racial overtones. The former president of Standard and Poor's, Brenton Harries, denied accusations of racism in the ratings but said, the "particular mix of population" in Detroit "requires more welfare payments, more housing. They're more of a drain as opposed to being more of a contributor."<sup>35</sup> Another credit rating analyst cited quality of life factors such as education, homelessness, crime, and health care as being difficult to measure but having long-term effects of Detroit's ability to meet their obligations.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, even though city officials cannot always steer the judgments of credit rating agencies, ratings continue to be a major factor in urban political decision-making because they matter immensely for the kinds of credit and interest rates to which cities have access and which they depend upon for everyday operations. On March 15, 2013, the day after Governor Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Detroit's emergency manager, Standard and Poor's upgraded Detroit's credit-rating outlook from negative to stable. "We view the appointment of an emergency manager as a positive step toward regaining structural balance and improving the city's overall financial condition," said Standard & Poor's credit analyst Jane Hudson Riley. At the same time,

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<sup>34</sup> Shaw, *Now Is the Time*, 170.

<sup>35</sup> Sinclair, *The New Masters of Capital*, 106.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Moody's threatened if Detroit considered bankruptcy, the rating agency would downgrade its bond ratings further into junk territory.<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing, Detroit has emerged from bankruptcy and emergency management. Detroit's approved plan of adjustment only further underscores the importance of ratings and foreshadows the lean Detroit that is in the making. A state financial oversight commission will oversee Detroit's finances for at least thirteen years or until a number of conditions are met, including obtaining an A-minus bond rating from a national creditor, which the city has not had since 1960.

Bond-rating agencies do not disclose the exact process through which they arrive at their ratings. However, we do know the general method of ratings include a basic quantitative analysis followed by much qualitative interpretation. Agencies require municipalities (and other bond issuers) to provide them with information about operating positions, accounting practices, public policy choices, business outlooks, and strategic plans. The agency also does their own research on the issuer's competitive position, quality of management, long-term industry prospects, and economic environment. In addition to this data, agencies evaluate so-called urban quality of life factors, as indicated by the Standard and Poor's official's comments, such as crime, homelessness, future population base, et cetera in order to create ratings. Often presented as value-free, ratings, as T.J. Sinclair argues, are judgments and they are embedded with an assumption that repaying a debt is morally right and obligatory. Along with other pressures, the ratings become tools for reverse engineering cities, disciplining municipal governments that are reliant on bonds for operating costs—like Detroit—into attacking budget deficits, cutting wages and employee benefits, and channeling large portions of their budgets to repay bonds.

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<sup>37</sup> Chris Christoff, "Detroit Outlook Raised to Stable After Emergency Manager Named." *Bloomberg*, 2013. <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-03-15/detroit-outlook-raised-to-stable-after-emergency-manager-named.html>.

While recognizing that the dominance of credit rating agency does not so much represent a shift from public to privatized governance, because rating agencies have always been private, what their rising power does illuminate is the process by which private authority is established inside the state. As political scientist Eleni Tsingou argues, “Going beyond sterile distinctions of public and private enhances our understanding of global financial governance and reveals that public and private are working together to get markets to operate in a certain manner.”<sup>38</sup> This hybrid form of authority is evident in the way bond-rating agencies limit local autonomy and exert pressure on cities to become entrepreneurial.<sup>39</sup> Entrepreneurial governance turns on the withdrawal of key social provisions of the Keynesian state and creation of conditions for privatization, including physical policing.

### **Securing entrepreneurial cities**

A defining feature of the entrepreneurial city is that advocates pursue development through the defense of real estate values (i.e., through policies that encourage gentrification) and, significantly, increase the presence of public and private security forces to protect new investments.<sup>40</sup> Geographer Katharyne Mitchell and sociologist Katherine Beckett argue that, bolstered by discourses of risk and security, bond rating agencies have come to exert significant power over urban space and society. Tracing the close relationship between bond-rating agencies and more aggressive urban policing back to the restructuring of New York City during its 1970s fiscal crisis, they write, “[T]he work of bond-rating agencies often reinforces the perceived need to hire some of America’s ‘top cops’ to help local authorities impose order and discipline on

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<sup>38</sup> Eleni Tsingou, 2004, p. 13, quoted in Johnson, James. “Lost in Translation: Rethinking the Politics of Sovereign Credit Rating.” University of Canterbury, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Jason Hackworth, *The Neoliberal City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> David Harvey, *New Imperialism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

urban residents; the financial security of a city is dependent on its physical security.”<sup>41</sup>

New York City’s fiscal crisis is instructive for understanding Detroit’s bankruptcy. As New York City’s debt rose, the city issued more and more short-term bonds to cover long-term debt giving the financial community power of the city’s resources and fiscal allocations. In January 1975, the Financial Community Liaison Group formed and made a number of recommendations for restructuring government including the mass firing of workers and the appointment of a financial manager to oversee the city. The pivotal moment in the city’s crisis came when bond-rating agencies downgraded New York City’s credit rating to speculative grade status, making municipal bonds unmarketable and bankrupting the city. Like in Detroit, outside agencies were brought in and given “carte blanche” to restructure city finances leading to the loss of autonomy for the city. After the bankruptcy declaration, the business community started reporting positive outlooks as New York City’s municipal labor force decreased by 15 percent or 47,412 employees. By the 1980s, gentrification had become widespread and the Giuliani administration aimed to bolster redevelopment further through aggressive law enforcement.<sup>42</sup>

Four decades later, these same processes are underway in Detroit.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, New York City’s governmental restructuring is widely understood to be a template for Detroit.<sup>44</sup> Yet it is

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<sup>41</sup> Katharyne Mitchell and Katherine Beckett. “Securing the Global City: Crime, Consulting, Risk, and Ratings in the Production of Urban Space.” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 15, no. 1 (January 2008): 75–99.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> In Detroit, municipal layoffs percentage wise pre-bankruptcy have been even more dramatic than New York City post-bankruptcy. Between 2000 and 2013, the municipal labor force was cut by over half, from 20,642 to 9,560. During the Bing Administration alone (2009-2013), over 3,500 employees were laid off.

<sup>44</sup> NYC fiscal crisis is instructive for understanding Detroit’s bankruptcy. As NYC’s debt rose, the city issued more and more short-term bonds to cover long-term debt giving the financial community power of the city’s resources and fiscal allocations. In January 1975, the Financial Community Liaison Group formed and made a number of recommendations for restructuring government including the mass firing of workers and the appointment of a financial manager to oversee it the city. The pivotal moment in the city’s crisis was when bond-rating agencies downgraded NYC’s credit rating to speculative grade status, making municipal bonds unmarketable and bankrupting the city. Like in Detroit, outside agencies were brought in and given “carte blanche” to restructure city finances leading to the loss of autonomy for the city. Mitchell and Beckett. “Securing the Global City.”

more than a model as experts involved in orchestrating New York City's restructuring more than 30 years ago have been consulting with officials in Detroit. For example, New York Lieutenant Governor Richard Ravitch, who was the architect of the state oversight of New York City during the 1975 fiscal crisis, was an unpaid consultant to Detroit's bankruptcy judge. Moreover, the masterminds of what's known as "NY-style policing" have lent their expertise in Detroit to develop a new regime of public and private security as part of the city's restructuring. The day after Governor Snyder appointed Kevyn Orr as Detroit's emergency manager on March 14, 2013, a new security coalition called Detroit One, made up of a number of federal, state, and community law agencies, began a new regime of policing across the city. Over the next six days, Detroit One made 245 arrests (including 94 felony charges), confiscated 41 firearms, and conducted 105 raids of suspected drug homes. More surprisingly, perhaps, they also issued a staggering 4,586 traffic violations and towed almost 500 vehicles.<sup>45</sup>

The crackdown on minor infractions, much to the frustration of residents, aligned with the "broken windows" policing that was coincidentally being rolled out across Detroit. In 2012, the Manhattan Institute – a conservative think tank that advocates for the privatization of public infrastructure, school vouchers, and cuts in social welfare programs -- partnered with the Detroit Police Department to pilot a "broken windows" program in two neighborhoods. The "broken windows" program and "zero tolerance" policing -- first pioneered under the Giuliani Administration in New York City in the 1990s and the NYPD Commissioner at that time, Bill Braxton – are based on the argument that if officers patrol by foot and crack down on smaller nuisances, for example, broken windows, crime will be reduced; crime, according to the policy's theorists, is more likely to happen in blighted neighborhoods. In New York, the policy has come

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<sup>45</sup> "Detroit One, Public Safety Initiative Announced by Mayor David Bing, Includes State Police Patrols." *Huffington Post*, March 21, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/detroit-one-public-safety-patrols\\_n\\_2923998.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/21/detroit-one-public-safety-patrols_n_2923998.html) (accessed November 10, 2014).

under much critique for enforcing vagrancy laws, criminalizing the homeless, and increasing incarceration rates among Black, Latina/o, and poor populations.

The rhetoric and practice of zero-tolerance policing has spread globally – from New York City to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Both Giuliani and Braxton run global risk management companies that consult with municipalities on policing and security to promote the “NY model.”<sup>46</sup> It has also been, as Mitchell and Beckett argue, “vigorously promoted ...by U.S.-based bond-rating agencies.”<sup>47</sup> In 2013, Bill Braxton began consulting with the Detroit Police Department on policing strategies.<sup>48</sup>

In tandem with these efforts, Detroit has also embraced corporate-sponsored security initiatives. A week after the Detroit One raids described above, the mayor announced that a coalition of private donors, including Quicken Loan Inc., Detroit’s three automakers (Ford, GM and Chrysler), Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan, among others, were banding together to buy and lease new police cruisers and EMS vehicles for the city.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, Dan Gilbert, a downtown real estate titan, began operating a computerized surveillance control room where employees monitored over 2 million square feet of real estate he owned in downtown through more than 300 cameras. He also had a team of private security guards patrolling Detroit’s

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<sup>46</sup> See e.g., Mitchell and Beckett, “Securing the Global City.” They write, “The Institute's ideas were, it purports, tested and proven successful under the leadership of Rudolph (Rudy) W. Giuliani in New York City. Indeed, the New York model revealed the importance of bond-rating institutions and laid the foundation for a portion of the transnational security consulting sector” (80). “Within the United States, the gospel has been spread primarily by former NYPD Commissioner William Bratton (now Chief of Police in Los Angeles), Mayor Giuliani, the Manhattan Institute, and the mass media, which routinely attributes the crime drop in New York to changes in NYPD practices. Many European political leaders, as well as officials from Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, have visited NYPD headquarters and incorporated much of the rhetoric, if not the practice, of zero tolerance in their home countries” (95).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>48</sup> See Corey Williams, “Detroit Trying ‘Broken Windows,’” *Detroit Free Press*, February 13, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Serena Maria Daniels et al., “Donors to Fund Purchase of Detroit EMS Units, Police Cruisers,” *The Detroit News*, March 23, 2013.

downtown streets on bikes and in cars “to spot potential trouble and deter thieves, drug dealers, muggers and even aggressive panhandlers.”<sup>50</sup>

Detroit’s new public-private policing regime demonstrates that austerity does not simply work through the rollback of public utilities and services, but a spatially targeted intensification of the security state. To be sure, crime is a problem in Detroit and people want their communities to be safe. Yet the new strategies of policing do not secure the city for everybody equally. Even as average citizens in many parts of the city routinely report waiting hours for the police to arrive after calling them, in the greater downtown development district, Wayne State University private security forces boast a 90-second response time. Hence, as part of a broader strategy of public/private redevelopment, governmental techniques are being deployed to distinguish between lives that bring monetary value to the city (entrepreneurial bodies) and criminalizing and/or removing those that don’t (surplus populations) as a necessary condition for attracting global capital. In other words, Detroit (or a part of it) is being secured for those who have already been successful in accumulating wealth.

### **Landscapes of debt**

In 1978 sociologist Lynda Ann Ewen predicted that two Detroits would emerge: “That which had been saved. That which has been let go.”<sup>51</sup> Her prediction is being borne out today. The parts of the city being “saved” include the revitalized downtown and a contiguous area to the north recently rebranded as “Midtown” by developers (residents who prefer the historic designation of Cass Corridor have contested the name change). Together, the downtown-to-

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Heather Ann Thompson, “Rescuing America’s Inner Cities? Detroit and the Perils of Private Policing.” *Huffington Post*, June 25, 2014. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/heather-ann-thompson/rescuing-americas-inner-c\\_b\\_5526012.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/heather-ann-thompson/rescuing-americas-inner-c_b_5526012.html)

<sup>51</sup> Ewen, Lynda Ann, *Corporate Power and Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

Midtown “Woodward Corridor,” named for the road that links them, is the epicenter of private redevelopment, philanthropic investment, and gentrification.

The area, easily accessible by highway, fans out from the Detroit River, a busy navigable waterway that links Lake Erie and Lake Saint Claire and separates Detroit from neighboring Windsor, Canada. The riverfront has recently been revamped as part of a multimillion-dollar foundation-funded project and is equipped with bike lanes and connections to other greenways, reflecting a renewed interest of capital in the city.

The tallest building on the riverfront is the Renaissance Center, a complex of seven reflective, cylindrical glass towers that loom over downtown. Constructed in the aftermath of the 1967 race riots, and during the reign of Coleman Young, the city’s first African-American mayor, the building was intended to signal Detroit’s rebirth and send a message that the city was safe for capital reinvestment, or at least parts of the city. In the eighties and nineties, other large-scale redevelopment projects filled out the downtown landscapes, among them a convention center (Cobo Hall), sports stadiums (Joe Louis Arena for hockey, Ford Field for football, Comerica Park for baseball), and three casinos. In 1996, GM decided to move its world headquarters into the Renaissance Center and other businesses have followed them downtown. Two of the largest – Compuware, a technology performance company, and Quicken Loan, the country’s largest Internet loan company – have formed what might be described as twenty-first century company towns in the city’s center. They have their own private security forces with cameras spread throughout large swaths of downtown. Their buildings are designed to accommodate anything one might need to live – gyms, childcare, health clinics, food service, and private shuttle services to employee cars. Job prospects, refurbished lofts, upscale restaurants, bars, and new stores are now successfully coaxing the managerial class back into Detroit,



reflecting the profound reorganization of the economy in the last 50 years with Fordist middle-class jobs increasingly replaced by service, financial, and tech industry firms.

In 2012, downtown still had many empty storefronts. In an effort to show their economic development potential, dozens were set up as virtual reality stores where window shoppers could use QR codes to shop from their smart phones for handbags, shoes, and clothing. Other strategies aimed to repopulate the Woodward Corridor with “uncommonly creative and entrepreneurial” people. Two programs, sponsored by corporations, medical and educational institutions, and foundations, offered financial incentives for their employees to relocate to downtown and Midtown (\$20,000 forgivable loans for home purchase and \$2,500 annual allowances for renters). Meanwhile, in the largest effort to attract upwardly mobile residents, Michigan State Governor Rick Snyder has petitioned the federal government to grant \$50,000 EB2 visas for entrepreneurial immigrants to move to Detroit.

Incentive programs have been so successful that the first wave migrants who precipitated the professional renaissance of greater downtown are now facing rising rents in the downtown-to-Midtown area and newcomers report trouble finding housing.<sup>52</sup> In these new reinvestment zones, landscapes are being constructed for the new and future arrivals – gourmet coffee shops, yoga studios, a Whole Foods, a light rail line – as long-time residents are facing foreclosures and evictions from private and public housing. In 2014, it seemed that every few months brought a new story of developers purchasing apartment buildings, remodeling them, charging higher rents, and displacing long-time residents.

While it’s often debated whether gentrification is happening in Detroit, if high rents are an

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<sup>52</sup> J.C. Reindl and John Gallagher, “Downtown Detroit Apartment Rents Spiking Higher, Even Pricing out Middle Class.” *Detroit Free Press* (January 26, 2014), <http://www.freep.com/article/20140126/BUSINESS04/301260081/Rents-rising-Detroit-downtown-Midtown-Corktown>.

indicator, it is. Detroit's median household income to annual median rent ratio is 3.08 versus 3.5 for New York City and 4.12 for San Francisco. The lower the number the more expensive it is for residents to rent.<sup>53</sup> As urban anthropologist Andrew Newman writes, "Indeed, for the residents of apartment buildings such as the Griswold in Downtown, Alden Towers on the East Side, and in Henry Street in the Cass Corridor neighborhood, many of whom have now been evicted by real estate developers, the gentrification of Detroit is both real and happening right now." The Detroit that has, in Lynda Ann Ewen's words, been "let go," is largely invisible from the Woodward Corridor, and is where the burdens of the city's debt are borne most heavily.

### **Detroiters respond to the "takeover"**

"It feels as though we're creating this permanent class of disenfranchised people who live on the outside of mainstream life and that mainstream is becoming ever and ever smaller," said Linda during our Uniting Detroiters meeting the morning after the Consent Agreement was signed. The median household income for Detroit residents fell 33 percent between 2000 and 2010 (compared to a state decrease of 22 percent and a national decrease of 9 percent).<sup>54</sup> The foreclosure crisis, combined with welfare cuts and job losses, deepened the poverty of the city's already vulnerable residents. In 2012, Data Driven Detroit, a data collection and analysis organization, found that over 49 percent of African-American children and 39 percent of Hispanic/Latino children in Detroit were in poverty, compared to 16 percent of white children.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Median rent figures are based on 2013 American Fact Finder data. Median household incomes are based on American Community Survey data. I list figures for each city, monthly rent followed by yearly incomes: Detroit - \$727/\$26,955; New York City - \$1228/\$51,865; San Francisco - \$1,491/\$73,802. Income to rent ratio is calculated based on annual median household income divided by annual media rent. Thanks to Andrew Newman for drawing my attention to these figures.

<sup>54</sup> U.S. Census data.

<sup>55</sup> Data Driven Detroit Report, "State of the Detroit Child 2012," <http://datadrivendetroit.org/projects/2012-state-of-detroits-child/> (accessed November 10, 2014).

These disparities mirrored a national trend: a widening racial wealth gap since the 2007 recession struck. In 1983, white U.S. families were approximately five times wealthier than nonwhite families. By 2010, they were six times wealthier.<sup>56</sup>

The expansion of the wealth gap and number those of living outside of the mainstream were, of course, not incidental to or simply a byproduct of decades of neoliberal restructuring, but foundational to it. By the early 1970s, as legal scholar Tayyab Mahmud argues, the wealthy were experiencing falling rates of profit with costs associated with increasing demands for economic and racial justice, imperial wars, escalating balance of payment deficits, a bond market crisis, and predictions of a dollar crisis. Depressing wages and raising unemployment was the neoliberal strategy to shore up falling rates of profits. In other words, as Mahmud explains, “the radical use of monetary policy to attack wages and smash the power of organized labor inaugurated the neoliberal era.”<sup>57</sup> Aggregate demand (i.e., the demands of goods and services) was stimulated through individual debt, which came to drive the economy rather than the Keynesian principle of full employment. While many workers through 401 (k) provisions came to have stakes in the market because of the privatization of pension funds, an increasing number of people also came to rely on debt to meet basic needs. The ascendance of finance capital arguably reached its apex with the subprime mortgage sector where a policy of engulfment/subordination reigned rather than exclusion.<sup>58</sup>

As discussed in the introduction, the Uniting Detroiters project emerged as a collective study in how to build an infrastructure to support twenty-first-century organizing that could more

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<sup>56</sup> Signe-Mary McKernan, Caroline Ratcliffe, Eugene Steuerle, and Sisi Zhang. *Less Than Equal: Racial Disparities in Wealth Accumulation*, 2013. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412802-Less-Than-Equal-Racial-Disparities-in-Wealth-Accumulation.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> Mahmud, “Debt and Discipline,” 22.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

adequately respond to the uneven development in the city. We conducted interviews as the emergency management and bankruptcy proceedings took place. The responses of the people we interviewed elucidate in more detail some of the competing ways of conceptualizing and responding to debt with which I started this chapter. Many interviewees opposed structural adjustment reforms to resolve fiscal debt by invoking historical debts, specifically the obligations of the Black power and civil rights struggles of the 1960s. In so doing, their moral framings of the relationship between citizenship and debt diverged from ascendant notions of entrepreneurial citizenship.

Not surprisingly, opposition to what many community activists and residents were calling a state “takeover” was widespread across the grassroots neighborhood groups whose members we interviewed. For example, many had participated in the statewide petition drive to revoke emergency manager legislation. Through *Uniting Detroiters* interviews and workshops, we also learned something more surprising: many of our interlocutors said that they did not expect the “takeover” and anticipated structural adjustments to have a major impact on their everyday life. This sentiment did not signal ignorance about the legislation, but the desperate conditions under which people were already living. Many talked about the lack of public services in the city’s neighborhoods. “So many people are forced off the grid,” as one woman put it. Another man explained, “We don’t get much in terms of the city. Right now, we get trash collection, we get police and fire, and sometimes we get our calls answered.” Likewise another person said, “The only time they [the police] will come here is when it reaches the point of murder and mayhem.”

School closings were a persistent concern expressed by residents in interviews when we asked about the Consent Agreement, which was unsurprising given that it was through schools that most *Detroiters* had had their most direct experience with emergency management. Since

2009, Detroit Public Schools had been under emergency management. Between 2009 and 2014, over 100 schools had closed, 15 had been placed under a controversial state-designated Educational Achievement Authority, and 3 were under the control of a private for-profit charter operator. For students, the emergency management of the Detroit Public School System was a disaster. Educational researcher Tom Perdoni reports that since 2009, student test ratings have dropped, enrollment has declined, class sizes have expanded, and designated classroom funds are being diverted at an unnecessary rate to pay debt obligations. In our Uniting Detroiter interviews, residents often described how young people who were able to walk to school before the crisis now had to attend school in other neighborhoods. As one former gang leader turned community activist put it, the risk needs to be understood in terms of life and death. “The neighborhoods from here to there are at war with each other. Two to three generations deep. And now you expecting this kid to go over there to this community that he has no relationship with. These are the problems we have to be dealing with. Is that the best practice? On the ground, you’re making it harder. You’re intensifying the situation.” One parent, whose children’s school was taken over by the state, expressed concern about the quality of education they’d be receiving. She said, “There was no discussion with the parents and I go to meetings... It’s just scary that one day you can come in and it’s a Detroit Public School and the next day the whole staff has pink slips, so it’s a totally different school.”

It was common in our interviews when we asked questions about the Consent Agreement and emergency management for residents to talk about regional racial antagonism in terms of a sort of historical debt that the suburbs owed Detroit. Comments fell into three main areas. First, people saw school and other neighborhood infrastructural losses not simply as a result of relatively recent emergency management but as symptomatic of decades of divestment from the

city. Between the late 1940s and early 1980s, Detroit's share of regional manufacturing employment declined from 60.3 percent to 25 percent. Similar drops occurred in other industrial sectors: retail trade decreased from 72.6 percent to 15.4 percent; services went from 75.3 percent (in 1958) to 23.6 percent; and wholesale trade fell from 90.1 percent to 29.6 percent.<sup>59</sup> These regional imbalances persist. Some residents attribute the persistence of these regional imbalances to a coordinated effort on the part of suburban leaders to punish Detroit. As one woman interviewed by Uniting Detroiters put it: "The city had sanctions placed on them by the surrounding communities. Oakland County, Macomb County, L. Brooks Patterson was one of the leaders of those sanctions. For almost the entire time Coleman Young was mayor [20 years], no investments were made in the city." While Young did succeed in luring business to Detroit and, as mentioned, achieving an investment grade credit rating, this interviewee's claim pointed to the racial animosity that many people associated with the state takeover of Detroit. Her mention of L. Brooks Patterson, the county executive of Oakland County, which borders Detroit, pointed to how one suburban leader has become well known for publically feeding such feelings of acrimony by making racist and appalling slurs about Detroit and celebrating the city's demise. In a 2014 *New Yorker* profile he declared, "I made a prediction a long time ago, and it's come to pass. I said, 'What we're going to do is turn Detroit into an Indian reservation, where we herd all the Indians into the city, build a fence around it, and then throw in the blankets and corn.'"<sup>60</sup> While Patterson is a controversial character and his call for the spatial sequestration of Detroit is extreme, it underlines how the state takeover is interpreted through the region's charged racial dynamics.

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<sup>59</sup> Darden et al., *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*.

<sup>60</sup> Paige Williams, "Drop Dead, Detroit!" *The New Yorker*, (January 27, 2014).

Second, it was also common for the community activists and residents we interviewed to argue that the moral discourse around the city's fiscal crisis criminalized Detroit as a Black city. The "race-laden narratives," as one person put it, that surrounded the state's takeover of Detroit say, "Detroit has gone to hell because it elected a Black mayor. It's a majority Black city. It's therefore incompetent, incapable, and corrupt." Likewise others explained that proponents justified the takeover by claiming that "the people are at fault." One person said this argument was undergirded by a kind of racism in this country that sees Blacks as always already indebted for being "given freedom."

Third, residents frequently pointed out that state "takeover" was a continuation of unresolved racial antagonisms between Blacks and whites that erupted during the postwar struggle for Detroit and saw the takeover as an attempt to loot the collective legacy of the city. One woman stated this dynamic in no uncertain terms: "There is an element who wants to take the city back because they believe they own it." Such claims were often followed by a re-narration of the city's history of abandonment and calls for an inversion of the debt relationship: others had a debt to Detroit, not the other way around. "We are entitled to this," as one person put it. "We have paid a lot of dues here. We've lived through incredible, incredible humiliation and degradation."

These three ways of interpreting the city's fiscal crisis vis-à-vis racial struggle linked to a broader inversion of the debt relationship. For many, the Consent Agreement raised a complicated and urgent set of questions about who is indebted to whom in the United States where debt, race, and citizenship have since colonialism been linked in damning ways. One interviewee expressed this concern as follows: "I feel like the auto industry got bailed out, the banks got bailed out, Wall Street ... multi-millionaire derivative traders got bailed out. You can

bailout a municipal authority ... I think it comes from a profound sense of -- really hatred. I think people in this state hate Detroit. It is beyond even racism ... There is this emotional tone of hate that's exhibited in the legislator. Even reading the comments of the news ... It's painful. It is painful how Detroit is derided and abused."

Debt as historical struggle was called up in other ways. For example, some interviewees connected this racialized discourse of blame to juridical loss under the Consent Agreement and suggested that a debt was owed to those of previous generations who struggled for freedom and voting rights. Some expressed outrage that the emergency manager legislation effectively nullified the voting rights of African-American citizens and unabashedly stripped away any pretense that the government had even a minimal obligation to poor residents. Many of the Black Detroiters we interviewed, particularly those who came of age during segregation and fought for civil rights, stressed the importance of voting especially at a time when community programs from food stamps to medical were being cut. One woman said the takeover made her think about civil rights organizing and the Montgomery bus boycott, which required people to make a sacrifice in terms of participating. "It was the economic impact that motivated the bus company to respond." She argued as a matter of tactics, people today needed to "wake up in terms of their consumer power, in terms of how they participate in their own oppression, how the elected official represents or doesn't represent their interest, how when they spend money whether or not those profits return to their community in any way."

Likewise others drew similar but less overt historical connections. Through remembering the past they reframed debt as an ethical entanglement with their ancestors and as an expression of gratitude. For example, Linda Campbell, my collaborator on the *Uniting Detroiters* project, made sense of the work she does today by talking about growing up during segregation and



being part of the freedom struggle. “I come out of a tradition of leadership and obligation,” she said. “I would say that in addition my mother and father, particular my father, who grew up in Mississippi and left Mississippi when he was a young man, and who raised his girls like boys and taught us to be tough women and to care deeply about our kids and to stand for something and not be afraid to stand for something. My teachers, those men and women, Black men and women – it’s a very emotional thing for me because many of them are gone. They made their transition, including my dad, and I often wonder if they were living what must they think of us. I’m always guided by all the promise that they held for us and the huge, huge sacrifices that they made so that we could live a better life, not just for ourselves, but for our community and so I’m inspired by my debt to those folks.”

The city’s debt crisis also became a way talk about a “deep lack of accountability” within existing government structures. The takeover had simply taken it to an “even worse, unimaginable place.” Many residents pointed out how political candidates routinely overlooked their neighborhoods because of the perception that Blacks, particularly poor Blacks, do not vote. As one man put it, “I mean how many of these folks get on the bus and ride for 45 minutes to get to the Northeast side to experience what folks are in those neighborhoods. How many of those folks are experiencing what it’s like to call the police and not have them show up for hours? How many folks are experiencing what it’s like to live in the last house standing on a block and not be able to get any of the houses around demolished because they’re unsafe and being squatted in? To me that is the Detroit that’s losing power that most people aren’t even in a lot of ways aware even exists. There’s becoming a narrative of a new Detroit but it doesn’t include the majority of Detroit and if anything, I would say, that it doesn’t include folks that are originally Detroiters.”

Because accountability had been a longstanding concern, some interviewees felt a dual

“inside-outside strategy” was needed that worked through or against the state and also worked to develop alternatives. Yet others felt that trying to hold the government accountable was futile. They described how nonprofit organizations and foundations were running everything: “Philanthropists put their money into nonprofits and they’re the ones out there pretending to be government. It’s like a shadow government. It’s completely rogue structures running everything.” (See chapter 5 for a discussion of the amount of money being invested in Detroit by foundations and NGOs. The “Grand Bargain” that was struck as part of the bankruptcy proceedings exemplifies the power wielded by foundations in Detroit. The Grand Bargain refers to a deal in which foundations and private donors pledged \$466 million in donations toward unfunded pensions in exchange for the protection of the Detroit Institute of Art’s collection not being sold to satisfy creditors.) Another person echoed the concern about foundations by saying, “it’s just this shadow ... how do we resist that soft force?” And according to another interviewee feelings that the government could not be held accountable has led to “more of a focus on being able to create community-led viable alternatives.” In this strategy, the aim was to “hold those institutions accountable, but ultimately to hold them accountable to make them obsolete via being able to create a parallel power structure that is led by the community, that’s truly accountable and trust worthy.”

Regardless of different strategies, for many, developing an adequate response required attending to the pathological effects of debt and racialized geographies on people’s humanity, and not just those most marginalized by them. It involved confronting how the loss of community infrastructure in neighborhoods (e.g., schools, recreation centers, churches) was coterminous with a loss of social relationships. A lifetime Detroiter and anti-racism activist talked about this loss. She said, “People are feeling more and more oppressed because there has

been a significant loss of relationship ... our humanity has been damaged. It's damaged from racism. It's damaged from our spirituality ... I think that's going to have to be part of the vision is what we can do to heal and repair our human relations. Out of those relationships is going to come the healing that will restore a community of people and the things that we need to sustain us are not going to be the same." Likewise another community activist described this loss: "People are exhausted and I do think there is a level of despair that people have been driven to ... it's not just fear. It's despair. Hope is really crucial to be able to imagine something different."

In this vein, other talked about the city's fiscal crisis in terms of learning about the modes of survival of those most economically indebted. Some African Americans talked about both despair and hope by drawing a connection between the plantation and a racialized economic order that continues to marginalize the Black community.<sup>61</sup> Their point was often to lift up what one community organizer called a "profound resiliency" operating in Detroit that came from resistance. She said: "In the face of this racialized region, it is like we are still here. And some of us are even thriving, but I think the majority of us are in survival mode. ... it builds a sense of anxiety, high blood pressure, frustration, and still we move through." Another person talked about mutuality this way: "what always inspired me was how people through these struggle share and work together to kind of meet the needs of the whole. So there are these mothers with multiple children, single mothers largely, that have really, really limited resources that just share money, share resources, share food and just make sure each other doesn't go under." These ways of responding to questions about Detroit's debt crisis and the state takeover called up a different

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<sup>61</sup> Geographer Katherine McKittrick draws similar connections to the relationship between the plantation and the contemporary city. Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 17, no. 342 (November 20, 2013): 1–15.

ways of being indebted – debt as a sort of mutual aid that offered another way of being human.

### **Conclusion: Debt as transvaluation**

The debate and indignation that surrounded the signing of the Consent Agreement in 2012 suggested that indebtedness is multiple. On the one hand, it invoked sums of money like the \$12 billion of debt negotiated in Detroit’s bankruptcy. On the other hand, the public frustration around the city’s fiscal debt underlined an ongoing debt to the African-American freedom struggle. This unpayable debt could only be honored through continuing to struggle for deferred dreams of a different future. Conversation about struggle often turned to discussions about a needed transformation of humanity and relationships of care, echoing the way historian Mary Poovey conceptualizes debt in terms of transvaluation, meaning to value something in terms of new standards. She posits that a transvaluation from the new debt economy is on the horizon yet still unclear.

In interviews, Detroit residents’ discourses of debt pointed to a possible future transvaluation. One interviewee captured it when she talked about the violence with which the current debt society treats poor people. The idea that “they have to earn water and food, that they don’t deserve it, that they’re lazy,” she said, is so “inhuman and it’s become so mainstream.” Echoing others, she asked, “Where’s our brotherly love? Where’s our compassion? Where’s our humanity?” These questions, she suggested, might help shift government from a system that exercises “power over the people” to one that cultivates “power for the people.” Asking and answering these questions were for her, and others we interviewed, about a different morality of debt that was entangled with but distant from the accounting taking place in boardrooms. It was debt delinked from credit, debt reconceived of as an ethical relationship of responsibility, debt as an antidote to a politics of abandonment rather than its cause.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DETROIT FUTURES AND EMBEDDED VALUES: OR, WHY ALL URBAN GREEN SPACES ARE NOT ALIKE

What we're trying to figure out is how to drive up the market demand for land in the city ... Detroit can lead the way to responding to the "urban condition." The question is how can we take the land and really make it work for us?

-- Dan Kinkead, Director of Projects, Detroit Future City Implementation Office, author interview

### Introduction

In 2013, the Detroit Works Project (DWP), a foundation-funded consortium of public and private actors, released the Detroit Future City (DFC) strategic framework. Arguably the most radical reimagining of a modern city to date, the 50-year citywide plan proposed a territorial reordering of Detroit. The plan aimed to solve the city's spatial mismatch, namely, in the words of the plan's authors, the problem of land being Detroit's "greatest asset" and "greatest liability."<sup>1</sup> According to the plan, Detroit's highest vacancy neighborhoods would be repurposed with landscape features we more often associate with the countryside than the city, for example, forests, ponds, and farms. Over time, traditional public services (water, street lights, garbage pickup) and the grey infrastructures that deliver them will be reduced and then eventually withdrawn from these zones. As a result, the plan had significant implications for the quality of life of residents, particularly the poorest.

The DFC proposed an urban form that was inextricable from the political-economic restructuring of Detroit. It reflected and complemented the severe austerity measures, land and

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<sup>1</sup> Detroit Future City, Detroit Strategic Framework Plan, 2012, 95.

infrastructure privatization, and public service outsourcing discussed in chapter 4. Upon its release, the DFC was widely heralded in academic and professional urban planning communities as an exciting and sustainable approach to rethinking urban form in shrinking cities.<sup>2</sup> According to the plan, in the “future city” residents would be connected to jobs and services in a “canvas of green” that included “stately boulevards, open green space, urban woodlands, ponds and streams, and new uses of natural landscape to clean the air, restore ecological habitats, and produce locally sourced food”<sup>3</sup>

The plan’s laudable and appealing ecological vision elided the significant redistributive politics associated with the attendant retraction of public works and service delivery. Over 100,000 people lived in neighborhoods slated for disconnection. Yet no money was set aside for the relocation of residents. Urban studies scholars have most often theorized displacement in terms of people being pushed out of places (e.g., from gentrification, urban renewal, disasters). The DFC represented a new type of displacement in which residents were not displaced but left behind as the services and infrastructures that served them was retracted.

In this chapter, I examine urban planning theory and practice in a city where private, corporate-funded foundations, philanthropists, and NGOs arguably exercise more power to reshape the urban landscape than the enfeebled, democratically elected city government. The first part of the chapter situates the DWP consortium and DFC’s responses to Detroit’s “land problem” within the broader context of urban planning theory. While Detroit’s problems are exceptional in scale, planners and policymakers have proposed solutions based on projects undertaken elsewhere and ideas circulating in national and international networks. Thus, experts

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<sup>2</sup> Justin Hollander, “A plan to shrink Detroit (well), Planetizen, (February 26, 2013), <http://www.planetizen.com/node/60940> (accessed November 11, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Detroit Future City, Detroit Strategic Framework Plan.

travel to and from Detroit to other cities trading development strategies and comparing urban conditions. The second part of the chapter examines how the proposals laid out in official documents have been enacted, received, and modified in practice. My analysis of this planning process in Detroit is based on extensive participant observation at DWP community meetings, interviews with urban planners, city officials, community activists, and neighborhoods residents. I also draw on resident responses from a series of meetings that we hosted through the Uniting Detroiters project in which we encouraged community dialogue about the planning process.

Although my focus is on planning theory and practice, the values that undergird Detroit's current foundation-funded and market-oriented planning process are most visible when contrasted with those of Detroit's established resident- and activist-driven urban agriculture movement (also see chapter 6). I argue that whereas official plans, particularly the proposal to construct green infrastructure in "distressed" neighborhoods, were organized around expert-driven analyses of social and economic indicators deemed desirable from the *developer's point of view* (i.e., emphasized on outside capital), many urban agriculture projects were organized around *activist values* (i.e., emphasized social justice). Ironically, community-level organizing established the conditions of possibility for the DWP's market-driven landscape as infrastructure approach, but ultimately the plan embraced only the urban agriculture aesthetic without the embedded values of community self-determination. Moreover, the DWP, with its rhetorical emphasis on managing urban "vacancy" rather than "rightsizing" Detroit and "greening" neighborhoods rather than disconnecting them, recalls what anthropologist James Ferguson calls an "anti-politics machine": part of a larger planning apparatus that attempts to reduce development to a technical problem amenable to technical solutions, thus depoliticizing the

operation of power through those solutions and their crucial side effects.<sup>4</sup> I argue that so long as maps and analyses that drive the planning process and, thus, the distribution of municipal resources, are constructed around a developer's vision of social and economic value, appeals to residents and activists to participate are hollow, existing to establish authority and legitimacy rather than meaningfully integrate community values. This reflects a shift in community economic development more generally as it has transitioned from its radical origins to a neoliberal vision in recent decades.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I examine the political and economic calculations of a consultant-driven Market Value Analysis that classified the city's neighborhoods to strategically locate redevelopment investment, leading to a map that has undergirded the city's territorial reordering. Second, I analyze how the DWP developed into a participatory planning process in response to citizen protest when the Bing Administration announced the DWP as a process of rightsizing. I situate this move in relationship to changes in the meaning of participation in urban planning practice. Third, I examine how the DFC turns on a strategy called "landscapes as infrastructure." The strategy coopts bottom-up efforts to repurpose the city's vacant lands by neutralizing the impetus and more radical orientation of many of them. I end by considering the meaning of refusal of those who decided not to participate in the planning process. That said, my analysis in this chapter is largely at the level of the planning process and rationalities upon which the DFC turns. In the next chapter, I turn to an examination of how the plan was enacted, contested, and reworked on the ground.

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<sup>4</sup> James Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development, Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Ferguson was talking about state power and that development is about economic growth through turning nature into civilization whereas I am talking about state weakness and foundation strength and green redevelopment as turning civilization back into nature.



## **The market value analysis**

The map that Detroit's planners and bureaucrats called the MVA (for "market value analysis") is central to creating a new, leaner Detroit. I first saw it in a meeting with Karla Henderson, then Detroit mayor David Bing's chief assistant. I had gone to interview her about the Detroit Works Project (DWP), the sweeping and controversial citywide planning process that was underway during my fieldwork. The project had gotten off to a rocky start with a public relations misstep, not unrelated to the map. In September 2010, Bing announced that the intention of the DWP was to "rightsize" Detroit by focusing city services and resources in seven to nine population zones so that the government could eventually shut off public services to a third of the city's footprint. No one would be forced to move, he said, attempting to disassociate the DWP from a long and violent history of urban renewal in Detroit, but the implication was clear. Those who remained in areas slated for underdevelopment would, as he said, "need to understand that they're not going to get the kind of services they require." These residents, he concluded, would be better off in parts of Detroit where they'd receive "water, sewer, lighting, public safety – all of that."<sup>5</sup>

By all accounts the first series of DWP public meetings, held several weeks later, were a disaster. According to Henderson, the aim of the meetings was to solicit ideas from residents about their visions for the city's future. During my fieldwork, when I asked people about the Detroit Works Project they invariably referred to the "great uproar" caused by Bing's rightsizing proclamation. Over one thousand residents packed the Greater Grace Temple for the first meeting. Henderson told me that she and an urban planner hired by the Kresge Foundation to head the project had planned, naively, in retrospect, to organize the crowd into five groups to

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<sup>5</sup> Bing quoted in Michelle Wilde Anderson, "The New Minimal Cities." *The Yale Law Journal* 123, no. 1118 (2014): 1166.

begin a visioning dialogue. Instead residents took over the meeting, expressing their frustration and confusion about why city officials weren't providing them more information. They demanded to see an official plan. When city officials failed to produce one (no plan existed according to Karla Henderson, despite Bing's media blunder), the crowd became incensed and accused them of hiding it. Whether or not a plan existed at that point, what was clear was that residents were outraged by the idea that the "plug would be pulled on certain neighborhoods." Displacement from urban renewal has a vexed history in Detroit "It may sound ideal on paper," as one resident told me, "but you're breaking up community...It's easy to say let's do it because it's better for the city, but when you uproot someone, I don't care if it's a shack, it's their shack ... you're upsetting their whole way of life." The church filled with chants: "We will not be moved." In an effort to calm the crowd, Bing took to the stage. "We are in a situation," he said, in a tone both pleading and commanding, "but it does not mean it cannot be fixed." He assured residents that Detroit would remain the same 139-square miles.

After the raucous meeting, a number of social justice groups including those focused on environmental justice, welfare rights, water access, and immigration reform, came together with the aim of developing a grassroots response to Bing's rightsizing proclamation. Bernadette Smith, an environmental justice activist with the Sierra Club, described their motivation in an interview: "Our biggest thing was that the community was not engaged. The community's not part of the process and to get community buy-in they got to be part of the process. You just cannot come in here and dictate to a community." Representatives from the groups coordinated a People's Movement Assembly (PMA) that drew approximately 250 participants who divided into seven vision and planning groups: health and healing justice, media justice, environment as a human right, food sovereignty, neighborhood stability, disinvestment from Detroit Works, and

education transformation. One of the outcomes of the PMA was a collective letter written to the mayor demanding that the Detroit Works Project include two grassroots seats on its Advisory Taskforce. The mayor granted one seat, which several PMA participants recalled as a partial success. Then the DWP got quiet and some even thought it was dissolving. “The PMA ended because we thought we won,” Anderson explained. “I was claiming victory, but then all of a sudden it came back like the night of the living dead. ... The city heard us. They did exactly what we said to do. ... [the PMA and people’s outrage] caused them to go around and start having these engagements.”

Karla Henderson’s description of the process revealed less a well thought out plan on the part of the administration than a series of haphazard decisions aimed at keeping the mayor in good standing, satisfying funders, and pacifying the public. According to her, after five explosive public meetings, DWP’s leaders realized they needed a better strategy for engaging the public and put the project on hold so they could regroup. Yet in December 2010, while the DWP was on pause, the mayor made a comment to a reporter that they’d have a neighborhood plan by the end of March. It was then, according to Henderson, that Bing decided to make a “course correction”: DWP 1.0 was replaced by DWP 2.0. The new project was still identified with DWP but the project had been split into short-term actions that would remain under the executive branch and a long-term planning process that would happen outside of the government and be funded by foundations. Short-term actions allowed the executive branch to fulfill the promise Bing had made to the media of a plan by March.

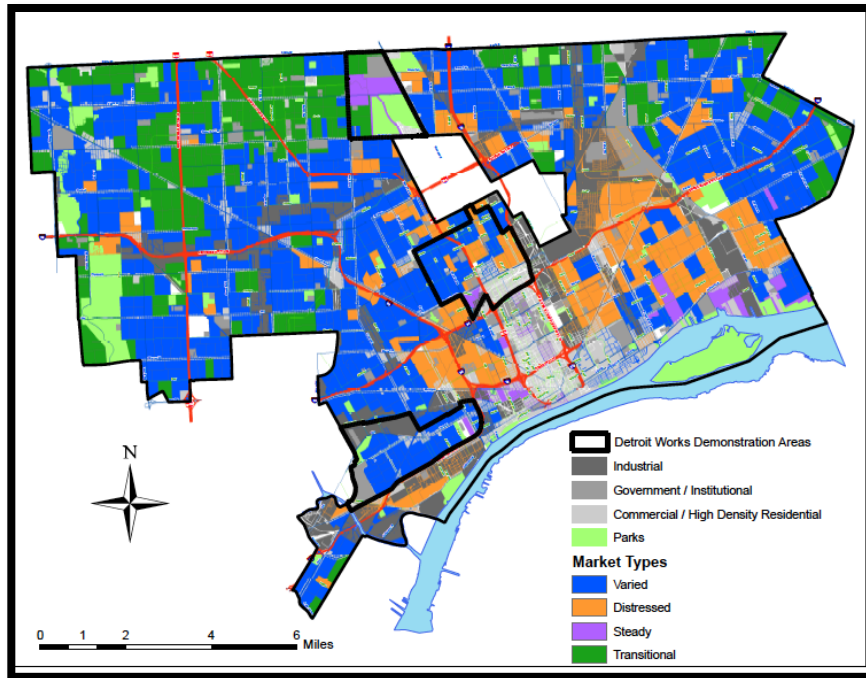
“That is the map,” she said, gesturing to the wall. “The map is the city’s development plan.” Her statement perplexed me. How could one map be the city’s development plan? At the time I met with Henderson, the long-term arm of the DWP was involved in an extensive

participatory engagement process to develop a citywide plan. Thus her statement raised a number of questions: How did the map figure into the long-term planning process? What did its existence mean for participation? What were its stakes for residents?

As critical geographers long have pointed out maps should be understood not only as representations of reality but propositions: arguments about the way the world works or should work. If maps, as the geographer Dennis Wood writes, “bring into being the territory *as we know it*,” then the MVA is critical for understanding what Detroit’s future might look like.<sup>6</sup> The map color-coded city blocks according to three market types. Henderson explained the colors: “Purple is steady. Distressed is orange, which represents 25 percent of the city’s landmass but only 10 percent of the population. Transitional neighborhoods, which are green, is where you drive through neighborhoods and say, ‘gosh, this is beautiful housing stock, but they are going for \$20,000 where before the foreclosure crisis they were going for \$80,000 to \$100,000.’ The blue area was a varied market type – “there was just so much going on ... we couldn’t put it in a category,” she said.

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<sup>6</sup> Denis Wood, *Rethinking the Power of Maps* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2010), 52.



**FIGURE 5.1** Detroit Works Project Market Value Analysis

The map known as the MVA was not just diagnostic. It was prescriptive: each color corresponded with a set of strategies for investment and disinvestment and for the allocation of municipal funds and services. As a purportedly neutral and apolitical analysis of risk, the map was eerily reminiscent of the risk assessment maps that led to redlining in 1930s to 1950s (see chapter 2). In the context of twenty-first-century austerity, color-coded zones shaped decisions about water provision, streetlights, transportation routes, and housing assistance. Purple areas defined as safe investment zones, were slated for redevelopment and infrastructural upgrades. Less than 50,000 people lived in those zones. In contrast, the orange areas defined as distressed, where over 100,000 people lived (one out of seven Detroiters), were slated for service delivery cutoffs and green redevelopment. The map re-spatialized the state’s role as a distributor of resources and the “public” in public services. The bottom line, Henderson said, was that no

federal, state, or local dollars would be invested in distressed neighborhoods. In other words, the map was the blueprint for a new economic geography for Detroit in which some areas would be set for life enhancement and others left to fend for themselves.

Over the next few months, as I interviewed city officials and planners, the map seemed ubiquitous. I'd see it prominently posted on office walls. People used it to show me how land-use and maintenance decisions were made – about where to repair and not repair senior housing, about where to cut and not cut grass, about where to promote and not promote greening projects. Due to its importance, it was both significant and revealing that few city residents even knew that the MVA existed. It was never shown in the long-term public engagement process. In fact, maps were rarely used at all in planning meetings, much to the chagrin of residents in attendance. So where did the map come from? Who made it? How? Why?

### **Making the map**

The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a community development organization based in Philadelphia, conducted the market value analysis (MVA) of Detroit and created the soon-to-be ubiquitous MVA map based on that analysis. Hired by the Bing administration with funding from the Ford Foundation, TRF is a self-described “socially responsible community investment group” that aims to make a difference for “low-wealth people and places” by delivering capital where it’s “needed the most.” According to Ira Goldstein, TRF’s Director of Policy Solutions who was the lead consultant for Detroit, the MVA was created to show governments and investors the best places to invest limited resources in order to transform depressed urban real estate markets into revitalized neighborhoods. The MVA, in TRF’s words, “creates an innovative

data-driven framework for restoring market viability and wealth in distressed urban real estate markets.”<sup>7</sup>

The MVA should be analyzed for how it portends neutrality while reflecting historical and racial geographies of uneven development that contribute to the formation of new territories of poverty and exclusion. The value of the MVA to the state lies in its abstraction and simplification and in how it depoliticizes political processes. The TRF has conducted MVAs for over a dozen cities in the United States -- all majority-minority cities with high poverty levels.<sup>8</sup> The MVA helps city officials decide how to spend limited public resources and where to target investment. In Detroit, the Bing Administration’s use of the MVA to make decisions was part of a broader effort to depoliticize the planning process by making it data-driven. In a November 2012 interview, a city planner told me, “As resources get limited and we look for greater impact, everyone is moving to a targeted strategy. You can’t have targeting be a political decision.” She showed me a document of service delivery changes associated with the MVA zones. “It has to be driven by empirical data. That is our reality here. I have to imagine colleagues in other cities feel the same way. You can’t have people saying, well you just picked these areas because. . .”

To this end, the MVA uses property value indicators (from residential sale prices to properties with building code violations and ratios of prime to subprime loans) and social

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<sup>7</sup> Ira Goldstein, “Maximizing the impact of federal NSP investments through the strategic use of local market data.” In *REO Vacant Properties: Strategies for Neighborhood Stabilization. A Joint Publication of the Federal Reserve Banks of Boston and Cleveland and the Federal Reserve Board, Philadelphia*, edited by P. Chakrabarti, M. Lambert, M., and M.H. Petrus (2010), 65–75.

<sup>8</sup> The Reinvestment Fund was hired to conduct MVAs in Pittsburgh; Baltimore; Newark, Camden, and a set of small towns in southern New Jersey; San Antonio; Washington, D.C.; and Wilmington, Delaware. According to U.S. Census data in 2010, most of these cities have majority African-American populations, Pittsburgh and San Antonio aside. (In 2010, San Antonio had a 63.2 percent Latino population and Pittsburgh a 64.8 percent white population.) The cities are also among the nation’s poorest with populations living below the poverty line ranging from a low of 21.6 percent in Washington, D.C. to 44 percent in Detroit – compared to a national rate of 16 percent. Preliminary research suggests that many of these cities, like Detroit, are also being restructured by austerity and a philanthropic investment. See Madeline Pill (2013) “Urban governance when austerity is the norm.” Paper presented at Interrogating Urban Crisis Conference, September 9-11, 213 at De Montfort University.

indicators (from race and ethnicity to income, education, and crime) to identify areas with similar market characteristics. After conducting statistical analysis of census tract and block group data sets, TRF staff worked with “local market experts” to conduct a physical inspection of each city block. These experts drove the city over several days with drafts of the MVA map, verifying that the different market type characterizations were accurate. According to Ira Goldstein, the MVA’s developer, the map was then adjusted based on “fieldwork” findings.<sup>9</sup> While analysts did attempt to ground truth the MVA, the types of property value and social indicators that could be incorporated in the MVA were restricted by its algorithm. The variables were selected, Goldstein explained, “because they reflect the conditions that any developer might observe when evaluating areas for investment or intervention”<sup>10</sup> (see Table 5.1). What, then, did the MVA and the map ignore in the classification of Detroit by these indicators?

**TABLE 5.1.** Variables used in TRF’s Market Value Analysis<sup>11</sup>

Citywide Cluster Analysis Variables	Targeted Project Analysis Variables
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• residential sale prices</li> <li>• housing tenure</li> <li>• presence/extent of subsidized housing</li> <li>• age of housing</li> <li>• housing vacancy/abandonment</li> <li>• demolition</li> <li>• presence of residential properties with building code violations</li> <li>• mixture of commercial and residential uses</li> <li>• credit score/mortgage foreclosures/ratio of prime to subprime loans originated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• publically owned properties by address</li> <li>• area incomes by block group</li> <li>• building permit and amount by property address</li> <li>• social and physical features</li> <li>• crime data by property address</li> <li>• age, race, ethnicity, and education by block group</li> <li>• public school performance and catchments</li> <li>• aerial photography</li> <li>• housing square footage by property address</li> <li>• zoning and land use</li> <li>• building conditions and vacancy by property address</li> </ul>

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, “Maximizing the impact of federal NSF investments.”

<sup>10</sup> Ira Goldstein, “Market value analysis: A data-based approach to understanding urban housing markets. Putting Data to Work: Data Driven Approaches to Strengthening Neighborhoods” (2012), <http://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/putting-data-to-work-market-value-analysis.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



The MVA's social and property value indicators were, significantly, all related to the current exchange (rather than use) value of property and potential investment yields. As a result, informal economies and quotidian practices of care through which Detroiters maintained land in their neighborhoods fell outside the indices of value used in analysis and were thus ignored. With one quarter of Detroit's properties in some state of tax foreclosure, another third in mortgage foreclosure, and a sizable number of parcels in the hands of speculators, the cultural and political systems that governed the exchange and maintenance of landed property were in crisis. As discussed in chapter 3, many residents without legal title spent an inordinate amount of time caring for land. Across the city, they developed coordinated systems of maintenance, including scheduled mowing of vacant lots, boarding up some houses, and planting flowers in front of others to make them look lived in. Some held ant foreclosure protests, petitioned against evictions, and demanded that absentee landlords take care of land and buildings. Others started community gardens, painted murals, and claimed vacant parcels for parks and theater spaces. For some, caring for the land was about keeping up property values and creating safe neighborhoods. Others saw the city's de facto public lands as a commons. For them, caring for land was about building new forms of community and more just systems of governance. The land's value did not stand apart from the neighborhood ecology and more often than not residents were considering how it is being used in the present, not expected future profits.

Critically, the MVA worked to establish not only what could be considered valuable in Detroit's future but also how value was defined. The MVA, by definition, was unable to reflect these more expansive community definitions of value because it started by selecting variables that were worth counting from the perspective of the evaluating developer, not residents. Thus, a broadly defined community value system was not the point of departure. Yet the most damning

aspect of the MVA was not just that some practices, knowledges, and systems of care were ignored, but how the MVA transformed the reality it represented. In other words, the misreading of the landscape became the landscape.

What must be underscored is that the formulas used in the MVA essentially geocoded the city according to the logic of real estate developers interested in making the best return on their investment. The Detroit city government then made deeply political decisions about service delivery, investment, and maintenance decisions according to the MVA's classification of "profitable" and "risky" geographies (and thus groups living within those lines). Because the MVA dictated where transportation ran, streetlights worked, housing assistance was provided, and so on, it raised important questions about the citizenship of people living in areas labeled "distressed" (as it could also be read as they were not deserving of services). On the whole, areas slated for investment were significantly whiter and richer than areas set for "replace, repurpose, and decommission." Over 19 percent of the city's residents lived in areas slated for decommission, whereas only 6.68 percent of the city's population lived in areas slated for upgrade. As part of the Uniting Detroiters project, we analyzed the DWP data set and found that decommission areas were on average 91.93 percent Black, 5.72 percent white, and 45.68 percent in poverty. Whereas upgrade areas were on average 66.68 percent Black, 19 percent white, and 37.34 percent in poverty.<sup>12</sup>

The MVA laid the conditions of possibility for green infrastructure plans that they city had adopted as a development strategy (discussed further below). What was purported to be a simple cost-benefit analysis that allocated resources to maximize social utility exacerbated the bifurcation of segregated landscapes and prepared Detroit for what might be described as

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to Tim Stallman for this data analysis.

accumulation by green dispossession.<sup>13</sup> In 2009, a group of scholars from top U.S. planning schools challenged the global academic planning community to develop a more robust research agenda on how to adapt growth-oriented planning tools for shrinking cities.<sup>14</sup> They recommended greening as the key strategy for capitalizing on urban decline. Their argument echoed that of an influential article published a year earlier entitled, “Greening the Rust Belt.” The paper’s authors, Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan, proposed rightsizing-via-greening as a new model for reorganizing shrinking cities. They defined rightsizing as “stabilizing dysfunctional markets and distressed neighborhoods by more closely aligning a city’s built environment with the needs of existing and foreseeable populations by adjusting the amount of land available for development.”<sup>15</sup> To do this, Schilling and Logan advocated replacing vacant and abandoned properties with green infrastructure. Green infrastructure, according to their model, would convert surplus, blighted land into green space and stabilize property values and population levels. While Schilling and Logan did warn of social equity issues and that the legacies of urban renewal would require politicians and planners to “balance residents’ immediate interests with long-term visions of community viability,” they remained vague about the criteria for measuring “balance.” As long-term plans for Detroit’s future progressed under the participatory arm of the Detroit Works Project, they increasingly incorporated rightsizing-via-greening strategies. However, as I show, planners were careful to distance themselves from the language of rightsizing and the MVA because it challenged the “participatory” planning

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<sup>13</sup> David Harvey uses the term “accumulation by dispossession.” David Harvey, *New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Justin Hollander, K. Pallagst, T. Schwarz, and F. J. Popper. “Planning Shrinking Cities.” *Progress in Planning* 72, no. 4 (2009): 223–32.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan. “Greening the Rust Belt: A Green Infrastructure Model for Right Sizing America’s Shrinking Cities.” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 74, no. 4 (October 21, 2008): 451–66.

process.

### **Community economic development**

The Detroit Works Project worked through a dual strategy. Short-term planning through the MVA functioned as a technology of abandonment. Once adopted, the MVA map came to have a power of its own because it mediated the actions of planners and city officials. By contrast, the MVA was obscured in the long-term planning process, particularly the civic engagement arm of the DWP. As a foundation-funded consortium that operated outside city government and, therefore, beyond mechanisms of state accountability (however weak), the legitimacy and authority of the DWP and its foundation funders depended on participation.

Within contemporary urban planning, public participation has become a way of accomplishing that goal. “Once a tool of empowering urban citizens against politicians and growth-oriented elites,” sociologist Michael McQuarrie argues, “participation is now a tool for grounding political authority in the context of urban decline [and redevelopment].”<sup>16</sup> In order to understand the DWP and its public engagement, we need to understand the transformation of economic development in U.S. cities over the past 50 years.

Market-based tools like the MVA represent a paradigmatic shift in community economic development. The field of community economic development emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of urban renewal and urban uprisings and as part of the broader civil rights movement. At this time, community groups demanded participation in the planning process. Indeed, the primary goal of antipoverty programs at multiple scales, from the Model Cities Program to Community Development Block Grants and Urban Development Action Grants, was to redress problems of urban disinvestment and poverty concentration by targeting geographically discrete

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<sup>16</sup> Michael McQuarrie, “No Contest: Participatory Technologies and the Transformation of Urban Authority.” *Public Culture* 25, no. 1 69 (February 18, 2013): 143.

communities, devolving decision-making authority, and fostering low-income community control and economic self-sufficiency. In its first wave, decentralizing reforms like community economic development worked to bring resources to impoverished neighborhoods and protect neighborhoods from being razed under urban renewal. However, the institutional structure of community economic development and emphasis on promoting local control shifted radically in the 1980s with the retrenchment of government-sponsored antipoverty programs. As market-oriented strategies were increasingly used to address urban poverty, Community Development Corporations became key institutions in revitalization efforts. As the case of the DWP in Detroit illustrates, market-based approaches undercut community development's initial mandate.

Legal scholar Scott Cummings argues, Clinton's decision to "end welfare as we know it ... marked the culmination of a two-decade-long ideological shift in favor of market-based antipoverty strategies."<sup>17</sup> In the aftermath of welfare reform, the federal agenda has shifted to market-based antipoverty initiatives (such as the Empowerment Zone Program and the New Markets Tax Credit)<sup>18</sup> at the same time that state and local institutions have adopted market-based programs that designate low-income communities as underutilized markets. However, as Cummings and others argue, market-based community economic development "fails to deliver on its promise of poverty alleviation, diverts attention from the need for a coordinated political response to economic disadvantage, privileges localism over structural reform, and impedes the

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<sup>17</sup> Scott Cummings, "Community Economic Development as Progressive Politics: Toward a Grassroots Movement for Economic Justice," *Stanford Law Review*, (2001), see: <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-83762766.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Congress established the New Markets Tax Credit Program in 2000 to spur new or increased investments into operating businesses and real estate projects located in low-income communities. The program allows investors to receive a tax credit in exchange for making equity investments in Community Development Entities (specialized financial institutions). The investment cannot be redeemed for seven years. The Empowerment Zone Program includes Renewal Communities, Empowerment Zones, and Enterprise Communities – all defined as highly distressed/high poverty urban and rural communities, which are eligible for grants, tax credits for businesses, bonding authority, among other programs.

formation of multiracial political alliances.”<sup>19</sup> The logic that undergirds approaches like the MVA is that innovative financial tools are needed to geographically target local assets and package them for outside investors and private sector capital. No only does the spatialization of poverty and race go unquestioned, the logic of market-based community economic development reinscribes patterns of racialized uneven development. The MVA is a tool by which the political-economic geographies of cities are being re-territorialized and divided.

Planning came to need participation to claim legitimacy and political authority. While community development corporations and community empowerment organizations were often defined by a radical politics at first, today many of them function as real estate development agencies and have become, in the words of urban studies scholars James Fraser and Edward Kick, a “private parallel government, insulated from democratic influence, lavishly funded, and long-term in outlook.”<sup>20</sup> Participation became institutionalized in planning and community development in large part to bolster their legitimacy as community representatives. Once a practice used by community groups to engage in deliberation, decision-making, and protest politics, participation has become a necessary tool for experts and elites. In other words, community economic development was made “safe.” Moreover, the underwriting of the DWP by foundations demonstrates how plans that are masked in the discourse of pluralism may legitimate expert-driven and developer-oriented rule.

The design and rollout of the DWP signaled the ascent of foundations and large nonprofit organizations—as opposed to the municipal government—as the key institutions managing the “comeback” of Detroit. Foundations serve as proxy for government in Detroit, creating a

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<sup>19</sup> Cummings, “Community Economic Development as Progressive Politics.”

<sup>20</sup> James C. Fraser and Edward L. Kick, “Governing Urban Restructuring with City-Building Nonprofits.” *Environment and Planning A* 46 (2014), 4.

development landscape dominated by the NGO and foundation sector reminiscent of that found in many countries in the global South. For anthropologist James Ferguson, the development apparatus works as an “anti-politics machine,” transforming highly political planning projects to “technical problems” and “technical solutions.”<sup>21</sup> Like the MVA and resulting remapping of service provision and investment in Detroit, the anti-politics machine depoliticizes the operation of power through projects and deflects attention from their crucial side effects.

Beginning around 2007, private foundations poured money into the city, including the long-term planning process. The Ford, Charles Stewart Mott, and John S. and James L. Knight foundations, all national organizations, played a key role. Between 2007 and 2014, the Ford Foundation alone invested \$60 million in the region, an almost two-fold increase in foundation giving to Detroit over the previous ten years. Meanwhile, regional foundations like Hudson-Webber, Skillman, Kresge, and W. K. Kellogg poured more than \$628 million into Detroit. Among these, several large foundations (Kresge, Ford, and Kellogg) and a number of smaller foundations supported the long-term engagement (i.e., participation) process and then pledged over \$150 million dollars so its plan could be rolled out and are aligning their funding priorities with the goals of the plan. In short, private foundations, along with Detroit’s numerous real-estate-focused Community Development Corporations, played a significant role in shaping the city’s planning process, including a participation regime that raised serious questions about democratic accountability.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ferguson, *The Antipolitics Machine*.

<sup>22</sup> Liz Essley Whyte, “Philanthropy Keeps the Lights on in Detroit,” *Philanthropy* (Winter 2014), [http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/excellence\\_in\\_philanthropy/philanthropy\\_keeps\\_the\\_lights\\_on\\_in\\_detroit](http://www.philanthropyroundtable.org/topic/excellence_in_philanthropy/philanthropy_keeps_the_lights_on_in_detroit) (accessed November 11, 2014). Also see: Suzanne Perry, “Detroit Tests What Foundations Can Do to Rescue Troubled Cities,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, (October 20, 2013), <http://philanthropy.com/article/Can-Philanthropy-Rescue/142415/> (accessed November 11, 2014).

## **“Participation” in the Detroit Works Project**

After the Bing administration’s “course correction” on rightsizing—when the project was split into short-term actions inside the executive branch and a long-term planning process outside city government—they hired an organization called the Detroit Collaborative Design Center to run the community engagement process and facilitate the development of a citywide plan. The center describes itself as “committed to design as a mean for uplifting and dignifying the human person” and promoting “collaboration among community organizations, local governments and private developers to confront the social, economic, and political realities which have for years contributed to the physical deterioration of urban Detroit.”<sup>23</sup> In May 2012, a month before my meeting with Henderson, I attended one of the Detroit Works Project’s long-term planning “community conversations” hosted by affiliates of newly assembled long-term planning team led by DCDC affiliates. These conversations were part of an extensive participation regime that was more about the quantification and performance of engagement than including residents in the planning process.

The meeting was held at the Detroit Rescue Missions Ministries, a nondescript brick building on the east side of Detroit. It was one meeting out of a series of three for the planning quadrant. The same series of three “conversations” took place simultaneously in three other planning quadrants across the city, which some residents interpreted as a method of diffusing dissent. At the building’s entrance, a long-term planning volunteer who was counting new arrivals welcomed me. Inside a few hundred chairs were set up in rows facing the front of the room. However, only 50 people came to participate. Attendees spread out across the sea of chairs, making the room feel empty. The audience was predominantly white. Only 12 African

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<sup>23</sup> See description here: <http://www.udmercy.edu/catalog/undergrad01-03/DetColDesCenter.html>



Americans were in attendance, meaning the racial demographics of the room inverted those of the surrounding planning quadrant, which was three-quarters Black. This mismatch extended to the Detroit Works Project long-term planning team leading the session.

In our Uniting Detroiter interviews, many African-American activists expressed concerns about the racial representation of the DWP. For example, Sierra Club environmental justice advocate Bernadette Smith said, “Some major issues that I have right now with the Detroit Works Project now who’s involved? Recently we went to visit the home office ... all white folks. The only Black folks I saw were the ones sitting at the – two women sitting at the reception desk. Now what is this? Who are these people?” Others articulated similar concerns, particularly in terms of what these dynamics meant in terms of trust. Trust was invoked in terms of distrust, namely that those in positions of power lacked an understanding of systemic racism and the needs of the people; therefore, they could not be trusted. One local activist, who runs a social center/community bookstore, put it this way, “white privilege automatically puts you at the table to get the resources and things of that nature. How can I trust you, how can I trust Detroit Works Project when it doesn’t speak to me? It doesn’t represent me, when you haven’t sat down at the table and broke bread with me? Those are the issues that I have with Detroit Works. And I don’t have a problem with development, but develop with the people.”

The disconnect between the rollout of the DWP and the needs of Detroiters was manifest in the former’s gratuitous spending on public relations, which seemed ostentatious given the city’s impending declaration of bankruptcy. At meetings, piles of glossy colored handouts and evaluation forms were always stacked neatly on each seat. Long banners printed with large bold numbers hung on the walls of the meeting room, celebrating the numbers of Detroit Works Project had engaged.

The meeting, like others I attended, began with a “coming clean” statement, acknowledging past mistakes and assuring the audience that things were being done differently now. The leaders emphasized that the long-term planning team *did not* work for the city, a fact they seemed to think would comfort residents. However, it actually seemed to have the opposite effect, highlighting their “outsider” status and raising concerns amongst residents that the planning process was part of a larger white takeover the city. In this vein, the presenters acknowledged the Detroit’s fiscal crisis could have unexpected consequences for their work, but because the Detroit Works Project was funded by foundations, it would not slow the process. Moreover, the process would not yield a plan, but offer options about how to use land, improve the economy, and make city systems more efficient. They said that the biggest question they were asked was: “Are you listening?” They assured the audience they had been. Over the last eight months, the long-term planning team had “reached” over 30,000 people and had 4,000 “meaningful conversations.” Yet how this scale of engagement translated (or not) into changes or revisions in the content of the plan was never explained.

The conversations typically involved a long presentation (hour plus). Based on my observations, the presentations were often slow enough to follow but too fast for the audience to reflect on what was being said. It was followed by a quick Q&A prior to a highly structured, rushed engagement exercise centered on completing worksheets sometimes alone, sometimes in small groups, and often predefined responses that delimited feedback. One resident in an interview described the meetings like this: “you spend 3 hours at a meeting, you spend 2 hours and 20 minutes [with them] talking about what needs to be done. Then you spend 20 minutes with them asking us what our opinion is.” Notably, at the community conversations, the city’s uneven development and geographic specificities were downplayed. Moreover, the MVA – the

foundation for the territorial reordering of the city – was never discussed in the series of three community engagement district meetings I attended. Presenters replaced the term “rightsizing” with “differential investing” and “strategic renewal.” Instead of the MVA map, they shared a neighborhood land-use typology.

In July 2012, I interviewed Dan Kinkead, who was then lead consultant for the team that produced the DFC framework and would, in 2014, become the director of projects at the DFC Implementation Office. Kinkead explained how his team had worked to morph the MVA into a land-use typology in which areas previously characterized as “distressed” markets in the MVA had been recoded as “high vacancy” in the DFC and slated for greening. In other words, the market analysis, more than vacancy rates, per se, guided the DFC’s disinvestment and repurposing plans. And yet, planners’ public rhetoric focused on vacancy because it was seen as less political. In other words, Kinkead saw adopting the language of vacancy as crucial, even if it simplified the actual process: “Everyone is looking at language. It’s highly scrutinized. We finally found something that is accessible to the public. It’s high vacancy. It’s low vacancy. Even though what we’re talking about is more than vacancy, it’s easy.”

Other planners who I interviewed explained the rhetorical shift from “distressed” to “vacant” in similar ways. One said when the typology, which described some neighborhoods as “distressed” was released to the public, residents were, in her words, “immediately offended.” They felt the typology characterized them as having a “distressed reality” even though planners assured them “they were not talking about the people,” as she put it, but market conditions, which are either strong or weak. “A lot of this data was using terminology that [the people] weren’t used to,” she told me. “But we’ve been talking about vacancy in this city for a long time, so someone talking about low vacancy versus moderate vacancy versus high vacancy. They are

not going to debate that. It's just what it is." This was a process of making the political technical – an “anti-politics machine.” By emphasizing vacancy, Detroit's planners no longer seemed to be “talking about people” and their removal, but projecting a technically rationalized and purportedly neutral landscape removed from the deeply political conditions of its production.

At the community meetings, presenters assiduously avoided using words like “rightsizing,” reduction, or disconnection. Employing language emphasizing investment rather than disinvestment, they told residents the city needed to “capitalize on strengths,” target “capital renewal on key systems,” and focus on “aligning” infrastructure. Restructuring was also presented as an “opportunity” for entrepreneurship and innovation. At one meeting the presenter showed an example of regular bus services being replaced in some unidentified areas of the city with jitneys or small buses (an enterprise often associated with decimated public infrastructure). Reduction of services, of course, is geographically targeted. However, rarely were spatial coordinates or neighborhoods identifiers offered in the conversations about Detroit's future.

During that same meeting, organizers' narrow definition of participation underlined its diluted meaning in the Detroit Works Project. Tension grew in the room as Alice, a member of the mayor-appointed steering committee, listed the predefined ways residents might participate: “you can become an ambassador; host a meeting and share information with neighbors; invite us to a meeting; visit the roaming table.” The roaming table is a foldup table designed to travel to different neighborhoods with the aim of spreading the word about the project and stimulating discussion, and make the process more playful rather than contentious. Alice continued, “you can receive our newsletters; visit our website and Facebook page; call home base [the name of the long term team's office] and sign up to work on developing the quality of life in the city.”

A man stood up before she was finished. “Where is the plan?” he demanded in an elevated

voice. “When are we going to see some plans?” He said that he had attended two other community engagement meetings and was exasperated with the engagement process. His response laid bare the anti-politics apparatus – it was a charge that residents knew this was a political process that would yield winners and losers.

The team leaders coaxed him back to his seat. Alice struggled to respond quickly. “One of the things we’ve been cautious about,” she said, “is that the community said back last year, ‘you already have a plan.’ There was distrust in the process and a feeling that we were wasting people’s time. There was a lot of pushback in year one. We have been careful not to put a plan on the table until we’ve heard from people. Wisdom has told us that we cannot ignore the community. Wisdom says we must engage every community voice in the city before a plan is done.”

The man rose again and interrupted her, “Well, let us see maps so that we can talk about our neighborhoods.” Several audience members nodded and said “uh hmm” in agreement.

The lead planning consultant who was co-facilitating the meeting with Alice, tried to calm the room with a particular unsavvy interjection: “This is about participatory planning. It is not about high modernist planning. We *all* need to participate.” Ironically, the defining feature of high modernist planning, most emphatically championed by the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, was that it approached cities as blank slates for complete transformation. In the United States, high modernism dominated planning in the late-1950s and 1960s. It undergirded urban renewal programs, transformed cities, and disrupted communities through the displacement of large numbers of people. Poor African-American communities were often the first to be razed. In general, high modernism was characterized by a commitment to scientific and technological progress, reliance on expertise, large-scale attempts to reengineer nature and

society to improve the human condition, a radical simplification of and disregard for complexity and context, the celebration of standardized models and uniform codes, and a belief in progress. With the right technical applications, the mantra went, there was always the possibility of a better tomorrow.

Given this history, the consultant's explicit distinction of the DWP and high modernism was ironic for two reasons. First, what excited many planners, designers, and developers about Detroit was precisely the opportunity to test innovative approaches to urban design in a setting with diminished social and political hurdles. Twenty-first century Detroit had been represented as a *terra nullius* or "blank slate," particularly given the amount of available land (most of it controlled already by the city). Second, the pervasive spatial abstraction and rushed approach to participation that defined the DWP community conversations seemed to stem from a deference to expertise and serve as a defense against residents who wanted to actually engage in envisioning the future of their neighborhoods or understand how the planning process would impact specific neighborhoods or how service delivery reduction decisions would be made.

At the community meetings, DWP staff explained how the infrastructural realignment of Detroit had already been developed vis-à-vis the new land-use typology for the city, rather than engaging residents in the process of devising solutions. In meetings they introduced a typology that included four neighborhood types -- "mixed medium," "green mixed use," "live + make," and "innovative production" -- that were derived from the MVA market-based categories.

When the DFC plan was released it deployed this new typology for talking about land-use in Detroit. The plan is designed to transform the city's physical and cultural landscapes in tandem. For example, its authors characterize "innovative production" zones as having multiple benefits. They wrote, "A new system of innovative landscapes creates a new framework for civic

life, reshapes perceptions of Detroit, and creates a new garden (and blue) city identity. These landscapes include traditional landscapes like parks of many size, but importantly expand the range of landscape typologies to include blue + green corridors, large-scale blue infrastructure, and larger areas for innovation.” These might include urban farms, greenhouses, managed forests and aquaculture facilities; research plots; deconstruction sites; and other active uses. Again, the DFC’s vision sounds in many ways idyllic. One resident expressed her concerns this way: “some of the [DFC’s] ideas seem reasonable, like turning the land into forest or farms or water. But the question is who’s going to control it? And how is that going to be done? It seems like a lot of money was spent on this planning and that seems crazy to me. Why didn’t you spend it on improving the parks or having better schools in this environment? I would say that it’s really about the gentrification of Detroit. And I believe Detroit will be gentrified, it will take a while, I think it will take maybe 50 years, but this is a strategic place in terms of its geography.” This fear of gentrification is not unfounded.

“Innovative productive” zones in Detroit are modeled on IBA Emscher Parks, a series of parks and cultural facilities in the post-industrial Ruhr Region of Germany. Notably, the IBA project has been criticized for contributing to a highly uneven regional geography in which the heritage sites of the park and those who live around it are disconnected.<sup>24</sup> In Detroit, the remaking of cultural landscapes — and with them, according to the DFC report, “civic life” and “perceptions of the city” — raises questions about urban racial formation and erasure when the people planning for the future are often white and not from the city and the people receiving large-scale development deals are also mainly white. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues the

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<sup>24</sup> Sebastian Muller and Constance Carr. “Image Politics and Stagnation in the Ruhr Valley.” In *Whose Urban Renaissance?: An International Comparison of Urban Regeneration Strategies*, edited by Libby Porter and Kate Shaw (New York: Routledge, 2009).

legacy of slavery and the seizure of land from Native Americans created not only a racist property law regime in the United States, but an actual property interest in whiteness, which has everything to do with what forms of possession are recognized and legitimated and what kinds of acts are considered sufficient to establish possession.<sup>25</sup>

The new landscape systems were heralded as carrying wide-ranging benefits from environmental (cleaner air and water, wildlife habitats) to economic (reduced maintenance costs, job creation, business attraction) and social (recreation, increase property values, renewal of city's physical image, improved resident's health). Yet by not divulging the MVA and allowing for a conversation about how complex histories of racism and racist housing practices are embedded in its algorithm, it seemed clear the DFC was poised to reinforce (or green) rather than interrupt patterns of uneven development.

### **The politics of remaking landscapes as infrastructure in shrinking cities**

Green urbanism, specifically remaking landscape as infrastructure, is an emergent method of enacting austerity in shrinking cities. In the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis, a number of U.S. cities facing fiscal crisis are shedding property and reducing public services to offer little more than fire and policing. These new “minimal cities” are not only shedding infrastructure but the visions of society it was built to support.

This shedding process coincides with a new way of conceptualizing and valuing urban space in a era of climate change: nature as infrastructure. In general, planners and policymakers aim to make cities more sustainable and disaster-ready through the security and management of infrastructure.<sup>26</sup> In the face of anxiety about ecological degradation and climate change,

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<sup>25</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (2012): 1707–91.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce P. Braun, “A New Urban Dispositif? Governing Life in an Age of Climate Change.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32, no. 1 (2014): 49–64; Stephen J. Collier and Andrew Lakoff. “The Vulnerability



landscape urbanists have argued that sustainable cities should replace some monofunctional “grey” infrastructures with polyfunctional “green” and “blue” infrastructures (for example, urban forests that sequester carbon and also raise property values). We might think of this process as planned ruralization, inasmuch as it involves the reduction or unbuilding of grey infrastructures and infilling and purposeful establishment of farms, forests, ponds, and wetlands.

Advocates of green urbanism often ignore the embedded values and redistributive politics of infrastructure as a particular vision of society.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly true in shrinking cities within the most recent age of austerity, during which greening has become a contested approach to managing “excess” land and stabilizing real estate markets. The revaluation of nature as infrastructure raises pressing ethical questions about who locates, controls, and benefits from urban forests, farms, and wetlands. They often elide political, economic, and racial differences. In other words, rarely do those calling for landscape infrastructure ask questions about what visions of society do infrastructures support or what visions should they foster.

What is infrastructure? Dictionaries define infrastructure broadly as the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities needed for the operation of society.<sup>28</sup> However, our conceptions tend to be narrower. Infrastructure is often taken for granted, a ready-to-hand backdrop for modern life.<sup>29</sup> If we think of infrastructure at all, we generally envision grey or hard

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of Vital Systems: How ‘Critical Infrastructure’ Became a Security Problem.” In *The Politics of Securing the Homeland: Critical Infrastructure, Risk and Securitisation*, edited by Myrian Dunn and Kristian Soby Kristensen. New York: Routledge, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Ashley Carse, “Nature as Infrastructure: Making and Managing the Panama Canal Watershed.” *Social Studies of Science* 42, no. 4 (April 02, 2012): 539–63.

<sup>28</sup> Oxford Dictionary (2014).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Edwards, “Infrastructure and Modernity: Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems.” In *Modernity and Technology*, edited by Thomas J. Misa, Philip Brey, and Andrew Feenberg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).

infrastructure (e.g., roads, powerlines, water pipes). Less often do we consider infrastructures as biopolitical projects through which populations and economies are managed<sup>30</sup> or as territorializing projects that carry with them particular political-economic ideologies or biases.<sup>31</sup>

Historically, North American planners sought to bring nature into the city in ways that were ostensibly about recreation and public health (e.g., parks, tree-line boulevards) if it had its own kind of erasures (e.g., New York's Central Park covered up slums). Now, in the face of climate change, urban nature is increasingly being called upon to perform services conceptualized at larger scales. For example, in New York City, after Hurricane Sandy, nearby oyster beds were recognized as a natural infrastructure that could attenuate waves, mitigate the effects of climate change, and support local fisherman. Landscape as infrastructure is celebrated for “polyfunctionality” (working with nature to achieve multiple benefits) as opposed to the monofunctionality of traditional civil engineering (controlling nature).<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, an urban green space might be designed to manage stormwater, sequester carbon, raise property values, reduce crime, and provide a space for recreation—or at least be publicly presented as such.

Natural infrastructure, as the example of the DFC plan illustrates, can be political and redistributive when the approach is deployed as a means of “subtraction” in urban austerity and structural adjustment plans.<sup>33</sup> U.S. cities are expected to invest billions of dollars over the next two decades in green infrastructure through public-private partnerships (e.g., Philadelphia — \$1.67 billion; NYC — \$1.6 billion; Detroit — \$50 million). Crucially, the construction of these

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Chandra Mukerji, “The Territorial State as a Figured World of Power: Strategics, Logistics, and Impersonal Rule.” *Sociological Theory* 28, no. 4 (2010): 402–24.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre Bélanger, “Landscape As Infrastructure.” *Landscape Journal* 28, no. 1 (2009): 79–95; Gary Strang, “Infrastructure as Landscape.” *Places* 10, no. 3 (1995): 8–15.

<sup>33</sup> Keller Easterling, *Subtraction* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2014).

landscapes often entails the *removal* of existing infrastructure. As a result, they dovetail with austerity plans that involve reducing and privatizing public services.<sup>34</sup> This revaluation of urban nature has become a way to restructure government (i.e., divest from certain areas, reduce public services, privatize public land and resources). It also coincides with a moment in which costly engineered infrastructures in the United States are approaching the end of their life cycles. In 2013, the American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that \$3.6 trillion would need to be invested to update and reinforce the nation's various infrastructural systems by 2020. As cities face the costly basic infrastructural maintenance, they also face pressure to implement climate change mitigation and disaster preparedness plans. New consortiums that involve state institutions, conservation groups, foundations, private engineering companies and asset management companies are developing financing tools for green infrastructure which is fast becoming a new frontier for investment. From the view of the anti-politics machine, the political process of subtraction or disconnection is deemphasized through the making of something new.

Likewise calls for the developing and investing in green infrastructure appeal to what geographer Bruce Braun calls the “naturalness of nature” (it’s not disconnection, it’s nature). As spaces that appear non-urban in the classic sense, they can appear to be panaceas for urban ills and the harbingers of a new kind of sustainable urbanism.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the “anti-state state” can extend its power through a process of racialized dispossession via greening.<sup>36</sup> In this process of securing and maximizing space/life for some residents, others are rendered invisible. In Detroit, these erasures have been challenged by the infrastructural expectations of local residents and

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<sup>34</sup> NRDC. “New Partnership Releases Path-Breaking Guide to Stimulate Private Investment in Natural Infrastructure Nationwide.” *Press Release*, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Braun, “A New Urban Dispositif?”

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography.” *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (2002): 15–24.

their efforts to repurpose landscapes for different restorative values. As mentioned before, a central way that residents are repurposing land in the city is through urban farming. Crucially, the politics of urban greening vary widely and may be in tension. Grassroots urban greening efforts, particularly the work of Detroit's vibrant urban farming community, laid the conditions of possibility for the DFC's landscape as infrastructure approach, which controversially embraced only the aesthetic of urban agriculture, eliding the values of community self-determination of many of its members.

### **Detroit Arcadia**

Detroit has become a poster child for urban agriculture, attracting young migrants, tourists, journalists, and investors who often fetishize the city's transition from industrial Motown to agrarian "Growtown." Today, approximately 1,350 community gardens are registered with the Detroit Agricultural Network, a nonprofit organization that provides farming supplies and offers workshops. According to the Detroit Food Policy Council, there are thousands more unregistered family, school, and church gardens in the city. People garden for many reasons: lifestyle, sustenance, income, nutrition, education, reclaiming communities, and as an act of resistance.

The media coverage of the agriculture movement in Detroit couches it within a broader postindustrial pastoral sublime—sunflowers grow among rubble, vegetables patches are oases in a "food desert," horses graze on urban prairie grass, and farmers drive tractors on empty city streets. These images are not false, but they are not as widespread as many media representations suggest. For smallholder farmers and gardeners without secure property rights and reliant on grants, their place in what essayist Rebecca Solnit has called "Detroit arcadia" may be precarious.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "Detroit Arcadia." *Harper's Magazine* (July 2007).

Over the last decade, Detroit's urban agriculture movement has moved from the back yard to the front page. It is now associated with a global movement shaped by reactions to the corporatization of the food system, the decline of the small farm, and concerns over climate change. Urban agriculture is also upheld as a way to confront social ills associated with uneven development: blight, crime, obesity, diabetes, and drug recovery. In Detroit, food security is also high on the list because fresh, healthy food is scarce in many neighborhoods where the primary outlets are "party stores" (liquor stores that carry some food items), gas stations, and fast-food restaurants. Within this context, farming is both crucial and poorly understood.

Backyard gardens have a long history in Detroit. African-American gardeners often associate them with their southern roots and resilience. During and after the Great Migration of the twentieth century, many Black Detroiters worked factory jobs and maintained household gardens that they tended by drawing on agricultural knowledge and customs carried from the Jim Crow South. Other immigrant communities also grew food to supplement their income. One African-American woman, a food justice activist, told me in an interview, "People have always farmed and gardened here. I think its current resurgence comes out of our resiliency." Another longtime resident said, "Gentrifiers believe they have discovered everything. My grandmother in the 1930s canned everything, stored it in the cellar and sustained off that food." And yet, this tradition, which has expanded in scope in recent decades, has reached a transformative moment.

In 2013, after years of organizing by the urban agriculture community, Detroit adopted an urban agricultural ordinance that is upheld as a model for other postindustrial cities. One study that has circulated widely suggests that the city could achieve food security, estimating that 76% of residents' vegetable needs and 42% of fruit needs could be met with season extension and

storage facilities.<sup>38</sup> Dozens of foundations and non-profit organizations have supported food production and greening in the city. The fact that many of the farms are reliant on these funding streams raises critical questions about their long-term sustainability. Some scholars and residents argue that, in the absence of a broader class-based political response, a fragmented approach to urban agriculture in Detroit could enable already pervasive conditions of marginality and pave the road for further neoliberal development.<sup>39</sup> Others have warned that urban agriculture initiatives may become avenues for new waves of capital accumulation, privatization, and disinvestment in poor neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup>

Yet for many residents urban agriculture is an important practice of community building and political self-determination and part of building anti-capitalist economic models. Sociologist Monica White found that farming is a strategy of resistance for many Black farmers in Detroit. Urban farms, she argues, are community centers where participants work to constructively improve the daily existence of residents rather than mobilizing against power structures.<sup>41</sup> Malik Yakini, director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network that runs a seven-acre farm called D-Town, explained their work similarly: “One of the major messages we carry is that we have the capacity to produce our own food, to distribute our own food, to process our own food, that we’re not just victims or pawns on the chess board where these more powerful forces move us around, that we actually have the capacity to define our own reality.”

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<sup>38</sup> Kathryn Colasanti, Michael W. Hamm, and Charlotte M. Litjens. “The City as an ‘Agricultural Powerhouse’? Perspectives on Expanding Urban Agriculture from Detroit, Michigan.” *Urban Geography* 33, no. 3 (April 01, 2012): 348–69.

<sup>39</sup> P.J. Draus, J. Roddy, and A. McDuffie. “‘We Don’t Have No Neighbourhood’: Advanced Marginality and Urban Agriculture in Detroit.” *Urban Studies*, November 15, 2013, 1–16.

<sup>40</sup> C. Tornaghi, “Critical Geography of Urban Agriculture.” *Progress in Human Geography*, February 05, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Monica White, “D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit.” *Environmental Practice* 13, no. 4 (2011): 406–17.

Community gardens are part of the social movement infrastructure in Detroit. While some people just like to grow food, many residents and community activists use gardens to support broader alternative economic development models based on cooperation and recuperation. Ironically, this type of community-level organizing and land management in a sense laid the conditions of possibility for the Detroit Future City's landscape as infrastructure development approach. Yet many food justice activists expressed concern that the DFC was attempting to co-opt the movement by embracing urban agriculture but not its goals of community self-determination. The important point to emphasize here is that "a garden is not a garden" by which I mean that physical landscapes are produced to bring about different visions of socioeconomic change. Consider the contrast between the DFC's green infrastructure, which is built in areas that according to the social and market indicators derived by the MVA have no market value to developers, and community gardens, which are built as social movement infrastructure (discussed more in chapter 6).

## **Conclusions**

Landscapes reflect the values of the people that build and maintain them (or disconnect them). Inasmuch as planning processes are built on forms of expertise that reinscribe a particular vision of the landscape (i.e., the redeveloper's) back onto it, participation is meaningless. As mentioned, despite boasting impressive number of engagement, participation at the DWP "community conversations" was largely hollow because it was predated by the MVA, which laid the foundation for the city's territorial reordering. Many activists and residents sensing that participation was a rubber stamp refused to participate. They criticized the planning process for pursuing local credibility and authority, particularly the way the long-term DWP arm touted the participation of food justice movement actors and other groups who did not actually engage in

the creation of the plan and often, in fact, were adamantly opposed it. Yakini recounted that when the project began he received a call from a newspaper reporter who'd seen his name listed as an advisory committee member and wanted to interview him about the project. Yakini said, "I had no knowledge of this. I had been appointed without my consent." He explained that he had attended one meeting, which he described as "not much of a discussion," but more an "insulting presentation" by consultants hired from outside the city explaining their vision for what should happen with urban agriculture in Detroit. "It suggested to us the mindset that the city is functioning with," he said. "Rather than extracting the knowledge from the people who are here with the lived experience, they hire people from the outside, who were all white, by the way, which was another kind of strange phenomenon in this majority Black city. To have a table full of white people presenting to us, you know, about urban agriculture in Detroit."

That the DFC planners and technical experts were mostly white and from "outside" was, as mentioned earlier, a persistent concern amongst residents and suggests that market-based community planning needs participation to gain legitimacy. People like Yakini were listed, but not actually involved, precisely because what was important about participation was its performance, even as the values that drive the DFC come from the developer viewpoint. In other words, this is a process that seeks to reverse engineer a developer's vision of what characteristics a place should have to be valuable and worthy of investment. These may or may not overlap with the values that people in Detroit hold dear. Generally, people are not opposed to development in the city. Indeed, those fighting for community self-determination see it as a type of development. However, it is a kind of development rooted in different values (e.g., care, mutuality, equality) aimed at directly benefiting their community rather than turning a profit for an investor.



## CHAPTER 6: TERRITORIES IN STRUGGLE

### Introduction

“The garden is a weapon in the war,” Wayne Curtis, an African-American artist and urban farmer in his sixties, told me the first time we met. Wayne and I were turning soil, preparing beds for winter in the community garden he and his wife, Myrtle Thompson Curtis, started in 2009 on the far eastside of Detroit. Wayne has unrestrained grey dreadlocks that reach down his back and a whimsical quality to his speech. He stopped shoveling and paused before he continued his thought, “The struggle is nothing new, we’ve been struggling a long time.”

Freedom Freedom Growers is a small place that has become an anchor institution in the Detroit’s urban agriculture movement. Altogether it consists of about two dozen beds, a large hoop house, and an extensive composting station. The garden sits next to the rented two-story wooden house where Wayne and Myrtle live and across the street from several overgrown vacant lots that they hope to eventually farm, as well. Yet as Wayne’s references to collective struggle suggest, Freedom Freedom is concerned both with growing food and an alternative development vision for Detroit’s future—a site from which to battle over the basic ways that “life” (land, labor, and money) will be organized. In more immediate terms, it is a gathering spot for neighborhood residents that offers “art in the garden” days, cooking classes, a winter coat drive, and a youth program that integrates agricultural training and political education.

At first glance, Freedom Freedom’s garden seems to match the Detroit Future City’s (DFC) “landscape for neighborhoods” land-use category, which includes small-scale playlots,

urban gardens, remediation meadows and blue infrastructures that repurpose vacant lots. As the DFC plan states, “[landscapes for neighborhoods] provide recreation opportunities, grow fruits and vegetables, clean soil, capture stormwater, increase property values, and improve a sense of community.”<sup>1</sup> Yet these two projects are actually antagonistic. Whereas the DFC follows a market-driven redevelopment imperative in which the logic of “greening” vacant lots is ultimately subtractive (disconnecting municipal infrastructure and transferring city-owned lots to private owners), Feedom Freedom emerged through a long struggle to build an organization to oppose historical patterns of racialized and uneven development driven by this very logic. Wayne and Myrtle are not alone in this effort. Their garden is one experiment among many in Detroit in which residents are working to construct their own infrastructures of survival and care in an effort to counteract state and capital abandonment and reimagine the possibilities of life in the city.

During my fieldwork, I occasionally volunteered at Feedom Freedom and became friendly with Wayne and Myrtle. Like many visitors, I often found myself engaged in conversations with Wayne who liked to philosophize as he worked. “To understand the garden,” Wayne told me one day, “you have to understand my history in the Black Panther Party.” Later, in a formal interview through the Uniting Detroiters project, Wayne spoke directly about how Feedom Freedom for him was an outgrowth of his earlier activism. He explained that when he sold newspapers for the Detroit chapter of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s, the party’s survival programs had helped residents meet their basic necessities. The BPP’s Intercommunal News Service distributed 125,000 copies weekly of *The Black Panther*. Wayne emphasized that selling papers was not just about disseminating news. The newspaper routes were about

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<sup>1</sup> Detroit Works Project, Detroit Future City Strategic Framework, 2012, 127.

establishing relationships, cultivating an ethic of responsibility, and creating an infrastructure that would support the party's numerous survival programs, which provided food, shoes, health care, education, and various services like legal, plumbing, and electrical. The BPP envisioned the programs as a way to escape the oppression of U.S. empire through everyday social reproduction, mutual aid, and the production of alternative forms of community. As Wayne remembers it, "we were everywhere in Detroit. ... the clothing stores, we had a free clothing program ... All the meat markets gave chicken for our free food program.... Like in Oakland, they gave out 75,000 bags of groceries once a month. Here in Detroit, we gave out 5,000 bags with a chicken ... we could go up to Chicago and help them bag up their food, they could come here and help us, that's a lot of food."

Wayne pointed out that a great deal had changed in the city and across the world since then. For example, the neighborhood stores that had donated food and clothing to the survival programs no longer existed. In many cases, they had been replaced by vacant lots. "We totally depended upon that political and economic system to survive. Now that it's not here, how do we get the resources we need?" Wayne asked. "How do we get the food which is needed? How do we create the economy?" This is where Feedom Freedom Growers came in. Wayne explained that Feedom Freedom (feed them freedom) had an unapologetic anti-capitalist orientation that was rooted in neighborhood self-determination. "We used to say the Black Panther Party was the ox of the people," Wayne said, "now I'll say the community is our ox. We have to formulate it, ride it, and develop it so it will serve us." Community in this sense does not just exist but has to be cultivated. It is what emerges from the work of Feedom Freedom and numerous other affinity groups in Detroit and beyond trying to gain control over the social reproduction of community. The garden, like the Black Panther survival programs, had a basic needs orientation and a

crucial, if humble, agenda for self-determination and self-sufficiency that began with creating a space conducive to “face-to-face relationships in the neighborhood.”

The impetuses for establishing urban gardens in Detroit vary widely (from entrepreneurial gardens to farming as a means of societal transformation). Many residents who are involved in them see themselves as part of a broader people’s movement for food justice and global food sovereignty and engaged in a struggle for the right for communities to dictate and define their own food and agriculture. Until 2012, all of the gardens in Detroit were relatively small-scale, approximately one to two parcels. The largest was D-Town, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network’s seven-acre model farm. This network, like Feedom Freedom, is an anchor organization in the city organized around the goal of Black self-determination.

As Detroit’s reputation as a farming destination has grown, debates typically associated with rural areas have emerged as new arenas for urban politics. In 2012, struggles over what kind of agricultural development standards Detroit should uphold came to a head during a city council vote on a controversial proposal by John Hantz, a white businessman, that promised to return Detroit’s to its “agrarian roots” by building the “world’s largest farm” on the city’s eastside. Community activists, particularly Detroit’s food justice community, actively opposed the project on the grounds that Hantz’s stated motivation was driving up real-estate prices by reducing the supply of available land on the market. Therefore, they pointed out, Hantz’s project was at odds with their vision of agriculture as a means of self-determination and community development.

Unlike Feedom Freedom, Hantz’s approach to urban agriculture dovetailed with the Detroit Future City’s (DFC) green redevelopment approach. Its logic is ultimately subtractive in that its managers couch the plan as reducing the city’s financial burden, both in terms of service

delivery and maintenance, and decreasing the supply of properties on the real estate market. Thus, it was no coincidence that the site for the proposed 181-acre forest called Hantz Woodlands was located in an area deemed by the Market Value Analysis to have “no market value” and slated for greening under the DFC plan. It also aligned with DFC’s land-use category of “innovative productive” zones (see chapter 5). Ultimately, however, it was not only the size that distinguished Hantz Woodland from existing agrarian projects in Detroit but also the moral and political economic rationalities that undergirded it.

In this chapter, I focus on the struggle over the sale of city-owned land to Hantz Woodlands that ensued during my fieldwork and why Hantz posed a threat to alternative agrarian and community-based projects like Feedom Freedom that long preceded it. The approval of Hantz Woodlands brought the stakes of DFC’s territorial reordering of the city and its landscape as infrastructure approach into stark relief. As such, it presented a challenge for activists and residents involved in grassroots projects like Feedom Freedom who had been trying to repurpose Detroit’s lands and neighborhoods according to a different set of infrastructural expectations and visions for agrarian futures and development. The struggle over the Hantz Woodlands proposal seemed to turn on the straightforward issue of land control. Indeed, as I show in the first part of the chapter, many of the people that opposed Hantz Woodlands framed their protest of the project as a “land grab” and made counterclaims by invoking land rights. However, the struggle around Hantz sale actually became a transformative moment in grassroots organizing by initiating a broader conversation around community land control among residents and activists. In the second part of the chapter, I argue that, while important, the struggle over Hantz Woodlands was not simply a struggle over land control. Some Detroit farms—Feedom Freedom, D-Town, and many others—are organized around what geographer Katherine McKittrick calls “a

grammar of liberation.” In these spaces, residents work to cultivate more “ethical *human-geographies*.”<sup>2</sup> More specifically, I argue that land rights assumed great importance in the resistance to Hantz Woodlands precisely because the project came to stand for a development paradigm (and a broader territorial reordering by the DFC and state takeover/bankruptcy) that threatened alternative visions for Detroit’s development being fostered at the neighborhood level through various social justice-oriented projects. This recognition led to a movement to organize for community land control not as the end goal but for securing the grounds on which to build another world.

### **Maintaining Detroit**

In order to understand why the Hantz Woodlands proposal was attractive to the Detroit city government, we need to understand the difficulties that the city faced in maintaining the 150,000 vacant lots only half of which they own. For most city residents—at least those not employed by utilities or maintenance departments—the constant maintenance necessary to support urban life and landscapes is invisible, because it is either taken for granted or operates, quite literally, behind the scenes of everyday life. As scholars in science and technology studies have observed, this routine infrastructural work becomes visible at moments of breakdown (roads develop potholes, waterlines burst, power outages, et cetera). Though vital in practical terms, maintenance work has remained under theorized in social theory, which emphasizes processes of construction, connection, and assembly over those of partial connection, disconnection, and disassembly.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) p. xxii.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, “Steps toward an Ecology of Infrastructure: Design and Access for Large Information Spaces.” *Information Systems Research* 7, 1 (1996): 111–134; Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance.” *Theory. Culture and Society* 24, 3 (2007): 1–2.

The “breakdown” in Detroit’s property system meant that residents spent an inordinate amount of time caring for land they did not own (see chapter 3). Maintenance was a huge source of frustration and concern across the city. Even though the ways residents collectively maintained landscapes often led to unexpected and positive outcomes like strengthened neighborhood relationships and communal space, it was also the case that many people involved in this work would prefer that the city or someone else do it. In the previous chapter, I examined the logics that undergird the Market Value Analysis (MVA) and DFC plan. Here I want to show how the MVA reshaped everyday municipal maintenance in the city and what these changes meant for decommissioned lands and the people living in these neighborhoods.

The second time I encountered the MVA map was in a meeting with Andrea Phipps, who was then manager of Detroit’s General Service Department and, therefore, responsible for overseeing the maintenance of vacant lots throughout Detroit. Her office was located in a barn-like structure on Belle Isle, a 982-acre city-owned park in the middle of the Detroit River often referred to as city’s “crown jewel.” When she began working as department manager in 2009, the city coordinated the mowing of 50,000 to 60,000 lots. By 2012, the number had exceeded 120,000, including lots owned by the city and those whose owners no longer maintained them. In the beginning, she explained, the department tried to keep track of which lots were private and which were public. However, lag times in data entry led to an increasingly inaccurate accounting system for keeping track of where and when mowing needed to be done. Consequently, the city government decided to cut all un-mowed grass within its jurisdiction because it was too hard to determine who owned what. This decision meant that the private contractors who the city hired to mow were cutting three times as many lots as before.

Before 2010, two private contractors cut vacant city-owned lots four times per year,

including the front lawns of empty homes where the grass was in excess of eight inches and the area around fire hydrants and fences. The contractors were paid half a penny per square foot. In 2010, the city reduced maintenance to two annual cuts and the amount each contractor was paid. Andrea explained, “Each contractor receives approximately \$500,000 divided over the two cuts. In the past, they were getting \$700,000 for four cuts. Now they are getting \$252,000 for the first cut and \$248,000 for the second, but it doesn’t really cover their costs. The square footage is approximately four times more than it was before. Last year, the contractors realized they were getting duped. Fuel prices had risen dramatically, but the city didn’t recalculate their contract to reflect the increase, nor did they calculate the increase in the number of vacant lots. In addition, the contractors always face a lot of repair, for example, on lots where people have taken out part of a fence, but left the base, the contractors will run over it and blow out a tire.” In 2011, the contractors came to Andrea and said that the arrangement was not working. She had begun working with them to prioritize areas for mowing when the Detroit Works Project’s MVA map was released and provided the department with this very classification.

As she explained the developments of the past few years, Andrea pulled a laminated MVA map from atop a nearby filing cabinet in her office. She explained that the map was distributed to all city departments with a mandate to modify service delivery based on the new market zones. But, in comparison to the MVA maps that I’d seen tacked on the walls of other departments, Andrea’s map looked well used. The plastic was crinkled at the edges and streaked with fingermarks. The map – which color-coded the city into market-based zones – helped her prioritize where and how frequently the contractors should cut the grass.

As a new tool for categorizing neighborhoods and prioritizing service delivery across the city, the MVA map altered both where and how Detroit’s General Service Department cut grass.



Before the map was published, they had just mowed everything, Andrea told me. Now in the “distressed” and “varied” market areas, they only did windowpane cuts. A “windowpane cut” entails trimming street corners by one tractor’s width so that one could see around the corner from the window of their car. In the “steady” and “transitional” market areas, they would continue cutting lots in full. However, it’s important to note that even a “full cut” differs from most mowed lawns. Rather than being evenly trimmed, the grass is reduced to a jagged stubble. When it (quickly) grows back, the lots begin to resemble prairie. Because neither “windowpane” nor “full cut” lawns maintained by the city are ideal for residential or social use, when residents want to use vacant lots as pocket parks, theater spaces, gardens, or to extend their lawns, they often coordinate with neighbors to keep them trimmed or do their own mowing.

To demonstrate the implications of prioritizing city mowing according to the MVA categories, Andrea offered to take me on a drive of the east side, which was adjacent to Belle Isle on the mainland and an area that the MVA designated as “distressed.” We climbed into her work truck and crossed over the Belle Isle bridge. She pointed out various landscape features -- the flowers at the park’s entrance and the road medians -- that workers in her department maintained. The history of the east side underscores how the MVA followed patterns of racialized uneven development. Historically, an auto production center, the east side was an industrial landscape with some of the city’s oldest and poorest housing stock. When the historically Black neighborhoods of Black Bottom and Paradise Valley were razed during urban renewal, the area became home to three-quarters of Detroit’s African-American population. Given its historical organization around automobile factories, it was impacted by changes in the industry worse than any other part of Detroit. Between 1953 and 1960, the area lost 10 plants and 71,137 jobs. Local

stores, taverns, and restaurants closed their doors, but many residents stayed.<sup>4</sup> The area was further devastated during the 1967 uprising when it was a key site for arson. The area was hit hard yet again by the subprime crisis. Between 2000 and 2010, the population in the surrounding area declined by an estimated 40 percent compared to an already-high 25 percent for the rest of the city.<sup>5</sup> Yet many people still lived there and needed services.

As Andrea drove, she explained that while mowing may seem trivial, its absence triggers powerful reactions. Indeed, east side residents reacted furiously to the changes in mowing and landscape maintenance that were pegged to the MVA map. “The director of the General Services Department issued a letter to residents explaining the changes, and it went over like a lead balloon,” she said. After the letter was mailed, the General Services Department set up a call center for people to make complaints. They received over one hundred calls per week. Additional calls were made to the mayor’s office and the main General Service Department office. “The calls were overwhelming,” said Andrea. “It would take us two months to return the calls, if they got returned at all.” Residents take their frustration out on the contractors. Andrea said that she once witnessed a resident become so upset that he shot at a contractor. The city started putting out signs that say, “City Don’t Mow” in an attempt to make it clear that the non-mowing is purposeful. Another strategy was tossing out wildflower seed bombs in “no mow zones” in an attempt to beautify the fields at little cost.

Keeping nature at bay in Detroit is a constant battle for residents and city workers. Over the course of a single season, Andrea said, the brush can grow so high that it will obscure houses. “If a lot is unattended, there will be weeds up to your knees in three months. After five or six

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Data Driven Detroit 2010.

months, saplings will have started to take over.” The species *ailanthus altissima*, known locally by the derisive nicknames “ghetto palm” and “stink tree” for its smell, has invaded unmaintained lots across Detroit. Native to China and Taiwan, where it is called the “tree of heaven,” *ailanthus altissima* was first introduced to the United States in the late eighteenth century. It has been used extensively for street tree planting in urban areas, but is now considered invasive because of its ability to colonize areas of rubble and vacant lots.

In practice, the new mowing schedule meant that the city had decided to cede areas categorized as “distressed” to the hybrid nature of the ghetto palm, even though they are still occupied by residents. Andrea stopped the truck on a deserted street and gestured, “On some blocks, there will only be one house. There will be one woman waiting at the bus stop to go to work. But people don’t want to move. Some of them do, but others don’t and others can’t. You can’t move a 90 year old,” Andrea says, matter-of-factly. “She’ll die. But if the 90-year-old who is living on a block by herself went out and yelled, no one would hear her. Oftentimes in neighborhoods, the weeds are taller than the heads of children.” She drove one block down and the “distressed” urban fabric gave way to rows of inhabited and well-maintained houses, demonstrating the problems with the MVA and DFC portraying distressed areas as empty. In other words, the heterogeneous conditions on the ground exceeded the MVA and DFC’s simple categorizations in terms of market conditions and vacancy.

Mowing in contemporary Detroit, as Andrea made clear, is about far more than simply cutting grass. Landscape maintenance (in its presence and absence) indexes the market-driven political priorities and values that are reshaping Detroit’s urban landscapes and the lives of the people who occupy them. The city’s decision not to mow certain areas, like a large swath of the east side, marks the first stage of abandonment and the withdrawal of care from neighborhoods

(and their residents) deemed to not carry the promise of future market value. In a material sense, then, the decision not to mow reproduces the MVA map on the ground, fragmenting the city into developed and underdeveloped areas. It was not coincidentally, then, that the areas where Andrea and I drove around was the proposed site of Hantz Woodlands. In an era of municipal fiscal crisis and austerity, Hantz is precisely the kind of land-use and private sector management that the DFC plan imagines for those areas deemed by the MVA to be “distressed” markets.

### **Hantz Woodlands: An urban cover crop**

The Hantz Woodlands origin myth, as told by Hantz in 2009 when he first proposed a farm in Detroit, goes like this: Every morning, the 48-year-old white financier drove through the city to the multi-billion dollar planning and investment firm he owned in the suburbs. One morning, he realized that the mismatch between Detroit’s population size and spatial footprint was fundamentally a problem of supply and demand. With almost 30,000 acres of abandoned land in Detroit, he thought, there is no incentive to buy real estate, because every year it becomes cheaper. He then pledged \$30 million to build a large-scale farm in Detroit with the explicit aim of reducing the supply of real estate on the market.

Between 2009, when Hantz first proposed a farm in Detroit, and December 2012, when the city council approved the land sale, he encountered various stumbling blocks. Residents worried about the impacts of a large farm in their neighborhood. Would it attract rodents? Would pesticides be used? What would be the environmental impacts, especially given that the city council had yet to pass an urban agricultural ordinance? In addition, they pointed out that the project lacked a community benefit agreement and would generate only modest revenue for the city. Finally, they worried the city’s agreement with Hantz would set a precedent for deals with other developers in areas being decommissioned through the elimination of public services.

In response to community opposition, the scope of the project diminished and its form changed. Following a grandiose initial proposal for a 5,000-acre complex to integrate vegetable, fruit, timber, and biofuels production, agritourism, and a hydroponic and aeroponic research center, Hantz and Score scaled it back to a more modest plan for a you-pick orchard and Christmas tree farm. In 2011, they finally settled on a hardwood tree farm on the city's lower east side. Why forestry in Detroit? Unlike food crops, trees were "forgiving," because they don't need pesticides, water, fertilizer, and can grow in rubble. Yet even the revised plan raised objections as the development agreement moved toward city council for a vote. The city planning commission issued a memo objecting to the sale because it set a dangerous precedent for future land sales. They also expressed concern that residents and property owners in the Hantz footprint had neither been properly consulted nor given the first right of refusal to purchase adjacent lots.

In June 2012, I went to interview Mike Score, the president of Hantz Woodlands, at the company's office. The one-story brick building with no windows also functioned as a personal hardware store that Hantz used to service his Detroit properties; he opened the store to the public one day a week. Score was born in Detroit. Like many white families, his moved to the suburb of Warren in the early 1960s when he was a teenager. Score was generous with his time and affable, something I heard many of those who opposed the Hantz Woodlands say in the same breath that they criticized the impetus for the project. Before the Hantz project, he had spent decades working in rural development around the world from cattle production in the Congo to mining reclamation in West Virginia before returning to school for a master's degree in sustainable agriculture at the University of Kentucky. With Hantz Woodlands, he brought this

experience with agriculture and development in rural areas to the very different social, political, and environmental context of a postindustrial U.S. city.

Score explained that Hantz Woodlands was a legacy project. John Hantz, a multi-millionaire, didn't need to make money, he just wanted to break even and have a positive impact by making the city more livable. If they could accomplish this, according to Score, "Detroit could be a new type of city," because other prominent Detroiters would follow in Hantz's footsteps and make similar investments in green redevelopment. The project would prove that there was room for farms of all sizes in the city. To illustrate what he meant by a positive impact, he toured me through the company's demonstration plot that they'd established to prove to the city that "our believable fairytale was true. We told them, you can take a farm and drop it into an existing neighborhood. Nobody has to leave." The language of dropping a farm into a neighborhood was a striking contrast to the visions of agriculture articulated by groups like Feedom Freedom in which the garden grew out of the community.

As we walked outside, he described their vision. Hantz would buy tax-foreclosed lots from the city, demolish any buildings on them, and plant hardwood trees (sugar maples, swamp oaks, bur oaks, white birch, flowering dogwoods). When – or if – the trees matured (after an estimated 60 years), they would be sold as hardwood logs. From a distance, the trees looked less like a forest than another vacant lot. Upon closer inspection, skinny saplings held up by poles were planted in rows twelve-feet apart. The wide spacing of the rows was important, Score explained, because residents could see from one end to the other and they could mow the grass in between, and didn't have to fence them. "It is park like," as he put it.

Yet, if we focus on the trees themselves, we miss how "livability" was imagined through this monoculture forest. I pressed Score on what livability meant for the Hantz project. First and

foremost, he described how blight decimates the exchange value of homes and also spreads a negative perception about the people who live next to blighted houses. “Imagine if you had a family reunion and people were coming from Chicago and Columbus, Atlanta. You can’t host a family reunion at your house because it’s an embarrassment. People will think you’ve failed in life because none of the lots next to your house are mowed. There are boats and tires and cars parked in the field next to your house....The dangerous structures have to be taken out. The thickets in the alleys have to be taken out. The lots need to be cleaned up. The grass needs to be mowed. So that when a private home owner maintains their house, it retains value.” For Hantz and Score, making Detroit more livable meant getting property out of the city’s hands because they didn’t have resources, staff, or expertise to manage it. As Score put it, “frankly, they don’t care.” Yet as we saw earlier with Andrea Phipps some people working for the city, of course, do care, as do many residents who tend land in their neighborhoods.

Mike Score felt frustrated in his efforts to work with the Detroit city government. He said, “This is the problem in Detroit: the city does not exist. We keep trying to figure out where the eyes are on this entity sitting across the table from us. We want to have eye contact...it’s like who is running the city.” For Score, a supporter of the state takeover, “government has to improve if the marketplace is going to thrive.” Thus, the Hantz project, in Score’s description, was not paternalistic toward residents, but neighborly because it “actually cares about what life is like for them.” Whereas many residents claim that they city and developers do not care about them, Score insisted that the Hantz Woodlands project did care. For him, care meant beautification. “People can walk through there. If they want to urinate on my trees, let them. Trees are great. We can make them look nice. It accomplishes the goal of making the area more livable.”

However, the 60-year production horizon reminds us that Hantz’s primary intention was not timber production nor beautification, but a green fix for depressed real estate markets. To his credit, Hantz had always been transparent about this. In his words, the project was about creating “positive scarcity” to induce people to “take action.” Hantz Woodlands was designed in Hantz’s words to “create scarcity in a way that impacts everything else we’re trying to fix, like reduced services ... With a farm, you can turn the sewage and the water off; it takes care of blight – it’s really the cheapest option you have.”<sup>6</sup> By using the term “we,” Hantz positioned his project as a private sector solution to the city’s infrastructural challenges; I discuss this strategic alignment more below.



**FIGURE 6.1.** Hantz Woodlands demonstration plot (author photo)

“John’s first proposal,” Mike said, “was not a farm. His real vision was to get property back into the private sector. He suggested to the city that there be a Homesteading program.” Hantz said he would give up the farm and fund the creation of a city Homesteading Office that his company would administer instead of the city, which he argued would be incapable of

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<sup>6</sup> The Editors, “A new harvest for Detroit.” *The Atlantic* (May 27, 2010), <http://www.theatlantic.com/special-report/the-future-of-the-city/archive/2010/05/a-new-harvest-fordetroit/57308/> (accessed 7.23.14).

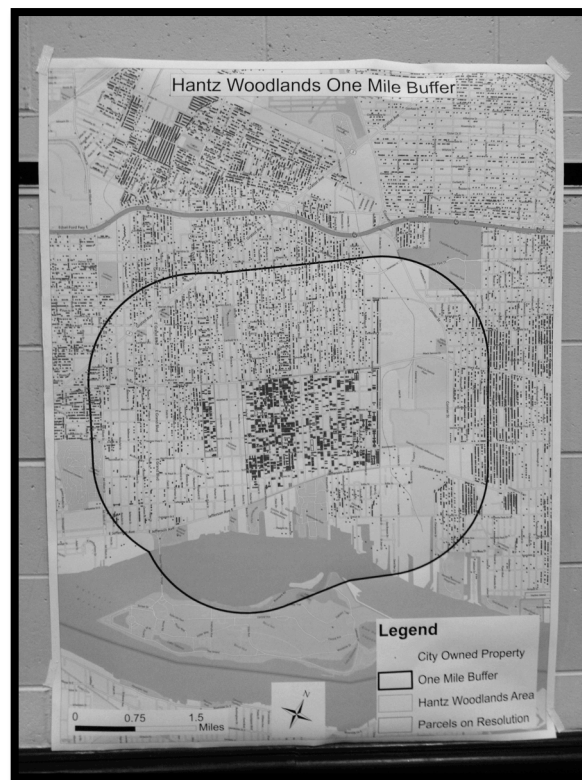


implementing it efficiently. “When people come in they’d bring their deed, there is a one-page application, we’d do a site visit, yes you own the property, yes it is adjacent to your house, you don’t have a blighted site now, you have to agree to cut the grass for three years, at the end of three years, you have to agree to pay the taxes ... The Homesteading Office signs off on the deal, they visit your site, at the end of three years it is yours.” For Hantz, economic development was predicated on the transfer of Detroit’s foreclosed public property into responsible private hands. Hantz’s vision of landowners mowing the grass for three years (which certainly many already did for longer periods of time without ownership) was an appealing vision to many city administrators given the contemporary reality of Andrea’s underfunded department and its overworked contractors. Yet the liberal assumptions of individualism and responsible use embedded in Hantz’s vision for urban homesteading and forestry raised questions about the larger project because these same concepts have long been used to justify dispossession and uneven development. Under neoliberal environmentalism, they have been recycled to support a new round of urban enclosures.

Hantz’s project evoked Lockean logics and arguments about labor and property to make a claim to Detroit’s “empty” land. John Locke argued that labor put into land confers ownership. However, Hantz Woodlands was not simply about land control, but property as a disciplinary mechanism. Locke argued that once people became property owners, they would also become civilized and rationale subjects who would seek to “improve” (i.e., productively use) their land. In short, private property was a way to induce progress and economic prosperity, much like Hantz’s homesteading proposal to transfer state property to individuals today; even if land was productively used, it would only produce exchange value when rendered legible within the private property apparatus.

## Hantz off our land

On December 12, 2012, over 400 residents gathered at Bethel Baptist Church to voice their concerns about Hantz Woodland to Detroit city council members before they voted on a development agreement to sell 1,900 parcels near the waterfront to the company for \$520,000. A map hung on the back wall of the church. On the map, a hand-drawn line encircled most of Detroit's lower east side, tracing a "one-mile buffer" around the footprint of the land Hantz Woodlands might eventually own if the development agreement was approved. In addition to the initial sale of 1,900 lots, the agreement indicated that Hantz would be given the right of first refusal to buy any city-owned lots within the buffer zone in four years. By 2016, as one city planner put it, he could potentially own 1/14 of Detroit.



**FIGURE 6.2.** Hantz Woodlands proposed development site

The Hantz project, which many residents saw as a "land grab" by a white businessman in

a Black city, upset the community's moral economy.<sup>7</sup> E.P. Thompson, who introduced the concept of moral economy, argued that the reactions of the poor to rapid social change could not be understood through crude economic explanations, but within the framework of the traditional norms and customs concerning the legitimate roles of particular groups within an economy. Thus, by invoking the term "land grab," opponents of Hantz Woodlands linked concerns that whites were coming back to take the city with the global territorial restructuring of the political economy of land. Following the food and fuel price spikes of 2007 and 2008, scholars and activists identified a spate of large-scale land acquisitions, or land grabs, by corporate and state entities that began taking place worldwide, particularly in rural areas. Detroiters use of the term drew a continuum between urban and rural struggles against the privatization of common and public property resources and their transfer into corporate or foreign state hands, the attendant widespread dispossession of smallholders and city dwellers, and impact of these processes on people's subsistence, whether in the countryside or city.<sup>8</sup> As one community activist put it, "Land grabs are about more than agrarian land, although Hantz fits into both. Land grabs are dispossessions that threaten projects of self-determination and people's ability to determine their own destiny, including, foreclosures, the privatization of public utilities, and gentrification."

Hantz's land grab was less about transforming land and exporting goods produced on it and more about the landscape itself being "greened" and held for its speculative value. In this way it fit into a subset of land grabs that anthropologist James Fairhead and colleagues call "green grabs." "Green grabbing" involves new forms of valuation, commodification, and

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<sup>7</sup> E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century." *Past and Present* 50 (1971): 76–136.

<sup>8</sup> Ben White, Saturnino M Borras Jr, Ruth Hall, Ian Scoones, and Wendy Wolford. "The New Enclosures : Critical Perspectives on Corporate Land Deals." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 3–4 (2012): 619–47.

markets for nature and a range of new actors (e.g., pension funds, venture capitalists, environmentalists, ecotourism companies, the military, anxious consumers) who find “once unlikely common interest.”<sup>9</sup> While discourses of sustainability are often used to justify the appropriation of land, green grabbing involves, as Fairhead and colleagues argue, reconfiguring rules and authority over access, use, and management, labor relations, and human-ecological relations in ways that have profoundly alienating and redistributive effects. While they focus on rural green grabs, the concept is also useful for analyzing the contested re-valuation of urban landscapes under the DFC and Hantz.

In the months leading up to the city council vote on the Hantz proposal, community activists launched a campaign of resistance, which would turn out to have important implications for community organizing around land issues that were much larger than this single project. The most vocal opposition came from Detroit’s well-organized food justice movement. They wrote op-ed pieces in local newspapers and letters to city council members, held public listening session about the land sale process, organized rallies, and appeared on talk shows. They argued that land ownership and control must be at the forefront of discussions about social justice and development in Detroit. They pointed out that many farmers who “improved” lands struggled to get legal title, even as Hantz ultimately acquired thousands of parcels.

Malik Yakini, a prominent figure in Detroit’s food justice movement, underscored these points in a radio interview, arguing the city needed to consider the social justice, class, and racial implications of land disposition and not just sell to the highest bidder. The Hantz project, he said, perpetuated a global legacy of “wealthy white men owning large tracts of land” and the majority of people being landless. “This is a legacy project. He is looking to leave this to his

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<sup>9</sup> James Fairhead, Melissa Leach, and Ian Scoones. “Green Grabbing: A New Appropriation of Nature?” *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39, no. 2 (April 2012): 237–61.

daughter. We are talking about the intergenerational transmission of wealth and continuing to create this imbalance of power in the city of Detroit.”<sup>10</sup> Score and Yakini both called it a *legacy* project. Whereas Score used legacy to explain Hantz’s desire to leave a positive mark on the city, Yakini used it to show how Hantz Woodlands was a social justice issue because it extended racial and colonial legacies of dispossession. Yakini, like others, felt Detroit had an opportunity to reimagine land use in a way that would benefit the majority of the people. “How can we use this [land] for the common good?” he asked.

The Detroit Food Policy Council (DFPC) hosted a public listening session on the sale of public land on August 22, 2012, attended by 240 people. While the impetus for the session was the announcement the month before, July, that plans for the Hantz deal were moving forward, the mandate was far broader: to come up with a just and transparent disposition process for the city’s “vacant” lands. The DFPC recognized that the city government wanted to sell land to be absolved of costly maintenance responsibilities like mowing thousands of lots, but called for the institution of a more just and transparent process to achieve that goal. In particular, they argued that the continued growth of a broad and inclusive urban agricultural community in Detroit turned on the policies developed for the disposition of city-owned land. Thus, the goals of the meeting were to clarify to residents how the Bing administration was proceeding with large-scale sales of city-owned land, consider the impact of the purchase of large tracts of land for urban agriculture or similar uses, and give Detroiters a chance to express their opinions about this issue.

The first panel of the DFPC-hosted listening session focused on residents’ experiences purchasing land from the city. Myrtle Thompson-Curtis of Freedom Freedom Growers spoke on

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<sup>10</sup> Malik Yakini, The Craig Fahle Show, Malik Yakini Interview on WDET: Is a Tree Farm the Solution to Detroit’s Blighted Neighborhood? (November 28, 2012).

the opening panel. She started off the session by describing Feedom Freedom as an urban agricultural institution with deep roots in Detroit. She explained that they had experience trying to get things done inside the city and worked across the neighborhood, grassroots, and family levels. Like many farmers in Detroit, Feedom Freedom's land tenure was precarious because they did not have title to the land they'd been tending since 2009. Like Malik Yakini, Myrtle Thompson-Curtis framed the land conversation in terms of city-owned land being a common good. She put it this way:

It does not belong to the mayor, it belongs to the city. Therefore, there must be a fair and just transparent process for purchasing city-owned land. It must be a process that does not unduly favor the wealthy. It is more than time to begin to think about the future of Detroit. We do not want to recreate the same models that have always been here. Historically there's been an imbalance in economic power based in part on who owns land and who doesn't. Increasingly, land ownership is being concentrated in the hands of a few while the majority is landless. So more than likely if your grandfather owned land, you will inherit land and therefore and so on...

Others who opposed Hantz tried to make visible the ways they stewarded and improved land, but had no security. For example, Edith Floyd had been farming for 40 years near the proposed site of Hantz Woodlands, but had been unable to get even a temporary permit for her greenhouse. She argued that the city should sell land to people who have been caring for it. "He's getting a special deal. This city is not treating us fair at all . . . It's two laws: one for the rich and one for the poor."<sup>11</sup> Not only did residents argue that smallholder farmers should be granted property rights, but that the labor of those who mow lawns, plant flowers, and board up buildings should be recognized through land rights. Like Hantz and Score, their arguments invoked Lockean logics – that labor should confer property rights – but their claims were based on informal labor, both past and present, rather than the promise of future benefits.

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<sup>11</sup> David Sands, "Hantz Farms deal, controversial land sale, to go before Detroit City Council," *Huffington Post*, (November 19, 2012).

At the DFPC listening session, Jerry Ann Hebron of Oakland Avenue Community Garden and Northend Christian Community Development Corporation described her organization's frustrating and ultimately futile efforts to purchase seven city-owned lots that they'd cared for by creating a community garden, planting perennials and shrubs, and installing sculptures. Between 1990 and 2012, they "improved" the land through these amenities, spent \$68,000 on cutting the grass and other maintenance costs, placed a \$1,120 deposit on the land with the city to try to secure the property, and submitted three sets of application on the same parcel. Yet they received no response. Thus, many of those speaking at the listening session wanted secure land rights and a transparent process. Toward that end, the DFPC issued a position statement on what a fair and just land disposition process would look like. The process would be accessible, facilitate equal treatment and access, consider public interest, give priority to Detroit residents, and value sweat equity.

Community opposition to the Hantz proposal precipitated activists' and organizers' efforts to begin articulating their own alternative visions for what a just land policy and development might look like in Detroit. Some activists started calling for a community land trust as a way to counter land grabs like Hantz and gentrification that was starting to displace residents in greater downtown. Under the community land trust model a nonprofit organization would own the land with the aim of securing it for the community by taking it off of the speculative market. Land trusts had been successfully used in other African-American communities to avoid displacement and gain greater community control of land. The first nonprofit community land trust in the country was New Communities Farm, which formed in 1966 on 5,000 acres near Albany Georgia to secure a commonly owned land base for Black farmers who became

members.<sup>12</sup> The Dudley Street Initiative in Roxbury, Massachusetts, was also looked to as a successful urban model that emerged from a coalition of community organizations working together to meet the needs of their neighborhood and secured more than 250 homes for low-income owners.

One person active in organizing for the Detroit community land trust put it this way: “what’s happening is deeper than saying no to a land grab. It’s about having an ability to develop our own plan.” A coalition of over 14 organizations argued that community land trusts – a legally sanctioned alternative to private property and state property – were the best path for future development. In an open letter to the city, they claimed the area where Hantz had proposed his development:

We . . . have done sustained, substantial work on the east side of Detroit for many decades. We have established youth programs, worked on anti violence efforts, organized business initiatives, encouraged economic innovation, established gardens, reclaimed homes, planted trees, developed new models of education, and supported artistic and creative activities. Like all Detroiters, we have contributed to the support of public lands, and we have all suffered from their neglect. We Believe: Public lands are a public trust; Public land should be used to further community health, welfare, beauty, independence, and interconnection.

In response to community opposition, Hantz Woodland’s Mike Score wrote an open letter that appeared in the Detroit *Huffington Post*, in which he argued: “People who have been generous, and who practice civic duty and pride in their communities understand and support Hantz Group’s willingness to make this type of investment. The effort is to clean up, maintain and create a beautiful environment that will grow the City’s population base and create an economic catalyst by stimulating new business opportunities and therefore, jobs.”<sup>13</sup> The letter

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<sup>12</sup> See Robert Swann (1972), *The Community Land Trust: A Guide to a New Model for Land Tenure in America*, available here -- <http://neweconomicsinstitute.org/sites/default/files/CLTbookCondensed.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Mike Score, “Hantz Farms President Mike Score defends Detroit venture against skeptics, rumored Monsanto ties,” *Huffington Post Detroit* (July 30, 2012), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/30/hantz-farms-mike-score->



called attention to the polyfunctionality of new green landscapes proposed under the Detroit Future City plan and accused people who opposed or questioned the Hantz development of lacking civic mindedness and pride in Detroit. Moreover, Score's argument that private property instilled civility, responsibility, and economic productivity carried racial undertones that were both problematic and contentious in an often-denigrated majority-Black city. A blogger on a site called the Above Ground Tumblr wrote, "there is one common narrative we keep hearing: that this land grab is a good thing because the people currently living in the area (or the ones who lost their own parcels of the land through foreclosures) don't know how to take care of the land. Those people are responsible for the blight of Detroit, they are responsible for 'everything that is wrong with Detroit today' . . . and so it's decided that it'd be best if the people on the land are removed to make way for people who know how to take care of it \*properly\*.'"<sup>14</sup>

In the weeks leading up to the 2012 city council vote on Hantz Woodlands, the Detroit Food Justice Taskforce, a consortium of people-of-color-led organizations and allies that aim to create a food security plan for the city, organized a door-to-door canvassing campaign within Hantz Woodland's projected footprint and estimated that 90 percent of residents did not know about the project, a result that was quite different from Score's previous claim that 90 percent of the people that they polled supported the proposed project. While no formal verification of either of these figures exists, the turnout at the Bethel Church meeting the night before the city council vote suggested widespread dissatisfaction. According to my own estimate, the overwhelming majority of speakers during more than two and a half hours of public comments expressed opposition.

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detroit-president\_n\_1719945.html (accessed 7.23.14).

<sup>14</sup> Above Ground Tumblr, Posted December 21, 2012 at <http://theaboveground.tumblr.com/post/36847060062/welivehere-landmemories> (accessed 01.03.14).

With the Detroit Works Project moving ahead, and the city's takeover by an emergency manager imminent, the city council voted to sell Hantz 1,900 parcels on the east side for \$520,000. The land, located a half mile from the waterfront, would be sold for 8 cents per square foot. In turn, Hantz agreed to plant at least 15,000 hardwood trees on the land or use it in any other way consistent with applicable law, regulations, and ordinances; maintain the landscape and mow the properties every three weeks during the growing season; and tear down at least 50 dilapidated structures. Hantz Woodlands was the perfect remedy for the broke city struggling with maintenance costs, particularly given that the forest was proposed for an area already designated on the MVA map as distressed and thus set for the immediate discontinuation of maintenance and eventually city services. As mentioned, if Hantz Woodlands followed the agreement, in 2016, the company would be given right of first refusal to buy all city-owned lots in a one-mile radius around the site. Nothing in the development agreement bound Hantz to forestry or agriculture after the initial 4 years.

On the surface, the opposition to Hantz Woodlands seemed to turn on land equity. However, for most the end goal was not land reform, per se. The struggle around Hantz came to represent a broader struggle for a new Detroit and the threat posed by the neoliberal territorial reordering of the city (DFC, the MVA, the state takeover, et cetera) to ways that residents and communities activists had themselves been trying to make the city "livable."

### **The urban commons**

Even though organizers did not stop Hantz Woodlands, resistance efforts provided the impetus for conversations that laid the groundwork for something potentially more important. In August 2012, over 50 residents gathered at the Solanus Casey Center on the eastside of Detroit near the Hantz footprint for a Uniting Detroiters workshop. After a discussion of the territorial

reordering of the city proposed by the DFC and MVA, participants broke into small groups to create their own maps of Detroit. Whereas official city maps, like the MVA and those in the DFC plan, represented a reconfiguration of the city according to the presumed logic of developers, austerity, and finance capital, these strategic maps were oriented around an analysis of power, social justice, and history.

During the workshop, one group created a map with a legend associating red dots with “stop, challenge, community detriment.” They marked the Hantz Woodlands area in red. They used yellow dots to identify zones of “caution,” which included other land grabs and a large “zone of gentrification” that extended from downtown to Midtown. Blue dots, by contrast, denoted “historical memory,” including sites of historical displacement like the Fox Indian Massacre, Black Bottom, the Battle of the Overpass, and Poletown. In addition to highlighting such sites of struggle, this group and others also located community assets that supported an alternative visions for the city’s development, including public sites like museums, libraries, and parks, community gardens like Freedom Freedom Growers, the North End Gardens, and

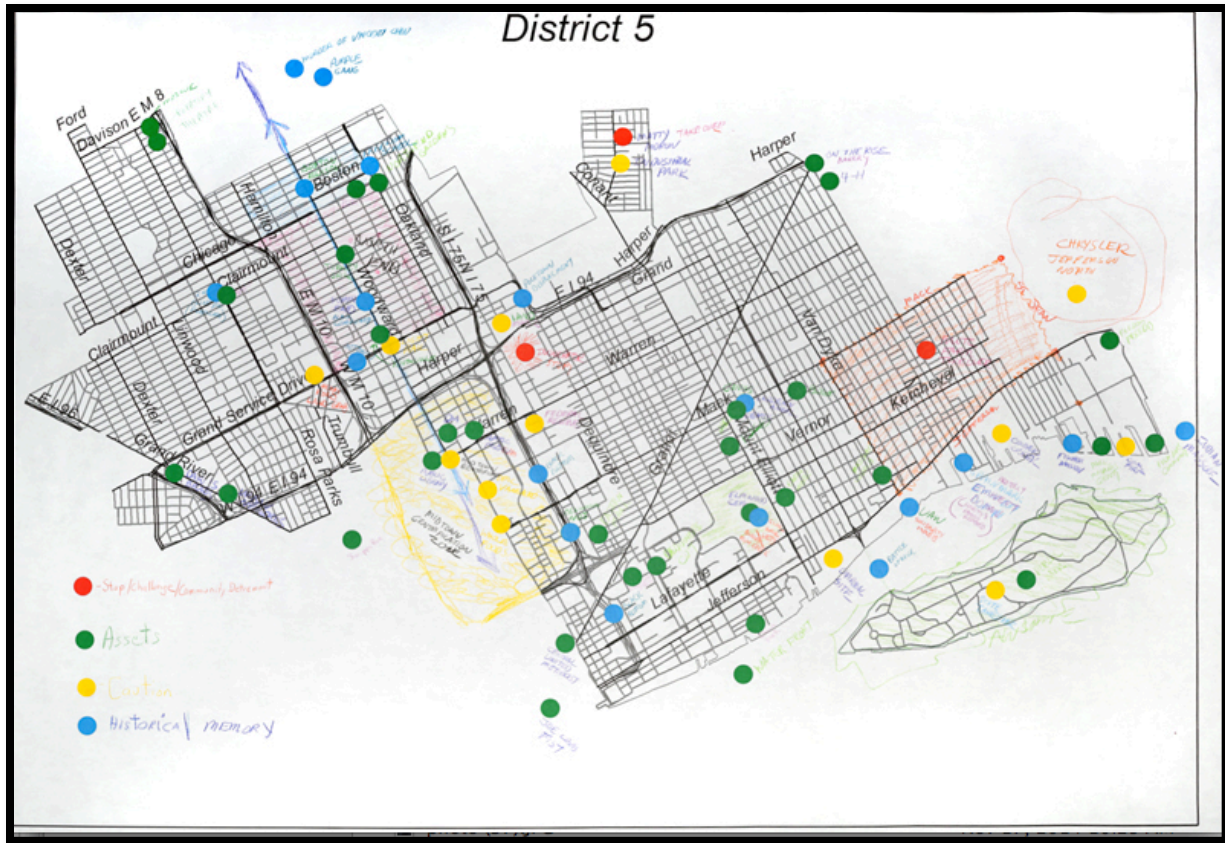


FIGURE 6.3. Community map made at Uniting Detroiters meeting.

Earthworks, community-based social justices institutions like the Boggs Center and Central United Methodist.

The maps illustrated territorial struggles over redevelopment in Detroit and identified spaces that supported an alternative vision of social reproduction based on dignity and community self-determination. They also reflected how many residents’ and community activists’ time is consumed by rushing to city council meetings, protests, and meeting to try to stop “challenges” like Hantz. At the same time, the maps staked a claim to the urban commons.

Scholars of common property have largely focused on rural contexts, particularly the collective management of natural resources like fisheries and pastoral lands, which have been

shown to generally be better managed by communities than individuals.<sup>15</sup> During my fieldwork, I noticed that community activists in Detroit also invoked “the commons” as something in need of community defense. As I showed in chapter 3, residents often physically claimed de-facto public land as a neighborhood commons. In Detroit’s activist circles, the commons was widely invoked to flag a vision of community self-determination and a strategy for combatting human disconnection and cultivating a different kind of citizenship. In addition, some people made broader normative claims to the public realm as a commons. In their views, defending the commons included resisting enclosures happening through the privatization of public infrastructure, the dismantling of public welfare structures, the privatization of primary education, and the defunding of secondary education. Bringing the commons into being involved both engaging in new customs and developing new governance structures and institutions that would support direct democracy.

Our Uniting Detroiter interviews are a testament to the multitude of ways residents were reclaiming what some describe as the commons. These included: establishing cooperative housing, community gardens, and community kitchens, developing grassroots plans through block clubs, neighborhood coalition, and church groups, taking back media production in the city, fighting for transportation justice, and developing peace zones for life.

Individuals involved in this work drew on different theories of social change. Yet in their dispersed and collective work it was possible to identify an alternative approach to development rooted in the commons. Through practice and discourse they espoused a shared set of principals that included a focus on intergenerational organizing; becoming educated about how structural racism works and working to undo these structures; healing and overcoming trauma; cultivating

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<sup>15</sup> Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

food sovereignty; preserving the traditions and rituals of various cultures; building relationships by being generous with one another, bringing joy to work, having collective meals, and caring for each other; creation horizontal forms of organizing; developing new forms of cooperative production, community ownership, and solidarity economies; developing ecological understandings of human-nature relationships; dispersing power by developing new institutions and neighborhood governance structures; creating power rather than taking it; building local, national, and transnational connections among movements; and putting love at the center of politics. Importantly, these practices were seen as part and parcel of transforming values and political subjectivities.

### **Conclusions: Liberated territory**

Wayne Curtis described the work of Freedom Freedom Growers using the concept of liberated territory. Wayne builds on Huey P. Newton and the Black Panthers history of organizing in Oakland in his theorization of liberated territory in Detroit. In 1971, after Huey P. Newton was released from prison, he called for the Black Panther Party to establish a strategic base in Oakland and set up a “city center commune” with the goal of making the first “liberated territory” in the United States. Liberated territory was conceived of as a strategy to secure control over the social and political mechanisms that organized human relationships from education to political organization.<sup>16</sup> In Wayne’s view land control is critical for liberated territory because it provides the concrete foundation for the reconstruction of society. “If they are able to take the land,” as Wayne put it, “It is going to temporarily slow that process.”

According to Wayne, liberated territory is a means of survival and a process of “centralizing resources so that we can survive mentally, physically, and spiritually. It’s about

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<sup>16</sup> Alvaro Reyes, “Can’t Go Home Again: Sovereign Entanglements and the Black Radical Tradition in the Twentieth Century.” Dissertation. Literature Program in the Graduate School, Duke University (2009), 218.

surviving the onslaught from enemies until we can figure out how to transform the situation.” He related the concept to the BPP survival programs. “People used to say [the survival programs] were not revolutionary because revolution is made out of sterner stuff.” However, he argued that culture, society, institutions, and jurisprudence all have to be transformed to make sterner things.

Liberated territory is a strategy to subvert the practices and rationalities that reduce people to “human debris,” to use Hannah Arendt’s term, thrown off by the cyclical crises of racial capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Over the last few decades, large cities have become major sites of producing surplus populations that are superfluous to the requirements of capital. As we see with the DFC project and the city’s bankruptcy and emergency management, capital interests are seeking to territorially restructure Detroit for economic speculation, circulation, and growth. Most often the city’s residents have no place in these market-based plans. As the city’s landscape is being fragmented into developed and underdeveloped areas, access to urban infrastructure has emerged for many as a question of life and death.

Wayne’s use of liberated territory is more than just an analytical critique of capitalism. It is a proposal that emerges from a lived understanding of the racial character of capitalism and the disregard for the value of Black life. It is a response to the ways racism, as Foucault argued, equips biopower with the force to foster the life of a certain part of the population through disallowing the life of another.<sup>18</sup> It is a premise arrived at from an intimate understanding of how superfluous life is inscribed into modern political reason and certain populations are denied equal citizenship, and if a politics of abandonment is fundamental to the liberal order than a power reversal might be a tactical maneuver but it is not a long-term strategy of disruption. The garden

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<sup>17</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Imperialism, Nationalism, Chauvinism.” *The Review of Politics* 7, no. 4 (1945): 441–63.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003).

is one experiment among many on Detroit's east side and across the city in which residents have been constructing their own infrastructures of survival and care that work to counteract state abandonment and are also productive of new political subjectivities and more equitable forms of governance.

Feedom Freedom emphasizes life, love, and self-determination. Wayne and Myrtle describe the mission of Feedom Freedom in a 2011 newsletter:

We grow food as a revolutionary act of love for self and others, employing the resources that were put in place to sustain life: sun, earth, our own labor. We are working toward being that community built on love, joy, and hope; that beloved community that Dr. King spoke of building. ...

As support from city officials decreases and food lines grow longer, we now rely on growing our own food and making our own work to enrich and empower ourselves, our families and our neighborhoods. We count on each and work together to build a strong and bonded community.

When we have no streetlights, we turn porch lights on and listen for potential problems, operating as each other's eyes and ears. We are the beloved community. When faced with no street snow plowing, we shovel an extra walkway or we pitch in to have someone with heavy equipment do the whole block. Why? Because we are the beloved community. When businesses are not providing quality service we put pressure on these as a community and hold them accountable. We are the beloved community.<sup>19</sup>

Feedom Freedom, like many other gardens in Detroit, is not about urban agriculture per se, but the dream of a different future city. The remaking of landscape as infrastructure in this vision is a fight against domination and oppression. It is the abolition of the color line. It is built upon the knowledge of freedom of enslaved ancestors who understood that fighting for liberation involved imagining "a free territory, a new commons," in the words of Saidiya Hartman. "The enslaved knew that freedom had to be taken; it was not the kind of thing that could ever be given to you," Hartman writes. "It is won and lost, again and again. The demands of the slave on the present have everything to do with making good on the promise of abolition, and this entails

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<sup>19</sup> Feedom Freedom Growers Blog, <http://feedomfreedom.wordpress.com/2011/03/>



much more than the end of property in slaves. It requires the reconstruction of society, which is the only way to honor our debt to the dead. This is the intimacy of our age with theirs — an unfinished struggle.”<sup>20</sup> The garden, then, in this sense, is a weapon in the war against limited emancipation.

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<sup>20</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007): 169-170.

## CHAPTER 7: “WHOSE CITY? OUR CITY”

### Introduction

In March 2014, Homrich’s red company trucks started appearing in Detroit’s neighborhoods. The city had recently paid the company \$5 million to turn off the water of up to 3,000 households per week. The Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, which aimed to collect on 90,000 water accounts, instructed Homrich to shut off water to any household with an overdue bill of at least 60 days or debts exceeding \$150. Oddly, Homrich was not in the water business but demolition. The wrecking company had a contract with the city at the same time to bulldoze thousands of buildings. This was fitting because both projects were about disconnection.

Detroit’s redevelopment, as I have shown in this dissertation, has proceeded through processes of local disconnection and connecting the city to new flows of transnational capital. Landscape architects call urban shrinkage “subtraction.” Subtraction in mathematics is the process of taking a quantity or amount away from another. In contemporary Detroit, subtraction has translated into what can seem like a Darwinian experiment in economic development and urban planning, detaching parts of a city to make other parts and markets stronger. In the case of the water shutoffs, what was being subtracted was the state’s connection to poor households in arrears and relationships of responsibility.

Water infrastructure is designed at the scale of the city, but shutoffs happen at the point where the public water pipes cross private property lines. Resident watched from their windows, porches, and yards as Homrich workers located home water valves and used long metal turnkeys

to turn the water off. The process took under five minutes. Some residents confronted workers during this procedure or afterwards as they spray painted a pale blue line on the sidewalk in front of the house, a method of record keeping that publically marked delinquency and had the effect of shaming and stigmatizing the occupants. The blue line symbolized an inversion of late-nineteenth-century civic commitments when the construction of municipal waterworks across the country signified a city's dedication to growth, maintaining sanitary conditions, and universal public service.<sup>1</sup>

All told, Homrich turned off water to 27,000 households between March and October 2014. Though half of these were reconnected after residents paid their bills, this was one of the largest utility disconnection campaigns in U.S. history. Detroit's 2014 shutoffs pointed to a larger trend: the intensification of neoliberal governance in the wake of the subprime crisis. The head of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department said the budget required them to change lenient policies. However, few missed the fact that the water department figured prominently in structural adjustment plans associated with the city's bankruptcy proceedings (see chapter 4), as the government invited exploratory bids from private companies to take over its management.<sup>2</sup>

The shutoffs represented a new precedent for dealing with urban fiscal crisis in the United States: the city would not even uphold minimal health and safety obligations to its citizens. The policy was given legal credence when Judge Steven Rhodes, who was overseeing the city's bankruptcy, was asked to intervene on residents' behalf. He concluded that no laws existed that guaranteed water service as a fundamental right. Meanwhile, the city's emergency

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Melosi, *The Sanitary City: Environmental Services in Urban America from Colonial Times to the Present*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The DWSD has not been privatized yet. In a deal brokered by emergency manager Kevyn Orr, a regional water authority was formed in September 2014. The DWSD, however, did hire Veolia Water, the largest private water and sewerage company in the United States, to advise them on reducing expenditures.

manager, Kevyn Orr, like the water chief, characterized indebted households as “scofflaws” and “people gaming the system.” “Let’s either bring them into compliance,” he said, “or not provide them with a free service. That’s not fair.”

“Fairness” -- understood in term of proportionality (i.e., you get the proportion of benefits you pay for) -- denied historical difference. It ignored the fact that corporate accounts owed millions but their water was not being shut off.<sup>3</sup> The claim also required overlooking the fact that many bills went unpaid due to factors beyond homeowners or renters’ control, namely high water tariffs and unemployment rates. Some supporters of the shutoffs invoked individual responsibility, asking incredulously how exactly people were spending their money and about the length of their showers. As talk about a renaissance in Detroit grew, the water shutoffs signaled a broader trend in punitive policies toward the poor, operating at a moral register that communicated to many residents that the “new Detroit” was not for them.

### **Geographies of disconnection**

For many residents, the shutoffs came without warning. Some had been paying their bills and their water was mistakenly shut off. Others were delinquent. Suspension drives had occurred over the past decades, however no record existed of anything on this scale. The water shutoffs meant that thousands of the city’s poorest residents did not have potable water, shower water, or flushable toilets. They were reduced to hauling water in five gallon buckets from their neighbors’ outdoor spigots. They bathed at the houses of friends and family. The shutoffs were particularly egregious given that in 2005, under the direction of Michigan Welfare Rights, Detroiters had developed a People’s Water Affordability proposal for an alternative rate structure. The Detroit city council approved it in 2006 but the DWSD never implemented it. Over the last decade, the

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Clark, “Going without Water in Detroit,” *New York Times*, (July 3, 2014), [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/04/opinion/going-without-water-in-detroit.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/04/opinion/going-without-water-in-detroit.html?_r=0) .

DWSD has increased rates by 120 percent, including a rate increase of 8.7 percent in the midst of the shutoff campaign. Whereas the average American household pays \$50 per month for water, Detroiters pay more than \$70.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, some people with precarious work chose between paying their rent or water bill, but most paid what they could. A few did not pay and then illegally turned their water back on, running the risk of hefty fines. Without water services, some parents feared that Child Protective Services could remove their children from their homes. Other homeowners worried that the water department might put a lien on their house, making it vulnerable to the tax foreclosure process and auction, which could eventually cause them to lose their home (see chapter 3).

James Ferguson, writing in a different context, the Copperbelt of Zambia, which has suffered from prolonged economic decline since the mid-1970s, theorizes the term “abjection” to refer to a process of “being thrown aside, expelled, or discarded.” He uses abjection to try to capture the act of not just being “thrown out” but “thrown *down*” – back into a past world in which the “color bar” kept “Africans” in their place. Thus, Zambians experienced a sense of “humiliating expulsion” as the promises of modernization betrayed them and they scrambled to merely get by.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, for many Detroit residents, the water shutoffs signaled the formation of a “new Detroit” emerging from bankruptcy and ready for investment in which they had no place.

The shutoffs, contrary to some rumors, were not part of the Detroit Future City’s plan (see chapter 5). However, like the DFC, they were part and parcel of a larger development

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Barnett, “It’s Time for America to Talk about the Price of Water,” *Huffington Post* (October 7, 2014), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/07/america-price-of-water\\_n\\_5944662.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/07/america-price-of-water_n_5944662.html); Joe Guillen, “Detroit city council approves 8.7% water rate increase,” *Detroit Free Press*, (June 17, 2014), <http://archive.freep.com/article/20140617/NEWS01/306170107/City-Council-water-rate-hike>

<sup>5</sup> James Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 236.

strategy aimed at making the city more attractive to transnational capital. In the 1950s, urban renewal involved the physical displacement of people from their homes. Over five decades later, the DFC turned on a policy of “strategic renewal,” under which people would be disconnected from public infrastructures and services. In this way, the water shutoffs signaled the potential problems of an urban redevelopment policy rooted in connecting some places through disconnecting others. While in some instances Detroiters have been pushed out of their homes because of redevelopment, more often the displacement process is one of being left behind rather than moved.

The water shutoffs signaled this type of disconnection whereby one is not physically moved but displaced from a place in the world they once occupied. “Disconnection, like connection,” Ferguson writes, “implies a relation and not the absence of a relation.”<sup>6</sup> Like my argument in this dissertation that abandonment is a structural and active process, Ferguson’s use of disconnection and abjection reveals something fundamental about how contemporary neoliberal governance is increasingly defined by the abandonment of society’s most vulnerable. As a result of the labor and civil rights movements, Keynesianism and the welfare state, mitigated the extent of social abandonment inherent in racial capitalism. With the rise of neoliberalism, social objectives have been increasingly decoupled from economic policies. In Detroit, development policies focus on creating the conditions for the market by fostering entrepreneurial, consumer citizens. The water shutoffs show how these policy changes are particularly damning when they are aimed at resolving “market failures” in places beset by entrenched histories of racial inequality.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 238.

Geographies of exclusion no longer happen under overtly racist laws and policies, but through an “anti-state state” and neoliberal development agendas (increasingly crafted and pushed by non-state actors – nongovernmental organizations, foundations, corporations, credit rating agencies) aimed at luring mobile capital.<sup>7</sup> In an effort to attract businesses, corporations, industry, and people, municipalities refashion themselves as competitive, entrepreneurial entities. We increasingly see urban space being differentiated based on spaces that are worthy of investment and those that are unworthy of investment (and thus the people attached to those landscapes). The protection of life – the governance of “making live” -- is reserved only for some living in delimited zones where the market is made to circulate. Creating a smooth terrain for the flow of capital requires both legal interventions to create the conditions for market circulation (e.g., bank deregulation, tax incentives, emergency management) and spatial intervention (e.g., creating special zones for artists and entrepreneurs, prohibiting activities relating to homelessness and extreme poverty in areas of the city with “market potential,” and withdrawing infrastructure from places with no market potential). These dynamics denote what I have called in the preceding chapters, a new spatial politics of abandonment in which certain geographies, and the populations within them, are rendered invisible and disposable.

Soon after I arrived in Detroit in 2011 to conduct my field research, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission based on the South African post-apartheid model was inaugurated in the city.<sup>8</sup> Beforehand the commission issued a declaration of intent stating that Detroit was the most segregated large metropolitan area in the country. They wrote, “The failure to understand

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow the terms “anti-state state” here from Ruth Gilmore, “Fatal couplings of power and difference: Notes on racism and geography.” *The Professional Geographer* 54, 1 (2002): 15-24.

<sup>8</sup> The TRC in Detroit is the second one established in the United States. The first was in Greensboro in 2005. The Greensboro TRC sought reconciliation specifically around the Greensboro Massacre when on November 3, 1979 five protestors marching in a “Death to the Klan” march were killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan and American Nazi Party. The march was the culmination of a Communist Party campaign to organized Black industrial workers.

the deeper structural dynamics of racism has cultivated the mistaken belief that these problems are only problems of the past. They are not. These institutional histories carry forward and define the patterns of behavior that exist today and will be projected into the future if not addressed now.”<sup>9</sup> How we acknowledge (or not) the sedimentation of racist property practices – the history of Blacks having been property as slaves and the ways that white fears of Black freedom organized space after Emancipation – is of enormous consequence not only to those who suffer the effects of these fatal couplings but to all.

At the swearing in ceremony of the Truth and Reconciliation, Detroit poet and professor Gloria House delivered a moving lecture in which she described the city as a space of loss: loss of population, taxes, city services, public school, parks, medical services, homes, livelihoods. “This is a space of profound suffering and dispossession. The process leading to this place has been in process for many years now,” she said, “It’s rooted in a stubborn, unrelenting racism that has fractured social relationships in Detroit since the nineteenth century.” House went on to talk of how racist capital and corporate power were coming back to claim Detroit. Her lecture was an ethical charge to go beyond recognizing past wrongs. It was a call to pay systematic attention to the genealogy of abandonment and to confront what W.E.B Du Bois a century ago called the “problem of the color line” and what Cedric Robinson has more recently called “the nastiness.”<sup>10</sup> This dissertation has been written in the spirit of a response to this call to connect the history of racial violence – visible and invisible – to Detroit’s “crisis” today, to the false solutions being

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<sup>9</sup> Declaration of Intent can be found at [www.miroundtable.org/Roundtabledownloads/declarationofintent.pdf](http://www.miroundtable.org/Roundtabledownloads/declarationofintent.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois famously argued, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” see Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Dover Publications, 1994 [1903]), 9. Robinson quoted in Gordon, Avery. *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).



developed, and to those struggling to undo such damage through the creation of other possible worlds.

### **The campaign to “wage love”**

Activists countered the water shutoffs with a campaign to protect the commons and “wage love.” Water (the liquid of life) is a potent symbol of the meta-materiality of austerity.<sup>11</sup> The water shutoffs were noteworthy not only because they were historically unprecedented but also because they made abandoned people visible in a way that other, arguably equal, detrimental policies have not (e.g., policies that cause people to lose their home, cutbacks in unemployment benefits and food stamps). The shutoffs drew the ire of many people in Detroit and from afar who argued that water access is a human right. Multiple protests attracted thousands. The National Nurses United declared a “public health emergency” in the city. A group of union coal miners from West Virginia called the Keepers of the Mountains whose water access had been impacted by the Charleston chemical spill earlier in 2014 delivered palettes of bottled water to show solidarity. Church and community groups set up water stations for the disconnected. The United Nations declared the shutoffs to be a human rights violation. They sent rapporteurs to Detroit who called for a total prohibition on disconnections for people who couldn’t afford to pay. At a public meeting with the rapporteurs, activists charged genocide against Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and President Barak Obama, drawing a historical connection between the shutoffs and the 1951 “We Charge Genocide” petition submitted to the UN that called for the U.S. government to account for their crime of genocide against African Americans.

Activists’ call to “wage love” against the water shutoffs resonated with grassroots planning projects in Detroit, reminding us that, as Ruth Gilmore argues, “feelings” serve as the

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<sup>11</sup> Weston, Kath. “Lifeblood, Liquidity, and Cash Transfusions: Beyond Metaphor in the Cultural Study of Finance.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (May 01, 2013): S24–S41.

basis of struggle. It is urgent, therefore, to understand “how ordinary people,” as she writes, “who lack resources but who do not necessarily lack ‘resourcefulness’ ... develop the capacity to combine themselves into extraordinary forces and form the kinds of organizations that are the foundation of liberatory social movements.”<sup>12</sup> As indicated above, a variety of tactics were used to combat the water shutoffs including the development of a water affordability plan, protests, court cases, and appeals to the United Nations. On the one hand, the invocation to wage love recognized contemporary politics as war. On the other, it was to call upon love as the basis for a new commons.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I quoted James Baldwin on the experience of crossing the “invisible frontier” that divides U.S. towns between white and Black. Revisiting the passage clarifies what activists meant by “wage love.” Once on the Black side of town, Baldwin went on to describe his and his companions’ arrival at a dancehall called Lucy’s Place. Inside people’s movements followed the loud and aggressive music. “If it held the heat of love,” he writes, “it equally held the heat of fury, and it could not be described as friendly. Passion is not friendly. It is arrogant, superbly contemptuous of all that is not itself, and, as the very definition of passion implies the impulse to freedom, it has a mighty, intimidating power. It contains a challenge. It contains an unspeakable hope. It contains a comment on all human beings, and the comment is not flattering.” Baldwin described a furious love, a love that contains a “challenge” and an “unspeakable hope.” To speak of love in this way elucidates the stakes of Detroiters’ campaign to wage love in response to the water shutoffs. This was not about pursuing a naïve sort of love. It was about fighting for freedom.

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<sup>12</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning.” In *Engaging Contradictions*, 31–61. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) 33-34.

Fighting for freedom means resistance, as well as proposing and building alternative institutions to support dignified life. At the end of summer 2014, a coalition of more than 30 community groups organizing under the name of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management issued a statement called “Whose City: Our City!” in which they argued that they must resist the measures exacted on the city by emergency management through organized self-help (e.g., water relief stations), protest, community meetings, urban farming and food cooperatives, and advocacy for more humane policies governing people’s access to urban resources. “We must also use our collective power,” they wrote, “to create our City, a city of self-government, public accountability, and protection of one another.” The focus was not about taking over power positions in city government (although that was certainly one tactic) and protection meant more than public safety. It was about combatting abandonment and disconnection through the creation of new governing structures that grew out the community infrastructures people had been establishing in their neighborhoods.

The statement continued: “In places long abandoned and forgotten by corporate development, we have established visionary ways to address the need of our community.” They included gardens that fostered food security; the restoration of homes, parks, and schools that made neighborhoods more livable; the creation of African-centered and place-based educational institutions; block clubs and neighborhood associations that watched out for neighborhoods; community groups that encouraged young people to stay in school, fought to keep libraries open, and raised money for students to go to study beyond high school; and church groups that developed grassroots plans for supporting local economies. These practices offered “a more collaborative, thoughtful future.” In this way, we can see that the campaign to “wage love” was an antidote to abandonment. It was about healing severed relationships. It was about claiming

and creating the possibility of a new city – “our city” – in which “all of us live in dignity, mutual respect, and love.

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