

# When Resilience Turns to Resistance

## A Detroit Case Study

NINA JACKSON LEVIN

Ph.D. in Social Work and Anthropology

### ABSTRACT

This article is the theoretical accompaniment to *Resilience/Resistance: A Short Film About Detroit*. The short film offers a character study of two sisters, Annette and Earlene, long-time residents who illustrate the broader story of the present-day negotiation between resilience and resistance at stake within the City of Detroit. This character sketch brings to bear an emotionally ranging response to the complexities of the recent re-urbanism driving the public narrative of Detroit. Working to complicate the use of the term 'resilience' within this redevelopment story, this piece and the accompanying short film offer the possibility that resilience and resistance are entangled phenomena. *Resilience/Resistance* asks the question: resilience for whom? In the case of Detroit, I propose two modes of resilience that coexist yet conflict: *mechanical* (outcome-oriented) and *ecological* (process-oriented) resilience. I argue that where the "urban core" of the downtown revitalization project strives for mechanical resilience, long-time residents embody ecological resilience by contrast.<sup>1,2</sup> Within the tension between mechanical and ecological resilience frameworks dwells the possibility – or necessity – of resistance.

All images accompanying this piece are stills from the *Resilience/Resistance* film. The companion film to this article can be found on the *Agora* blog.

Across academic literature, resilience serves as a major explanatory framework to understand an amorphous and exhaustive litany of social issues. The term originally derives from the Latin word *resiliere*, which means to bounce back.<sup>3</sup> Claims to ‘bouncing back,’ however, are theoretically vague despite their ever-increasing popularity: ‘resilience’ has seen an eight-fold increase in the probability of use in scholarly databases in the past 20 years.<sup>4</sup> This term has emerged in the fields of disaster preparedness, environmental sustainability, economies and markets, public policy, child welfare, urban and regional development, national security, humanitarian response, and international relations.<sup>5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11</sup> Such rapid and widespread conceptual uptake of resilience as an explanatory framework reflects an urgency to mitigate increasing precarity.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1. *Resilience/Resistance* (Jackson Levin, 2018).

The City of Detroit is a place where resilience has found rhetorical footing. Over the past 20 years, resilience has dominated the narrative of Detroit’s resurgence of cultural and economic activity within the “urban core.”<sup>13</sup> Academic literature and popular press alike have treated Detroit’s ‘urban renaissance’ as a resurrection from the dead.<sup>14</sup> However, this mythology is built on limited conceptual and geographical notions of resilience, providing escalating investments in the 7.2-square-mile Greater Downtown (just a “a slice of

Detroit’s 139-square mile geography”) as the empirical basis for laying claim to the City’s ‘comeback.’<sup>15</sup> A selective narrative that heralds a city’s rebirth based upon development within less than 5 percent of its entire geography silences residents for whom those developments do not signify ‘renaissance.’ Furthermore, such an account fails to acknowledge the kinds of generative cultural activity that are and have been alive within Detroit, not just throughout but also in spite of economic downturn.

Therefore, the question remains: resilience for whom? Is resilience a double bind if, in fact, it serves some but not all? Through the Filming Future Cities project, I set out to complicate the concept of resilience at play within the narrative of Detroit. I found that where resilience emerges, so too does resistance. Writing as an outsider to the urban planning discipline, I offer an alternative perspective on issues at the heart of the urban studies field. In doing so, I reflect on the process of making a short film titled *Resilience/Resistance: A Short Film About Detroit*. The making of this experimental documentary was supported by the ethnographic film project Filming Future Cities (created by Dr. Damani Partridge, University of Michigan Department of Anthropology and Department of Afroamerican and African Studies) and the graduate course Doing Photoethnography (created by Jason De León, former University of Michigan faculty member and current faculty member at University of California, Los Angeles Department of Anthropology). Through moving and still images mixed with soundscapes produced within and about the City of Detroit by musical artist Shigeto, I explore the liminal paradox between the concepts of resilience and resistance through a character study of two native Detroiters and sisters, Annette and Earlene. This text serves as the theoretical accompaniment to the short film, which can be viewed on the *Agora* blog. As lifelong Detroiters, Annette and Earlene have lived

through the various chapters of glory and struggle in the story of Detroit and serve as expert witnesses to the changes taking place in the City today. The film elicits the sisters' experiences in and of the City, showcasing their memories of the past, perspectives on the present, and concerns and hopes for the future of Detroit.



Figure 2. Annette and Earlene at "They Say" on Jos Campau St. (Jackson Levin, 2018).

## REFLECTIONS ON THE MAKING OF RESILIENCE/ RESISTANCE: A SHORT FILM ABOUT DETROIT

I met Annette and Earlene at a store opening event on the East Side of Detroit in September 2018. The inaugural celebration featured live jazz, a food truck of Yum Village's Afro-Caribbean cuisine, and congenial chatter amongst the strangers and acquaintances attending the event. Annette stood out in the crowd, dressed head to toe in a white track suit with intricate red beads dripping from her neck, wearing a hat that cast the right side of her face in shadow, and carrying a small patent leather briefcase. I couldn't miss her. Earlene was beside Annette, warm and reserved, smiling from beneath her dark sunglasses and with her fists tucked into the front pockets of her black sweatshirt. The two sat beside me at one of the tables near the food truck and we

started chatting immediately. We shared an instant conversational chemistry; within a matter of minutes, we had discussed a range of topics from the intimate to the mundane.

When I asked what her briefcase contained, Annette told me that – among several other jobs – she is a spiritual advisor. She proceeded to offer an oracle card reading of my spiritual state. It was unclear whether she was seeking payment for this work, so – sheepishly – I asked her as much while she unpacked a tablecloth, candles, bells, angel figurines, and decks of oracle cards. She said this reading was a gift. I offered in return to take photographs of her card reading for use on her website as, after all, I had my camera around my neck (I had been attempting to, at any given moment, document Detroit for this film project). She obliged, and so began our relationship as anthropologist and interlocuter, mediated constantly thereafter by the presence of the camera.

A certain degree of serendipity was on my side in that moment: it is not always the case that querents encounter interlocuters who are as open, trusting, and engaged as Annette and Earlene. I emailed the photos of Annette to her the following day and left a voicemail asking if I could take her and Earlene out to lunch to interview them about their perspectives on the city. The following day, Annette returned my call and we arranged to meet at their local favorite, They Say on Jos Campau Street near the waterfront on the East Side. The four-hour conversation we shared at the restaurant became the central narrative for my documentary.

## MECHANICAL RESILIENCE VS. ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE

The use of the term 'resilience' is flexible to a fault. Its function ranges as broadly as the contexts in which it has come to hold



Figure 3. Listening (Jackson Levin, 2018).



Figure 4. Serendipity (Jackson Levin, 2018).



Figure 5. Divine light (Jackson Levin, 2018).



Figure 6. Kindred Spirits (Jackson Levin, 2018).

meaning. Such a capacious application can result in a lack of conceptual clarity.<sup>16</sup> In order to ensure accuracy within the relevant context, it is essential to define boundaries around the term 'resilience.'<sup>17</sup> In the case of Detroit, I propose two modes of resilience that coexist yet conflict: *mechanical resilience* (outcome-oriented) and *ecological resilience* (process-oriented).<sup>18</sup> In mathematics and physics, mechanical resilience implies the capability of a material or system to return to balance after being displaced. In biological discourse, ecological resilience signifies the persistence of relationships within a system and a measure of the ability of those systems to absorb changes of state.<sup>19</sup> A mechanical approach to resilience views the phenomenon as outcome-oriented. Such a framework imagines resilience as a static premise achievable either before or after an adverse event. The dominant narrative characterizing Detroit's

revitalization adopts this framework: after falling on the hard times, Detroit experienced "exogenous shock," which caused a vacuum in the municipal agenda.<sup>20</sup> After years of widespread deterioration, targeted refurbishment of the central business district – that is, economic investment in the 7.2-square-mile Greater Downtown – sparked "urban allure" and rekindled a healthy pulse in the City.<sup>21</sup> This is one common, albeit crude and inaccurate, narrative for Detroit that reflects a mechanical application of resilience, one in which the City has returned to a state of stability after a contained instance of hardship or disruption.

In contrast to mechanical resistance, an ecological approach to resilience is a process-oriented phenomenon. Such a framework imagines resilience as a dynamic process that incorporates adaptation and flexibility into its very premise. Adapting, innovating, and reformulating

are constant aspects of resilience within this framework. In ecological resilience, 'before' and 'after' are less significant than 'during' the process of change. In the instance of Detroit, staking a claim in the City's mechanical resilience suppresses the notion that the residents are and have been resilient in an ecological mode, not because of but rather in spite of the "urban allure" of the 'resilient' downtown area.<sup>22</sup> Within the tension between mechanical and ecological resilience frameworks dwells the possibility – or rather, the necessity – for resistance. The interaction between resilience and resistance reverberating throughout the city, from the Greater Downtown to the edges of Outer Drive, is made evident in stories like those of Annette and Earlene.

## EXPLORING MECHANICAL VS. ECOLOGICAL RESILIENCE ON SCREEN: EXPERIMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

As longstanding residents of Detroit living through a moment of acute attention to the urban core, Annette and Earlene embody ecological resilience. In the film, the two sisters discuss the ways in which they have adapted to changes and challenges posed by the rise and fall of economic conditions in the City. I asked them to talk about their perspectives on the changes in the City over their lifetime with particular emphasis on the past 10 years. Annette replied with sincerity that she "love[s] that the City is coming back and all of that," but followed with a caveat: "Don't throw us away in the process; the ones that stayed here, was born and raised here, went to school here, worked here." Earlene interjected with zeal: "There you go!"<sup>23</sup> Annette shared her paradoxical struggle with the resurgence of economic and cultural activity in the

downtown area as it forces into precarity the conditions of her housing. In response to claims related to revitalization, Annette said:

The only thing that's coming back is downtown area...to draw in more contracts...but nobody is talking about where we the elderly are gonna go when they get through raising the rent, or building any houses or anything affordable along the river bank or along the river line so we all can enjoy besides just the rich folks that's coming back and that can afford all of that.<sup>24</sup>

Annette and her husband, who is 20 years her senior, have been living for two decades in a historic apartment building on the waterfront that is rented exclusively to senior citizens. Following our lunch, I visited Annette at her apartment to film a cursory tour of the lobby.<sup>25</sup> The building offered a grand entrance: two double doors atop stone steps flanked by statuary pillars opened onto a carpeted hallway decked with chandeliers. A polished, wooden clawfoot table in the center of the entrance was decorated with a tall vase of flowers. Two parlors, to the left and right of the front doors, offered upholstered furniture – worn but classic. From the left-hand parlor, the riverfront was visible at the edge of the lawn. A security guard in an entrance booth and a resident traipsing down the hallway both eyed me curiously as my camera traced the crown molding on the high ceilings, but Annette explained my presence as we continued past them ("I'm helping her with a school project"). Around the corner, the smells of laundry detergent and cigarettes mingled, and the thumping of vending machines could be heard in time with the ding of the elevator. The hallway wrapped rectangularly around the building, leaving open at the center a sweeping ballroom. Behind locked, glass French doors, the open dance floor was empty, alight with the grey October light streaming in through grand skylights overhead. Annette explained that the ballroom was once the heart of the

building's social pulse. Now, however, the landlord does not permit residents to use the space, as he reserves it for paid events.

---

**“ Therefore, the question remains: resilience for whom? Is resilience a double bind if, in fact, it serves some but not all?”**

---

“We worked all our lives to be where we at,” Annette says as the film opens, “and now, I’m constantly feeling threatened.”<sup>26</sup> Annette’s rent has increased each year of the past decade, resulting in housing insecurity for her and her neighbors. “Every year the rent goes up, up, up. They have plans to put the rent up so high that we can no longer afford it, so where will we go then? ...All of the neighborhood houses are gone... so, those are some of the things that I worry about.”<sup>27</sup> About the threat of displacement, Annette says, “my plan is to keep it moving. I don’t want to move, but I feel like we’ve been forced to make a decision, you know. Because...I can see it coming.”<sup>28</sup>

Annette’s case of precarious housing articulates the tension between mechanical resilience and ecological resilience currently at play within the City of Detroit. Furthermore, her case demonstrates the production of resistance caused by the friction between mechanical and ecological resilience. Resilience for the downtown area drives long-term residents to adapt, adjust, and modify their lifestyle in the City. In the case of rising rents, resilience for the urban core invokes resistance from its long-time citizens. A resilient downtown requires its denizens to absorb shock, adapt, and recover in response to selective developments. Here mechanical and ecological resilience coexist yet conflict: for Annette and Earlene, resilience for the downtown means resistance through

adaptation. When the urban core rebounds from shock and demonstrates mechanical resilience, it casts a tremor amongst residents throughout the City, producing further instability. Such a tension thrusts the burden of resilience onto citizens as opposed to lifting their burden through the City’s supposed renewed stability.

In order for the urban core to achieve mechanical resilience, long-time residents must respond to the impacts of downtown developments by intensifying their proclivity for ecological resilience. In this way, ecological resilience is no longer a neutral expression of resilience, but rather becomes an active mode of resistance. Being adaptative, flexible, and resourceful in the face of a powerful albeit myopic account of downtown revitalization is an act of impedance. Resilience transmuted becomes resistance. The case of Annette and Earlene complicates claims to resilience in Detroit by parsing out two modes of resilience and resistance that inherently operate in contentious tandem.

Our conversation about the current state of Detroit’s development sparked nostalgia in Annette and Earlene for previous iterations of the cityscape. Laughing at their recollections, the sisters reminisced giddily about their childhood on the East Side (it is notable that long-time residents often locate the City according to cardinal directions, whereas more recent parlance names the city by neighborhoods – Woodbridge, Corktown, New Center – thereby commodifying geographic units). Remembering visits to their grandparents’ home, Annette said, “When we ate, we picked our food out the garden.”<sup>29</sup> “Yeah we did,” Earlene chimed in, “our grandmother had every type of vegetable that there was.”<sup>30</sup> About eating meat in their childhood, Earlene continued, “Our grandparents went to the farm, they bought the half a cow, they knew what the meat was. They kept a meat chart – you know when you open up a cabinet, you look up that meat chart right



there?”<sup>31</sup> Earlene mimed swinging open a pantry door and running her fingers down a butcher’s diagram. “They had these, like, metal tables,” she explained, smoothing her hands across the edges of the restaurant table where we were filming. “And they had these grinders that were attached to the table. And me and my sister” – she gestured toward Annette – “when they stuffed the meat down, we would have that roll.” She mimicked cramming meat into the top of a funnel and grasping a handle with both hands in front of her. “And we were like *rolling, rolling, rolling*”<sup>32</sup> – Annette and Earlene both grabbed imaginary handles and simultaneously acted the part of two children grinding meat in their grandmother’s kitchen, as if they were rowing a boat. “And then this meat came down, and somebody’s holding the bowl.” Earlene pretended to scoop up the ground meat from the edge of the table, making Annette giggle as she relived the memory. “It was the funniest thing!” Earlene leaned into the camera and pointed at the viewer. “East Side Detroit, y’all.”<sup>33</sup> The two sisters burst out laughing.

This scene always makes viewers smile. Annette and Earlene’s laughter is irresistibly contagious. Both women exude a genuine affection for one another and for the life they have shared in Detroit. Their love for their city is evidently as strong as their love for one another, as

though the backdrop against which they grew up is as much a part of their family – like a sibling. That Annette and Earlene radiate such palpable pride for their hometown, that their lives are built on a kind of local love for place and family that is one and the same, and that between them they stoke the embers of treasured memories of a version of the city that no longer exists make Annette and Earlene both resilient and resistant. Already in their lifetime, these sisters have lived through multiple iterations of the cityscape, the most recent downtown developments being just one of many chapters in the saga of a complex, evolving Detroit. Annette and Earlene have spent a lifetime adapting to and with changes in the city; throughout, their pride of place endures unassailable. Even in the face of exclusionary developments, rising rents, and threats of displacement, Annette and Earlene preserve a celebratory spirit



Figure 7. Annette at her apartment, smiling (Jackson Levin, 2018).



Figure 8. Real Woman Warrior of Detroit (Jackson Levin, 2018).

of their Detroit through memories of the past, concerns for the present, and hopes for the future. Such undefeated pride makes Annette and Earlene – according to Annette’s bedazzled black and red t-shirt, “Real Women Warriors of Detroit” – real resilient, real resistant.

In the 18 months that passed between our serendipitous meeting and the writing of this article, I maintained periodic contact with Annette and Earlene. When the film was screened at the Los Angeles Underground Film Festival in August of 2019, I printed a movie poster-sized gazette and mailed it to them. Annette has expressed hopes of developing a larger film project together, *The Broken Dreams and Promises of Woodlawn Manor* (Annette’s working title), that tells a more complete story of her beloved building and its elderly tenants. Perhaps another installment in my collaborative storytelling of Annette and Earlene’s Detroit will transpire. It would be a loss not to document and elevate the voices of these long-time residents, the enduring stewards of a resilient, resistant Detroit.

As Annette, Earlene, and I concluded our lunch at They Say on the day of filming, I profusely thanked our server, Carissa, who accommodated our impromptu film set graciously. I started to pack away the

recording equipment when she asked about the context of this project, as she herself is a student with a communications major at a nearby university. I told Carissa how I had met Annette and Earlene by happenstance, and how they were willing participants for my Filming Future Cities project. She was excited by the idea and equally willing to participate. She and I exchanged numbers and made arrangements to meet the following week. Placing the last pieces of the camera in its kit, my iPhone still on the restaurant table recording, I asked Carissa what resilience means to her as a native Detroiter. I will leave the last word of this article to Carissa, as her response directly articulates the persistent, pervasive, and unassailable ecological resilience that characterizes long-time residents of Detroit in the face of mechanical resilience rolling out downtown:

You know what? It’s a natural quality that we have. You know? Born and raised here you just pick up things, you adapt to things that will make you livable anywhere. It makes you intolerable to BS, it makes you rough around the edges, it makes you a little bit aggressive, it makes you passionate. I love being from this city. I feel like I can do anything and be anywhere and be just as strong.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nina Jackson Levin is a third-year doctoral student in the Joint Ph.D. Program in Social Work and Anthropology. Jackson Levin received her Bachelor of Arts in Comparative Literature in 2013 and her Master of Social Work in 2016 from the University of Michigan. She uses multimedia and sensory ethnography to ask questions about rupture and repair in relationships. Her dissertation explores family making and reproductive health among adolescents and young adults with cancer whose fertility is affected by treatment. Resilience theory informs her inquiry in multiple domains of social work and anthropology research, from (in)fertility to urban revitalization.



## ENDNOTES

1. Shoshanah B.D. Goldberg-Miller, "Creative City Strategies on the Municipal Agenda in New York"; Rus, Kilar, and Koren, "Resilience Assessment of Complex Urban Systems to Natural Disasters." *City, Culture and Society* 17 [September 2018]: 2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2018.08.004>.
2. Katarina Rus, Vojko Kilar, and David Koren, "Resilience Assessment of Complex Urban Systems to Natural Disasters: A New Literature Review," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 31 [October 2018]: 311-312, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2018.05.015>.
3. Rus, Kilar, and Koren, "Resilience Assessment of Complex Urban Systems to Natural Disasters."
4. Alastair Ager, "Annual Research Review." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 54, no. 4 (April 2013): 488-489, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12030>.
5. Hulya Dagdeviren, Matthew Donoghue, and Markus Promberger, "Resilience, Hardship and Social Conditions," *Journal of Social Policy* 45, no. 1 (January 2016): 1-3, <http://dx.doi.org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1017/S004727941500032X>.
6. J.P. Evans, "Resilience, Ecology and Adaptation in the Experimental City," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36, no. 2 (February 2011): 223, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00420.x>.
7. Lauren E. Johns, Allison E. Aiello, Caroline Cheng, Sandro Galea, Karestan C. Koenen, and Monica Uddin, "Neighborhood Social Cohesion and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in a Community-Based Sample: Findings from the Detroit Neighborhood Health Study," *Social Psychiatric Epidemiology* 47, no. 13 (December 2012): (1899-1900) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-012-0506-9>.
8. Kevin C. Desouza and Trevor H. Flanery, "Designing, Planning, and Managing Resilient Cities: A Conceptual Framework," *Cities* 35 (December 2013): 89-90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.06.003>.
9. Lindsay Hill and Angie Hart, "Gaining Knowledge about Resilient Therapy: How Can It Support Kinship Carers?," *The British Journal of Social Work* 47, no. 5 (July 2017): 12900-1292, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw143>.
10. Janet Ledesma, "Conceptual Frameworks and Research Models on Resilience in Leadership," *SAGE Open* 4, no. 3 [July 2014]: 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014545464>.
11. Sarah R. Lowe, Laura Sampson, Oliver Gruebner, and Sandro Galea, "Psychological Resilience after Hurricane Sandy: The Influence of Individual- and Community-Level Factors on Mental Health After a Large-Scale Natural Disaster," *PLoS One* 10, no. 5 (May 2015): 2.
12. Ager, "Annual Research Review." 488.
13. Goldberg-Miller, "Creative City Strategies on the Municipal Agenda in New York." 1.
14. William K. Tabb, "If Detroit Is Dead, Some Things Need to Be Said at the Funeral." *Journal of Urban Affairs* 37, no. 1 (February 2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/juaf.12173>.
15. Hudson-Webber Foundation, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, Detroit Downtown Partnership, Midtown Detroit, Inc, Invest Detroit, and Data Driven Detroit, "7.2 SQ MI: A Report on Greater Downtown Detroit," 2014, <https://detroitsevenpointtwo.com/>.
16. Evans, "Resilience, Ecology and Adaptation in the Experimental City," 223.
17. Seeliger and Turok, "Towards Sustainable Cities."
18. Rus, Kilar, and Koren, "Resilience Assessment of Complex Urban Systems to Natural Disasters," 311-312.
19. Rus, Kilar, and Koren, «Resilience Assessment of Complex Urban Systems to Natural Disasters.» 311-312.
20. Goldberg-Miller, "Creative City Strategies on the Municipal Agenda in New York," 1.
21. Goldberg-Miller, "Creative City Strategies on the Municipal Agenda in New York," 2.
22. Goldberg-Miller, "Creative City Strategies on the Municipal Agenda in New York," 2.
23. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance: A Short Film About Detroit*. (00:07:07).
24. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:01:29).
25. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:02:13).
26. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:00:08).
27. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:02:13).
28. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:02:59).
29. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:07:30).
30. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:07:36).
31. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:07:41).
32. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:08:05).
33. Jackson Levin, *Resilience/Resistance*, (00:08:14).

