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Gravity in a Jar: A Poetic History of the People, Places, and Events of Detroit

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GRAVITY IN A JAR: A POETIC HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE, PLACES, AND EVENTS
OF DETROIT

by
Morgan McComb

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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ABSTRACT

MORGAN LEIGH MCCOMB: Gravity in a Jar: A Poetic History of the People, Places, and

Events of Detroit

(Under the direction of Beth Ann Fennelly)

In this thesis, I explore the history of the city of Detroit in order to better understand the factors that have led to Detroit's current state. The research materials I have used are standard history books as well as newspaper articles, journals, and published interviews with former and current Detroit residents. I have incorporated this research into the construction of both a strict research element as well as poetry in order to present varying accounts of the city of Detroit beginning in the early 20th century and continuing into the present-day. I have found that the history of Detroit has been/is being most notably shaped through three factors: race relations, the automotive industry, and depopulation. In conclusion, although these three factors continue to affect the city at large, I have found that there are many political and social movements within the city that are working to combat the deterioration of a Detroit and, ultimately, I believe it is possible for Detroit to reconstruct itself as a new, modern American city.

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Introduction

My fascination with Detroit began my junior year of high school when my father gave me a book titled *Ghostly Ruins: America's Forgotten Architecture* by Harry Skrdla. The book is filled with beautiful and haunting images of dilapidated mansions, subway stations, skyscrapers, bridges, and more. However, the book was overwhelmingly filled with Detroit landmarks such as the Book-Cadillac Hotel, Broderick Tower, the Packard Plant, and the neighborhood of Brush Park¹. A theme in the book immediately struck me: Every other architectural ruin was located in an abandoned or remote area except for those located in Detroit. My knowledge of Detroit at this point was limited—I knew it was a dangerous city, that it was the birthplace of the automobile, and that it was extremely cold. As I read through each story that accompanied the pictures, I wondered why Detroit housed so many points of ruined interest when, as far as I knew, it was still a major American city.

It is this question that evolved into my thesis. In a country where it is explicit that we have the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, why did a city that once possessed the means to secure these rights—one that was perhaps the first ‘American-made’ city—decline so dramatically in such a short period of time? This was the question that has permeated the media coverage of Detroit’s plights since the late 2000s, and it is undeniably valid. However, I did not write this thesis in order to explicitly answer this question, though I

¹ The stories behind each of these buildings is fascinating. The Book-Cadillac Hotel was once the premiere celebrity hotel in Detroit where old Hollywood movie stars—including Marlon Brando and Marilyn Monroe—once stayed. Broderick Tower, the topic of one of my poems, was once the most prestigious office building in the world as well as a major radio station hub. The Packard Plant, once the largest factory in the world, is over 4 square miles. The neighborhood of Brush Park was the Park Avenue at Detroit, with every major auto company president having once owned a home there.

certainly argue that my thesis offers insight. In addition to my aforementioned aesthetic interest in the city, it began as a response to the overwhelming amount of negative coverage Detroit has received, the majority of which stems from the referencing of census data and shocking (as well as occasionally sensationalized) statistics.

This thesis presents poems from distinctively different points of view, ranging from the World War II factory worker to an abandoned skyscraper downtown, as well as different time periods, diversifying the scope of who and/or what has a story to tell about Detroit. In addition to presenting poems from diverse and non-traditional points of view, I also focus on certain events in the city that either unified or divided its populace. I do this in order to demonstrate the dynamic nature of Detroit as a living body of residents, inextricably linked to each other. I embarked on this creative project to make Detroit's story relatable and tangible, to take it further than hard facts and statistics have been and are able to do. In order to understand Detroit as a city, I believe that you have to remember that cities are, fundamentally, people. This is not to say that hard facts and statistics are not integral to any who seeks to better understand Detroit's unique identity as an American metropolis; they are integral which is why I have included them in historical backgrounds introducing the decades.

From a creative writing standpoint, Detroit is a content goldmine, filled with fascinating—and often even bizarre—stories, people, and places. The dilapidated skyscrapers and factories that define the Detroit skyline and brought urban explorers and professional photographers to the city are distinctive and moving. Images such as these are essential to successful writing, especially poetry; I wanted to capture them in a way that is not necessarily able to be understood through a book or photograph. Throughout the compilation

of this thesis, I wrote these poems in the hope that they make the reader both see and feel these images, that they cause the reader to be able to transport him or her into a different place and time. Again, I wanted to make the people of Detroit and their stories tangible to the reader as well as construct these in an authentic and genuine way. I intend to give Detroit a dimension that remains essentially absent in the modern literature on the city.

1910-1939

In the early 1900s, Detroit was a boomtown. The cause of Detroit's explosion was obvious: the auto industry. Henry Ford was the industry's pioneer: in 1910 Ford opened up his premiere factory in Highland Park where he first enacted and eventually perfected his assembly line strategy.² Many of those in the rising automotive industry wanted a piece of the pie, two of which were former Ford employees: in 1914 Ford bought out two of his most prestigious engineers, the Dodge brothers, effectively spurring the creation of the Dodge Auto Co.³ Regardless of competition, Ford continued to thrive. Later that year, Ford introduced his revolutionary "\$5 Dollar Day," subsequently making Ford the most desirable employer in Detroit.⁴

By 1913 World War I was looming, and the United States government began to take action to strengthen military defense. In 1917, the government contracted the Lincoln Auto Co., a division of Ford Motor Co., to begin production on the Liberty engine, a plane engine that would prove essential to Allied aircraft during the First World War.⁵ Bolstered by this and other government contracts during the war, in 1920 Ford was able to open his River

² Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis*, (Chicago: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 182. It is also important to note Ford's strategy in placing his factory in Highland Park: because Highland Park was not officially incorporated into the city of Detroit, its business taxes were significantly lower. Despite Ford being seen as a Detroit hero, none of his major factories were located within the city, essentially robbing the city of major income and property taxes.

³ Frank B. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 264-265.

⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 260. Woodford notes what a "raw deal" the \$5 Dollar Day was in actuality: a person had to be employed at a Ford factory for at least 6 months before they were eligible for this pay and they also had to have "good moral fiber". The majority of employees never qualified and, because they were thankful to simply be employed, never forced the issue.

⁵ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 276.

Rouge assembly plant. When it began operation, it was the largest industrial complex in the world.⁶

Ford's success inspired others, and not just the Dodge brothers. In 1919, General Motors was formed, and less than two years later (in obvious response to Ford's massive River Rouge construction), GM built their world headquarters in central Detroit at West Grand and Second Street.⁷ At the time of its completion, it was the largest office building in the world.⁸ By 1922, Chrysler Auto Co. had also formed, thus establishing what would come to be known as the American Big Three automakers.⁹

By 1926—just four years after its creation—Chevrolet (a division of General Motors) surpassed Ford in sales.¹⁰ Ford discontinued its iconic Model T in 1927 in order to develop and then introduce the Model A in 1928, putting Ford back in close competition with General Motors.¹¹ Unfortunately, just one year later, the Great Depression would halt the quickly spinning wheel of industrial success of the burgeoning American auto industry.

World War I made Detroit the American industrial capital, but it also greatly shaped its demographic. Mostly due to the eponymous Great Migration—the movement of Southerners to northern manufacturing cities in search of jobs—the population of Detroit tripled between 1910 and 1930.¹² In an attempt to accommodate the many workers—white Southerners as well as foreign immigrants and blacks—that were flooding the city, the mayor began annexing new land to Detroit. The city's final annexation in 1926 brought the city's

⁶ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 263.

⁷ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 263.

⁸ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 263.

⁹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 264.

¹⁰ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 286.

¹¹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 286.

¹² Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 95.

official size to roughly 140 square miles, the area Detroit maintains today.¹³ What the city did not do (and perhaps what it needed most of all) was make affordable public housing available to these new residents. The city was massively overcrowded with ghettos such as Black Bottom and Poletown becoming areas of concentrated racial segregation and extreme poverty. In the late 1920s, the city government vetoed a proposed housing project, the Sojourner Truth Housing Project, because of the backlash city officials received from whites who were concerned that the project would push poor immigrants and blacks too closely to their neighborhoods.¹⁴

In 1935, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt visited Detroit, bringing with her 6 million in federal money to spur the long-stagnant development of low income housing such as the Sojourner Truth Project.¹⁵ By 1938, the federal government provided \$25 million to the city of Detroit to build new, affordable public housing, and the city did just that: the Brewster-Douglass, Parkside, Charles Terrace, Herman Gardens, John W. Smith, and Jeffries Home housing projects were all constructed in the late '30s.¹⁶ Despite the sudden boom in public housing, the city was still congested and, more evidently, racially divided. White neighborhoods began including race clauses in their deeds which stipulated that houses in such neighborhoods were not to be sold or inhabited by a minority (specifically blacks).¹⁷ By 1925, the aforementioned residential racial tensions boiled over when a black doctor, Ossian Sweet, attempted to move his family into a predominantly white neighborhood. His house was swarmed by neighboring whites which resulted in him shooting a white man whom he

¹³ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 277.

¹⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 344.

¹⁵ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 133.

¹⁶ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 156.

¹⁷ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 341.

felt was a threat to himself and his property.¹⁸ Racial tensions were building quickly, but it would take the 1943 race riot to make city officials recognize the severity of the racism and general unrest that manifested in the '20s and '30s.

Minorities were not only facing opposition in their attempts to relocate to white neighborhoods. Racist organizations began to rapidly take root in the city. The racism that is typically more readily identified with the violent lynchings and cross-burnings of the pre-Civil Rights Movement American South was just as prevalent in those same years in Detroit. In 1923, 1000 men were initiated into the Michigan division of the Ku Klux Klan; less than a year later these same men burned a cross in front of Detroit City Hall.¹⁹ In 1924, three Klansmen were elected to the city council.²⁰ By 1929, a well-known Klansman was elected mayor.²¹ The Black Legion—a distinctively more violent and outspoken racist organization than even the Ku Klux Klan—first began establishing itself in Detroit the same year as the attack on Sweet's home.²² The Black Legion was the most pervasive force of racism in the first half of the 1930s. After members of the Black Legion killed an innocent factory worker in a sloppy, nonsensical murder and were subsequently arrested, they proudly boasted about their hatred-driven violence, and admitted to over 20 murders (though many historians today believe the Legion responsible for over 50 murders during these years).²³

Though racial issues were mounting, the Great Depression would thrust economic instability to the forefront of Detroit residents' concerns. After the stock market crash in

¹⁸ Sweet's case made national news after famous Civil Rights lawyer Clarence Darrow took his case.

¹⁹ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 108.

²⁰ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 109.

²¹ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 110. A recall election was ordered shortly after his election, causing the Klan member to lose his mayoral position.

²² Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 126.

²³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 126. The murder that led to the arrest of several members of the Purple Gang was cruel and seemingly pointless violence: members of the gang led a white factory worker into a field intending to hang him, but after he put up a fight they shot him several times—for “shooting practice”, they would say later in court.

1929, practically all residents (poor blacks and immigrants most especially) suffered in every conceivable way. In addition to these heightening racial tensions, city residents were suffering from rampant unemployment and poor maintenance of city services. Because their residents were broke, major cities like Detroit were limping by on little city funding, their annual budget having been dependent upon property income tax that Detroiters could now no longer afford to pay. Twenty percent of the city was unemployed by 1931 with no relief in sight.²⁴

Where there is desperation, there is crime, and Detroit was rife with both. Having gained notoriety and momentum during the years preceding the Great Depression, Detroit gang involvement and operations reached their climax in the years after. Robert Rockaway notes in his article that the Purple Gang was perhaps the most notorious.²⁵ Their involvement with “Bloody July”—a period during the first week of July 1930 that resulted in ten gang-related killings—ultimately resulted in the murder of Gerald E. “Jerry” Buckley later that month. Because the victim was a popular radio personality in the area, the media covered the story religiously. The public was outraged, even accusing the mayor of being involved. This particular event led the federal government to launch a study of prohibition-related crime, and not surprisingly, Detroit was listed as the American city most affected by it.²⁶ The final report, called the Wickersham Report, was integral in leading to the repeal of the 18th Amendment in 1933.²⁷

Despite Detroit’s reputation as a crime-filled, racially hostile and impoverished American city, one important social movement began to take root during the years preceding

²⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 313.

²⁵ Robert A. Rockaway, “The Notorious Purple Gang: Detroit’s All-Jewish Prohibition Era Mob,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 20 (2001).

²⁶ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 310.

²⁷ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 311.

World War II: the rise of labor unions. Beginning in the 1910s, workers attempted many times to form loose organizations of workers, with none of them developing a substantial enough support base to thrive. However, in 1935, the United Auto Workers union was formed. Its first two years were extremely rocky; however, after Walter Reuther—future UAW President—formed his Local 174 union in 1936 (which shortly afterwards merged with the UAW), this union gained support and momentum.²⁸ By 1937, after a series of strikes in manufacturing and auto plants across the city, General Motors signed the first agreement recognizing the UAW as an official bargaining agent of its factory workers. Chrysler followed suit shortly afterwards.²⁹

Henry Ford, however, was vehemently opposed to unions. Though Ford is seen as an American innovator and his contributions to and within the auto industry are unrivaled, his business policies were purely profit-driven.³⁰ Union power threatened his profits, and he went to extreme measures to keep unions from gaining support. In 1937, UAW leaders Walter Reuther and Richard Frankensteen went to the River Rouge Plant to distribute union pamphlets.³¹ Before they were able to make it to the factory, Ford's private security team apprehended them and proceeded to beat them severely. Unfortunately for Ford, a *Detroit News* reporter was nearby and took a picture of the assault (one that would win the photographer the Pulitzer Prize). The famous "Battle of the Overpass" shattered Ford's public image, leading many to become union sympathizers.

In the years preceding to World War II, Detroit was a chaotic city of paradoxes. The auto industry saw the rise of self-made millionaires and a stable working middle class, while

²⁸ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 157.

²⁹ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 136.

³⁰ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 182.

³¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 158.

residential segregation and racism drove blacks and immigrants further and further into poverty. While the labor union movement germinated and made significant strides in legally securing workers' rights, gangs involved in illegal alcohol-and drug-running spawned violence and murder. Though southern blacks had fled for the north in order to escape racism and violence, they were met by groups such as the KKK and the Black Legion along with many white residents whose goals were to actively oppress members of the black community. Detroit, in almost every way but industry, was diverse but dysfunctional. However, World War II would not only cause a delay in the city's addressing of its social and economic issues but also further exacerbate them.

Ossian Sweet House, 1925

Two problems: my owner ain't white and he ain't poor,
and as usual, there ain't no better sign
than the badges and blue in front of my door;
something's 'bout to pop off when there's that neat line.

As it usually goes, there ain't no better sign:
a man after blood, seven men at his side—
something's 'bout to pop off when there's that neat line
rushing toward me like seagulls to fish at low tide.

A man after blood, seven men at his side.
I don't want no trouble, but here come the police,
rushing toward me like seagulls to fish at low tide,
a ragtag group sent in to keep peace.

I don't want no trouble, but here come the police,
police as useless as my broken wood fence!
Who sent *them* in to try to keep peace?
The hell you doin' shootin'?! That don't make no sense!

The police are as useless as my broken wood fence!
Father, Son, Holy Ghost, you just shot a man dead!
The hell you doin' shootin'?! That don't make no sense!
You got blood on my lawn and rutted my flowerbeds!

Father, Son, Holy Ghost, you just shot a man dead.
Don't give them no 'scuse to come up my steps!
You got blood on my lawn and rutted my flowerbeds.
My God, you're kiddin' me, did you *aim* for his head?!

Don't give them no 'scuse to come up my steps!
I didn't ask to be built, I didn't ask to be brick!
My God, you're kiddin' me, you *aimed* for his head?!
I'm asking you now, please stop all this shit!

I didn't ask to be built, I didn't ask to be brick.
They musta told him twelve times living here wasn't wise.
I'm asking you now, please stop all this shit.
Do you know what it is to watch a riot rise?

They told him—the whites—living here was unwise.
He did and they came: flashing blue and badges at my door.
Do you know what it is to watch a riot rise?
Two problems: my owner ain't white and he ain't poor.

Letter Home, 1927

Louise, I sure miss you.
It's colder than a dead man's bones
but Detroit ain't half bad.
I will say there's too much talk
of race and not enough
about raisin my pay.

I'll be honest, I don't mind them blacks.
I don't mind at all, cause
the hungry mut don't feel so hungry
after stumblin 'pon a dead one.
I've got a toilet and portable heater
here on Ledyard, but they sleepin two a bed
just for warmth in Black Bottom!
Seein that rat trap gave
a whole new meaning to sympathizin,
and if you was here you would likely die
of either sympathy or the chills.

The new assemblyman from Georgia
(gap in his teeth so big
you could stuff it with his Bible)
told me a story bout this new South yesterday,
how an old klansman spit on his loafers,
and in Georgia that's getting off easy.

Baby, I don't have in it my head
or my heart to tell him
they just elected three of the klan
to the city council. A little white lie
from a little white man
won't hurt no black as happy
as he thinks he is.

He's gettin off easy, he thinks.
I would tell you what I think
but at Packard, I don't get paid
for thinking, if I get paid at all.

Big City Blues, 1937

If you could take the tempature of Detroit today—
Go on, take the tempature of Detroit today!—
I can bet it even lower than my daily pay.

'partment E ready to fall whenever God calls.
'partment E be fallin whenever God calls,
but to lose it to the Lawd is losin nothin at all.

I don't miss guvna Walkah or the KKK.
I don't miss guvna Walkah or the KKK,
but I miss that Georgia sun and momma's hotcakes.

She got plenty in Georgia to keep her warm;
got barn burnings and hot springs keepin her warm.
All I gots a fickle woman and the dreams of my farm.

Momma always said, 'Nothing make the devil madder'—
morning, noon and night—'Nothing make the devil madder
than a man of the Lawd, and nothing make the Lawd gladder.'

I only got one thing to make my momma proud,
got only one thing makin my momma proud:
every night I give the Lawd all my love out loud.

1940-1959

World War II furthered the prosperity of the American auto manufacturers, both during and directly after the war. In 1940, the federal government offered its first war contract to Chrysler, commissioning the development of a substantial tank arsenal to be stationed in the city.³² After Pearl Harbor, war contracts flooded Detroit automakers. Hudson was contracted for a navy gun arsenal and GM for a tank arsenal. Ford's Lincoln division, having been successful in manufacturing airplane engines during World War I, made B-24 Bombers, while other Ford employees developed the first all-terrain military vehicle.³³ Chrysler (along with Wolverine Tube Co., a parts manufacturer and supplier) developed tubing that would be used in the creation of the atomic bombs.³⁴ Detroit was "the Arsenal of Democracy," and because of this was viewed as a high-risk target for attack. The city prepared for such an event, planning citywide blackouts, rationing, and weekly air siren drills.³⁵ While Detroit men were being sent overseas, another migration of southern workers—the Second Great Migration—scrambled to the city to take their jobs.

After the war, the automotive industry in Detroit slowed: the end of the war meant the end of many war contracts with auto manufacturers. Every major automaker cut jobs, and the city was once again flooded with unemployment. In addition, men returning from deployment were met with slim to no job opportunities, adding to the unemployed.

³² Frank B. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 332.

³³ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 334. This would become the first Jeep.

³⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 334.

³⁵ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 335.

Thousands had migrated to Detroit in the four-year war period, but no one had prepared for the population influx that was going to be a direct result of the city's wartime prosperity.

However, the city had not been completely complacent in its attempts to resolve the continuing affordable housing issue. In 1941, the Sojourner Truth Housing Project was finally approved and its construction was completed in 1942.³⁶ However, the day the (mostly black) residents were scheduled to move in, they were met with an angry, predominantly white mob composed of residents from surrounding neighborhoods. The city, in order to assuage the mob, said that they would re-evaluate the project and decided not to allow blacks to move in. When this issue was taken to the state courts, the city was forced to revoke their original statement, and later that year residents were once again allowed to move into the Sojourner Truth Project. However, they had to be escorted in under the protection of 1000 state troopers, 300 state police, and 450 Detroit police officers.³⁷ This incident, seen by many whites as forced integration, sparked a major backlash: in 1943, the Detroit Housing Commission adopted a formal policy of "preserving the racial and economic characteristics" of existing neighborhoods.³⁸ Though the Sojourner Truth Project, despite the adversity it faced, was a step in the right direction, in 1946 Mayor Jeffries condemned a large percentage of Black Bottom (a predominantly black-populated area) in order to build a major freeway. The residents were forced to move out but had nowhere to go. Many flocked to the Twelfth Street area, an area that would continue to grow more dangerous, impoverished, and problematic.³⁹

³⁶ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 344.

³⁷ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 344.

³⁸ Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 17.

³⁹ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 11.

Instances of racially-charged aggression escalated in Detroit in the decades leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. In 1942, 350 white female workers at Hudson Department Store walked off the job after a handful of black workers were hired⁴⁰, and in 1943 20,000 white factory workers at the Packard plant protested the hiring of blacks.⁴¹ Compelling radio programs by Father Coughlin, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Reverend J. Frank Norris gained notoriety, their message of racism grounded in their varying but radical religious beliefs.⁴² In the early years of the war, a new police chief was appointed, ushering in an era of extreme police brutality with the brunt of it directed at blacks.⁴³ Black Detroiters were facing racism in practically every aspect of their lives

Tensions that began mounting pre-World War II and were exacerbated by the Second Great Migration exploded in 1943. Three weeks after the strike at Packard (dubbed “the Packard Hate Strike”⁴⁴), the nation’s first major race riot stormed through Detroit for three days. In his book, Scott Martelle outlines the progression of the riot.⁴⁵ It began as a confrontation between a sailor and a black factory worker on the bridge from Belle Isle, a popular summer amusement park situated on an island close to the upper eastern shore of the city. The fight escalated and moved to the banks at the Brodhead naval armory. The mob grew, numbering almost five thousand before the police were finally called. Within twenty-four hours of the beginning of the riot, downtown Detroit was effectively closed. White and black mobs organized, staging attacks and counterattacks. When federal troops arrived on the 22nd, Detroit was a war zone. Despite the city’s thorough preparation for an attack from the

⁴⁰ Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 152.

⁴¹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 345.

⁴² Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 151.

⁴³ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 168. More specifically, the police chief gave orders to his officers to “shoot first, investigate later.”

⁴⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 345.

⁴⁵ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 150-155.

Germans or the Japanese, it had not been ready for an attack on its own residents by its own residents. The city was placed under military occupancy for ten days, and troops were stationed in the city for over six months per President Roosevelt's orders. The physical damage to the city was over \$2 million, and the days of anarchy and guerilla warfare had resulted in thirty-four deaths. Twenty-five of these deaths were of black residents and the other nine white residents; of the twenty-five black men killed, policemen killed seventeen. The 1943 Detroit race riot sent a spark through the major cities of America.⁴⁶

In his book *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967*, Sidney Fine argues that the 1943 riot was the first time blacks took an overtly violent stance against discrimination in the city: "The 1943 riot was the ugly climax to an increasingly bitter racial conflict between whites and blacks in the wartime city over jobs and housing," a conflict that was to continue for years to come.⁴⁷ After the riot subsided, Mayor Jeffries admitted that he had "been conscious of the seriousness of the race problem [t]here for more than a year."⁴⁸ Even the mayor admitted his apathetic attitude towards the serious racial issues that had been developing before and during his term. The riot in 1943, fueled by the desire of the black community to be recognized as equals by their neighbors and their city, was unfortunately not the last nor the worst race riot to erupt in Detroit.

However, post-riot (for perhaps the first time) city officials were taking action in trying to address racial issues in Detroit. Mayor Jeffries formed a committee on interracial relations, and leaders of the black community were elected to public office.⁴⁹ During the war

⁴⁶ Most notably, just one month later a severe and violent race riot broke out in Harlem.

⁴⁷ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 1.

⁴⁸ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 148.

⁴⁹ Fine, *Violence in the Motor City*, 22.

the black workforce had grown and subsequently so had the black middle class. This black middle class would begin moving away from traditionally black areas in the city, and their relocation was unsurprisingly faced with much hostility. However, in 1948, a pivotal victory for black Detroit homeowners was won in the U. S. Supreme Court.

Despite the national media attention Ossian Sweet's 1925 court case received⁵⁰, blacks were still being denied the right to move into predominantly white neighborhoods in the '40s. In his book *All Our Yesterdays*, Frank Woodford tells the story of a black man named Orsel McGhee who in 1948 purchased a home on Seebaldt Avenue, a predominantly white neighborhood.⁵¹ White members of the neighborhood were outraged, citing the race-restrictive clause in the deed and ordering McGhee to move. When the case was taken to the local courts, the race-restrictive clause was upheld; however, McGhee took his case to the U. S. Supreme Court where it was ruled that such clauses were in violation of the 14th Amendment. Neighborhoods across Detroit whose deeds stipulated race restrictions no longer had legal support and were eradicated.

While black homeowners won a decisive victory in the Supreme Court, the city government was failing to address other serious social and economic problems. One division of city government in particular was becoming central in the systemic oppression of blacks. During the 1940s, the Detroit Police Department was notorious for their racist policies and was considered the most biased in the country.⁵² City officials hoped to keep racial tensions at bay, but the ever-present housing problem was continuing to stoke the fires of racial tension. Black workers continued to move to Detroit to search for and obtain jobs even after World War II ended, which spurred bitterness in white workers who felt blacks had stolen

⁵⁰ The case was championed by famous Civil Rights-era attorney, Clarence Darrow.

⁵¹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 342-344.

⁵² Fine, *Violence in the Motor City*, 11.

their jobs. In addition, the riot in 1943 had only further irritated relations between races. The city had responded to the riot by essentially ignoring its existence after the media attention surrounding the event tapered off.

Despite the city's ongoing racial issues, the labor union movement reached its peak during the '40s and '50s, making significant strides in securing better wages and benefits for many factory workers. After the war, the unions and their relationship with the auto industry were finally garnering respect and support from residents as well as the auto companies themselves. Walter Reuther—one of the men who had been severely beaten by Ford's private security during the "Battle of the Overpass"—was elected as president of the UAW in 1947.⁵³ He brought strong leadership and organization to the UAW. Despite him being severely wounded when shot by a would-be assassin in 1948, Reuther remained devoted to union activity and was highly respected.

While a major figure in the union movement rose, a major figure in the auto industry fell: on April 7th, 1947, Henry Ford died at the age of 83. He had been sick for several years, and the company had asked his grandson, Henry Ford II, to take over in 1945 (much to Henry Ford, Sr.'s chagrin).⁵⁴ Henry Ford II brought new vigor to Ford, hiring a crack team of engineers and mechanics to develop new models and further advance production. They were called "Ford's Whiz Kids," and they were instrumental in reinvigorating the production and sales of Ford automobiles.⁵⁵ The entire auto industry post-World War II was on the upswing, and by the end of 1948 car production again reach the five million unit mark for the first time since before the stock market crash in 1929.⁵⁶

⁵³ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 329.

⁵⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 357.

⁵⁵ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 356.

⁵⁶ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 360.

The 1950s was a major turning point for Detroit in every aspect. The city had, in a period of just half a century, risen to become the fifth largest city in America, with its population reaching its peak of 1,849,568 in the 1950 census. The city was a melting pot of cultural diversity, with everyone looking for the same thing: jobs. Unfortunately, these jobs would become increasingly difficult to find during the decade. However, the issue of creating affordable public housing, yet to be effectively resolved, was still the city's most prominent issue.

The city's decisions regarding public housing were less than successful, further stoking the racial fire that was ever smoldering between members of the black and white community. Scott Martelle reports in his book *Detroit: A Biography*, that "public housing had become shorthand for black housing"; the general attitude of white residents (and many white city officials) was that continuing to create public housing would only entice more blacks to move to the city and thus incite more violence and crime.⁵⁷ Federal funds were made available to Detroit throughout the 1950s for use in the construction of public housing projects; however, the city refused these funds, instead embarking on a massive relocation strategy in order to isolate the black community from white neighborhoods and hopefully assuage any possible confrontation.⁵⁸

Many black families were relocated to Twelfth Street, an already impoverished area of the city. This relocation perhaps kept altercations between members of the white and black communities from manifesting, but the rampant overcrowding and deplorable conditions in the areas and neighborhoods surrounding Twelfth Street sparked black-on-black crime. Members of the black community who had been living in the sprawling Black Bottom

⁵⁷ 171.

⁵⁸ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 171.

ghetto⁵⁹ were also relocated to areas surrounding Gratiot Avenue and Lafayette Park in the eastern part of the city (which was, at this time, predominantly white), a relocation that instigated perhaps the first major event in Detroit's developmental stagnation and ultimate decline: the massive relocation of members of the white community to surrounding suburbs.

In 1953, the mayor created the Detroit Commission on Community Relations in the hopes that its members would be able to effectively (albeit slowly) integrate the cities neighborhoods peacefully. However, despite the good intentions behind its creation, the committee itself did not have the manpower nor the authority to be able to be taken seriously amongst members of the community. With the police department already well known for its racist policies, the committee had no means by which to intervene in racial issues nor enforce its proposed policies. Because of relocation and continuing racial hostilities, Detroit would lose 23.4% of its white population during the 1950s.⁶⁰

Meanwhile, the auto industry was beginning to plateau. After the war the Big Three automakers were still under a handful of military contracts. By the beginning of the 1950s however, the majority of these contracts had been completed or terminated. Car sales had seen a small spike in the several years following the war, but sales began to level off. Competition was fierce: the decade would see end of both the Hudson and Packard auto companies, two companies that had once been iconic in the Detroit automobile industry.⁶¹ Henry Ford had been driven to his funeral in a Packard, then considered a symbol of status, but in 1956 the sprawling Packard plant located in the heart of the city was closed, and by

⁵⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 20: A large, predominantly black residential area of the city, it was condemned and slated in order to build the I-75 Freeway. This was a major blow to black Detroiters and further convinced them that their city was racially biased. Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, and Berry Gordy had all grown up in Paradise Valley

⁶⁰ Fine, *Violence in the Motor City*, 3.

⁶¹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 357.

1958 the last Packard car rolled off the assembly line. Now, the title of ‘Big Three’ was more fitting than ever: Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler were able to edge out practically all of their other smaller competitors by the end of the ‘50s.⁶² In addition to the stagnating sales, local labor unions in Detroit had, in their attempts to secure job security and quality for their members, caused some businesses to relocate their factories to the south where unions were practically nonexistent and both land and taxes were cheaper.⁶³

In a matter of 30 years, Detroit had changed drastically. Once the epitome of American innovation and a symbol of opportunity, people were beginning to steadily leave Detroit proper. During the 1950s, the city suffered from four recessions—at its peak, unemployment amongst black youth reached 18.2%.⁶⁴ By the end of the decade, Detroit had lost almost one-fourth of its white population, leaving neighborhoods empty.⁶⁵ Despite this mass exodus, the poorer areas of the city were still severely overcrowded. The income divide between whites and blacks was also severe and further segregated the city: according to the 1959 census, the median income for a white family was \$7050 per year, whereas the median income for a black family was \$4370 per year. Because most of the black community was living in a state of poverty, they were not able to afford to move to these now-empty white neighborhoods. The city also suffered financially because of this movement to the suburbs: uninhabited neighborhoods meant that the city was losing massive amounts of property taxes, revenue they desperately needed to handle the issues of overcrowding and housing. In the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement, Detroit found itself in a precarious racial and

⁶² Though sales were undoubtedly seeing a post-war decrease, that is not to say that the American car industry was not still powerful: In the mid-1950s, General Motors’ total annual revenue was larger than the gross domestic product of Belgium, making GM the 18th largest country in the world. (“Detroit and Deindustrialization: Questions and Answers with Barry Bluestone,” *Dollars & Sense* 308 (2013): 19.)

⁶³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 29.

⁶⁴ Fine, *Violence in the Motor City*, 3.

⁶⁵ Fine, *Violence in the Motor City*, 3.

economic situation. However, it would not be until the infamous Race Riot of 1967 that the continuing issues Detroit was facing would be made explicitly evident and nationally known.

Detroit is Dynamite, 1943

A black boy in grey slacks
and a tartan buttonup,
presses his cheeks
between a metal gate
encircling a faded carousel.
His grandmother, deep ditches
from decades in the sun
cut into her eyes and neck,
struggles to find a nickel
in her handbag.
The carousel turns.

The boy's eyes follow golden poles
spearing the backs
of painted wooden horses.
Bobbing, going nowhere.
His grandmother drops her nickel.
It falls, a soft metal ting
on the asphalt,
lands at the feet
of two patent Maryjanes.

A white housewife:
cotton dress printed with pansies,
hair coiffed in ringlets.
She flicks her left ankle
and the nickel skates away,
trampled by a cloud of white collars,
suspenders, A-line dresses.
Arms crossed, eyes placid.
"When did they start
letting your kind on Belle Isle?"

Belle Isle, shaped
like a double-ended arrow,
hangs carelessly to the end
of the MacArthur Bridge,
connecting the amusements
to the shores of Motor City.
As the Earth turns its back on the Sun,
park-goers spill from Belle Isle's gates.
Families board the bridge towards home.
The island sighs as the ferris wheel halts.

The bridge brims with headlights.

The grandmother grips
the grooved leather steering wheel
of her '39 Studebaker,
grandson snoozing in the backseat.

Four cars in front of them
is a sailor, dressed in full garb,
leaning on the hood of a Dodge.
The cries of Pontiac car horns
pierce the darkness.
The grandson rubs his eyes awake.

“Nigger!”

The sailor, fingers snaked around a man's neck,
and spits. The worker's right fist soars,
making contact with the sailor's jaw.
The huddle of cars begins drifting
past the two bloodied men. Minutes later
the '39 Studebaker hits north shore.

The boy stares at the confused battle
from the backseat—stretching
east and west, covering East Jefferson,
north, engulfing East Grand, spilling over
onto Congress, Concord, Canton.
The Studebaker turns left onto Lafayette,
dodges men racing east.
The Studebaker crosses Brush Street.
The old woman reaches into the back seat,
taps her grandson's knee and whispers
“Chil', we almost home.”

They lock themselves in their apartment
in the red brick Brewster Projects.
A Zenith radio fuzzily reports back:
Fenelen and Nevada streets unwalkable,
broken glass and flaming storefronts.
Roosevelt's papabear voice rings out
during a fireside chat. Not one word
about blood, about race, about violence
creeping through the Rustbelt.

Four days pass.
The boy and his grandmother step outside,
eyes squinting from the sight of sun.
They head to Mick's Five and Dime

at the corner of Lafayette and Brush.
“He’s been such a good boy these three days,”
the grandmother tells a woman at the counter,
handing him an ice cream cone.
The cashier, hair permed in tight black curls
asks them what they know, what they’ve heard.

“They say some whites tossed a black lady
and her baby off the MacArthur.
Like some ole worthless ragdolls.
Thirty-four dead. The police ain’t seen nobody
but blacks killin’. Bastards.”
The grandmother cuts the cashier a severe look,
places her palms over her grandson’s ears.
The two leave, walk down Brush for three blocks.
Each face they pass
is a billboard
for the same unspoken message:
watch out for yourselves.

They round the corner towards Brewster.
The grandmother sees a stack
of newspapers by the entrance.
A photo of a young black man:
pleat-front slacks, scuffed loafers,
white button down, broken suspenders.
Eyes closed and jaw tensed.
Walking down Woodward past the Calvert plant,
held tight on both sides by policemen.
The headline reads:
DETROIT IS DYNAMITE!

South Carolina Sonnet, 1944

Came 'nd got me, they did, seeing I couldn't see,
'cruiters from Dee-troit, needin' men on machines.
I been lookin' fo' work: I unemployed 'nd nineteen,
'nd if I don't work, my momma don't love me.
Eyes don't work right, but if they did—woo!
I'd be flyin' high widda fellas. But I been shinin' steel,
boltin' bolts, screwin' screws, tryinta feel
a part of their army: painted red, white, and blue.

Ain't no water, no food, 'nd I share work with the blacks!
But Rosey just got re-'lected, 'nd now that we gainin'
on those Nazi bastards, Dee-troit's gettin' right crowded.
They said fish or cut bait. Ain't no skin off my back.
Tapped my shouldah wit my ticket south. I sho ain't complainin'.
I wouldn'ta stayed if them city boys allowed it.

1960-1979

Detroit during the 1960s was a hub of activity, and the racial undertone of almost every aspect of life was apparent. The city had isolated the black community in certain designated pockets of the city, and conditions were brutal: by 1960, the concentration of residents in and around Twelfth Street neighborhoods had reached 21,376 people per square mile.⁶⁶ The mayor at the time, Louis Miriani, was a controversial figure in that many believed he was lenient on the police department's use of excessive force. Miriani was also extremely reluctant to discuss racial issues and thus stunted the conversation amongst city leaders and representatives of the black community trying to find plausible ways to alleviate animosity towards the black community. On August 11, 1960, a coordinating committee composed of members in communities surrounding Twelfth Street met with Miriani, pleading for assistance in improving the conditions in the area.⁶⁷ Miriani told them he was committed to improvement and would designate several departments to begin to actively evaluate the problems and attempt to find solutions. It was a pledge completely devoid of merit.⁶⁸

Continuing the trend that began in the 1950s, white residents of Detroit were fleeing to the suburbs. Perhaps one of the few still-attractive aspects of Detroit was the general success being experienced by the auto industry, despite the somewhat uneasy nature of the

⁶⁶ Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanaugh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 4.

⁶⁷ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 4.

⁶⁸ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 4.

industry throughout the 1950s. Unfortunately, the businessmen running the companies, not the public, felt this success most readily. Smaller car companies were still moving away from Detroit or going out of business altogether. Despite many automakers closing shop in the city, during the 1960s automobile production would reach an all-time high. In 1965, production reached 9.3 million units, and the following year it still exceeded 9 million.⁶⁹ The car industry, however, was becoming less and less competitive, with only the Big Three automakers left in Detroit by 1967. Jobs that were eradicated when smaller companies went out of business were not being replaced due to newly developed manufacturing technologies stifling employment opportunities.

As aforementioned, the upswing of the auto industry was not an upswing for the city as a whole. Major social and racial issues were still being ignored and frustrations amongst members of the black community were beginning to grow at a rapid pace. Beginning after the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 (which declared segregation unconstitutional), what would eventually become known as the American Civil Rights Movement was building momentum; in tandem with this momentum, members of Detroit's black community were becoming emboldened and steadfast in their resolve to be seen as equals. On December 14th and 15th, 1960, the United States Commission on Civil Rights held hearings in Detroit.⁷⁰ Leaders of the black community collected their ideas and voiced their concerns: they argued that the city had an obvious and pressing obligation to do something about the discrimination of blacks in the workplace, in public housing, and in the education system, as well as address the police brutality towards blacks. Unfortunately, the city was slow to act in addressing the problems presented by the black community at these hearings.

⁶⁹ Frank B. Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 356.

⁷⁰ Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 6.

During the '60s, issues of race permeated every facet of Detroit, including politics. Once the 1961 mayoral election began holding primaries, Mayor Miriani was confident in his ability to win: he had the support—both politically and monetarily—from the most influential white members of the community.⁷¹ After the primaries, it still appeared that Miriani had the upper hand; however, a man named Jerome Cavanagh, in his first campaign for public office, campaigned relentlessly, especially among members of the black community. Cavanagh, who pledged to eradicate the overtly racist policies in city government (most especially within the police department) inspired black residents. On Election Day, black voters turned out in droves, and Cavanagh won the election. He inherited a job rife with problems and would face overwhelming opposition in his attempts to hold fast to his campaign promise of battling racial injustices.⁷²

Despite the violent riot that would shape Detroit's reputation during this decade, many politically active blacks in Detroit went about attempting to enact change in peaceful ways. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s March on Washington is perhaps one of the most famous events of the Civil Rights Movement; however, his Walk to Freedom in Detroit on June 23rd, 1963, was the Washington March's precursor.⁷³ Woodford describes the motivations behind peaceful political activism such as the Walk to Freedom as follows:

The Detroit negro community...served notice upon the city, the nation, and the world that the black-skinned American would no longer accept second-class citizenship,

⁷¹ Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 31-34.

⁷² Fine, *Violence in the Model City*, 6.

⁷³ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 349-351.

would no longer live in a segregated society or be satisfied with less than equal civil, social, and economic rights.⁷⁴

On a sunny summer afternoon, 125,000 people peacefully marched down Woodward Avenue singing “We Shall Overcome”. They eventually arrived at the steps of Cobo Hall where Martin Luther King, Jr.—joined by Mayor Cavanagh, former Michigan governor John Swainson, and UAW President Walter Reuther—gave the preliminary version of his now-infamous “I Have A Dream” speech.⁷⁵ Despite the hope for equality that this march nurtured, blacks in Detroit still found themselves discriminated against in the years afterwards.

Four years later, perhaps the most well-known race riot in American history began in the early morning hours of Sunday, July 23rd, 1967, when a routine police raid of a popular bar in the black community led to the arrest of 82 blacks.⁷⁶ The reason for the gathering in the bar that evening was a celebration of the return of two black soldiers from serving in the Vietnam War. Word of the arrest spread rapidly through the black community and a mob numbering in the hundreds began to crowd the police, yelling and accusing them of racial profiling. At some point in the confrontation, one member of the crowd threw a bottle through a police car window, and the crowd turned vicious. They took to the surrounding streets, emptying garbage cans, starting fires, and throwing bricks through businesses’ windows that they would then loot. Instead of attempting to combat the crowd, the police patrolled the area, stopping nothing and arresting no one. The mob took this as a signal to continue.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 349.

⁷⁵ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 350.

⁷⁶ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 350-352.

⁷⁷ The reason for this inaction on the part of the police force is difficult to discern. However Woodford offers a possible explanation saying that, because over 80 arrests had been made, the number of police officers available at the time to attempt to address the mob violence were so few that the officers did not feel that it was safe to intervene.

By 6:30 AM, a fire had begun to blaze at a destroyed and looted shoe store. When firefighters were called to the scene, the rioters refused to allow them to extinguish the fire, blocking their path. The fire chief decided to send in an all-black firefighters' team, hoping the mob would allow them through; instead, the mob attacked this team even more rigorously. Well-respected leaders of the black community began scouring the areas surrounding Twelfth Street where the riot was spreading, pleading with the people to stop the violence. A highly revered local black congressman, John Conyers, went to the roof of a building within the melee with a bullhorn, attempting to assuage the violence of the crowd. The mob was not moved by his speech; rather, they began throwing stones at him until he had to retreat to safety.⁷⁸

By Monday afternoon, the city was chaos—fires had broken out across the city and rumors had begun to circulate of citizens engaging in the sporadic sniping of rioters. The police had been completely ineffective. Governor George Romney declared a state of emergency, enforced a strict 9 PM curfew until further notice, and dispatched 400 state police officers and 7300 national guardsmen to try to tame the mob.⁷⁹ The mob continued, spreading in all directions and taking over major streets such as Woodward, Grand River, Livernois, and Mack. The governor soon realized that the policemen and guardsmen he had dispatched were not capable of quelling the turmoil. On Monday alone, over 617 fires had been reported in the city, and the first death of the riot had occurred when a white man running from a looted building was shot.⁸⁰ The governor made the executive decision to request federal troops.

⁷⁸ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 110.

⁷⁹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 351.

⁸⁰ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 351.

President Johnson was hesitant to dispatch troops, questioning whether the riot was truly as severe as Governor Romney claimed. Johnson stalled the request with technicalities, finally sending 4700 paratroopers into Michigan Monday night.⁸¹ However, Johnson kept them 40 miles away from the city, again stalling federal troops from reaching the city. (Instead, Johnson sent in a member of his administration to survey the situation and report back.) Meanwhile, Johnson went on national television to address the riot, and in the process he condemned and blamed Mayor Cavanagh and Governor Romney for the delayed response. Troops were not authorized to enter Detroit until the next morning, but they were sent in with little to no direction.

Because the troops were proving ineffective in the efforts to stop the riot, police officers began to go on the offensive. The rioters were ready for them, counterattacking and driving city police forces out of areas surrounding Twelfth Street twice on Tuesday night alone. By Wednesday, the riot had spread at a rapid rate to both the east and west sides of the city. The arrest tally had reached over 3000, and police had to turn a bathhouse on Belle Isle into a makeshift prison to house all of the arrested rioters. By Thursday the riot began to taper off. The mob had extended to almost every part of the city. The damage done to businesses and homes was extensive with the riot essentially burning out on its own accord. By that Friday, the last major fire was reported and the riot came to an end. It had ravished the city relentlessly for six days.

One of the biggest questions that surrounded the race riots that broke out in major cities across the nation during the 1960s is why a race riot never manifested in any major southern city, such as Atlanta or Memphis, but rather in Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles. I believe in his book *Detroit: An Autobiography*, Scott Martelle offers the most

⁸¹ Woodford, *All Our Yesterdays*, 352.

viable explanation: "...the difference between being black in the North and being black in the South [lay] in expectations."⁸² Southern blacks expected racism—in a sense, it had become a part of their everyday lives with many accepting discrimination as inevitable and unstoppable. However, many blacks had moved to the North, East, and West believing that the opportunity to be accepted as an equal socially, economically, and politically was possible, that racism was less severe and pervasive. Their expectations were disappointed, and it was this disappointment that debatably turned into violent action. In his book, Mark Binelli notes that "Detroit drew a different kind of people. It had a *history* of drawing a different kind of people. People were coming to work. And that's what helped set them up for rebellion."⁸³

By the 1970s, everyone living in Detroit and its greater metro area had begun to realize that Detroit was changing dramatically, not necessarily for the better. The 1970s was a particularly devastating period for the American auto industry, a fact that has only recently come to be fully understood in relation to the 2009 Big Three Bailouts. On October 6th, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched military action against Israel.⁸⁴ Because of the United States' sympathies with Israel in global politics, the U. S. supplied arms to Israel in the wake of the Egyptian and Syrian attacks. As a result, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries decided to stop all oil deliveries to the United States, an embargo that lasted for six months until March 1974⁸⁵. This oil embargo was an important factor in the American recession that began during this time and caused a dramatic increase in gas prices nationwide.

⁸² Martelle, *Detroit: An Autobiography*, 194.

⁸³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 110.

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 8.

⁸⁵ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 205.

In addition to the oil embargo, another internal political event would force the American auto industry to either make dramatic quality changes or suffer the consequences. In 1975, Congress enacted the first government fuel standards, a policy for which automakers were not prepared.⁸⁶ Cars being produced in Detroit and in America in general could not compete with the more efficient, lower-gas mileage cars manufactured in countries such as Germany and Japan that were starting to gain popularity. Not only were these foreign cars more fuel-efficient, they were cheaper and steadily gaining the reputation of being more dependable than American-made cars.

The autoworkers' unions most especially recognized this necessity for more efficient, better-quality cars, specifically in the years immediately after World War II. During the height of the labor workers' union movement, in 1946 the UAW went through a period of heated debate regarding the "management rights" clauses that were to be agreed upon in the first post-war contract between the unions and the auto companies.⁸⁷ By management rights, the unions meant what type of control and to what extent factory workers would have over production: what type of production, production costs, quality assurance, etc.⁸⁸ This debate arose during a period of obvious American dominance in the global industrial market, and because of this, the UAW placed larger emphasis on wage and benefit increases in this new contract than they did on establishing their involvement in the very production that employed them. Because they were paid well and received increased retirement and health benefits in these contracts, they essentially resigned themselves from asserting their voice in production.

⁸⁶ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 208.

⁸⁷ "Detroit and Deindustrialization: Questions and Answers with Barry Bluestone," *Dollars & Sense* 308 (2013): 20.

⁸⁸ "Detroit and Deindustrialization", pg. 20.

Unfortunately, by 1970, this earlier decision by the UAW to forfeit their voice in production in exchange for increased wages and job security meant that the heads of auto companies did not feel any internal pressure to keep up with the global market. Barry Bluestone, director of the Kitty and Michael Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy at Northeastern University (as well as the son of a former Detroit UAW vice president), said in his interview with *Dollars & Sense*:

During the Days in which there was little international competition in the auto industry—in the 1940s, ‘50s, ‘60s, and right up until the early ‘70s—neither the industry nor the union had much to worry about. Imports as share of gross domestic product in the United States never exceeded 5.7%, about the same level as in the 1920s, until the early 1970s.⁸⁹

For decades, America had dominated worldwide car production, and few wanted to face the fact that there were others—most notably America’s two most prominent enemies of World War II—that were encroaching upon their territory.

Also, in the eyes of many UAW members, the UAW had, in its attempts to look out for the jobs, wages, and working conditions of its constituents, grown uncomfortably close to the car companies themselves. Most unions felt this tension; while they were seen as sleeping with the enemy, they were actually toeing a delicate line, knowing that in order to keep the roadways of conversation and delegation open between themselves and the companies, they had to make compromises. They also could not ignore the facts: profits across the board in the auto industry were down.⁹⁰ The first place where costs were cut were among the wages of the factory workers. The decline of the auto industry was a lose-lose situation for everyone

⁸⁹ “Detroit and Deindustrialization”, pg. 20.

⁹⁰ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 206.

involved, most directly the workers themselves. It would not be until the Obama administration and the 2009 recession that the United States would be able to see that the presidents and stock holders would ultimately suffer as well (though it's undeniable that the businessmen, and not the workers, received the better deal).

As with the eventual bailout with the auto industry, there were other aspects of Detroit's urban crisis that germinated during the 1970s, aspects which would not come to fruition until the 1990s (and still continue today). Most notably, many journalists, scholars, city officials, political commentators, and others often point to the perhaps most notable change in Detroit's identity: its overwhelmingly black populace. This demographic change, most obviously aided by the sociological phenomenon of "white flight," accelerated in the 1970s.

It is important to note, however, that the demographic change of Detroit did not happen all at once. Bluestone outlines three important waves of population exodus from the inner city.⁹¹ The first wave was immediately following the end of World War II when the American economy was globally dominant (bolstered by America's industrial strength). Families could now afford to own homes, and huge suburban sprawl developments were constructed outside of major cities, Detroit included. Veterans were able to buy houses with discounts and tax breaks made available to them via the G. I. Bill. This first wave was not necessarily racially-driven, despite the riot of 1943. In the minds of many Americans home ownership was the ultimate affirmation of the American dream. The suburbs were the answer.

The second wave, unlike the first, is uniformly undisputed as racially charged, resulting in the aftermath of the 1967 riots. Many whites sought safer, less conflict-oriented

⁹¹ "Dollars and Sense," 20.

places to live. The third wave that took place starting in the 1970s (and, I believe, could be argued to still be taking place today) was characterized by whites and members of the emerging black middle class moving from the city to the suburbs. The advances made by and for the black community during the Civil Rights Movement opened many financial and residential doors to Detroit blacks. The two previous waves had already left Detroit with a significantly reduced tax base, and because of this city services began to suffer. Middle-class blacks during this time—just like the whites of the post-World War II first wave—were seeking the American dream of a better life. Inner-city Detroit was quickly become the antithesis of this dream.⁹²

I do not point out this black middle class exodus during the 1970s in order to diminish the fact that there were still severe racial tensions in the city throughout the '70s. In addition to the pre-existing racial tensions within racially segregated neighborhoods as well as amongst factory workers, radical political groups were beginning to flock to the city hoping to provide a remedy to the ongoing bigotry. However, more often than not these radical political groups did not recognize their common purposes, and Detroit became a city with major political as well as racial hostilities during the '60s and '70s. Heather Ann Thompson discusses this radical political phenomenon in her book *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*:

...well into the early 1970s it was far from clear whether this city would exist as a white-dominated center of racial segregation and political conservatism, a place where Great Society liberals had finally achieved both integration and prosperity, an

⁹² “Detroit & Deindustrialization,” 21-22: It is also important to note that, because of this fleeing of both the white and black middle class, the tax base that Detroit did have to draw from was exceptionally poor; thus, the problems of city services only continued to become worse, a phenomenon that can certainly still be seen in Detroit today.

island of black nationalist and white leftist revolution, or an oasis of opportunity for the black middle class. Because each side of Detroit's multifaceted political constituency believed so firmly in its vision of the future, the Motor City as well as its motor plants became virtual war zones between 1967 and 1973.⁹³

Perhaps the auto factories were the most obvious examples of these "war zones". In the early 1970s, auto manufacturers began to speed up production lines and enforce strenuous work schedules for their factory workers. In addition, safety conditions were ignored. Thompson, in her book regarding the state of industry in Detroit from its inception to the 1980s, especially notes the increase in foreman abuse of power.⁹⁴ When once foremen supervised factory workers they regarded as equal to them except in terms of seniority, they now supervised predominantly black and uneducated groups of workers. Thompson also notes in her book that many of these factory workers and foremen were black and white migrants from the South, and the underlying racial tensions they brought with them often caused violent outbreaks. She notes one particular incident in her book, the story of James Johnson, Jr.⁹⁵

Johnson was originally born in Starkville, Mississippi, and spent his childhood and young adulthood in the pre-Civil Rights South, working the fields and living in impoverished conditions. (For an extended period of time, Johnson did not have running water.) Johnson was deeply affected by having witnessed the lynching of his cousin's brother, Henry Taylor, on MS Highway 82 in June 1943. He was only nine years old at the time, and afterwards he suffered from severe night terrors that continued throughout his life. In addition, he was

⁹³ 3.

⁹⁴ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 61-65.

⁹⁵ His entire story can be found throughout Thompson's book, his story progressing in parts with each part preceding each chapter's content in italics.

terrified of whites. Whenever he approached or came near a white person, he began shaking with fear, often running away in terror.

Johnson left after his first year of high school to move north to Detroit. Thompson says he made this move hoping “to find a good job, to flee the poverty and racism of the South, and...to escape his own personal demons.”⁹⁶ He moved to Detroit in 1953 but was immediately drafted, returning to Detroit in the late 1950s. He took a job at a restaurant, the Scotch and Sirloin. The job allowed him to take cooking classes and he finished a six-month course while having the cost deducted from his paycheck. He felt accomplished; however, he was still deeply psychologically disturbed by the racism that surrounded him during his childhood. In 1964, Johnson got into an argument with a fellow employee over a food order. Johnson, believing that the employee was under order by management to give him a hard time because of his race, stabbed the employee. He was subsequently fired. Johnson went to live with his sister in Chicago for a period of time, hoping to find a job that would allow him to live on his own. He took an assembly job but hated it. He turned his sights back to Detroit, believing there were more diverse opportunities and moved back in 1965.

Johnson held several jobs in the years following, including shoveling cement and tar pits at Michigan Drum and working as a janitor in city services. He continued to be unhappy with his pay and his inability to be financially independent. However, Johnson was not an outspoken opponent of the racism he felt he was a victim of: during the 1967 riots, Johnson was not a participant, due to his crippling social anxiety and complete lack of friends. Finally in 1968, Johnson obtained what he thought was his dream auto job and ticket to financial freedom as a conveyor loader at Chrysler’s Eldon Avenue gear and axle plant. But this job

⁹⁶ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 10.

was one of the worst at the plant—Johnson was never more than eight feet from a toxic chemical inferno that gave him severe breathing problems and chest pains.

In 1969, Chrysler moved Johnson to the cement room, where he made more money and even worked with other whites. He was extremely satisfied with himself, reaffirmed by the company's decision to place him among white employees. With the help of a skilled fellow employee, he was even learning to become a job setter, hoping to expedite another promotion. But his foreman, Bernard Owiesny, was exceptionally cruel to Johnson, constantly berating him with racial slurs. On July 15th, 1970, Johnson casually walked into Chrysler just as he would any other day and then opened fire. He killed Owiesny, another foreman, and one die setter. Johnson's eventual murder trial would grip both the city and country. Ultimately, Johnson was deemed criminally insane and spent the rest of his life transported between several Michigan state sanitariums, but his actions had made an impact. What is most important about Johnson's story, and why I am including it here, is that Johnson's violent action was atypical, but his story was not. While Johnson translated his outrage into murder, most other factory workers—both white and black—simply stopped going to work.⁹⁷

In the midst of the tensions erupting in factories across the city, the Detroit School Board adopted an integration policy that would only further spark instances of racially-charged violence in 1971. This integration program outlined the restructuring of six school districts, including their system of transportation. Oddly enough, this policy pleased neither whites nor blacks—the (conservative) whites for obvious racial reasons, while many radical

⁹⁷ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 68. Thompson notes a period of increased absenteeism among factory workers: “Between 1964 and 1967, Detroit’s auto plants were plagued by such serious worker absenteeism that the minutes of virtually every meeting between labor and management at the local level include some mention of it.”

members of the black community felt these policies were inadequate, leading only to further violence against those in the black community.⁹⁸ The issue of school busing was highly contested throughout the first half of the 1970s. White conservatives were so outraged that several cases brought against the school board ultimately reached the State Supreme Court.

In 1971, the North Carolina state court ruled in *Swann v. Charlotte Mecklenburg Board of Education* that school districts had the right to create busing programs in order to integrate schools.⁹⁹ The reason why many white conservatives were so outraged by the policy was that the new school busing system now encroached on the school systems in the suburbs, a place where many whites had moved in order to evade blacks. After almost three years of heated political debate and outrage regarding busing, another case was taken to the state court. In 1974, the court effectively reversed *Swann v. Mecklenburg Board of Education* by ruling in *Milliken v. Bradley* that outlying school systems—namely, those in the suburbs—reserved the right to effectively refuse busing programs designed to integrate their schools.¹⁰⁰ The NAACP was outraged by the decision and took the case to the U. S. Court of Appeals, where it was eventually ruled that the state needed to adopt an integration plan that included the 54 outlying school districts as well as those in the traditional inner city. This case and its ruling was then taken to the U. S. Supreme Court, where its decision was reversed—not due to any racial motivations, but rather because the Supreme Court upheld that the power to integrate schools should be left to the city, not to the state (in addition to the fact that this plan of integration outlined by the Court of Appeals would create a school district so large

⁹⁸ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 87.

⁹⁹ Sarah Alvarez, “How Court’s Bus Ruling Sealed Differences in Detroit Schools,” *National Public Radio*, last modified November 19th, 2013, accessed March 13, 2014. <http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/11/19/245970277/how-courts-bus-ruling-sealed-differences-in-detroit-schools>.

¹⁰⁰ Alvarez, “How Court’s Bus Ruling”.

that the Supreme Court believed effective management would be impossible). The school busing issue ran itself into circles.

Meanwhile, inner city Detroit was becoming a hotbed for political activism, both far left and right of center. Wayne State University was a particular draw for radical groups who adhered to socialist, communist, and other controversial political views. Thompson outlines this rise in political activism and the contentious relationships they held with one another:

In the 1960s and early 1970s a number of progressive-minded whites came to Detroit to join with native-born white Detroiters; they wanted to mold a political moment, in cooperation with Black progressives...Detroit would be on the opening shots in a protracted war with the holders of power—maybe the Fort Sumter of the late twentieth-century People’s Movement.¹⁰¹

In the early 1970s, the *Inner City Voice* formed as a newspaper willing to publish radical and controversial political views that other city papers refused. The language of the paper was crude and rampant with cursing, but its impact was substantial. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the Black Panthers began to become more active and increased in number during this time, while the *Inner City Voice* increased their efforts through the creation of Black Star Productions (which released documentaries on black struggles) and Black Star Press (which published literature relating to the black struggle).¹⁰²

Despite the devastation the city suffered because of the race riot of 1967, racism was still prominent in the city. Perhaps the most obvious instance of racism post-1967 was the continued brutality against blacks by the Detroit Police Department. In 1971, Mayor Roman Gribbs (a strict, white conservative) established the STRESS program (“Stop the Robberies,

¹⁰¹ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, pg. 93 (as quoted from sociologist Richard Mast).

¹⁰² Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 82-84.

Enjoy Safe Streets”). The most controversial aspect of this program was its decoy division in which one officer would disguise himself or herself as a vulnerable citizen (a drunk, a prostitute, etc.) while other officers would stake out the decoy, waiting for a potential robbery or attack. Most of these decoy operations took place in predominantly black neighborhoods, leading many blacks to feel that they were unfairly targeted.

Plenty of citizens were outraged when STRESS was first proposed and the statistics of STRESS’s first year in action perpetuated further outrage. In its first nine months, STRESS officers made over 1400 arrests and killed ten suspects (nine of which were black).¹⁰³ To put this in perspective, officers in the STRESS division arrested 33 people per week (almost 5 per day) and killed a suspect at least once per month. As just one division of the Detroit Police Department, STRESS in its first year accounted for 39% of all citizen deaths as a result of police action.¹⁰⁴

An incident in early 1971 sparked public rallies and protests by both blacks and whites against the program after the STRESS task force killed two upstanding teenagers during one of their operations. A deadly mistake on the part of STRESS in 1972 would continue to damage the reputation of its members and of its supporters. In March, STRESS officers stationed in a residential neighborhood witnessed two men walk into a home with guns visible on their persons. The officers—for reasons they never sufficiently elucidated—barged into the homes and opened fire, killing one man and wounding two others. Unfortunately, the man who was killed was a Wayne County Sheriff Deputy and the two wounded were also sheriffs, which explained why they had been carrying guns. The Wayne

¹⁰³ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 83.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 82-92.

County Sheriff Deputy, Aaron Vincent, was holding his weekly boys' poker night at his home, and the two wounded deputies had just gotten off duty and had come to join.¹⁰⁵

Despite the public outrage—and the self-inflicted embarrassment the police department's actions had on the public's view of the city government as a whole—Mayor Gribbs refused to disband STRESS when directly asked by the community two weeks later. As ludicrous as it seems, Gribbs did still have some support, mostly from conservative whites who believed that police action, regardless of its radical nature, was better than no police action.

Though the actions of STRESS were undoubtedly an egregious misuse of power, the police department was facing a seemingly overwhelming amount of community issues as well, mostly rampant crime. In the '70s, heroin entered the street drug scene. It was cheap and easy to find, and gangs began to form in order to control its distribution and its profits. Perhaps the most notable gang of the '70s was the Errol Flynn's street gang. Greg Mathis, a popular television judge on the show *Judge Mathis*, makes no attempt to gloss over his involvement with the gang at a young age as well as the reasons behind his decision to join: “The lure was money, excitement, recognition. Prostitution was omnipresent, and so were pimps with their flashy cars, pockets of cash, and pretty women on their arms.”¹⁰⁶ The promise of success and social and economical mobility that the auto industry once promised poor inner city residents was slowly deteriorating, and many turned to drugs and crime in order to boost their incomes. These gangs were not discreet: one particular incident involving the Errol Flynn's street gang took place in 1976 at a Kool and the Gang concert being held at Cobo Hall. Gang members—dressed in double-breasted suits in outrageous colors, some with

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, *Whose Detroit?*, 97-99.

¹⁰⁶ as quoted in Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 227.

fur hats and others wearing four-inch Plexiglas heels—beat and robbed the concert crowd, as well as raped two women during the attack.¹⁰⁷

Regardless, there were members of the community and of the city government that were determined to make a marked change and who were invested in the future of the city. In 1974, Detroit saw the election of its first black mayor, one who would served the city for five terms until 1994. Coleman Young had lived the life of the majority of black residents in Detroit. He was born in the South and moved with his parents to Detroit at a young age, and he had also held several manufacturing/industrial jobs in Detroit during his young adulthood. Young guided Detroit into the '80s with his liberal agenda and focus on civil rights. However, his hopes for the city would prove difficult to obtain in its complicated political atmosphere.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 228.

¹⁰⁸ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, 208-12.

Walk to Freedom, 1963

The afternoon is mild,
sky overcast. The street is filled
with people in huddled silence,
waiting for the word.

*We shall overcome,
we shall overcome,
we shall overcome someday.*

A single baritone rings out,
spurring them on.
Voices every shade
of song joining.
Each new voice
is a thread woven
into the blanket of people
that warms Woodward.

*The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through,
The Lord will see us through someday.*

Others too shy to march
line the sidewalks,
nodding at the marchers:
both a crowd and a choir.
One man puts his hand
over his heart, saluting
the singing soldiers.

*We're on to victory,
We're on to victory,
We're on to victory someday.*

The voices strengthen
with each verse.
Those who do not know the words
look to their neighbor,
memorizing the shapes
of their lips. Repeating.

*We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand,
We'll walk hand in hand someday.*

They all reach for a hand.
Every palm is filled. Many
have their eyes closed, faces
turned to the sky. A soprano
rings out, cheerful and fast—
they follow, the song
no longer a chant but a rejoice.

*We are not afraid,
We are not afraid,
We are not afraid today.*

The singing does not end
when the marching stops.
As Reverend King climbs
the concrete steps, shaking hands
with the mayor and governor,
the crowd sings on.

*The truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free,
The truth shall make us free someday.*

King faces the crowd,
scanning the marchers
right above their heads,
seemingly able to see
each voice rising:
a melody in air.
And he sings:

*We shall live in peace,
we shall live in peace,
we shall live in peace someday.*

The song ends,
but there is no clapping.
A perfectly executed
yet unplanned ceremony.
Three, even four blocks away
people hear King's crisp rumble,
this disembodied voice
inviting them to live
in his dreams.

Black Bottom Butcher Shop, 1967

I know my customers by their orders:
Mr. Haf-Pound-Honey-Bake-Ham
(his name close ta 'Sherman,' or somethin')
Rhonda-Pig-Ears (take them off my hands, missus)
Danforth-Bone-In-Ribeye,

I seen Rhonda-Pig-Ears on my television
just the other day, yappin' like that weiner dog
(that dog, I tell her, must be kept outta the stoh)
about injustice and racism and come on down
march with us, the Black Bottom crew

but I'd rather burn my brisket
than have them police char my backside.
You can holler at Motown, praise the polished moon,
and tell Diana Ross to come home, but she's makin'
that white man's money, and I don't blame her

for leaving Black Bottom behind.
I ain't got nothin for her but a damn good price
on a pound of smoked sausage.

Listen, Rhonda-Pig-Ears,
you got bad taste in meat, and sho 'nuff
you got bad taste in pickin' fights.
But honey, I'm not high-tailin' it down
to 12th and West Grand to make a polize mockery
of my blackness; the only blood I'm seein'

is on my butcher's knife. No ma'am,
I ran away from Belle Isle in forty-three
and I ain't above being a possum in this parade
of bloody bricks and am'nition shells.

Shoot, to keep my windows from breaking
I gotta board 'em up. What I'm sayin is,
to keep the lights on in this place,
I gotta keep the light out—
ain't that something else?

James Johnson, Jr., 1970

When I was young
I saw Howie hang
strung up like a caught fish
It was the first time
I felt like dying

I would dream
of that white man's rope
and wake up
with blood in my mouth

I went north to Detroit
I worked in the tar room
the heat and ash burned
my shirtsleeves

My foreman was my master
wouldn't let me take lunch
and called me names
I said mister please stop please

he never did
I dreamt of him holding
that rope of him choking
me in Howie's dusty loafers
with his pink hankie tucked
in my shirt pocket

and I woke up sweating
heated and all stove up
like gravity in a jar
It was the first time
I felt like killing

My mother always said
you can either make a fist
or shake a hand

I pulled the trigger

A Band Called Death, 1974

Their momma don't care
that all the neighbors pass by, staring
at that same window, shaking their heads
at three boys blaring Pink Floyd.

Their momma don't mind
that the neighbors call
what they want to play "white boy music",
that they call them "the black Beatles."

Their momma don't sit
on the color line. Says it's about time
they stopped dividing the music they love
into black and white.

Their momma don't worry
that they named their band "Death,"
that they aren't going to church as much.
She bring them soda, kisses their foreheads.

Their momma don't tire
of seeing her boys singing and playing,
brother bolstering brother.
Soldiers of rock from 3 to 6.

1980-1999

Events in Detroit during the 1980s and 1990s largely shaped the default view of the city today: crime—most notably, drugs—was rampant, the population was steadily draining into the suburbs, the auto industry declined in sales, quality, and stability, and Detroit politics were exceptionally dysfunctional.

Coasting off of the heroin epidemic, the 1980s ushered in the nationwide crack cocaine epidemic. New gangs banded together to take hold of the street drug trade. These gangs were not like their Prohibition predecessors, or even like those of the 1970s heroin trade—these gangs were organized and smart. Young Boys, Inc. was perhaps one of the most notorious gangs in the city.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the '80s, they would make an estimated \$35 million in both heroin and crack cocaine distribution.¹¹⁰ Young Boys, Inc. sent minors to do their deliveries; because the boys were not of legal age, they would usually be sentenced to a small fine, probation, or a short term in juvenile detention. This kept gang members out of jail as well as kept their identities and locations relatively obscure. Though Young Boys, Inc. was perhaps the most profitable and well-organized gang in the city, they were just one gang of many saturating the streets of Detroit with gang activity. Most of this violence was linked to arguments over gang turf that turned deadly. Mark Binelli notes in his book *Detroit City is the Place to Be* that:

¹⁰⁹ Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis* (New York City, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012). 228-230.

¹¹⁰ Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013), 228.

...for the three-year period between 1985 and 1987, Detroit was the homicide capital of the United States, with triple the murder rate of New York City. Local law enforcement estimated there were more guns in the city than people. On average, a child was shot every day in 1986.¹¹¹

Gang violence was not the only danger wreaking havoc in the city. In 1984, “Devil’s Night” fires ravaged areas of both the city and suburbs. The traditional day-before-Halloween mischief night taken to the extreme, Devil’s Night 1984 was the most devastating with over 800 fires reported.¹¹² Detroit became both the murder capital and the arson capital of America in the same decade.

The social frustrations that manifested themselves in ways such as arson and gang activity were directly linked to the city government’s inability to enact effective social and economic reforms. With automotive factories closing or relocating to suburbs and the south, jobs were scarce. Detroit’s populace steadily drained into the surrounding metro area where suburb developments were growing at a rapid pace. The population exodus left neighborhoods disjointed, and the community ties that had once so staunchly defined certain areas crumbled. In addition, the city had to provide services to its 140 square mile constituency despite the fact that the tax revenue needed to maintain these services disappeared along with its residents. Detroit was disjointed in every aspect.

Coleman Young, the city’s first black mayor elected in 1974, started his third term in 1980. Once considered the liberal, innovative voice the city needed, he was beginning to prove himself ineffective in many ways.¹¹³ To be fair, Young inherited problems that he

¹¹¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 206.

¹¹² “Hundreds of Fires Light Up Devil’s Night in Detroit”, *The New York Times*, November 1, 1994, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/01/us/hundreds-of-fires-light-up-devil-s-night-in-detroit.html>.

¹¹³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 129.

would only learn the severity of once he took office. Young's run as mayor balances the scales in terms of missteps and victories, but after the 1970s he shifted his attention from civil rights issues, the platform that had arguably won him his first election.

The city teetered on bankruptcy during the early '80s, but Young was able to affectively negotiate with city workers to take salary cuts and residents to accept an increase in income taxes to save the city's finances.¹¹⁴ However, there were perhaps too many things in motion for Coleman to be able to stop, most noticeably the closing of auto factories and little incentive for businesses to establish themselves in Detroit. Coleman was also, undoubtedly, a Democrat, and the 1980s were dominated by staunch Republican, Reagan-era politics. Binelli notes that

...with the election of Ronald Reagan—needled throughout the 1980 campaign by Carter loyalist [Coleman] Young who described the future president as 'Old Pruneface'—federal disinvestment in urban centers exacerbated the struggles of big-city mayors across the country.¹¹⁵

Though Young faced much political adversity and inherited the problems of a deeply troubled city, he was also undoubtedly distracted and made misguided decisions. In 1984, Young hired Motown founder Berry Gordy to write a theme song for the city, a decision which, though not offensive, seemed pointless and laughable.¹¹⁶ In 1987, The People Mover opened in downtown Detroit, a monorail train with stops in notable buildings in the area such as the Renaissance Center. The People Mover was erected in response to a consensus among residents that Detroit's complete lack of public transportation (with the exception of a line of

¹¹⁴ Coleman A. Young, 79, *Mayor of Detroit and Political Symbol for Blacks, is Dead*, December 1, 1997, <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/01/us/coleman-a-young-79-mayor-of-detroit-and-political-symbol-for-blacks-is-dead.html>.

¹¹⁵ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 132.

¹¹⁶ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 271.

buses running up and down Woodward Avenue) was a serious problem. Unfortunately, The People Mover was (and still is) essentially useless, only reaching a very small area.¹¹⁷ Young also hoped to build a festival mall which would entice shoppers to downtown Detroit and stimulate economic activity in the area, but the project failed miserably.¹¹⁸

The plights of Detroit had become so well-known that the city's issues were immortalized in popular culture. The movie *Robocop*, released in 1987, was an instant success. The story, set in Detroit, hit close to home. Because of the city's law enforcement's inability to control crime, a cyborg supercop is sent in to quell the anarchy.¹¹⁹ Despite its taking the crime problem in Detroit to cinematic and theoretical extremes, the movie established Detroit's reputation as a city in decline. In 1988, the Detroit Pistons—on the heels of a record-breaking season in which the team went to the NBA Finals for the first time in 32 years—moved to a new stadium in Auburn Hills, a city roughly 30 miles north of Detroit. Even the city's basketball team did not want to play within the city limits.

By the 1990s, Detroit's rapid decay was undeniable. All factories except the General Motor's Hamtramck plant had closed.¹²⁰ Chrysler had followed the Pistons and relocated their headquarters to Auburn Hills in 1992.¹²¹ The 1990s would be a series of failed economic investments and stunted developments for the city, most notably the Detroit Economic Development Corporation's I-94 Industrial Project. The DEDC bought over 200 properties on Detroit's east side and slated them, hoping to attract industrial business.

However, the property they purchased was internally scattered with other private properties,

¹¹⁷ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 144.

¹¹⁸ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 271.

¹¹⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 2.

¹²⁰ Hamtramck is a separate city from Detroit, though some of the factory is located within Detroit city limits. Like Ford and his Highland Park plant, General Motors built this factory in Hamtramck in order to reduce his tax burden.

¹²¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 146.

rendering the area impractical for large-scale industrial complexes. The area was such a failure that Binelli notes

An article in *Crain's Detroit Business* [stated] that...industrial vacancy rates [in Detroit and nationwide] had risen so precipitously that even if developers were given the land *for free*, it wouldn't make economic sense to embark upon any new construction.¹²²

Perhaps the only positive business development the city created was the approval of the construction of several casinos in downtown, starting with the opening of MotorCity Casino in 1999. While the casino did create a notable amount of jobs, it did not make the city a tourist destination like it had originally been pitched.¹²³

In 1999, the state of Michigan eliminated a law that required public servants to live where they worked, sending many public servant residents of the city to the safer, stable suburbs.¹²⁴ By the turn of the century Detroit's population—which just 50 years prior was approaching two million—sat at roughly 800,000.¹²⁵ Downtown Detroit was a ghost town; even Ford, fleeing the rapid deterioration in the city's business sector, sold its crown jewel, the Renaissance Center, to rival General Motors in 1999.¹²⁶ The very company that had made Detroit the industrial power of yesteryear had finally given up on its hometown.

¹²² 97.

¹²³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 214.

¹²⁴ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 215.

¹²⁵ Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2013), xx.

¹²⁶ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, xxi.

Momma's Arms, 1982

My momma makes lines in her arms.
She told me it don't do no harm.
Then her eyes roll back.
"That's that good smack."
My momma makes lines in her arms.

My daddy makes money on the street.
He calls it "workin the beat."
His little baggies of brown
sell uptown and down.
My daddy makes money on the street.

My nana makes me mac and cheese,
makes me say "thank you" and "please".
Her heart's actin funny
and she ain't got no money,
but my nana still makes mac and cheese.

My brother makes my momma mad.
He calls her lowdown and bad.
He leavin this May,
says he runnin away.
My brother makes my momma mad.

My teddy make me feel okay.
I hold him at night and I pray
that my hair ain't so nappy—
to be white, to be happy.
My teddy make me feel okay.

St. Ann's Foster Home, 1984

My momma made my daddy crazy,
She kicked him one night, called him lazy
then jumped on him, bit him,
yelled *bastard* while she hit him.
My momma made my daddy crazy.

My daddy made mean with one man.
He came in the night, gun in hand—
shot daddy at our back door,
daddy's head broke on the floor.
My daddy made mean with one man.

My momma made my nana cry.
My nana pray momma don't die,
but my momma don't care
bout my nana or prayer.
My momma made my nana cry.

My daddy made my brother hurt.
My brother asked for a new shirt.
My daddy asked why
then gave him a black eye.
My daddy made my brother hurt.

My momma made me go away.
She told me I'd be okay.
But I wanna see my brother
and pray with each other.
My momma made me go away.

Broderick Tower, 1999

Detroit is a wheel, unturning. I'm its hub,
where the arms of Woodward and Grand shake hands.
Scavengers carved out my windows and my fireplaces,
tried to kidnap my elevator doors—
bronze and emblazoned with Zeus on his chariot
greening like maples trading winter for spring—
but left them behind, like my stories.

The barber cried
in the corner of 18
when the Japs took Pearl, then
his oldest off to war.

Dr. Bushka's chair, always waiting,
next to a drawer of Simple Mints and floss
on floor 14, which is really floor 13,
but Broderick was superstitious.

Mr. Broderick took 30 to 34 all for himself
and made a bar in the sky. Held glittering parties,
toasting the men building airplanes
for that very same war.

Now, music: whistles and songs.
My corners are filled with settled dust
on feathers, paper scraps,
twine, and twigs: simple nests.

The Carson family's graphotype
sleeps amongst their papers
in the eastern corner of 27
with a fine titmouse near its feet.

Downstairs, there's a toppled grand.
A black-capped chickadee hides
the occasional nut in the body,
between the bridge and the soundboard.

On the southern side of floor 9
there's a windowless frame.
Birds perch there on clear days,
chittering, sunning themselves.

I'm America's biggest birdhouse,
a million songs inside of me.

2000-Present

Detroit in the 1980s was rife with city issues, issues that are still evident in the city today. Crime—arson and murder included—began to taper off in the early 2000s but would again be a serious issue by the end of the decade. It was apparent to anyone who either visited or read about Detroit that the city was struggling with unemployment and depopulation. The difference between Detroit of the 1980s and 1990s and Detroit post-millennium is that people, for a variety of reasons, began to pay attention to Detroit and the implications of its struggles in reference to the nation in general.

When you ask almost anyone about Detroit, the first response is usually regarding crime. The city certainly cannot be to blame for each individual murder, rape, and robbery, but its police department was only hindering the city's ability to protect itself. In 2003, the Justice Department officially intervened in Detroit Police Department misconduct, citing its notorious use of excessive force and its penchant for illegally detaining suspects.¹²⁷ Detroit's political infrastructure was faulty at many levels, not just in the transgressions of the police force.

City officials throughout the 2000s misused their appointed power, greatly damaging the city's reputation and finances. Laura Sternberg's profile of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's time in office outlines Kilpatrick in depth, beginning with his rise in local politics.¹²⁸ In 2003, Kwame Kilpatrick, dubbed "the hip hop mayor," was elected. He was the youngest

¹²⁷ Mark Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be: The Afterlife of an American Metropolis* (Picador, 2012), 206.

¹²⁸ Laura Sternburg, "Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's Track Record and Timeline," *About.com*, <http://detroit.about.com/od/governmentpolitics/i/Kilpatrickrec.htm>.

mayor ever elected in the city. During his campaign, he was an outspoken opponent of the actions of the police force, and the animosity between the force and Kilpatrick was widely broadcast, gaining him much public support. He was not incompetent; Kilpatrick was able to balance the city budget despite a \$75 million deficit in his first year in office. By the end of his first year in office, Kilpatrick's approval rating among voters was 75%. When discussing the 2003 movie *Head of State*, actor Chris Rock—who plays the nation's first black president in the film—said that he modeled his character after the Detroit mayor himself.¹²⁹

However, by 2005 *Time* had named Kilpatrick one of the worst mayors in America.¹³⁰ Sternberg notes that he had been accused countless times of using taxpayer money to lease cars for himself and his family as well as pay for luxury spa sessions, vacations, and fancy clothes (a tab that would eventually be officially tallied at \$210,000). In addition to his spending, Kilpatrick was accused in 2003 of hosting parties at his mansion for city officials where he hired prostitutes. Despite his frivolous spending and unethical conduct, Kilpatrick was elected for a second term in 2005. Under his administration, the city's taxes from 2005-2007 were filed months late, costing the city millions of dollars. In 2008, Kilpatrick gave a State of the City Address and in it used the word “nigger,” resulting in massive city, state, and national backlash.

In 2008, Kilpatrick was accused of being involved in the murder of a young prostitute in order to keep her from testifying about the parties Kilpatrick held at his mansion. Within the same month, explicit text messages between Kilpatrick and a member of his staff were leaked to the press. This launched a comprehensive investigation into the already sketchy

¹²⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City*, 239. It should be noted that this was meant to be a compliment, despite the fact that the movie was defined as comedy.

¹³⁰ Steven Gray, *Can Kwame Kilpatrick Grow Up?*, September 20, 2007, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1663791,00.html>.

activities of the Detroit mayor, and as a result Kilpatrick resigned that same year. Sternberg's article notes that Kilpatrick would ultimately be convicted of perjury, obstruction of justice, mail fraud, wire fraud, and racketeering.

Kilpatrick was not the only member of city government making waves in both the political and media arenas in the early 21st century. In his book *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, Mark Binelli outlines several council members during the Kilpatrick administration that also toed ethical lines. Monica Conyers, a city council member during Kilpatrick's tenure, got in a bar fight with another woman as well as threatened to shoot one of the mayor's staff members during a recorded meeting. Martha Reeves, also a councilwoman during the Kilpatrick years and former Motown star, traveled to England while important votes were being cast on city issues like crime and the budget. And yet another councilwoman, JoAnn Watson, was found to have only paid \$68 per year in property taxes for years, saying she had just simply thought her house was not worth anything anymore.¹³¹

While city officials were lining their pockets with taxpayer money, residents were approaching the largest recession the United States had faced in years. Though every major American auto company except General Motors had cut ties with Detroit, the bankruptcy of the Big Three still cast a dark shadow on the city. By the time Chrysler and General Motors declared bankruptcy in 2009, Detroit residents had already been steadily suffering from the automakers' decline for years most obviously in terms of unemployment. In July 2009, the unemployment rate in Detroit was 27.4%.¹³² This, compounded with the complete collapse of the real estate market, left city residents in dire straits.

¹³¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 230.

¹³² Scott Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography* (Chicago, Illinois: Chicago Review Press, 2013), xiii.

The general wellbeing of city residents was deplorable, and when the city authorized the use of \$15.2 million in federal stimulus money in 2009, they expected to be able to help roughly 3500 families.¹³³ The day the relief was handed out, over 30,000 people showed up, hoping for financial relief. There was nothing the city could do other than turn them away. By 2010, nearly four in ten Detroiters—and over half of all Detroit’s children—lived at or below the poverty line.¹³⁴ Detroit’s public education system was also failing: in 2010, Detroit’s schools were noted as some of the worst in the country with 73% of 4th graders “lacking even the basic skills that are the building blocks of reading.”¹³⁵ In addition, in 2012 it was cited that one in four Detroiters had not finished high school.¹³⁶ Because so many residents were both poor and uneducated, they were effectively stuck in a city drowning in problems.

With not even its own government to depend upon, Detroit was in complete shambles. Again, where there is desperation, there is crime, and unfortunately 21st –century Detroit was still failing to effectively address both issues. In 2008 Detroit was again awarded the title of murder capital of America. That same year, *Forbes* ranked Detroit the most dangerous city in the United States.¹³⁷ Robberies and carjackings were everyday activities; even police chief James Barren’s home was robbed in 2009.¹³⁸ Abandoned buildings became dumping grounds for bodies and kids were reported robbing citizens at gunpoint.¹³⁹ In 2007 the entire police crime lab was closed because of “gross systemic error.”¹⁴⁰ Police Chief

¹³³ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, xi.

¹³⁴ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, xi.

¹³⁵ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, xi.

¹³⁶ Martelle, *Detroit: A Biography*, xi.

¹³⁷ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 8.

¹³⁸ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 27. When asked about the items stolen from his home, Barren said: “They got me pretty good.”

¹³⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 203.

¹⁴⁰ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 24.

Warren Evans (who replaced Barren in 2009) did nothing to change the public view of the police department as incompetent. In his book, Binelli describes a raid, ordered and attended by Evans, the results of which would eventually cost him his position.¹⁴¹

In the summer of 2009, Evans led a raid on a house believing a murder suspect was inside. He was, but so was his friend's 7-year-old daughter, who was shot in the head and killed because of the trigger-happy unit. The raid, filmed for the investigative reality television show *The First 48*, was a complete embarrassment, and when Evans released a promotional video for his own television show, *The Chief* (with a shot of Evans in front of Michigan Central Station holding a shotgun), Mayor Dave Bing (Kilpatrick's replacement elected via special election) removed him from office. Detroit also regained its distinction as the arson capital of America during the 2000s—severe poverty led many residents to set their now worthless properties ablaze for the insurance money. Because only 1-2% of arson cases are prosecuted nationwide (and it can be reasonably argued that an even less percentage is prosecuted in Detroit), arson was, for many, an easy moneymaker.¹⁴² Arson continues to be a formidable problem in Detroit today.

Detroit undeniably has its problems, some big and some small. However, despite its reputation as a deteriorating city—or, perhaps, because of it—residents of Detroit have tried to find ways to reclaim their city. The *New York Times* ran ten articles on new revitalization efforts in the city in 2010 alone.¹⁴³ One burgeoning urban movement in Detroit has permeated literature on the city: the urban gardening movement. Roughly 875 urban gardens have been developed across the city, making use of abandoned land the city has been unable to develop by planting local gardens and encouraging cooperative efforts amongst members

¹⁴¹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 203-205.

¹⁴² Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 194.

¹⁴³ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 54.

of the neighborhood.¹⁴⁴ In the Hope District, a neighborhood on the city's southwest side, members plant fruit trees in vacant lots.¹⁴⁵ The Detroit Zymology Guild was recently formed, holding weekly canning sessions to preserve vegetables grown in nearby community gardens.¹⁴⁶

Detroit has also become a major artistic hub for both up-and-coming and established artists looking to spur city rejuvenation. The Eastern Market area of the city has become a hub for graffiti artists, most notably Nychos, an established graffiti artist known for his 'dissected' street art.¹⁴⁷ Tree Guyton and his Heidelberg Project have also made use of abandoned land and properties in order to create large-scale art installations, incorporating the deterioration now synonymous with the city. Guyton's project, which he began in 1986, uses abandoned homes in the area where he grew up (Heidelberg Street, located on the eastern side of the city) to offer artistic commentary on social issues like race and crime that have plagued his hometown. His works include a house covered with stuffed animals, various totems incorporating items such as broken dolls and shopping carts, and (perhaps his most well-known piece) his childhood home painted with colorful polka dots. Guyton's project has, in recent years, extended beyond the borders of his childhood neighborhood: he has begun painting polka dots on dilapidated but historically relevant buildings in the city in order to raise awareness and hopefully spur the city to restore these former landmarks.¹⁴⁸

Other groups of artists have moved into old Detroit mansions—one group of anarchic artists have moved into a beautiful red brick home on Turnbull Street and refer to their home as “the

¹⁴⁴ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 56.

¹⁴⁵ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 54.

¹⁴⁷ When my mother and I visited Eastern Market, I saw one of his pieces: it was a kitten dressed in an astronaut's uniform, 'cut' open to reveal objects symbolic of the cat's 'personality'. Though he certainly has both a polarizing theme and style, Nychos's artistic ability is undeniable.

¹⁴⁸ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 66.

Turnbullplex”—and the city itself has given abandoned homes to artists to either morph the homes into art installations or rehabilitate the houses to be used as low-rent apartments for writers and artists alike.

In addition to the city’s thriving gardening and artistic communities, some promising economic developments have begun in Detroit in recent years. In 2010, Tim Bryan, president of a computer manufacturing company, moved his entire company’s operations from India to Detroit, noting the city’s competitive rent and tax rates for businesses as well as coining downtown Detroit’s unofficial business motto: “Outsource to Detroit”.¹⁴⁹ Our tour guide told us that Michael “Mike” Ilitch, founder and owner of Little Caesars Pizza (as well as the Detroit Red Wings and Tigers, the famous Fox Theatre, and MotorCity Casino), has been active in the rejuvenation of downtown into the shopping and entertainment center that it once was with the recent renovations of Cobo Hall and Comerica Park (where the Red Wings and Tigers play, respectively). I also noticed on our trip massive construction along the riverfront, and our tour guide informed us that the city was beautifying the riverfront by adding a river walk, hoping to entice retail stores and restaurants to bring both jobs and businesses back to the Motor City’s business hub.

The future of Detroit is uncertain, especially in the wake of the city’s declaration of bankruptcy in July 2013. Attempts at city-sanctioned relocation—relocating people in areas of the city to a more central location in order to better overall city services as well as cut city spending—have faced staunch opposition.¹⁵⁰ Crime and arson still plague Detroit, and city services such as education and public transportation are severely lacking. However, because Detroit’s story has increasingly captivated journalists in recent years, many argue that this

¹⁴⁹ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 101.

¹⁵⁰ Binelli, *Detroit City is the Place to Be*, 87.

outside attention and support has started a dialogue about the city that could prompt the development of attainable solutions to ensure the city's survival. Throughout my research, I have encountered references to Detroit's official motto countless times, and in reference to its future this motto proves particularly insightful. Charlie LeDuff, former Detroit journalist, in his book *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, says:

Since its founding, Detroit has been a place of perpetual flames. Three times the city has suffered race riots and three times the city has burned to the ground. The city's flag acknowledges as much. *Spermus Meliora; Resurget Cineribus*: We hope for better things; it shall rise from the ashes.¹⁵¹

The title of his book alone makes LeDuff's view regarding Detroit obvious. However, rather than viewing the city's motto as foreboding and negative, I see this motto as symbolizing Detroit's ability to remake and rebuild from even the most dire circumstances. Detroit's story is to be continued; however, Detroit's residents have already been able to prove themselves worthy of the monumental task that is transforming the city's identity and have begun empowering themselves to do so. Detroit's revival lies in its residents' ability to re-develop community ties and work towards a common goal: that of making the Motor City once again a place to be.

¹⁵¹ 26.

King Solomon Baptist Church, 2002

A woman eats a clementine
sitting at the top of concrete steps
leading to an empty, boarded brick church.
She has a scar—like a dry, red clay river
seen from an airplane—reaching
from the corner of her left eye
to the hairline, just above the ear.
A man, maybe thirty, approaches:
brief, genial eye contact.
She renders a simple nod as he passes,
then beckons him back, cradling
a Clementine in her palm.
The offering exposes her forearm:
sallow, tan skin, spotted with age.
Surrounded by finches, arm
curved towards him,
she is like a cedar tree.
He climbs the cracked, crooked stairs
and takes the fruit readily.
Settling two steps from the top, he eats.
Finches dance and chirp at their feet,
pecking at the leathery peels.
Chewing and swallowing synchronize,
like bodies like to do
when two people share silence.

Arson Summer, 2007

Alarm: There's a short in the wire.
The sound is hoarse, sputtering—a crow's cry.
Two firemen at a card table, scented with smoke and fire
after their latest call. A single hanging lightbulb flickering.
Ignore the alarm. Coffee isn't hot.
Drink it anyway while the city is suffocating.

Alarm: Arson, drug house. Three addicts suffocated.
Firefighters know about crackhouses; they've watched *The Wire*.
The coroner didn't come, so they drug the bodies out hot.
Emotionless: flame, water, smoke, bodies. No one cries.
Across the street, a little girl stares, flame flickering
in her eyes. Three blocks away: beacon of smoke, another fire.

Alarm: Electric fire at dawn. Horizon meets fire.
The summer heat lulls, settles, and suffocates.
Outside a smoldering Cape Cod, firemen see the flickering
of electric current: a dead cat, zapped hopping wires.
One woman, fanning herself, yells over a baby crying:
"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, hell ain't even this hot."

Alarm: Collapsed house. A fireman inside—broken, hot—
buried where he burned. No phoenix from fire.
That night, the firemen hear the alarm's cry
ringing, ringing, ringing—it's suffocating.
One firefighter threatens to cut the wire.
Silence, then: "Do something about this damn flickering!"

Alarm: lawn fire. Inside the house, a small TV flickers,
a slapdash set of foil bunny ears on top. "It's too hot
to be startin' fires," a teenager nextdoor yells, shiny wire
braces peeking through his teeth, glittering gold from fire.
He steps to the firefighters, asks: "How do you not suffocate
without a proper mask?" In the distance, an ambulance cries.

Alarm: Another arson. A woman outside, crying
to her mother on the phone, the phone's light flickering
against her tears. Her husband is belly down on the bed, suffocating.
They pull him out, their hands chaffing and hot,
their gloves useless: palms and fingertips exposed by holes. Then: gunfire.
A homeless man shoots at the empty streets, cracked out and wired.

The alarm: now a hawk's wail. Someone had it re-wired.
One firefighter is 4 hours late. They want to call, but then: another fire.
His son finds him later: car on, garage down, suffocated.

Detroit Packard Plant, 2009

I have been here forty years alone.
Now, it is crowded, full of busy hands
with spray paint, cameras, and sketch pads.
I am somehow a new thing.
Once they needed me to build cars
to take them somewhere more beautiful—
they needed me to live and lived to watch me die.
They've returned to perform my autopsy.
There is nothing as vulnerable as a dead body.
I heard one man say
there's something honest about ruin:
the exposed steel, the peeling paint.
They come, crowding my empty spectacle,
longing to stare at my skeleton.

*

Longing to stare at my skeleton,
they come. Crowding my empty spectacle:
the exposed steel, the peeling paint.
There's something honest about ruin.
I heard one man say:
there is nothing as vulnerable as a dead body.
They've returned to perform my autopsy.
They needed me to live. They lived to watch me die,
to take them somewhere more beautiful.
Once, they needed me to build cars.
I am somehow a new thing.
With spray paint, cameras, and sketch pads—
now it is crowded with busy hands.
I have been here forty years alone.

What It Costs to Be The Boss: Detroit Mayors, 1940-2013¹⁵²

Confusion is the theme of the day too often.
You can't look forward and backward
at the same time.
There was no one left to kill.
I did have a sense of loss.
I took personal leave time.
I would define it as a rebellion
rather than a riot.
There are no symptoms of racism.
We hoped against hope
that what we had been doing
was enough.
I mean, money is going to help—
no doubt about that—but how much?
These allegations are absolutely ridiculous.
Hit Eight Mile Road!
Take your souls to the polls and vote!
That's the tribute we owe Mother Parks.
You can't walk down Woodward Avenue in this city
without some fear of violence.
I never got in trouble in my entire life,
never, until I got this job.
The city is broke, I don't know how many times
I have to say that.
I don't give a damn if they are black or white
or if they wear Superfly suits
or blue uniforms with silver badges!
I have heard so much wailing,
gnashing of teeth,
shedding of crocodile tears.
There ain't no shortage of blacks out there
behind them garbage trucks.
The black and white thing is getting old.
Swearing is an art form.
Racism is like high blood pressure:
the person who has it
doesn't know he has it
until he drops over
with a goddamned stroke.
I'm asking for unity in this community.
I'm not sure exactly what to ask for.
It has been very, very difficult.
God is good all the time.

¹⁵² This poem is a compilation of assorted quotes attributed to Detroit mayors having served from 1940 to the present day.

Heidelberg Project, 2014

An information booth at the corner.
Cartoon faces made with brushstrokes
yellow, green, and red on plywood.
Underneath a stuffed Homer Simpson head
in childlike script: Welcome.
Thank you for your visit.

Across the street, a green house
swarmed with stuffed animals,
a raucous party paused at its peak.
The porch, guarded by teddy bears
in wicker chairs. People-watching.

A plaster doll on a cross, nailed
to a rotting telephone pole. This is art
because I can feel it:
like the warmth of the bath as its water
fills the spaces between you.

A fence strung with lonely shoes
coated in white paint,
snow filling their empty toes.
For the feet that filled
those shoes, I ache.

My Trip to Detroit

Perhaps my most important principle in writing this thesis was to present an authentic and accurate picture of Detroit throughout the 20th century to the present day. Research alone can not accomplish this task, and so my mother and I set out for Detroit in January 2014. We arrived the day after the worst of the polar vortex had passed, and one of my aforementioned preconceived notions about Detroit proved true: it was very, very cold.

After we arrived at the airport, a long line for the taxis immediately welcomed us. What I had not realized about the ‘Detroit’ airport is that it is actually in Romulus, Michigan, a city roughly 45 minutes southwest of Detroit. Though I know it is standard for city airports to be located somewhat outside the city limits, it struck me that their airport was so far from the actual city. Like Chrysler and the Detroit Pistons, Detroit’s airport took the city’s name far away from the city hub.

Our hotel¹⁵³ was located in Midtown, just one block from Woodward Avenue and two blocks from the Detroit History Museum, the Detroit Library, the Detroit Institute of the Arts,¹⁵⁴ and Wayne State University. A brochure in the hotel highlighted the midtown area as one designated by the city for active rejuvenation, and it was apparent: the houses were well kept, several condominium complexes were being built nearby, and local restaurants were filled with college students and young professionals.

¹⁵³ The Inn on Ferry Street, an exceptional hotel which I highly recommend.

¹⁵⁴ In 1932, Henry Ford’s son, Edsel Ford, hired painter Diego Rivera to paint a mural of the famous River Rouge plant within the library. It is still there and quite a sight to behold. Binelli notes in his book: “Rivera began painting [in 1932] what he would later describe as his greatest work, the *Detroit Industry* murals: twenty-seven separate frescoes on all four walls of the museum’s templelike courtyard, depicting both the awesome scale of the modern factory floor and an iconized Marxist fantasia of working-class solidarity and collective toil.” 167.

The gymnasium of an old middle school had been renovated and re-opened as an independent movie theater where my mother and I saw the *Detroit Unleaded*. The film, which opened the Toronto Film Festival, was a romantic comedy about an Indian man in his mid-twenties who has to forego graduate school in order to take over his father's gas station. His father was shot and killed in his gas station after an attempted robbery, and the film follows the son's struggle to cope with his duty to his family in contrast with his desire to move away from Detroit and pursue his education. The gas station is located on the eastern side of Detroit, widely considered the most dangerous area in the city. The film was authentic, written by a native Detroiter and shot on location—it was even predominantly funded by donations from the community. After watching the movie, I realized I was not the only person hoping to offer a genuine story of Detroit, nor the only one who believed Detroit did have a future.

My mother and I ate at local restaurants, rode the People Mover, visited the art museum as well as the history museum, took in a show at the Hockeytown theatre, and watched the Pistons beat the Phoenix Suns. Each experience gave me new insight into Detroit, both the physical city and the people who had molded it into what it is today. However, two particular experiences stood out: our guided riding tour through Detroit and our trip to the Eastern Market.

Detroit as a tourism destination has been a recent development for the city. I was only able to find one riding tour that would drive in the freezing temperatures, a new start-up company owned by two native Detroiters. I told her my reasons for coming to Detroit as well as some attractions that were on my must-see list, and she was instantly excited. After fifteen minutes in the car and before we had even reached our first destination—the Packard Plant—

she had showered us with interesting tidbits, such as the fact that a man had been living in one of the old engine warehouses in the Packard Plant for almost twenty years. In addition to the Packard Plant, we visited the Heidelberg Project, drove through the Indian Hills neighborhood, toured downtown landmarks and Belle Isle, and visited Grosse Pointe—a picturesque and prestigious neighborhood just north of Detroit bordering the lake. The driving tour gave me a sense of just how truly massive Detroit proper is, one of the aspects of the city most often cited in reference to the lacking city services as well as its widespread abandonment.

While the driving tour gave me a solid grasp of the geography of the city—an understanding that would prove essential in my writing—my mother herself showed me how to connect with city residents. My mother is a chaplain and true people person. Everyone we encountered—our hotel shuttle driver, our waiter at Maccabee’s, the woman at the Pistons’ ticket counter—was a person with a great story. My mother asked them about themselves and we listened to their stories. Some were Detroit natives whose parents had been part of the Second Great Migration, others were descendants of Polish and Italian immigrants. One had been a factory worker at the Packard Plant the year before it closed; another was a former writer for the *Inner City Voice*. The stories that my mother asked these people to tell influenced my writing in ways both large and small. One woman’s story of her southern father who left her and her mother in Detroit to return to South Carolina inspired the poem “Carolina Sonnet.” Our waiter at Maccabee’s told us about his outspoken uncle who had a butcher shop, leading to the creation of the character in “Black Bottom Butcher Shop.” By talking to them, I was able to understand how, despite the city’s less than sterling reputation, many of its residents felt deeply connected to and hopeful for the city.

My mother's ability to connect with people in order to help them to tell their stories is an aspect of her character I still admire, one which I have tried to emulate in my writing in order to develop a genuine connection with Detroit and its people. On our last day in the city, my mother and I went to the Eastern Market Farmers' Market. My mother was immediately drawn to a table of colorful mushrooms, some of which we were not even able to identify. When my mother asked if she could take a picture of them, the farmer was touched. He told us that no one had ever asked to take a picture of his mushrooms, that no one had ever told him his mushrooms were beautiful. This exchange of respect, admiration, and gratitude between the farmer and my mother struck me. At that point more than ever in my research and exploration of Detroit, I realized how important it was to offer a uniquely human, intimate representation of Detroit and the people who populate it.

Despite its rocky history, the interactions my mother and I had with these people taught me that neither Detroit's story nor its residents are simply black and white—the people of Detroit and the city itself are colorful, unique, and often misunderstood. Our trip to Detroit brought the purpose of my thesis full circle; that what I wanted to offer in my exploration of the city was a better, more authentic understanding of its complexity and individuality.

Conclusion

This January, I was finally able to visit Detroit. My preconceived notion of Detroit stemmed from my years of fascination with the city, most notably my attraction to the haunting architecture that is so often seen in the media. Detroit was certainly suffering from rampant abandonment, but conscious efforts at rejuvenation were also being made. Broderick Tower—the subject of the poem of the same name—had been completely renovated into residential apartments. Not only had it been developed, our tour guide told us that all apartments in the building were full. Downtown Detroit, as it was reported on the local news, is now 94% occupied, and figure that was both shocking and indicative of Detroit’s resilience and potential rejuvenation. Despite the fact that I had been researching Detroit extensively for over a year, after I visited I realized there were aspects of Detroit even I was not aware of, aspects that get lost in the general dysfunction the city is so well-known for. This visit only further reaffirmed my original intent in writing this thesis: to demonstrate the dynamic nature of Detroit often unrepresented in current literature.

Most importantly, I hoped to create a work of definitive and unique substance. Throughout writing this thesis, I have consulted poet Richard Hugo’s book on poetry writing, *The Triggering Town*, an uncountable amount of times. One passage struck me in particular: “It’s flattering to be told you are better than someone else, but victories like that do not endure. What endures are your feelings about your work. You wouldn’t trade your poems for anybody’s.” This is the feeling I have strived for in the creation and compilation of my thesis,

a feeling I have attained. I hope that, through my outline and presentation of the unique history and stories of Detroit, that I have created a work that affects others as well.

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