Too Detroit to Starve:
The Social Imaginary of Dreams, Death, and Survival
in Detroit, Michigan

by

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How do you do that? The puzzled ones would ask.  
My answer: Well, I imagine myself in the future. It’s a great exercise in survival  

-jessica Care moore, “I’m too Detroit to Starve (and so is the rest of this country)”
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Prologue:

How do you imagine Detroit? Do you see it as the home of Motown? Do you remember it as a great front of African American popular culture? Or as the genesis of the automotive industry? Maybe you think of the city’s architecture and Diego Rivera murals. Or perhaps you see none of these things. You could see Detroit as the capital of murder and crime in America. Or maybe you know the city because of its enormous amounts of vacant land—enough to encompass the city of Manhattan. Possibly you connect that vacant land with the depopulation of a dilapidated city, a bankrupt city, a dead city. Or do you see something that needs to be saved? You’ve heard it’s a blank slate that welcomes artists and businesses. Maybe it’s the place for billionaires to place their pet-projects because it is impossible to fail in an already failing city. You could see a city revitalizing and redefining what it means to be from Detroit. Do you see all of these imaginings? None of them? Regardless, defining a city is never easy.
This thesis attempts to examine the social imaginary of Detroit, Michigan. How is the city being represented or sold to the outside world? Is a “New Detroit” being made? If so, who is it being made for? What images of Detroit are being used to attract an external viewer? I considered these questions myself this summer as an intern at the advertising agency Team Detroit. The office handed us a project from the Detroit Mayor’s Office to rebrand the city an advertising campaign that could be placed around the city and country. For an entire summer, I was surrounded by a group of mostly white, college-age students from the suburbs trying to construct a marketable image of Detroit. We started the conversation with our ideas of what makes Detroit a great city and who makes up the city. The following is an excerpt from our meeting notes:

**Whom are we talking to?**

**The Locals:** The ones who have always lived in Detroit, through the good, bad and ugly times. They’re gritty, resilient, hard-working Americans. Diverse and independent, they see Detroit as a melting pot of culture. If you bad-mouth the city, be ready for a mouthful and (maybe) a fistful – no one is more proud of their city than these tough folks.

**The New Kids on the Block:** The young professionals who want to make a change in their lives and careers. Maybe L.A.? Or N.Y.? They’ve heard whispers of Detroit’s comeback– in the financial, tech and creative businesses – and can sense a resurgence happening downtown. But they’re still unsure of the city. Has it really changed? What does the city offer?

After much deliberation, my internship group of six students decided on the tagline “You Don’t Know Detroit.” It was supposed to be a rallying call for residents of Detroit and a challenge to outside misconceptions of this strong and gritty city. Ironically, the motivation for this line came from an outside and mostly white perspective. Everyone in our group was from a fairly affluent background, and we all had a certain level of disconnect from the actual social and economical realities of the
“tough folks” we were describing. The word that everyone threw around was “grit.”

_The city is gritty, the people are gritty, the culture is gritty_—but no one was willing to confront the implications of describing a predominantly African American and working class city as “gritty.” Despite all of this, my group won the entire project and got to present our idea to the City Council of Detroit…and they loved it. While this may seem strangely problematic (why would a council of mostly African American residents of Detroit love a campaign from the perspective of a bunch of suburban white kids?), it may reflect a trajectory that the city is undergoing today.

The discourse is that Detroit needs people. Of the many problems that Detroit is facing today, one of the most pressing and visible issues is depopulation. In official city documents from Detroit’s bankruptcy filing, the first key objective for the city is to “Provide incentives (and eliminate disincentives) for businesses and residents to locate and/or remain in the City.”¹ Motivation to move to a city, or stay in the city, is embedded in historical and social narratives. The story of Detroit has changed rapidly throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century, but each iteration of a “new Detroit” is informed by the city’s culture, politics, and past. That is why this thesis will track the social imaginary of Detroit through representations of the city from three different eras. But first, it is important to understand a basic history of this American town.

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The History of Detroit

Detroit, named after the city’s river which connects Lake Erie and Lake Huron, began as a small, fur-trading French settlement. Its proximity to the Great Lakes Region as well as its influx of European immigrants in the mid-1800s led to Detroit becoming an industrial powerhouse in the twentieth century. Henry Ford and his creation of the assembly line in the Highland Park Ford Plant revolutionized automobile manufacturing and contributed to the very first ideas of Detroit as “The Motor City.” Ford’s implementation of a higher minimum wage attracted a vast amount of European immigrants as well as blacks from the south, bringing the population from 200,000 to over 2 million in the span of 60 years. Sometimes called “The Paris of the Midwest”, Detroit entered a gilded age as a cultural center with upscale neighborhoods, booming commercial districts, and beautiful architecture.\(^2\)

The post World War II period brought about great economic and racial change in Detroit. Detroit saw its most prosperous era in automobile manufacturing and industrialization. This prosperity allowed for more suburban expansion away from the city. Historian Thomas Sugrue argues that the aftermath of World War II brought about a fluctuating racial order in the forties, fifties, and sixties. Detroit’s economic growth during this time created areas “overwhelmed by the combination of racial strife and economic restructuring. Their impact played out in urban streets and workplaces. The labor and housing markets of the postwar city became arenas where

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inequality was shaped and contested.”  

The economic climb of Detroit began to lose its steam in the 1950s when America’s Midwestern and Northeastern cities lost hundreds of thousands of entry-level manufacturing jobs due to the increased speed of production and automation. A growing apprehension towards the crowded and racially integrated city as well as a desire for a white-picket-fence American home prompted whites and prosperous blacks to move to the suburbs. Highways, including the construction of I-75 that tore through a predominantly African American neighborhood, allowed more people to commute to work in the city. Eventually, African American neighborhoods stood in stark contrast to white neighborhoods both in terms of space and condition. The flight of the middle class to the suburbs and reduction of manufacturing jobs exacerbated the existing crack that would fracture the city of Detroit.

As time went on, stratification in Detroit became larger and more dangerous. Up to this point, Detroit’s black population had experienced issues with racial discrimination and unfair treatment by the police and city government. Notably, on July 5th, 1963, the shooting of Cynthia Scott, a black prostitute, by a white police officer began a summer of protests over police brutality, which had ramifications in the city for years afterward.  

Almost four years later on a hot night in July, Detroit police raided an unlicensed, after-hours bar on the corner of 12th street—currently known as Rosa Parks Boulevard. What began as an aggravated arrest of eighty-five people quickly turned to two hundred and then nearly three thousand black

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Americans fighting police brutality on their streets. The 1967 Detroit Uprising⁵, as prominent activist Grace Lee Boggs dubbed it, lasted five days and resulted in 43 people dead, 467 injured, 7,231 arrested, and 2,509 buildings destroyed.⁶ In the autobiography of Coleman Young, the first black mayor of Detroit, he stated this of the long-lasting effects of the rebellion:

The heaviest casualty, however, was the city. Detroit's losses went a hell of a lot deeper than the immediate toll of lives and buildings…The money was carried out in the pockets of the businesses and the white people who fled as fast as they could. The white exodus from Detroit had been prodigiously steady prior to the riot, twenty-two thousand in 1966, but afterwards it was frantic. In 1967, with less than half the year remaining after the summer explosion—the outward population migration reached sixty-seven thousand. In 1968 the figure hit eighty thousand, followed by forty-six thousand in 1969.⁷

The 1967 Uprising as well as Coleman Young’s controversial tenure as mayor added fuel to the economically drained and racially antagonistic fire that was burning in Detroit. However, it would be a fable to understand the city’s decline as a result of the 1967 Uprising. As Sugrue argues, the beginning of Detroit’s downfall could be seen as early as the 1940s and 1950s as institutional racism, housing regulations, and segregation efforts all aided to the urban rebellions of the 1960s. He continues saying that the white and middle class flight from Detroit, as well as the urban decline were not inevitable but instead consequences of “political and economic decisions, of choices made and not made by various institutions, groups, and

⁵ The other prominent name is the “1967 Detroit Riot.” However, I will use Boggs’ terminology as I feel it lessens the stigmatization of race-based protests.
⁶ Sugrue, Origins of the Urban Crisis, 259.
individuals.” Although not inevitable, Detroit’s decline was exacerbated as decades went on and people continued to leave the city, leaving more and more blighted areas. A series of politicians blew through Detroit, the crime rate rose, and the city wilted as a forgotten and discarded section of the United States.

**Detroit Bankrupt**

In February 2013, the Governor of Michigan Rick Snyder announced that the Michigan State Government would take fiscal control over the city of Detroit. The Detroit City Council as well as the mayor at the time, Dave Bing, accepted more fiscal oversight from the state in exchange for aid with Detroit’s finances. The financial review team appointed by Governor Snyder reported that the 2012 fiscal year would have acquired a $900 million deficit had it not borrowed a sizable amount of money. The report also noted that the city’s convoluted bureaucratic structure would cause difficulty solving Detroit’s financial issues. After this report, Governor Snyder declared a state of financial emergency. Under Michigan’s 1990 Public Act 72, the Local Emergency Financial Assistance Loan Board appointed Kevyn Orr, a financial consultant and lawyer, as emergency manager over the city. Emergency Managers in Michigan are accountable to the Governor and the Legislature in Michigan but hold power to eliminate and reconfigure state departments, renegotiate

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8 Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 11
contracts with creditors, sell assets of a unit of local government, and institute bankruptcy proceedings.\textsuperscript{10}

Orr’s appointment was met with considerable protest by Detroit citizens who resented the city being managed by a non-elected figure. Of note, one lawsuit was filed in 2013 claiming that appointing an emergency manager violates equal protection of voters. The case argued that emergency managers are disproportionately appointed in cities predominantly populated with people of color. U.S. District Judge George Steeh ruled that the appointment of an emergency manager in Detroit was valid but did find that the enactment of fiscal emergencies seemed to have a racial component. The judge observed, “six out of seven communities…with a majority population of racial and ethnic minorities received EMs when they had (fiscal stress indicator) scores of 7. At the same time, none of the 12 communities…with a majority white population received an EM despite having scores of 7 or higher.”\textsuperscript{11} However, this ruling did not affect Orr as emergency manager since it came at the very end of his tenure.

The city filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy on July 18, 2013. Declaring bankruptcy gave Detroit protection from its creditors while it developed and negotiated a plan for adjusting its debts. Governor Snyder said in the letter giving his state-required approval,

It is clear that the financial emergency in Detroit cannot be successfully addressed outside of such a filing…I authorize this necessary step as a last

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\textsuperscript{11} Chad Halcom, “Judge tosses most of emergency manager law challenge; race claim to go forward” \textit{Crain's Detroit Business}. November 19, 2014.
resort to return this great city to financial and civic health for its residents and taxpayers. This decision comes in the wake of 60 years of decline for the city, a period in which reality was often ignored.\footnote{Nancy Kaffer, Stephen Henderson, and Matt Helps, “Detroit files for Bankruptcy Protection,” \textit{USA Today}, July 18, 2013.} 

Orr’s restructuring team began negotiations with 53 creditors; 48 unsecured (meaning money owed was not underwritten by city revenue streams) and the rest made up of unions and pension receivers.\footnote{Associated Press, “Detroit’s Bankruptcy Follows Decades of Decay,” \textit{CBS Detroit}, July 19, 2013.}

The next day, Judge Rosemarie E. Aquilina, from Ingham County Circuit Court, ruled that the bankruptcy filing violated the Michigan constitution. Aquilina argued that according to three court orders she issued the bankruptcy would cause “irreparable injury” to pensioners by disrupting benefits of 20,000 retirees and 9,500 Detroit employees who were currently paying into the system.\footnote{Ann Mulen, “Judge rules Detroit Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing unconstitutional,” \textit{WXYZ Detroit}, July 19, 2013.} In addition to the obstruction of benefits, various parties also argued that Detroit was ineligible to declare bankruptcy. This objection focused on whether Detroit was insolvent, had negotiated with creditors in good faith, whether negotiation was possible due to the number of creditors, and whether or not Detroit’s bankruptcy petition was filed in bad faith. The case moved to Federal Bankruptcy Court and was assigned to Bankruptcy Judge Stephen Rhodes. He ruled that despite the ongoing nature of the lawsuits, Detroit would continue down the path to bankruptcy, saying the city would suffer if the process was delayed. Michigan’s Attorney General, Bill Schuette, stepped in as the “people’s attorney” to defend the constitutional protection of public pensions. Orr, on the other side of this legal battle, argued that federal bankruptcy laws trump state
protection of pensions. On August 19, 2013, over 140 objectors, including numerous creditors, unions, and retiree groups, filed against Detroit’s eligibility to declare bankruptcy. Interestingly, bondholders or bond insurers who would receive a steep loss from Orr’s plan did not object. Several news sources speculated that the cost would not weigh out the possibility of winning the court case for the bondholders.

On December 3, 2013, Judge Rhodes ruled that the city of Detroit could formally enter bankruptcy. Although Rhodes agreed that the city had failed to make good faith negotiations with creditors, he conceded that the circumstances would not allow such negotiations. Most notably and controversially, this ruling disputed the obligation to pay pensions in full. “Pension benefits,” Rhodes stated, “are a contractual right and are not entitled to any heightened protection in a municipal bankruptcy.” It was the first bankruptcy court ruling of its kind. Workers, retirees, and union leaders were all distraught by the decision. The president of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees had this to say: “It sets a bad precedent for cities that are under economic distress to look at doing the easy thing: to attack the workers and attack the retirees.”

In the midst of these court hearings, Detroit elected a new mayor: Mike Duggan. The first white mayor since the seventies, Duggan ran on a campaign for economic development in the city; his

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16 Caitlin Devitt, “No Challenge to Detorits Eligibility from Bond Insurers, Investors” The Bond Buyer, April 10, 2013.
18 Davey et al, “Detroit Ruling”
campaign slogan, “Every neighborhood has a future,” reflecting the fear that many Detroiters felt for their future post bankruptcy.

The city emerged from bankruptcy on December 11, 2014. At the same time, Orr left his position as emergency manager and returned the power to the elected leaders. Judge Rhodes approved the exit plan that allowed the city to shed $7 billion in debt and invest $1.7 billion into city services over the course of ten years. This money would be split up between capital expenditure reinvestment, technology infrastructure reinvestment, fleet reinvestment, reorganization implementation costs, blight, and the largest percentage (42%) going to “additional operating expenditures.” The plan was settled through private mediation sessions between major groups involved, including the city’s retired workers and the financial creditors. Retired general municipal workers accepted a 4.5% cut from their monthly checks amid other concessions such as a higher health care cost and an end to cost-of-living increases. Although the power was restored to the elected government, the exit plan required a financial advisory board to oversee any financial decisions. With these provisions, Detroit exited bankruptcy and began a course set for economic rehabilitation.

**Detroit Today**

“What hope remains,” Sugrue claims for Detroit’s urban crisis, “comes from the continued efforts of city residents to resist the debilitating effects of poverty,

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racial tension, and industrial decline.” However, what happens when these efforts are from non-residents? Or from people who have never felt the debilitating effects of poverty? What does this hope look like and who is it for? These are the questions I used to begin my research when interviewing two reporters from *Craine’s Detroit Business*, Kirk Pinho and Marti Beneditti.

Pinho and Beneditti both provided insightful information as to who was creating the most visible change in Detroit. The city has seen countless initiatives come and go with limited success in creating a difference in the economic and social climate. This thesis will not cover all of these influencers and their effect on the city, but it is important to note who is changing Detroit and how they are doing it. On the administrative side, Mike Duggan has been enacting and supporting change from his seat as mayor and Tom Lewand serves as the Group Executive for Jobs and Economic Growth. According to Pinho, Lewand is Duggan’s “go-to-guy on all redevelopment issues.” These administrative officials have been crucial in the policies and funding that shape the city. However, Duggan and Lewand are not the only major players affecting Detroit.

Within the last ten or so years there has been a small collective of huge influencers in Detroit. Dan Gilbert, the founder and CEO of Rock Ventures and Quicken Loans, has received more press coverage than any other initiatives and will be discussed later in this thesis. Another major contributor to Detroit’s revitalization efforts is the Ilitch family, helmed by Mike and Marian Ilitch. Owners of Little Caesars Pizza, Detroit’s hockey team the Red Wings, and Detroit’s baseball team the

*Sugrue, “Origins of the Urban Crisis,”* 279
Tigers, the Ilitchs have created the beginnings of The District Detroit. Their vision for the city includes a hub downtown featuring sports, shopping, casinos, housing, and entertainment. Both the Ilitch family and Gilbert have bought deteriorating properties within Detroit and renovated them, gaining power and influence over the future of the city in the process.

Other influencers in Detroit deal with millions instead of billions. Sue Mosey, director and creator of Midtown Detroit Incorporated, has created a host of programs and initiatives in the midtown region. Dave Di Rita of the Roxbury Group has revitalized classic Detroit architecture such as the Whitney Building. Ron Bartell, a former professional football player for the Detroit Lions, is helping develop Detroit’s Avenue of Fashion. Phil Cooley, fashion model turned tycoon, is instrumental in the development of Corktown with his successful barbecue restaurant as well establishing a low-rent business space for artists and creative entrepreneurs. All of these efforts have worked, sometimes together and sometimes in opposition, to reconstruct, develop, and revive Detroit from its grave.

But was Detroit dead? There has certainly been a narrative to suggest that. However, when Detroit was at its lowest population, there were still 713,000 people living there. The rhetoric of these efforts, “revitalization,” “rehabilitation,” and “reconstruction,” all point to a city that needs to be saved from itself. Everyone is looking to bring in new life and business to Detroit, but few are considering what is happening to the born-and-bred Detroiter’s, the older generation overlooked by this movement. Pinho, who specializes in real estate and higher education, points to the fact that most of Detroit’s “sexy projects” are happening in the greater downtown
area. The area is being transformed into a hip and happening place with trendy restaurants, high-end boutiques, and upscale apartment buildings. More and more buildings within the Midtown area are being restored and renovated and larger businesses are moving in and creating jobs. All of these things, while positive for urban renewal efforts, neglect struggling residential neighborhoods and push long-time Detroit residents out of downtown. They are simply (through social, economic, and political complexities) being priced out of the real estate market. This points to an overreaching problem where areas of Detroit that undergo the most development and receive the most financial resources are places where only upper middle-class people can live. A two bedroom, two bath apartment in the middle of downtown Detroit costs an average of $1,600 a month. Pinho observed that in all of the time he spent in Detroit he rarely saw older, long-time residents of the city in places like Midtown and the Eastern Market. The city, he noted, is now visibly younger and whiter than it was ten or so years ago.

All of these initiatives are doing their best to bring in a larger population to Detroit. Infrastructure, however, isn’t the only thing that is being sold to outsiders. Image, meaning the image of Detroit and the image of the future of Detroit, is what inspires people to invest their money and live in the city. This thesis looks at the way that Detroit has been depicted within different forms of media and how this shapes the social imaginary of the city. From Olympic promotional material to the indie smash-hit horror film *It Follows*, the social imaginary of Detroit has been reflected in numerous interpretations by a variety of forms. Finding a “correct” portrayal of the
city is an impossible task but each of these representations can build upon an understanding of how Detroit has been crafted into the popular imagination.

**Literature Review**

The social imaginary does not have, to the best of my knowledge and research, a standard definition or lexicon. Used by French philosophers, the term has varied definitions across different texts. In the most basic terms, as Sarah Maza states it in *The Myth of the French Bourgeois: An Essay on the Social Imaginary 1750-1850*, the social imaginary is “the cultural elements from which we construct our understanding of the social world.” 22 A more expansive restate of various conceptualizations of the social imaginary is explained in Susan Roddick’s book on homeless youth in Los Angeles. She states that the social imaginary, as described by Henri Lefebvre, is a societally produced image that rests in the unconscious. She summarizes that the social imaginary,

Signals an image that exists within the popular imagination or unconscious: social, because the process which produces it is societal rather than individualized, and imaginary, rather than symbolic, because it indicates not a state of signification but a condition of possession...The imaginary, far from reflecting the objects to which it seems to refer (be it a social, political, or other imaginary) is, in fact, produced by the discourse that surrounds it. 23

The social imaginary is thus a socially constructed idea that, through representations comes to define an object. Zukin et al in their study on Coney Island and Las Vegas, argue that the social imaginary of a city can make a large impact on growth and

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Narratives of Detroit, created by cultural elements, can consequently be responsible for both the social and economic future of the city.

The social imaginary in Detroit has been studied through a number of lenses. In 2003, Peter Eisinger argued that renovations in infrastructure and the “comeback” of the city were ways to reimagine Detroit and the narrative around it. He explained that restoration and innovation projects are not for the residents of Detroit but instead to change the imaginary of the city. Eisinger examined the way that the imagining of Detroit is often in conflict between the majority black population and the white corporate actors and news media.25

In the thirteen years since Eisinger’s article was published, changes in the city are still used to create new narratives for Detroit. In many ways, the narrative that has surrounded Detroit in the past decade has been one of decaying buildings and abandonment. These ideas of deterioration are often supported by photographs and media representation, sometimes referred to as “ruin porn.” Ruin porn showcases broken down infrastructure and other man-made environments. It is criticized for its exploitative practices that dramatize landscapes but do nothing to understand or inform the causes behind the destruction. Nate Millington argues that the practice of ruin porn often uses elements of the natural environment to create a narrative of Detroit reclaimed by the natural world. Imagery of unmanaged grass or feral animals distinctly separates urbanism and nature. This juxtaposition, according to Millington,

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“assumes a normative ethical rejections of urban life that severs nature from the city and constructs Detroit’s decline in moral rather than politics-economic terms.”

Paul Draus and Juliette Roddy observed a similar idea of a doomed Detroit in their analysis of the narrative of monstrosity in the city. They argue that the largest struggle Detroit must face is overcoming its iconically negative image of decay. They continue that, as a predominantly African American city, Detroit is often pigeonholed as a representation of otherness and a stand in for “a particularly American set of fears about urban society and where it is heading.”

Draus and Roddy categorize Detroit’s horror identity into four monster archetypes: ghosts and the haunted city, vampires and the predatory city, zombies and the mindless city, and finally werewolves and the feral city. These persistent images continually pop up across artists’ representations of the city and create a monstrous interpretation that has often dominated the social imaginary of Detroit.

Starting in 2009, Siobhan Gregory began to notice a different trend in representations of Detroit. Gregory’s study looks at the problematic metaphorical language in local and national news sources when describing the influx of businesses and artists into the city. These new residents were described as pioneers and saviors of the “blank slate” that the city represented. This kind of vocabulary has historically been used to heroically present the act of gentrification. Neil Smith’s seminal text *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*, explains that a pioneering framework has often been used in the social representation of

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27 Paul Draus and Juliette Roddy, “Ghosts, Devils, and the Undead City: Detroit and the Narrative of Monstrosity” *Space and Culture*, 2015: 3
Applying this to Detroit, Gregory found that news media often portrays privileged efforts done by white businesses and artists as pseudo-saviors within Detroit. “Whether consciously or not,” Gregory concludes, “this affordance further anchors a belief that a narrative of returning Whiteness to the city is the preferred formula for success and that Blacks are not critical to this scenario.”

These articles are useful in understanding the social imaginary that surrounds Detroit. However, they are quite specific in their choices of narrative themes (such as the monstrous city) or media examined (news articles or ruin porn). In this thesis I hope to expand on this knowledge base by providing a broader analysis of Detroit’s social imaginary through different eras, mediums, and themes.

**Chapter Summary**

This is not a comprehensive study of the social imaginary of Detroit. Instead, it is a small dive into representations as they inform the current and turbulent state of the city today. I have chosen to track a very specific path of Detroit’s social imaginary that runs chronologically through various emblematic narratives of the city. Each chapter will be defined by a certain theme in representation that coincides with an era of Detroit’s history. Inside each section will be separate readings of cultural elements that have added to the social imaginary of the city. Chapter one will cover the supposed heyday of Detroit, the fifties and sixties, through fictional and political productions of the time as well as recent nostalgic depictions of Detroit’s

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zenith. The second chapter will delve into more recent depictions of the city as it has become synonymous with abandonment and decay. This analysis reflects Detroit’s timeline in the years before, during, and after the bankruptcy as they focus on the city as a gritty place of urban struggle. Chapter three focuses on imaginaries of Detroit that are future thinking—beyond the bankruptcy and the current hardships and into a booming metropolis. This is the largest section as it deals with the current construction of Detroit’s social imaginary: who is building it? Who is it being designed for? What cultural elements are used to create this imaginary?

The social imaginary of Detroit is an undeniably large part of the current development and growth happening in the city. New narratives both reflect and create a demographic shift in Detroit. A paternalistic attitude arises from this shift that has become detrimental to the city’s long-time residents and African American population. Examining the way the city has been presented through these three eras will perhaps give an understanding of the political, racial, and economic battles that could determine the future of Detroit. So, how do we imagine Detroit? Let’s explore.
Chapter 1:

Dreams from the Motor City

“Glow from Detroit Spreads Everywhere!”

-Life Magazine, January 1963

This title from Life Magazine showcases the hope and exhilaration Americans felt about Detroit in the sixties. Although deindustrialization and racial politics were already affecting the atmosphere of the city, there was an undeniable acclaim to Detroit in the fifties and sixties. A great producer of technology and music, Detroit had one of the largest populations of any city in the United States. Success, prosperity, and dreams were huge aspects of the narrative about the city and the following depictions exemplify that. The first two are examples from the 1960s of Detroit where the city is depicted as an All-American fantasyland of ambition and triumph but blatantly ignored the growing racial tensions in the city. The third example is a modern take on this era and focuses on the way black artists navigated the waters of success in Detroit. As I will point to later, there is a high level of nostalgia for this era in modern social imaginaries of the city. Reminiscence of this pinnacle time informs modern depictions as people yearn for a time of success and prosperity in the city. However, in each of these accounts the narrative of a dream-like Detroit is complicated by attitudes toward blackness and the lack of African American representation.
The Disneyfication of Detroit

In 1967, Walt Disney produced what would be his final film before his death, entitled *The Happiest Millionaire*. Set in 1916, this musical film is based on the true story of the eccentric millionaire Anthony J. Drexel Biddle and his family. Biddle’s daughter, Cordy, meets and falls in love with a young man named Angier Buchanan Duke who is fascinated by the new automobile and the city of Detroit. In one of the film’s songs, Angier explains that he wants to leave his family’s tobacco company and move to Detroit. Although the audience and the film’s characters never actually see Detroit, *The Happiest Millionaire* provides a social imaginary of the city as the ultimate dream for young white men trying to make their name and fortune.

“It’s no humdrum 9 to 5 town / It’s a growing, going, bright, alive town!” Angier belts these lyrics as he explains to Cordy his desire to move to Detroit. He cannot contain his excitement about the brand new automobile produced in the city as well as the prospect of his independence and success. He sings of Detroit as a futuristic mecca for dreams where hard work can bring you fame and fortune, “golden sparks light up the skies there like a thousand 4th of Julys there / How I want to stake a claim in / roll up my sleeves and make a name in Detroit.” The film depicts the city as an archetype of the American Dream, a place where anything is possible with hard work, determination, and ambition.

This short scene mirrors the values and normative conditions of the American Dream. Angier decides to reject his family’s fortune and business in order to break out on his own and become independent in the city “west of here.” Reminiscent of the “Go West, young man” concept of fortune and manifest destiny for young, white
American men. Angier is the quintessential All-American guy with the blond hair, charming smile, and manners to match. When he meets Cordy, they make a picturesque young couple following their dreams. Through the course of the song, the audience sees Angier and Cordy fall in love as the seasons pass. By the end of the number, they decide to get married and move to Detroit. The centrality of Detroit in this Hollywood “happily ever after” displays the way the city was associated with fantasy and burgeoning opportunities.

This depiction of 1916 Detroit was created at a particularly poignant moment for the city. As noted earlier, the sixties in Detroit were shadowed by structural circumstances that would lead to the eventual decline of the city. It is interesting then to consider the reason why *The Happiest Millionaire* chooses Detroit as a site of nostalgia for unfettered dreams. Significantly, Disney chose to create a fantasy about early twentieth-century Detroit when the city was predominantly white. The film was released one month before the 1967 Detroit Uprising and was filmed during a time when race relations in the city grew more tenuous by the day. Counteracting this, the film points back to a time to the beginning of the great migration, when African Americans were moving to northern industrial cities from the South. *The Happiest Millionaire’s* hopeful iteration of Detroit is thus contingent on the whiteness of the city. This film, released in 1967, points to the “last gasp” of any social imaginary that could involve a predominantly white Detroit. This reflection of nostalgia for a time before racial conflict and difference, particularly as the film coincides with the urban

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protests of the 60s, points to the ways that the social imaginary of Detroit is shaped by the social circumstances and urban fears of the city.

Olympian Hopes

From 1944-1972, Detroit made a bid to host the summer Olympics seven times all without success. The bid for the games in 1968 came the closest to a Detroit Olympics with the city as one of the five finalists. In 1962, Detroit’s fiscal and organizational responsibility was put into question by the International Olympic Committee. In response, the government of Michigan and Detroit created a promotional video called “The Detroit You’ve Never Met” to explain the values of their town as well as emphasize the responsibility and stability of Detroit’s financial situation. The video convinced the U.S. Olympic Committee to reinvest their faith in Detroit and propose it as the official nominee of the United States. Despite the success in the U.S., the International Committee chose Mexico City instead. However, that did not prevent Detroit from trying again for the 1972 Olympics, creating another video entitled “Detroit, City on the Move” in 1965. Both videos promote Detroit as a vibrant cultural hub that represents the American spirit of hard work, innovation, and responsibility.

In “The Detroit You’ve Never Met,” the video introduces the five “Detroit Dynamics:” talent, experience, resources, enthusiasm, and responsibility. These qualities are what then-mayor Jerome Cavanaugh claims are the defining factors of Detroit to the American people. Cavanaugh and Michigan’s governor at the time, George Romney, emphasize the plans for Olympic facilities as well as the viability of Detroit’s amenities and attractions. The video exudes unfettered pride for the way the
city was a prosperous cultural and business hub. A huge aspect of the video involves Cavanaugh and Romney defending Detroit’s organizational and fiscal responsibility spouting statements such as, “The only dirt on Detroiter’s faces is the dust kicked up by dedicated men when they roll up their sleeves to do a job and do it well.” They emphasize Detroit’s competency and economic strength through statistics, saying that 80% of Detroiter owned their own homes and that Detroit produced more wealth per capita than any other city at that time. To end the presentation, Governor Romney describes the American spirit of Detroit, “Detroit’s the city of champions. The whole world knows that Detroit is the American city whose products have revolutionized our way of living. And only in Michigan will you find the men and women whose talent made us the arsenal of democracy in wartime and the economic pace setter in peacetime.” The bid from Detroit for the 1968 Olympics presented the city as an essential part of American culture at the time. Unfortunately for the city, this attempt ultimately failed.

This defeat did not stop Detroit from trying one final time for the 1972 Olympics. Unlike the other video, which concentrated on the infrastructure planned for an Olympics in Detroit, “Detroit, City on the Move” highlighted more of Detroit’s cultural and historical appeal. This video could be considered a pre-cursor to the language implemented in representations of Detroit today, “Yes, Detroit is enjoying its finest hour. There is a renaissance, a rebirth in the city. There’s a newness in Detroit.” Back again to represent the city, Jerome Cavanaugh touts Detroit as the most “cosmopolitan city of the Midwest” with a “resurgence of civic pride and unfettered imagination.” The video contains tons of b-roll footage featuring bustling
streets and smiling Detroiters enjoying the city. The cinematography is simple with shots of Detroit buildings and attractions and focuses on a very straight-laced representation of Detroit. The movie ends with this peppy sentiment,

Whether you come to live, to work, to visit, to attend a convention, to establish a business, to build things, Detroit is unsurpassed for opportunity and growth. The friendliness of its people reaches out. The warmth of the city. The excitement of change. The dedication of progress: social, spiritual, cultural and material is equaled only by its 20th century vision. The city on the straits welcomes you to share that vision as it continues to plan, to build, and yes, to dream.

Unmentioned in these Detroit’s Olympic bids are the increasing racial tensions within the city. These videos barely mention the growing African American population within the city or any kind of non-white citizenship within Detroit. Because of this sensitive time, the fight for a 1968 Olympics in Detroit was riddled with racial tension from the beginning. In an attempt to show off the city to the International Olympic Committee, Mayor Cavanaugh organized a relay for the passing of the torch ceremony in Detroit, an event that would usually only be held in cities that have previously hosted the Olympics. On the day of the relay, around fifty civil rights protesters, both black and white, booed and jeered outside the ceremony. They were protesting the defeat of the Patrick-Ravitz open-housing bill that would have punished housing discrimination. To many, the bill losing seven to two in the City Council was an unjust setback for equality and civil rights in Detroit. Cavanaugh was outraged by the presence and behavior of the protestors claiming that they were booing and catcalling during the national anthem. He called for a public apology and one of the protestors, David Feinberg, wrote a letter in response. In it he said,

I feel that the people of Detroit have become so excited about the honor and the millions of dollars Detroit would receive from having the Olympics that they
have forgotten there are large segments of our population that do not enjoy full equality of opportunity.31

Issues such as these in Detroit are never mentioned within “The Detroit You’ve Never Met” or “Detroit, City on the Move.” Very few people of color are visible within the films and the sparse narration focused on diversity is glossed over with pandering statements, “here people of many nations have met, and mixed, and built a metropolis of thriving commerce and culture.” Strangely, when people of color are present in the films, it is not African Americans but instead Asian Americans and Native Americans who are pictured while Cavanaugh talks about the “good ethnic relations” in Detroit. Despite this assertion from the mayor, the videos glorify the racist political moves of Detroit’s administration. When talking of Detroit’s medical advances, Cavanaugh mentions the removal of poorer neighborhoods within the city, “a magnificent new medical center is to arise on these grounds. This as well as in the other vast reaches of the city where once lay the ugliness, the poverty, the sickness of slums, has been condemned and cleared.” The expulsion and vilification of poorer areas of Detroit is depicted as part of the top-notch safety and prosperity in the city. This kind of attitude and policy toward impoverished neighborhoods has definitive racist undercurrents as African Americans were among the most disenfranchised groups within Detroit.

The general disregard of racial dynamics within “The Detroit You’ve Never Met” and “Detroit, City on the Move” is particularly poignant when considering the charged atmosphere of the 1968 Olympics. During the games, two African American

31 Maraniss, Once in a Great City, 254-256.
Olympians raised their fist for Black Power during the Star Spangled Banner at the medal ceremony of the 200-meter race. This political demonstration became an iconic symbol in the continuing civil rights struggles in the U.S. and around the world. Also important to note is that these videos were made only shortly before the 1967 Uprising, which is often seen as the breaking point of racial tensions in Detroit.

It is hard to tell whether or not Detroit would have been ready and able to host the Olympics in 1968 or 1972. One thing that is clear is that officials within city and state government thought that Detroit’s future was to be envied. However, as mentioned earlier through Sugrue, the city was headed for trouble long before these Olympic bids failed. Details from the 1960 census in Detroit revealed that the city was already seeing a population decline—both white and black citizens were leaving the city for the suburbs if they had the financial means.32 These factors, along with other troubling facts and figures, saw the beginning of an economic and social decline in Detroit just as Mayor Cavanaugh was calling it the most cosmopolitan city in the Midwest.

**Black Success in Nostalgic Detroit**

One of the many accolades of Detroit can be found in Hitsville USA, a small house converted into a recording studio where many of Motown’s greatest hits were heard for the first time. Berry Gordy Jr., founder of the Motown record label and its subsidiaries, worked with dozens of African American musicians and turned them into legends: Diana Ross & the Supremes, Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Jackson 5, The Temptations, and the list could go on. The genre played a

major role in the integration of African Americans into the mainstream music scene with many songs appealing to both black and white audiences. The company provided employment for 450 Detroiter and reached a huge amount of success through its artists with a gross income of $20 million by the end of 1966. In the short eight years between 1959 and 1972, Gordy forever linked the sounds of Motown to Detroit. Hitsville USA still stands today and is available to the public as the Motown Museum, despite the fact that in modern day presentations of Detroit, Motown music is often unmentioned and unheard.

Gordy took inspiration from Detroit and particularly with the auto industry. The name of the company is a portmanteau (the linguistic conjoining of two words to create a new word with a new meaning) of Motor and Town because Detroit is often nicknamed the Motor City. Before starting in the music industry, Gordy worked on an assembly line at the Mercury-Lincoln plant. Later he would claim that this helped inform the music-making process at Motown as the musicians would come in as raw material and come out as finished commercial products. Gordy would have each act go through etiquette, dance, and music practices until they all could similarly perform the identifiable sights and sounds of Motown.\(^{33}\) Gordy’s business sense, reflected in this mass production of art, is probably what allowed the Motown groups to reach such great heights of fame and acclamation. This sense also led him to create music that was a crossover of soul, R&B, and pop. This converging of worlds allowed Motown music to gain a larger distribution and appeal to a more mainstream and white audience.

\(^{33}\) Sugue, *Once in a Great City* 51-52
In many of the movies, advertisements, and campaigns featuring Detroit, Motown is strangely missing. This seems like a surprising choice in representation since so much of the modern narrative about Detroit is centered around nostalgia for the past. The prime time of Motown in Detroit was also part and parcel with the most lauded era in Detroit, the same time Cavanaugh was bragging about the city’s cosmopolitanism and Disney created songs about it. Motown, however, had a much larger and longer effect on the culture of the United States and Detroit than the Olympic bids or The Happiest Millionaire. Yet, not many mainstream productions have returned to Motown in their representation of Detroit except the movie Dreamgirls (2006). Although there had been other representations of Motown, like the miniseries The Temptations or the new musical Motown the Musical, Dreamgirls has been a quintessential representation the musical genre since it opened on Broadway in 1981.

The theatrical production of Dreamgirls was set in Chicago but the movie version, directed by Bill Condon, brought Motown and its characters back to Detroit. The plot follows car salesman turned record producer Curtis Taylor Jr. (based on Berry Gordy Jr.) as he develops the careers of the black girl group the Dreams (the Supremes) and Jimmy Early (an amalgamation of James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and Marvin Gaye). The film spans from 1962 to the mid-seventies and chronicles the success of the Dreams and the harsh realities of the music industry.

As the Dreams rise in success, the plus-sized member of the group, Effie, who has a bigger and more soulful voice is replaced as lead singer by the prettier and thinner woman, Deena, with “no personality, no depth” to her voice. Deena is chosen
to lead the group due to her traditional beauty and versatile voice. Her performances are popular among white and black audiences and she is able to stylistically change for whatever new genre was popular (for instance, she starts singing Motown but later sings disco). The desire to appeal to larger audience is central to the often ruthless decisions that Curtis makes in the film. The issue becomes more nuanced when Curtis points out that an appeal to a larger audience isn’t just pandering to white people but also raising up black artists. When discussing the growing fame of Jimmy Early and the potential for him to perform in whiter venues, Curtis said this to Jimmy’s manager, Marty:

**CURTIS:** It’s not bullshit, Marty. It’s change. I’m talking change, can’t you see? The time is now. Jimmy needs a new act, something classier with a better sound

**MARTY:** Yeah, that’ll go down better with white folks

**CURTIS:** That’ll put him where he should be, making the type of money he should be making!

*Dreamgirls* makes a strange move by connecting Motown so much to the desire for a whiter audience. Although it celebrates black artists and music, it connects their success to the villain of the film, Curtis. Depicted as overly ambitious and cut-throat, he callously controls the singers in the name of success. Angered by white artists continually stealing black music, Curtis turns to payola, the illegal practice of paying commercial radio stations to play certain songs, to promote Jimmy Early and The Dreams. This slightly veiled depiction of Berry Gordy Jr. angered both Gordy and Motown artists including Smokey Robinson and Diana Ross. *Dreamgirls* is one of the only successful representations of Motown and yet the plot centers more on the devious behavior behind the scenes than the actual music.
Dreamgirls uses Detroit not only as a scene of origin but also to represent failure and death as well as rebirth and authenticity. Fed up with Deena in the spotlight, Effie storms out of rehearsal and performances for the Dreams. At the same time she finds out she is pregnant with Curtis’s child, Curtis replaces her in the band, telling her that “it’s all over.” Seven years later, everyone has moved to L.A. and The Dreams have become a giant success with Deena as the lead. The movie spends considerable time chronicling Curtis’s success, showing that in the past seven years he has married Deena and they have built her career into global stardom. He sings her a song and tells her that the first time he saw her he thought, “Oh my, that’s my dream.” The movie then cuts to Effie, who has been left in Detroit, visiting a welfare office with her seven-year-old daughter, Magic. A white social worker asks Effie if she has looked for work this week and she replies, still angry about her hijacked career, “The only thing I know how to do is sing. And since ain’t nobody letting me do that no more, no I did not look for a job.” In striking contrast to Deena’s glamor and fashion, Effie wears her natural hair and no makeup. This is the first time the audience sees Detroit after the films depiction of the 1967 Uprising. After that, Effie remains in a demolished Detroit with many buildings either looted or burned down.
Back in L.A., Jimmy Early’s career has been overshadowed by the success of Deena. Feeling under appreciated, he goes after a new sound with a song that C.C., the main songwriter and Effie’s brother, creates for him called “Patience”. Curtis rejects the song because of its political message. In the following scene, Curtis talks it over with Jimmy, CC, and the member of the Dreams who replaced Effie, Michelle.

**CURTIS:** It’s a message song

**MICHELLE:** It tells the truth. People are angry out there. I’m angry. My brother is in Vietnam fighting a pointless war and I’m angry about it.

**CC:** That’s right Curtis. Isn’t music supposed to express what people are feeling?

**CURTIS:** Music is supposed to sell. Look, don’t worry about it, Jimmy. We’ll find you some new material. And about that shirt, you should lose it. It’s messing up your image.

Drugged up on cocaine and heroin, Jimmy stops in the middle of a televised performance of a Motown blues song and says that he cannot sing sad songs anymore. Instead, he raps
Jimmy got soul, Jimmy got soul
Sooner or later a time comes around for a man to be a man and take back his crown
I got to do something to shake things up
I Love Johnny Matthews but I can’t do that stuff

After this riotous performance where he ends up stripping his shirt and dropping his pants, Curtis drops him from the label. Despondent, Jimmy overdoses on heroin and dies a few days later. His body is sent back to Detroit where members of the old Motown music industry, including Effie, gather for his wake. His funeral is shown in the dead of winter with only a couple dozen people in attendance. Detroit in *Dreamgirls* thus is linked not only to the destruction of the 1967 Uprising and Effie’s career but also death caused by neglect.

In spite of this, Detroit is not just a site of despair in *Dreamgirls*. By the end of the film, it becomes clear that the city is also a place of authenticity and rebirth. In the second half of the film, Curtis has made many successful records with the help of CC. However, over time CC becomes unhappy with his lack of artistic freedom and begins arguing with Curtis about the integrity of his music,

**CC:*** I didn’t think it was possible, Curtis. I didn’t think you could squeeze anymore of the soul out of my music.
**CURTIS:*** We just made it danceable, that’s all.
**CC:*** What about the lyrics? That rhythm takes all of the feeling out of the music!

This and Jimmy’s death prompt CC to leave L.A. and return home to Detroit. Meanwhile, Effie has found a music manager in Detroit and is on the verge of a comeback, selling out nightclubs and finding her own success. CC convinces Effie to sing one of his new songs; a somber and soulful tune. In Detroit, Effie has her comeback and CC is able to express himself through his music again. Angered by the
growing success of Effie, Curtis steals the song and has Deena perform a disco version of it. Contrasting the slow version with the frenetic, over the top style of disco displays both the artistry of CC’s original song and its more direct attachment to soul and gospel—both traditionally African American genres. Deena discovers that Curtis stole Effie’s song and decides to divorce him. In the end, Curtis is left with no one after Effie, Deena, and CC blackmail him about his payola scheme and force him to distribute Effie’s record. For their final farewell performance, the Dreams return to Detroit and bring onstage the “fourth Dream.” Effie comes on stage, looking confident and relaxed with her natural hair and sings lead in front of hundreds of people.

Although this resurrection and return to authenticity is cathartic in many ways, it also points to a troubling solution for black success in Dreamgirls. Effie’s downfall and comeback are paralleled to the way Detroit is presented in the film. When Effie is humiliated and kicked out of the group the audience sees Detroit falling to pieces. Conversely, when Effie starts performing again with CC’s authentic songs we see nightclubs and theaters packed with Detroiter. However, the way that Effie comes to success is through getting rid of her “diva” behavior. In order to be hired as a performer at a local Detroit club, Marty, who is now Effie’s manager, tells her that she cannot succeed with her talent alone.

EFFIE: I can’t sing with someone I don’t know
MARTY: You got to…Now you listen, Effie White. For four months I’ve been your money. I’ve taken you to every club in this freezing town and I’m telling you that this is it. It’s time that you stop making excuses so that you don’t have to prove anything. You’re gonna have to start proving it just like the rest of us. I don’t know maybe Curtis was right about you. You want all of the privileges but none of the responsibilities.
This last phrase combined with Effie’s scene in the welfare office evoke the narrative of the Welfare Queen, a pejorative phrase used to describe women who are accused of collecting welfare payments through fraud or manipulation. Effie’s time in Detroit and on welfare are framed through her unwillingness to work and high maintenance behavior. However, when she is told by Marty to start taking responsibility for herself, she launches into a song called “I am changing” with lyrics, “I’ll be better than I am” and “all of my life, I’ve been a fool.” By separating herself from the welfare persona and the diva behavior, Effie is able to have her career comeback.

This characterization of success as a result of upstanding morals is similarly seen in Curtis. In the beginning of the film, he is portrayed as sympathetic and valiant in his unstoppable desire to get black artists on the radio waves. His personification sours when he moves to L.A. and continues to expand his empire with insatiable greed. After he has lost almost everything, Curtis watches the Dreams perform their last song. He looks into the audience and sees his daughter for the first time and seems both mystified and overjoyed, implying hope that Curtis will become a better person and father. Similar to Effie’s changed morality, Curtis is redeemed only when he gives up greed and corruption.

A prevalent theme in *Dreamgirls* is the idea of fighting for recognition and fame. Curtis illegally pays radio stations to play black artists, CC fights to find an authentic sound for his music, and Effie has to prove herself as a serious artist. Even Deena, who is handed fame at the beginning, earns her place as a fighter when she helps Effie and CC blackmail Curtis even though it would cause irreparable harm to her career. This sense of tenacity is what allows the characters to succeed in the end.
On the flip side of this is a need for the characters to also be humble and rid themselves of excess. Effie must abandon her diva behavior, CC has to leave the flashy and fake world of L.A. and return to Detroit, Deena is required to risk her career, and Curtis needs to confront his corrupt values and become a father to the daughter he never knew. Made in 2006, the film came at a time when Detroit was not yet making waves about revitalization or resurgence. The city had experienced all of the apocalyptic blight that the film portrayed but very little of the comeback. *Dreamgirls* then seems to suggest that success—and more importantly black success—in Detroit comes from a certain mixture of a hard work, determination, and humility.

“Dreamgirls will help you to survive! Dreamgirls will keep your fantasies alive!” The power of fantasy is palpable in *Dreamgirls*. In the behind the scenes footage, production designer John Myre described the aesthetic in the film as glamour in everyday Detroit life. The film chronicles one of the happiest and most prosperous times in Detroit and connects the city with a unique genre of American music. Instead of depicting 60s Detroit as only a fantasy, *Dreamgirls* also shows the darker side of the music industry and the inconvenient truth of black artists appealing to larger audiences. This nuanced portrayal of the city continues to develop as it becomes the place for the comeback of Effie’s career, CC’s true music, and the reunion of all of the Dreams. *Dreamgirls’* depiction of Detroit is complicated, including both positive and negative perspectives of a city through time. The plot creates a social imaginary of destruction and death but also establishes the conditions necessary for authenticity and rebirth in Detroit. Combining these notions the film’s ultimate message seems to
suggest that success for African American can only come by remaining modest and rejecting excess.
Chapter 2:

Death and Guts in the Dystopian City

“Detroit turned out to be Heaven, but it also turned out to be Hell”

-Marvin Gaye

Far from its seemingly sunny past, the Motor City’s narrative swerved off course as the years went on. Dubbed as the “Murder City” by Time Magazine in 1973, Detroit became a symbol of crime, abandonment, and decay. In many ways, the city is still represented through these frameworks, especially just before and during the bankruptcy. The cultural elements analyzed in this chapter all situate Detroit as a downtrodden and struggling city. Similar to Draus and Roddy’s analysis of the narrative of monstrosity, this chapter begins with an analysis of Detroit based films that connect horror to the city. On the flip side of this representation is the appropriation of Detroit’s uneasy history as a sign of strength, resilience, and grit. The imaginary shifts again when it moves away from scripted and fictionalized depictions and attempts to show the reality of the city. This turn to the real world also provides an opportunity for these narratives to include their own solutions for the problematized city. A dystopian rendering of Detroit is what has become prevalent in our current social imaginary of the city. Through this imagining, the atrociousness of the city allows for a paternalistic treatment of Detroit by outsiders.

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34 Draus, “Narrative of Monstrosity,” 2
**Movies and Monsters:**

In the last decade, a telling trend has developed for movies set in Detroit. Six of the ten films fall into the categories of horror, science fiction, or dystopia films. This strange and complex trend focuses on Detroit as a place with the newest technology, the greatest fear, and the utmost disaster. The list of movies and a short description of their plot are as follows:

*Dreamgirls*, 2006: As mentioned earlier, this film is a musical drama featuring the history of Motown and the singing group, The Supremes.

*Flash of Genius*, 2008: A biopic following Robert Kearns and his legal battle against Ford Motor Company surrounding his patented windshield wiper design

*Gran Torino*, 2008: A drama film that follows an elderly Korean War veteran as he navigates his changing neighborhood of Highland Park where many Hmong immigrants have settled

*The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations*, 2009: A science fiction psychological thriller where a young man uses time travel to solve the murders of his family and friends

*Vanishing on 7th Street*, 2010: A post-apocalyptic thriller where an unknown darkness causes people to disappear

*Real Steel*, 2011: A science fiction sports film where boxers are replaced by robots in the year 2020

*The Giant Mechanical Man*, 2012: A romantic comedy about a silver painted street performer and a zoo worker

*Only Lovers Left Alive*, 2013: Set in a world where the blood of humans is contaminated through environmental degradation, two jaded vampire lovers explore music and romance.

*RoboCop*, 2014: In 2028 Detroit, a police officer is critically injured and is transformed into a cyborg

*It Follows*, 2014: An unidentifiable entity follows and kills whoever has a sexually transmitted curse

These ten movies are all over the spectrum in terms of plot and theme—if they sound like ridiculous and bizarre movies, that’s because they are. However, there is a definite pattern in the way Detroit has been used as a place of future and current dystopic visions. *Real Steel* and *RoboCop* are both set in the near future and are part of the cyberpunk genre, a futuristic sub-genre of science fiction noted to depict
societies of highly advanced technology and low quality of life. *Gran Torino, Butterfly Effect 3, Vanishing on 7th Street, Giant Mechanical Man, Only Lovers Left Alive,* and *It Follows* are all either set in the modern day or have indeterminate timelines—meaning it is unclear what decade or universe the movie lives in. Interestingly, the only two movies that focus on past events are the oldest movies in the group, made in 2006 and 2008. Generally, the other films are about a sense of unbelonging, change, or the supernatural.

Although *Gran Torino* and *Giant Mechanical Man* are the only modern movies with no supernatural elements, they are still out of place and seemingly random in their depictions of Detroit. *Gran Torino* was one of the first films to take advantage of the tax break from the state government incentivizing film production in Michigan. Originally, *Gran Torino* was supposed to take place within the northern parts of Minneapolis, Minnesota where a large Hmong population resides. Highland Park, a small city within Metro Detroit and the actual location of the movie, has only a small Asian immigrant presence. The 2000 census stated that Asian immigrants make up only around .02% of the population in that neighborhood. *Gran Torino*’s focus on an influx of Hmong Americans thus rings hollow when it comes to using Detroit as its location. *The Giant Mechanical Man* is another movie with no particular investment in Detroit. The platitudinous plot revolves around a 30-something white woman and man who have yet to learn how to navigate adult life. Detroit barely registers as the setting of the film, the plot revolving more on aimless white privilege than any part of the city. Both *Gran Torino* and *Giant Mechanical Man* are set in Detroit but do not depict Detroit. Although they are the only movies in the group that depict realistic
stories, the films fictionalize a population and social climate for the city.

*Real Steel* and *Robocop* are both futuristic Detroit films. Set in 2020 and 2028 respectively, they focus on a technologically advanced society stricken with poverty and crime. Oddly, both films deal with humans being replaced by machines. *Real Steel* depicts a man who has lost his job as a boxer due to the growing popularity of fighting robots. In *RoboCop*, ethical questions are raised when the scientists who create RoboCop turn off the human emotions that trigger a militaristic policing. These two movies are both hyper-technological and paint a future of deteriorating human conditions and personhood in Detroit.

*Only Lovers Left Alive* and *The Butterfly Effect 3: Revelations* are both supernatural films whose main characters have special powers in the form of time travel and vampirism. *Only Lovers Left Alive* features Detroit heavily as a vampire contemplates his despondence with life and disgust for the modern world. In this alternative universe, the world’s environment has become so degraded that the blood of humans has been contaminated, adding to the despair of the two vampire lovers. At the end of the movie, they decide to commit suicide together with tainted human blood. *The Butterfly Effect* franchise focuses on time traveling white men. The third in the series follows a Detroit police officer who uses his time traveling powers to solve crimes. Things go awry, however, when he tries to alter things from his own past—creating the “butterfly effect” of chaos theory in which small changes in a non-linear system can create large differences in later states. Murder, arson, and incest are all incorporated into this psychological thriller. These films and their supernatural characters both depict Detroit as a place of despondence and chaos.
Unknown (and unknowable) evil entities are the epicenter of the two movies that feature Detroit the most, *Vanishing on 7th Street* and *It Follows*. Both depict a hopeless uncertainty while its protagonists try to evade a mysterious creature that follows them wherever they go. In *Vanishing on 7th Street*, a group of characters convene in an abandoned bar after almost everyone else in the city has suddenly vanished, only leaving their clothes and non-organic parts. The characters soon find out that darkness is making people disappear and the only way to save themselves is to keep a source of light on them at all times. The characters believe that what is happening to them is the same thing that happened to the Roanoke colony, a 16th century English settlement that disappeared without a trace. Although this is the theory from the movie it does nothing to explain the supernatural darkness that reaches out to grab and trick people. Similarly evil and devious, the monster in *It Follows* shape shifts into any human form and slowly walks toward and kills whoever has the sexually transmitted curse. Set in and around the suburbs of Detroit, the film takes care to set certain scenes in different areas of Detroit. For example, in the scene where the curse is exchanged, two characters have sex outside of an abandoned factory located farther from the suburbs and closer to the city. These two films use Detroit as a character and a central entity for story telling. For that reason, my analysis of these Detroit-based films will mostly focus on these two movies.

*It Follows* and *Vanishing on 7th Street* have no origin story for the evil entity that haunts the main characters. This is at odds from a typical horror movie where the tortured past of the villain adds to the haunting plot of the film—think Jason’s tragic story in the *Friday the 13th* series. As the movies show, it almost doesn’t matter what
the monster is and why it torments the protagonists; the only important thing is the hopelessness that the creature inspires. Both films have fairly ambiguous and bleak endings. The darkness takes almost everyone except the two children in Vanishing and the monster still walks towards the cursed in It Follows. The films ending show that the mysterious creatures cannot be defeated, they can only be evaded for a small time. These plotlines predicate the decay of population and infrastructure within Detroit. The all-encompassing darkness in Vanishing cannot help but be compared to the lack of city streetlights that plagued Detroit for years and the monster in It Follows becomes an emblem of Detroit’s depopulation.

These films use the landscape of Detroit as a tool for fear and helplessness. It Follows uses the suburbs, abandoned neighborhoods, and decimated buildings of the city to convey the frightening nature of whatever “it” is and also as an allegory for the urban decay for which Detroit is known. When Jay, the protagonist, catches the curse she is at an old abandoned factory in Detroit. Subsequently, the curse follows her into the suburbs and she flees to northern Michigan to escape. This pattern of movement, carried out by a cast of all white characters, reflects the panic that emerged from the city that caused those in the surrounding area to move farther and farther away from
Detroit. Every time the characters try to escape from the monster, the camera pans to rows of abandoned homes, linking their flight to the decimated conditions of the city.

The film seems to link the monster to Detroit over and over again. Author Mark Binelli analyzed the film,

Likewise, while the central ghost story can be read as both an obvious AIDS metaphor and as broader existential horror, anyone who grew up in the area might also view the unstoppable forces of decay as representative of the widespread suburban fear of the city itself, and all it had come to represent: unplanned obsolescence, crime, and, of course, unchecked blackness. I can remember the racism and paranoia openly expressed by many white suburbanites in the eighties when you’d get them going on the possibility of “Detroit” crossing 8 Mile Road.35

Towards the end of the film, when the group of teens attempts to trap and kill the monster, one of the supporting characters explains this very phenomenon, “When I was a little girl, my parents wouldn’t allow me to go south of 8 Mile and I didn’t know what that meant until I was a little older and I started to realize that’s where the city started and the suburbs ended.” The pattern of exodus that decimated Detroit’s population is reflected by It Follows, which uses the city’s landscape to convey a sense of hopelessness and terror.

The link between fearing the city and fearing an unstoppable killing entity is similarly found in Vanishing on 7th Street. It seems almost obviously allegorical to use Detroit as a landscape for a movie where people disappear. Set in downtown Detroit, the film uses shots of city streets to showcase the total loss of humans in the city. At various points in the film, the skyline is juxtaposed to the abandoned city roads; displaying a once great metropolis hollowed of its people. The film ends with

35 Mark Binelli, “How It Follows uses Detroit to Explore the Horror of Urban Decay,” Slate Magazine, April 1, 2015.
two young children, who are the only survivors, leaving the city on horseback. As the sun sets, the little girl turns on the flashlight keeping the darkness at bay while Detroit sinks into the background. Although the children don’t know what hope is left (it is shown that the entire world has experienced this apocalypse), the desire to “get out of this city” is overpowering. There is no hope in Detroit and the children, acting as symbols of the future, must leave the city behind.

In both films, the characters are forced to confront their own existence and being. *It Follows’* main characters are all teenagers, with adults only being shown in the background or out of frame. The film takes pains to show the naiveté of its characters as they continually make stupid decisions. They are on the brink of adulthood but cannot successfully navigate it. The curse is transferred through sex, an act that is viewed as a precipice into adulthood. After Jay has sex and receives the curse she muses, “I used to daydream about being old enough to go on dates. I had this image of myself holding hands with a really cute guy, driving along some pretty road. It was never about going anywhere really. It’s having some sort of freedom I guess.” The film relies heavily on the uncertainty of growing up. Similarly in *Vanishing*, each character is literally fighting to be a person. The characters repeatedly “will” themselves into existence to keep from disappearing. The little boy in the film, James, survives against the encroaching darkness by repeating “I exist” over and over again causing one candle to remain lit, protecting him. The end of the movie repeats this when James and the little girl leave the city and the shadows of the other main characters are seen against a wall. Their voices all chant “I exist” even though they have dissapeared. The fixation on existence and personhood can be
linked to the fight Detroit is facing for survival. In many ways, Detroit was written off for dead when *Vanishing on 7th Street* was made in 2009. The film reflects the way in which the city fought for existence as it became more and more blighted yet ultimately failed and was forced into the background of American society. *It Follows* was made in 2013, the year Detroit exited bankruptcy and began its “ascent.” When the monster follows the characters to the supposedly safe parts of Northern Michigan, they decide that they must return to the city to kill it. This plot twist is alarmingly allegorical to the gentrification that Detroit is facing now—when blackness remains prevalent people return to the city to remove it.

Films set in Detroit are critical to thinking about Detroit’s representation for larger-mass audiences, creating an image and idea of Detroit. The parallels between these films and the city in which they’re set seem to be no accident. The representation of Detroit in movies of the past 10 years has been a strange smorgasbord of psychological thrillers, futuristic technology, supernatural creatures, and dramas with tax breaks. Otherworldly and unnatural things happen in the bulk of these movies, often placing Detroit at odds with the existence of humans. Their representations of Detroit are sometimes inconsequential, reflecting everyday America that just so happens to be placed in the city. However, the simple cinematic choice of setting their film in Detroit lends weight to the social imaginary of the city as a place of fracture and fear; an arena for the impossible to happen.

*Importing the Grit*

It begins with an image and a question. A deep-voice asks the viewer, “what does this city know about luxury? huh?” while the camera takes the audience on a
drive into Detroit. Flashes of industry, highway, and broken buildings inundate the screen as the unseen voice continues: “What does a town that’s been to hell and back know about the finer things in life? Well I’ll tell you, more than most.”

Chrysler’s two-minute advertisement, “Imported from Detroit” is by far the most viewed advertisement featuring Detroit. Originally aired during the 2011 Superbowl, the commercial struck a chord with people around the United States. The next day, the Detroit Free Press spotlighted the ad with the headline “Motor City Pride.” David Maraniss, an editor for The Washington Post, returned to Detroit and wrote his latest book Once in a Great City because he was so inspired by the advertisement. Although it is ultimately a commercial for Chrysler 200 (a midsize sedan), this ad ostensibly creates a problematic narrative that capitalizes on Detroit’s racial and economic issues.

“Imported from Detroit” engages with an audience that is unfamiliar and skeptical of Detroit. The questions asked and the answers told invite the audience to restructure their idea of what it means to be from Detroit. “You see, it’s the hottest fires that make the hardest steel. Add hard work and conviction and the know-how that runs generations deep in every last one of us.” During this narration, we are shown images of Detroit’s art, architecture, and monuments through the perspective of a viewer within the Chrysler 200. The audience is both being addressed as an outsider and viewing Detroit from that perspective. Eventually, at the 42-second mark, the car is revealed and we hear the beginning of “Lose Yourself,” the hit song from Detroit-based rapper, Eminem. While the iconic riff strums on, there is a change of visual focus from objects to subjects as the narration continues, “That’s who we
are. That’s our story. Now it’s probably not the one you’ve been reading in papers; the one being written by folks who have never even been here and don’t know what we’re capable of.” The gravitas of the quintessential images of Detroit are matched with an equally prominent depiction of people; a football team runs during a snow storm, a figure skater leaps and twirls in an ice rink located in the city’s center, men in suits cross busy streets while police officer direct traffic. The narration and the images work harmoniously to dictate a strong sense of community within the City. Detroit’s people are the hard work, conviction, and know-how that creates a city of steel.

The narrator continues, “Because when it comes to luxury, it’s as much about where it’s from as who it’s for. Now we’re from America. But this isn’t New York City or the Windy City or Sin city and we’re certainly no one’s Emerald City.” Chrysler’s version of Detroit is distinct and it won’t fit into any preconceived notions of what a city is or should be. As Eminem pulls up to the iconic Fox Theater in Detroit, the billboard outside reads “Keep Detroit Beautiful.” Eminem walks through the aisles of the gilded theater as a gospel choir sings in crescendo with the song. He turns away from the choir and looks directly in the camera while he delivers the final, crucial line, “This is the Motor City. And this is what we do.” He points his finger at the camera, accosts the audience with the declaration, and leaves. Final images of the vehicle roaming through the streets are shown as the commercial fades to black with the ending words, “The Chrysler 200 has arrived. Imported from Detroit.”
The narration, images, and attitude of this commercial creates a classed and raced depiction of Detroit. The word “imported” is a misnomer here in multiple ways. First off, after the release of the commercial Chrysler had to clarify that the Chrysler 200 was only designed in Detroit—not manufactured. Secondly, the idea of being “imported” implicates Detroit as a foreign entity within America. The advertisement ‘others’ Detroit but also garners pride from difference. However, as Rick Tetzeli argued, the foreign implications of the culture also have a more sinister side to it, “it blends luxury and quality with Motown pride, while at the same time acknowledging just how much America has wanted to pretend that Detroit is from a different country, an ‘unAmerican’ country that would allow its citizens to live in such despair.”\textsuperscript{36} The images of Detroit’s run-down buildings in the dead of winter showcase the ruin porn that is so present in the city. Pictures of Detroit’s vacant buildings and land are captivating in their desolation that seems to be so alien to the modernized and western world. Detroit is othered as non-American but also used to create a new identity of pride from the city’s rugged past.

Eminem gives the final line in the commercial and also connects Detroit to his

personification of a violent outsider in mainstream rap. Eminem as a rapper presents an interesting focal point for the representation of Detroit. On one hand, he is seen as a critical emblem within rap music and thus a point of pride for Detroit. Eminem’s history of growing up in a lower-middle class neighborhood, dropping out of high school in ninth grade, and having a troubled family life combined with his immense success as a musician and popularity as a public figure makes a compelling “rags-to-riches” American story. However, Eminem has also been criticized as a white man in a predominantly black industry and people often cite him for cultural appropriation within hip-hop. Eminem also has a history of misogynistic and homophobic lyrics that constitute his musical style. Carl Rux wrote an essay entitled “Eminem: The New White Negro.” In this essay, Rux focuses on Eminem’s identity as an outcast who has never disguised his true identity by using black culture. He has maintained his whiteness while delving into a culture dominated by African Americans. Rux cites Eminem’s style as nasal white-boy horror rap, “rappers Big Boi and Dre may go by the moniker Outkast, but Eminem proves that a real outcast has got to do more than make Miss Jackson’s daughter cry—you got to fuck the bitch, kill the bitch, dump the bitch’s dead body in the river, and not apologize for any of it.”

Chrysler’s use of Eminem as a symbol for Detroit points to a strange combination of the city as outcast but authentic to identity. Detroit, like Eminem, may be on the outskirts of American life and normatively but it thrives in this role. However, this narrative also points to the awkward fact that Eminem is the most famous rapper from Detroit. He is the

antithesis of the way *Dreamgirls* presents success for black artists. His success is based on a total glorification of excess and bad behavior whereas characters like Effie and Curtis must fight against those attributes.

The commercial works in several ways to create an identity for Detroit. The narration, recorded by Kevin Yon of Rockford, MI, emulates a hyper-masculine tone and attitude through each sentence. In an article from the Detroit Free Press, Yon stated, “my vision of Detroit is it’s tough, and it’s grizzly, and it’s hard and it’s real. I tried to portray that in the voice.”38 Yon’s deep, resonant voice evokes a male persona for the city. He also gives a “General American” accent, his tone lacking any notable ethnic, regional, or socioeconomic characteristics. Yon, with his identity as a white man who lives two hours away the city, presents a voice of Detroit. The qualities of his voice—masculine, lacking regional or social ties—contribute to Chrysler’s personification of Detroit.

This “tough guy” narrative is seen in multiple sections of the commercial. Christopher Roddy, the man seen giving the nod outside the Guardian Building in Detroit, indicated the narrative style when he was interviewed for the same Detroit Free Press article. “Roddy said he became involved after going on a casting interview. ‘I told them that Detroit is like magic,’ he said. ‘Everyone here in the city of Detroit is not what you think they are. They're magic.’ Roddy's portion was filmed outside the Penobscot Building in Detroit. He said it took several tries to perfect his tough-guy nod. ‘I'm mostly a smiler,’ Roddy said. ‘It wasn't easy at first.’”39 This,

39 Snavely, “Chrysler Super Bowl ad”
seemingly forced, tough and gritty attitude was crafted for this commercial and image of Detroit.

Race is an undeniable entity within Chrysler’s commercial. There seems to be an exacting equality in the way that race is represented within the commercial. For every black body there is a white body to balance it out. This racial seesaw act works in a specific way for Chrysler’s branding and image of the City. Detroit has been through hard times but there are still black businessmen who fashionably walk across the street. A white figure skater twirls in the middle of the city while black and white football players run in the snow. At the end of the commercial, a white rapper who Rux argues was “socialized as black” stands in front of an all black gospel choir and speaks as a unified voice for the city. Detroit’s black citizens make up over eighty percent of the total population yet Chrysler’s commercial depicts the City as equally diverse between whites and blacks (there are no other races shown in the commercial). This equal representation of African Americans and whites in the city dismisses the long troubled history of whites leaving and avoiding Detroit.

The main inconsistency within the commercial is how Chrysler sells luxury cars using Detroit at its epicenter. What does Detroit know about luxury? The beginning of the commercial points to the way Detroit’s buildings and industry has been almost destroyed through the years. The city has been to “Hell and back”—where is the glitz and glamor in that? Slowly, the commercial starts revealing the art and architecture that remains from Detroit’s gilded age—intricate statues, golden finishings, and stately buildings. However, the language problematizes these visuals. “Because when it comes to luxury, it’s as much about where it’s from as who it’s for” the narrator
states. This line, pronouncing that production of luxury is equally important as its intended market, points to a mindset Chrysler has of Detroit. Detroit isn’t luxury. Detroit will produce others luxury. The city’s strengths rest in their hard work, conviction, and know-how. These qualities describe dedication and power but not luxury, “it’s the hottest fires that make the hardest steel.” This is not a tale of coal transforming into a diamond. In fact, Detroit doesn’t transform at all. Instead, the city is just part of the process, the fire that makes the steel. There are images of Detroit’s luxury within the commercial yet the language points to a distinct message of Detroiter's constructing the vehicle—not buying or driving. In this narrative, Detroit sells luxury but it doesn’t get luxury. Chrysler’s mega-hit of a commercial inundates Detroit as a place of grit and perseverance who, despite their hard work and fire, do not benefit from the fruits of their labor.

The next year, Chrysler came out with another commercial during the Superbowl called “Halftime in America” starring Clint Eastwood. Although it shares similar imagery of blighted buildings and American symbols, this commercial focuses much more on people. The script reads:

It's halftime. Both teams are in their locker room discussing what they can do to win this game in the second half. It's halftime in America, too. People are out of work and they're hurting. And they're all wondering what they're going to do to make a comeback. And we're all scared, because this isn't a game. The people of Detroit know a little something about this. They almost lost everything. But we all pulled together, now Motor City is fighting again. I've seen a lot of tough eras, a lot of downturns in my life. And times when we didn't understand each other. It seems like we've lost our heart at times, when the fog of division, discord, and blame made it hard to see what lies ahead. But after those trials, we all rallied around what was right, and acted as one. Because that's what we do. We find a way through tough times, and if we can't find a way, then we'll make one. All that matters now is what's ahead. How do we come from behind? How do we come together? And, how do we win? Detroit's showing us it can be done. And, what's true about them is true about all of us. This country can't be
knocked out with one punch. We get right back up again and when we do the world is going to hear the roar of our engines. Yeah, it's halftime America. And, our second half is about to begin.

The commercial opens with Eastwood walking in a darkened alleyway and talking directly to the audience. Images of people guide the advertisement. Men and women getting ready for work in the morning, family portraits, firefighters, and construction workers are all featured as epitomes of hardship and perseverance. Blighted buildings or Detroit ruin porn takes a very small role in “Halftime in America.” In fact, a good deal of the imagery in the commercial is not easily identified as Detroit. Unlike the other Chrysler commercial which featured emblems of the city, “Halftime” shows people in more nondescript places such as a waterfront or the interior of a home. This commercial focuses on Chrysler as a brand, showcasing a whole host of different vehicles (whereas the Eminem commercial only focused on the Chrysler 200) and images of Chrysler’s assembly line. The commercial ends as it begins with Eastwood looking into the camera and delivering a rallying call to win the “second half.”

Although this commercial is a part of the “Imported from Detroit” campaign, the main narrative does not directly deal with Detroit. Eastwood asks the American audience to take Detroit as an example of unity and perseverance. However, the commercials imagery surrounding Detroit seems to only associate the city with the production of vehicles. Eastwood says toward the end of the commercial, “Detroit’s showing us it can be done, And, what’s true about them is true about all of us. This country can’t be knocked out with one punch.” Similarly to the phrase “Imported From Detroit,” this commercial uses the terms “us” and “them” to place the United States and Detroit as two separate places. When Eastwood first mentions Detroit, “the
people of Detroit know a little something about this. They almost lost everything,”
the text is accompanied by the only pictures of broken down buildings and an
American flag. “But we all pulled together, now the Motor City is fighting again,”
shows auto plant workers building a car together. For Chrysler, the Motor City
fighting connects back to “Imported From Detroit’s” final message: Detroit only
exists to create luxury vehicles for the rest of the United States. Although at first
glance the ad seems to promote Detroit as an ideal, it could instead be read as
denigrating Detroit as a tool.

_Detroit Speaks_

In December of 2015, the largest daily newspaper in Detroit, the _Detroit Free
Press_, released a special article entitled “50 Detroiter’s: Voices from Our City.” The
featured piece commemorated the one year anniversary of Detroit exiting bankruptcy
and asked, “What’s life like for the Detroiter’s that never left or those newly arrived?”
The article’s format uses fifty mini profiles of Detroiter’s from all across the city. The
majority of the profiles are comprised of the citizens’ own words and the journalists
summarizing and providing background information. The article was accompanied by
two others, “Attitudes Changing for the Better in Detroit” and “Exclusive Detroit
poll: 69% say city headed in right direction.” Although both of these articles have a
positive spin on the city’s trajectory, the statements from Detroit’s own citizens seem
to have a slightly different perspective. In the fifty interviews, the majority of people
had negative feelings toward their situation in the city. A look at the demographics of
those interviewed and their testimonies reveals split, though more often pessimistic,
views on the neighborhoods, the bankruptcy, and the downtown area. However,
feelings of Detroit spirit, pride, and community seems to emerge from almost all of the Detroiterse—whatever their outlook on the city’s current state of affairs.

The two articles that accompanied “50 Detroiterse” covered a 400-person poll of citizen’s opinions on various aspects of their community. Conducted by EPIC-MRA and commissioned by the Detroit Free Press, the survey took place from November 30 to December 6, 2015 and has a 4.9% margin of error. The study asked Detroiterse for their opinions on various hot button topics in Detroit including safety in neighborhoods, Mayor Mike Duggan and the City Council, as well as their overall opinion of the city’s future. 56% of those polled believe that the city is better off a year after the bankruptcy ended and 51% say that they are optimistic for the future of Detroit. However, a large margin of people believes that the quality of the city services have stayed the same or have gotten worse. A substantial 75% of people polled have a negative view of Detroit Public Schools. The reception of public figures
in Detroit is generally positive with Mayor Duggan at a 60% approval rating and the police chief James Craig at 75%. On the other administrative side, opinions on the city council is 66% negative (although this is 20 percentage points better than they were faring in 2013.)

Overall, these numbers represent a positive shift in opinion in Detroit. Yet, the numbers don’t reflect a hugely favorable depiction of the city—especially with an almost five percent margin of error. Additionally, the Detroit Free Press notes that opinions on the city differ based on who they asked, “Detroit residents with children are split, with 49% saying better off and 49% saying the conditions in the city are about the same. That compares with 60% of residents without children who say things are better off.”

When questions are vague or cover a large topic, such as the state of the city, residents seem to have a more positive response. However, when questions become more specific, for instance a question on city services, people become a bit more pessimistic. The numbers in this poll don’t generally reflect the attitudes of the 50 Detroiters interviewed for the front-page article. Although these numbers are important in understanding large trends and attitudes in Detroit, the article from the perspective of Detroiters speaking candidly about their lives in the city creates a stronger and more compelling social imaginary.

To understand the significance of the statements in this article and how they reflect on current attitudes in Detroit, it is important to look at the demographics of those interviewed. Also important, although more subjective in the way it is
classified, is the general attitude that citizens expressed in regard to the future and current state of Detroit. The racial breakdown consisted of 78% African American, 12% white, and 10% people of color who are not black (interestingly, these numbers are also accurate in their reflection of real demographics in Detroit). All of the white interviewees viewed the city positively and 61% of the African Americans interviewed believed the city was the same or worse off from the bankruptcy. The average age of those interviewed is 51 whereas the city’s mean age is thirty-five. In fact, only nine people under the age of thirty-five were included in the article.

Out of the fifty interviews, I classified that twenty-eight people had negative feelings toward Detroit’s current state while twenty-two felt positively. Although some of the profiles seemed split on their opinions (for example, some weren’t happy with the security in their neighborhoods but were optimistic about small business downtown), I classified them by the general sentiment I believed they were trying to express. Despite this range of opinions, the fact remains that fifty people cannot accurately represent all of Detroit. Instead, those who were interviewed show the kind of people the Detroit Free Press believes its audience would like to see in this kind of article. This catered representation by the city’s largest daily newspaper contributes significantly to the local and regional social imaginary of Detroit.
These opinions on Detroit do not reflect the city as a whole but they do construct a pattern of how the city’s citizens are represented in the social imaginary. This article, although from the perspective of Detroiters and uses many quotes verbatim, is curated through the lens of nine different Detroit Free Press journalists. With the goal of finding a “representative” depiction of the city, the journalists sometimes arranged meetings with people while others just interviewed people on the street. The article, although not completely representative, uses the words of Detroiters to convey the issues that are most important to the city’s people: safety, city services, the bankruptcy, and development.

Safety for many of these Detroiters boils down to the state of policing, blighted housing in their neighborhoods, and criminal activity. Most people who were positive on Detroit’s safety cited the demolition of abandoned houses as a huge improvement
in their feelings of security. On the negative side, many of the people profiled reference the prominent drug use, break-ins, and auto theft that still occur in their neighborhoods. Although very few people reference the police directly, those who do, say that they are less present in the neighborhoods than downtown. To compensate, the security of Detroit neighborhoods often seems to come from the residents themselves with a few interviewees mentioning neighborhood watches or “neighborhood private security patrols.”

Connected to ideas of safety as well as basic city services, the lack of working streetlights has often plagued Detroit neighborhoods and citizens, with some saying lights around their house had been out for five or six years. Likewise, many residents said they were upset at the lack of garbage collection with bulk pickups only happening quarterly. Those interviewed seem to have split opinions on these two city services. For many of those interviewed, their streetlights were replaced and they noticed a difference in regularity for their trash pickup. However, others stated that they saw no difference in their services. Only one person stated that their garbage pickup remained the same and four residents said that their neighborhoods are just as dark as they used to be.

This article that commemorates Detroit’s exit from Chapter Nine also reflects the contentious nature of the bankruptcy itself. Twelve people directly commented on the issue (referencing the bankruptcy itself and not the after effects) and six of those were against Detroit filing for Chapter Nine. Three believed that the bankruptcy was a good thing for the city and the other three thought it had no effect on the city at all. Those who felt positively about the bankruptcy believed that the decision has helped
Detroit gain a fresh start, “I think it was a good thing. I think it gave us a starting point. That’s why bankruptcy exists, because people make mistakes. No one’s perfect, a lot of businesses aren’t perfect. So you have to have a restart.” Unhappy with this restart, those against Detroit’s filing were often the people whose pensions had been cut due to the bankruptcy or lived in areas that they felt the city was neglecting.

One of the main contentions in the eyes of these Detroiter is how the residential neighborhoods have been treated versus the downtown area. Frustrated by the lack of improvements in the neighborhoods in lieu of big projects downtown, many of those interviewed expressed distress that they were being forgotten in this post-bankruptcy era. Even those who had generally positive things to say about the direction of Detroit were hesitant to praise the progress, or lack there of, made in the neighborhoods. However, many people were hopeful for the possibilities that a vibrant downtown area would bring to the rest of Detroit, “The first time I came here, it felt like everything closed at 6. But now? People outside of Detroit, they think Detroit is just like New York, that it’s 24/7 and something always going on. Now it’s up and coming. I really appreciate the growth, the maturity and the ingenuity.” Multiple people commended the arrival of new businesses and opportunities downtown as well as the positive image it was providing Detroit. However, others expressed worry that this image would force certain people out of the city, both figuratively and literally.

Embrittled in this discussion of neighborhoods versus downtown is the sensitive element of race and gentrification. Some, like youth pastor Kenneth Davis, believes
that white people moving into Detroit is a sign that the city is moving in the right direction. Others like Kevin Rigby Jr., a senior at Wayne State, believe that this kind of attitude ignores those who have lived in Detroit all of their lives,

I live right there on that edge of downtown, Midtown and New Center. More and more people are moving into this area. There are more students, particularly white students, moving into the area, but when I first moved in my whole building was black...The mainstream media kind of proliferated this kind of impending doom, and now we’ve gone through it and we came out. Now that we’re coming out of it, there’s this whole language of revitalization, a rebirth, a new Detroit. I think that’s strange and very dangerous...I think about what happened to the people that were here and where they’ve gone. Are they included in the language of revitalization? It’s obvious that they aren’t.

This statement reflects all of the anxieties that the 50 Detroiter’s expressed in this article. Those who still deal with poor city services or severe crime in their neighborhoods are not part of the future social imaginary for the city.

Although the article covers people of many different ages, it is clear that the majority of “50 Detroiter’s” focuses on an older crowd who do not live in the downtown area. Even more moving is the fact that so many of the people profiled, both young and old, express pride and attachment to their community with many saying that no matter how hard things are, they could never imagine leaving Detroit.

This article shines light on what is often ignored in depictions of the city: old African Americans who have lived in Detroit through it all. The report focuses on the daily struggles and important issues that affect the people who are so often left out of the discussion on Detroit’s future. This acknowledgement of an older and struggling Detroit creates one of the only imaginaries that present a hope and love for the city that isn’t centered on revitalization or rebirth. Unlike the pieces that are included in
the third chapter of this thesis, “50 Voices” presents hopes for the future through confronting realities of the present.

**Ruins and Revival**

A portmanteau of “Auto” and “Parts” with a strategically placed “I” creates the word “UTO PIA.” This sign, found in Detroit, inspired filmmakers Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady to name their documentary film *Detropia* (*2012*). Focusing on the decline of the economy and population within Detroit, the film places emphasis on the residents of Detroit as they experience and react to the changing city circa 2010. The documentary follows three Detroiter and offers small vignettes about the lives of other residents. The three main characters include video blogger and barista Crystal Starr, local president of Union of Auto Workers George McGregor, and owner of the Ravens Club in Detroit Tommy Stephens. One of the directors, Ewing, is from a prosperous suburb of Detroit and voiced a personal connection with this project. In a time of rapid change in Detroit, *Detropia* depicts the attachment its citizens feel toward the nostalgic past of a booming city. A clear representation of the distinct pride and community of Detroit shines as the heart of the project but is underscored by scenes and acts of desolation found in the city. However, the future *Detropia* presents is riddled with uncertainty and an ominous sense of intrusion.

One of the largest themes within this documentary is the nostalgia experienced by citizens of a once thriving city. Crystal Starr is the first person introduced in the film as she walks around an old destitute building. As she looks at different items and travels from room to room, she wonders aloud about the lives and events that transpire in the building. In a particularly poignant point, she cheerily talks into the
intercom pretending that the building is bustling with people and friends. As Crystal reaches the top floor of the building, she sees the skyline of Detroit through the half-blow out wall and muses,

Can you imagine having breakfast here? Like, look at your view! Like, yeah I’m going to go out and conquer the world because I can damn near see it from right here…Can’t leave man, can’t fucking leave. I feel like I was maybe here a little while back. Or I’m older than I really am but I just have this young body, and spirit, and mind but I have a memory of this place when it was banging. That’s how I feel.

Crystal is one of the youngest people the documentary profiles and yet she feels an affinity to a Detroit that she has never really known. Surrounded by blight and destruction, she imagines nostalgia, viability, and vibrancy into everything she sees.

This sense of longing for the past prevails throughout the movie. Images and videos from the fifties and sixties are supercut into the present day narratives that make up the majority of the film. After Crystal is done reminiscing about the past, the film switches to an old Hollywood commercial of the luxury cars riding the “Highway of Tomorrow.” As soon as this video comes to a close, with a smiling white couple driving off into the distance, present day Detroit resumes with images of blight busters tearing down abandoned homes in various neighborhoods. These jarringly contrasting representations of Detroit showcase the city in juxtaposition with the past that is longed for by so many Detroiter s. When talking about the Detroit Works Project, a program that asked neighborhood residents to consolidate into viable areas with working city services so the city could repurpose un-occupied land, one man said “if I could have Detroit back like it was when I was younger, before all the craziness, you know what I’m saying? I would consolidate the city in a half second. It’d be half a city. Period.” The documentary portrays Detroiter s as relying
heavily on an imagined and idealized past to create a future. Statements like these complemented by footage of Detroit from the 50s, 60s, and 70s that Ewing and Grady splice into the documentary give a sense of impossibility to the nostalgia of Detroit. These citizens want Detroit to go back to its heyday and yet all of the filmography from that time portrays only white people enjoying the luxuries of industry and white-picket neighborhoods. With this editing, it seems that the apex of hope for Detroiter is located within something that scarcely existed for the African Americans imagining it.

*Detropia*’s critically acclaimed cinematography is striking in its depictions of Detroit’s broken down buildings, neighborhoods, and people. The beginning of the movie follows darkened streets littered with trash, evoking a dangerous and deserted feeling to the movie. Shortly after Crystal Starr’s introduction, the film switches its focus to a news report on the demolition of abandoned homes. As the structure of the house is being crushed and broken down by a giant excavator and power washer, the
documentary pans to a black man looking out from a barred, prison-like window. The film seems to literalize the image of Detroit being washed away as its citizens helplessly watch, lending to the idea that Detroit is more of a dystopia than utopia.

*Detropia*’s presentation of human hardship in the film is equally staggering and adds to this apocalyptic version of the city. Accompanying the three main narratives, small snapshots of Detroiter’s show the difficulties of living in a city that provides very few resources and options for its citizens. A UAW meeting led by local president George McGregor showed the proposed wage cuts that American Axle presented to its Detroit workers under threat of moving the plant to Mexico. In an impassioned speech, George tells the members that when questioned about the livability of a more than $3 an hour wage cut, American Axle responded, “I don’t care about your guys having a livable wage.” Disgusted, the union workers ask George, “Why? Why do this to us?” and George replies, “to humiliate us.”

Displays of human suffering are often the power driving *Detropia*. The film takes care to show hard working Detroiter’s whom the audience can immediately sympathize with or even pity. At a town hall meeting one woman made a staggering speech in which she deplores the deteriorating city services as it gets in the way of her
American Dream.

My name is Stephanie Wier. I work. I make minimum wage. I keep pushing and pushing to improve myself. I have a new job I start this Monday. I get up early in the morning, faithfully. I may not have to be to work until 10:00, but I am out there at 8:00 and 7:30, waiting to catch my bus ‘cause I don’t be late for anyone. What am I to do when I only have the bus? Please, please don’t take our transportation away. That’s all we have. Thank you.

The way that Stephanie presents herself as a hard working American pushing to improve herself immediately recalls ideas of how the American Dream is not fairly presented to everyone, particularly women of color. Her dedication to her minimum wage job and the way she pleads with the city government evoke powerful emotions in this scene; she is strong but she cannot succeed without the city in which she lives.

In a way, the movie portrays two kinds of ruin porn in Detropia. First off, there is the literal ruin porn found in the broken down buildings and deteriorating landscape of Detroit. Second, Ewing and Grady seem to focus largely on the ruin of people. This approach makes the documentary into a kind of high drama. Paralleling this, they edited videos from the Detroit Opera House within the documentary. According to Ewing and Grady, featuring tragic and powerful operatic scores was the perfect way to represent the intensely storied nature of Detroit, "It just fit so well in the sense that Detroit has got such an epic story. It's an operatic place. It's got such highs and lows. In so many ways it's a tragic place, and also a place we project our fantasies on."41 She doesn't mention that opera is also a classed form of art as it has been historically and socially consumed by an upper class audience. Detropia thus creates an epic drama with the people of Detroit as the despair that drives the play for the

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entertainment of a more privileged audience.

Despite the tragic figures and stories told in the documentary, there is also a larger sense of Detroit community and pride that emerges from the ruins porn. George McGregor and Tommy Stephens often act as caretakers and community leaders in their scenes. George, as leader of the Detroit Union Auto Workers, knows the lives of the men and women whom he represents. He personally answers phone calls from retirees and has to explain to them the health benefits they lost or the pension cuts they received as a result of the automotive bailout. Tommy’s club acts as a social and musical hub in Detroit. He seems to know everyone who enters and personally waves goodbye to his customers as they leave his club for the night. These two older black men represent the struggles of both work life and social life in Detroit: George fights giant corporations for the rights of the worker, and Tommy struggles to keep a nightclub open that once thrived with customers who worked at the General Motors plant before it shut down. Both have voices of experience within the documentary and show the strength of the older generation that fights and remains in Detroit. Other elderly city residents are featured prominently within the movie, including a Detroit woman who spoke this testament in response to the Detroit Works Project, “Twenty years from now, I will not know what the city will look like unless the good Lord let me live. I am 83 years old. But this is our city. We don’t have to stay in it. We can go somewhere else. But if the good Lord let me live, I’ll die in Detroit because this is my city.” These perspectives are particularly poignant in their devotion when the documentary turns to Detroit’s gradual change in demographics and culture.

The poster for Detropia features two figures wearing bright gold gas masks,
goggles, and gloves standing in front of an abandoned and destroyed home. They have on luxury suits and fur coats, the man sporting a giant gold dollar sign that hangs from his neck. These two figures turn out to be white young artists who moved to Detroit for an urban landscape and cheap housing. Although they may be attempting to target capitalism at large, the art installation that they work on literalizes them as affluent aliens entering Detroit for personal gain. Looking distinctly out of place, they wear protective gear to shield themselves from the poisonous environment. They are the only people in the documentary who speak directly to the camera but are not introduced to the audience through a caption, remaining impersonal and detached from the main storyline and structure of the documentary. The male artist explains why they moved to Detroit saying it is a place that is “redefining what the value of things are. $25,000 for an amazing loft? That just makes it accessible to me. I would never be able to afford a home as an artist. And here I am with a studio and an apartment in a major city. Functioning for $700 or less a month.” This comes in striking contrast to the UAW scene of wage cuts and livable incomes. Ending the artist’s segment, he laughs and says, “we can experiment here because if we fail here we haven’t really fallen anywhere.” There is a definite ambivalence about the city from the perspectives of these young, hipster-like artists who have moved to Detroit. Grady and Ewing are quick to point out in their film that arrivals such as these artists are becoming quite common as the 2010 census reported a 59 percent increase in young residents moving to downtown Detroit.
It could be said that the majority of the documentary traffics in narratives of nostalgia and ruin. However, the end of the documentary heavily features notions of rapid change. Unlike the Detroit of childhoods, the film seems to suggest that Detroit needs to innovate and change to survive. After George and other UAW workers celebrate the creation of 2,500 jobs from a GM Plant, a montage of voices grimly discuss Detroit’s economic prospects. In a generally gloomy film, this moment isn’t a happy sense of relief or burgeoning hope for jobs within the city. Instead, the creators chose to showcase these voices and return to images of desolation and poverty. The voices, unidentified and condescending in tone state (with ellipses imply a change in speaker), “the auto industry is experiencing a resurgence and that’s good. The bailout has saved a million jobs. But that doesn’t mean that manufacturing is back to what it was…Change is difficult. Change is hard work. You have to keep up. You have to innovate or else you’ll be out of a job.” The message seems to be that of warning; to not be lulled into a sense of Motor City security. In one of the very few positive and
happy moments in the film, the editing almost refuses to let the audience or Detroit’s citizens celebrate this revival of jobs and spirit. The documentary seems to argue instead that change is what should be celebrated because it will save Detroit or at least allow the city to stay afloat. There seems to be very little room for the nostalgia expressed by the citizens at the beginning of the movie. When the film features the older black generation, there is a feeling of stagnation. Idealism of the past or even the literal refusal to move from their homes with the Detroit Work Projects showcase the older citizens as unwilling to change for Detroit’s future. With a new younger and whiter population moving into Detroit there is definite shift. Although the editing and perspective of Detropia does not seem to sympathize deeply with the artists, there is a strikingly sinister nature to the very end of the documentary. Tommy Stephens speaks the final words of the film in a speech about the dangers of capitalism’s exploitation of the weak, “what happened in Detroit, is now spreading throughout. This is coming to you. Yeah. It’s coming to you.”

For the final two minutes of the documentary, no words are spoken as the previously featured opera singer walks through the Detroit train station and sings a haunting and melancholy ballad. As he tests the acoustics of the building, the viewer sees the filmmakers move through different landscapes as they talk. In one image, the train station can be seen through a blown-out wall on the side of a building. Four of the filmmakers, including Ewing and Grady, frame the iconic image of Detroit. Similarly, Detropia itself, including its narrative, visuals, and overall presentation is framed and constructed by these same young white filmmakers. The final image of the documentary features again the white artist’s street installation. However, graffiti
covers the images, which could either indicate how the city is still decaying or how Detroit is fighting back against the influx of people like these artists. The image fades away and the screen reads “this film is dedicated to the many Detroiter who work every day to make the city a better place.” This sentence is vague and pandering after a film bursting with different perspectives. However, the final scenes before this dedication suggest that Detropia’s hope for a better place can only include those willing to accept and make change in the city.

There is a glaringly problematic absence of young black people in Detropia. The few times young people are shown, it is usually cast in a negative light like when a young black man is shown walking his dog and someone says “look the dog is pulling him! He ain’t got no control over the dog. What are you doing?! Pants about to fall down and shit. His pants are at knee level.” Crystal is virtually the only young and black person the audience sees. Interestingly, Crystal’s role within the documentary is often one of mediator. She is a video blogger, communicating to people through new technology (as opposed to the face-to-face relations that George and Tommy have). She works as a barista but has a beautiful and spacious apartment in Detroit. Crystal is also the only person who interacts with both the older generations of Detroit and the younger artists and hipsters coming to the city. Most notably, she goes with one of the film makers to the Detroit train station towards the end of the film. At various points in the documentary she speaks directly into the camera, addressing Detroiter and narrating her activities. She tells Detroiter, “I’m urging you, I’m not even urging you, I’m daring you to come out. We got enough problems, y’all. Now, let’s just come up with some way to solve these problems.
‘Cause I think we destined for the heavens Detroit.” However, it is unclear who she is talking to in this video blog. As the audience never sees any other young black people in the movie. Crystals’s call to Detroitters is not unlike Tommy’s speech at the end of the film where he says “when you see your neighbor going down, you have to think about yourself. And if you don’t go over and put that fire out, help your neighbor put that fire out, that fire is coming to you. No matter what the problems are.” Both speeches from Crystal and Tommy function as invitations to outsiders to come into Detroit. They do not bother mobilizing the young and black in the city—according to the documentary those kinds of people do not exist in the city. Neither do they appeal to the older generations in Detroit who are shown to be too wrapped up in their own nostalgia to embrace change. The city is destined for the heavens as long as outside people come in and help. It is no mystery who these outside people are in Detropia. Artists, including the documentarians themselves, are coming in with an idea on how to “make the city a better place.”
Chapter 3:

The Future(s) for a Resurging City

“Detroit: Just West of Bushwick”

-Jennifer Conlin, “Last Stop on the L Train”

The future of Detroit is unclear. Political and social institutions, local initiatives, and independent moguls are all changing the way the city operates. At the same time, many things have stayed the same in Detroit, either through a refusal to bend to these changes or through a blatant and systematic disregard of certain citizens and neighborhoods. The social imaginary of Detroit is both informed by these fights for the future and also helps influence a path toward the future. The discourse surrounding the future of Detroit, such as the dialogue around repopulation and infrastructure, are not the only ways for the city to be a successful and functioning entity. In this chapter, I have chosen narrative productions that center around an optimistic and vibrant Detroit. However, there is very little mention of Detroit’s political, racial, and historical issues in the majority of these productions. Consequently, these social imaginaries raise issues of who will be prioritized, what will be conserved, and what will be demolished in the future ideations of Detroit.

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A New Wave of Tourism

The tourism industry in Detroit came to a grinding halt when the city became more of a danger zone than a vacation zone. At one point, Detroit was a cultural destination for Motown and the auto industry. However, as time went on it became a place where people didn’t want to live, much less visit. Today, with the advent of new infrastructure, businesses, and downtown attractions, the call for tourism has grown tremendously. An independent non-profit economic development organization called Detroit Michigan Convention & Visitor Bureau (DMCVB) has created an array of tourist videos for Detroit. Additionally, Michigan’s tourism campaign Pure Michigan created a TV spot for Detroit. These videos are compelling representations because of their sole agenda to bring people to Detroit by highlighting different attractions in the city—unlike other representations that are centered on a product or plot. The Pure Michigan commercial is also a product of governmental efforts; one of the few overtly administrative efforts in rebranding Detroit. Although the DMCVB partners with local Detroit government, it is mainly a company whose funds are from membership dues from participating businesses. Despite the differences in funding between these commercials, the presentations of Detroit are similarly energetic and positive versions of the city. They attract businesses and tourists by portraying a safe, family friendly experience that is suitable for every kind of visitor.

Although each video takes on a different format in its presentation of Detroit, all of the videos promote similar attractions in the city and convey similar emotions. Each commercial highlights Detroit as a cultural center, a safe place, and a city that attracts young people. The video from the Pure Michigan campaign is a short 30-
second spot entitled “First Time Feeling.” Narrated by Michigan native Tim Allen, the commercial speaks of the feeling one receives after visiting Detroit for the first time. Interestingly, the video seems to be self-aware of the fact that just a few years prior, Detroit was almost unmarketable as a tourist destination. The narration points to the fact that for many people it will be their first time or first time in a long time to visit the city.

The DMCVB produces a whole line of promotional materials featuring Detroit. Most of the videos feature either people or events in the city but some are compilation videos that consist of the “best of Detroit.” Three of those videos will be used in the analysis of the tourist promotional material in Detroit, “Vibrant Detroit,” “Detroit: A Vibrant City with a Rich History,” and “The D.” “Vibrant Detroit” was intended for a British audience, with the DMCVB partnering with Pure Michigan and USA Discover America, and showcases various cultural highlights within the city. “Vibrant Detroit” shows downtown Detroit through interviews with community and business partners, police officers, and people on the street. “The D” features almost all of the participating companies that work with the DMCVB. Using buzz words all starting with the letter D, such as dazzle, dig-ability, and deluxe, the commercial works to feature a glamorous and cosmopolitan Detroit. All made within the last three years, these four videos display the most talked about aspects of Detroit and use these attractions to convey a city of culture, safety, and spirit.

In each of these commercials, a substantial focus is on Detroit’s cultural sophistication. In one of the DMCVB commercials, the city is described as the “quintessential home of cars and culture.” Edification sights such as the Detroit
Institute of Arts, Henry Ford Museum (which is actually not in Detroit), and the Detroit Opera House are almost always mentioned in these videos. The culture available in Detroit seems to often be limited to hubs of white art and history. Although the Motown Museum is mentioned in two of the videos, it is not a focal point of culture—surprising since Detroit is the home of this worldwide phenomenon. Additionally, there is a class component of these cultural hubs. Although Detroit Institute of Arts as of 2012 offers free admission to residents of surrounding counties; others are less financially accessible like the Detroit Opera House and the Henry Ford Museum. Ticket prices notwithstanding, each of these cultural centers contain social significance as an elite area within Detroit—a place where suburbanites can visit and remain safe from the poorer areas of the city. Calling on Detroit’s culture to promote tourism is a useful way to represent show off the city’s strong history in music, art, and commerce. However, these commercials seem to focus on a very high-end vision culture that communicates a classed and raced depiction of the city. It also discounts the cultural history of a predominantly African American city that has always had issues with social and economic division.

The issue of safety is a monumental obstacle for Detroit’s tourism. Rarely do people choose to vacation or hold a conference in a dangerous city (unless they go for the voyeuristic thrill.) However, the Pure Michigan and DMCVB campaigns both create as much distance as they can between their version of the city and its menacing reputation. Particularly, these commercials sell Detroit as so safe families can visit and lounge in the downtown area. Each video shows parents bringing their smiling children to Detroit’s many attractions. Footage of people walking the streets is
heavily featured in each commercial emphasizing the security of the city.

If this imagery isn’t enough to convince viewers that Detroit is safe, one of the DMCVB videos has two police officers commenting on security, “I’ve been all over the country and downtown Detroit is as safe as anywhere I’ve been.” Significantly, the two police officers are black and make up two-thirds of the people of color in the video, the other being the CEO of the River Front Conservatory. It seems poignant that those who are the official voices of safety, the police, are also representative of the predominant African American population that makes white tourists nervous in the first place. This portrayal of the only African Americans in the commercial seems to be a problematic attempt at combating negative and racist stereotypes of Detroit. Thus the commercial leaves the only depiction of black people in Detroit as one of safety and security as well as responsibility and success represented by the CEO.

Although culture and safety are important factors in selling Detroit as a tourist destination, depicting the city as a cool and hip place is equally—if not more—crucial to its selling power. Each video finds multiple ways to describe Detroit as vibrant, exciting, thrilling, and other synonymous adjectives. The majority of people that are shown in the videos, whether they’re interviewed or just in the b-roll footage, are young and mostly white. Concerts, nightclubs, and the epicenter of downtown: Campus Martius, are all used to show a “neighborhood that stays awake 24 hours a day and is a year round entertainment venue.” This obvious riff on “A city that never sleeps” is illustrative of a young and vibrant population. The presence of Wayne State emphasizes the youthfulness of Downtown Detroit. While it may be strange to use a college campus as material for a tourist video, the prominent appearance of Wayne
State in the commercials shows a youthful, intellectual, and prominent Detroit.

Accompanying this young and lively presence in Detroit is the savior complex that so often accompanies youthful whites entering a struggling city. Two young white women interviewed in “Vibrant Detroit” said, “Detroit has its own vibe right now, it’s awesome to be in Chicago and New York but Detroit has a kind of underdog feel…We have a lot of people, especially in our generation, who are doing everything we can to build it up.” This language, condescending and egotistical as it may be, is emblematic of the way these tourism videos brush over Detroit’s racial, cultural, and socioeconomic history for their own game. The two young women and creators of these advertisements seems to showcase Detroit as a city where they can cherry-pick the culture of the city and produce a narrative that is without the presence of race and struggle. The tourism imaginary creates a perfectly sunny and energetic city that is just right for young people, families, and businesses.

*The Downtown Pied Piper*

It is difficult to talk about Detroit these days without bringing up Dan Gilbert. The chairman and founder of Rock Ventures and Quicken Loans, Gilbert moved the Quicken Loans headquarters to downtown Detroit in 2010. Since then, he has bought seventy properties and invested $1.6 billion in commercial spaces and downtown parking garages. Gilbert has spent much of the past five years focused on private reinvestment in the city. In addition to his own companies investment, he has made many efforts to convince other companies to invest in downtown Detroit. He is also

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on the board for numerous other Detroit ventures, most notably Opportunity Detroit, which focuses on attracting businesses, residents, and tourists to the city. In many ways, Gilbert has helped create a thriving downtown Detroit area; complete with high-end restaurants, businesses, and community attractions. Gilbert has wooed businesses, such as Chrysler, Uber, and Twitter, into Detroit. Due to all of this, he often credited for the private sector’s revitalization of Detroit—which has arguably been much more successful than the public sectors such as the schools or city services. However, the expanse of business and infrastructure in certain areas has helped create a stratified Detroit. Gilbert’s investment in the private sphere of Detroit shifts the public attention to focus on a triumphant Downtown while allowing less central neighborhoods to be forgotten.

Gilbert was born in Detroit but raised in Southfield, a northern suburb of the city. He started Rock Ventures with his brother and friend, and developed it into one of the most successful mortgage lending companies in the United States along with Quicken Loans. Gilbert’s net worth, according to Forbes, is estimated at $5 billion. Owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers and the Greektown Casino in Detroit, he is also chair of Detroit Venture Partners, a venture capital firm that has helped almost 80 small companies settle into the downtown area. Gilbert’s business savvy is often applied to a younger generation, offering 1,300 internships (while turning down 21,000 other hopeful applicants) and $20,000 to any employee who buys property in

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45 Forbes, “The World’s Billionaires”
the city and live there for five years.\textsuperscript{46} Mayor Mike Duggan has praised him, saying, “this next generation has an awful lot of folks who don’t want that ‘live in the suburbs with a minivan’ experience. They want to be in the urban setting. For a lot of people, Dan Gilbert has provided that opportunity here.”\textsuperscript{47}

Despite praise, Gilbert has also received a fair amount of criticism. Skeptical of a white man with such a large influence over a predominantly black city, people are quick to point out that Gilbert’s efforts are highly concentrated to the downtown area. Seemingly aware of this, he has stated that his ventures are “not the only solution. The education system needs to be addressed, but what we’re doing is a big part of the solution. I can’t think of a great American city that doesn’t have a great downtown.”\textsuperscript{48} Although he invests, both economically and emotionally, in Detroit, Gilbert lives 20 minutes away in the prosperous city of Franklin, Michigan. In addition to the estate-like homes available in Franklin, Gilbert’s weariness of living in Detroit seems to also be in part because of his five children and desire to avoid the Detroit School System. In fact, Gilbert’s investment in Detroit seems to go hand in hand with an unwillingness to trust Detroit’s existing systems. Surrounding his seventy properties are 500 security cameras that monitor every move on the streets. This unofficial policing of the streets creates a sense of distrust between Gilbert and the very city he is supposedly helping. These criticisms point to the way that Gilbert’s investments in the city are for only a select group of people who can afford to live in

\textsuperscript{46} Joan Miller, “Gilbertville: A Billionaire’s Drive to Rebuild the Motor City” \textit{Forbes}, September 9, 2014.
\textsuperscript{47} Tim Alberta “Is Dan Gilbert Detroit’s New Superhero?” \textit{The Atlantic}, February 27, 2014.
\textsuperscript{48} Segal, “A Missionary’s Quest”
Downtown, send their children to a private school instead of the Detroit Public Schools, and look trustworthy in the eyes of the public.

These criticisms, however, have not done much to tarnish Gilbert’s name or his economic and social power in the city. “Dan Gilbert’s Down Payment on Detroit,” “A Missionary’s Quest to Remake Motor City,” “Gilbertville: A Billionaire’s drive to Rebuild the Motor City” “Is Dan Gilbert Detroit’s New Superhero?” These are all headlines for various news articles featuring Dan Gilbert’s work. The media’s representation of Gilbert has been filled with punchy titles highlighting the mortgage mogul as a savior of the city. He has become the object of fascination for many news articles, reporters both baffled and intrigued by the billionaire who concentrates his efforts on a dilapidated city. One article in the Atlantic reads, “Dan Gilbert doesn’t need a political title; elected office could hardly augment his financial influence over Detroit…Gilbert has established himself as Detroit’s de facto CEO.” Although the majority of articles mention the criticism towards Gilbert, they generally focus on Gilbert’s business ventures and success. Interestingly, multiple articles take special note of Gilbert’s height at 5 feet 5 inches. This seems to epitomize the overarching tone in the articles about Gilbert: astonishment at the stature of his accomplishment in the face of adversity. This could also be seen as a metaphor for Detroit as it is canonized in this era as the underdog on the upswing.

Gilbert’s vision for the future of Detroit relies heavily on young outsiders coming into the city. His large internship program and the monetary incentives he gives his employees has served as a siren call for many young Americans looking for

49 Alberta, “Detroit’s new Superhero”
a city to start their careers. As the Forbes article chronicles, Gilbert personally welcomes his new employees into the city on their first day of orientation,

In an age of punishing college debt and endless unmet expectations, he’s giving his young workers a perk that rival employers can’t equal. He’s made them urban pioneers, part of something exciting, important and wondrous. They’re not just working at a company. They’re saving a city. ‘What a great time to be launching a career’ [Gilbert] tells his new employees at the orientation. ‘You couldn’t have hit it better. If you have parents who are skeptical, they won’t be skeptical in the next few years. I truly believe it’

This is the apex of Gilbert’s involvement in Detroit—bringing new blood into the city. The emphasis on the young outsiders combined with the amount of influence Gilbert has over the private sector in downtown Detroit will allow for a monumental shift in demographics, and we are already beginning to see these effects play out.

In 2013, a joint commercial for Quicken Loans and Gilbert’s other venture, Opportunity Detroit, aired during the World Series. With a celebrity guest appearance from Detroit-based artist Kid Rock, the ad combines footage of young, artistic entrepreneurs with iconic images of the city. Throughout the quick minute-long commercial, Kid Rock uses his toughest and gruffest tone of voice to narrate,

Opportunity. It doesn't stare you in the face. It's not going to yell at you to come 'n get it. It doesn't knock. So what does opportunity look like? Not what you might think. You see, opportunity is not a right. It's definitely not equal. And it doesn't come with an instruction manual. That's because opportunity isn't found. It's molded. It's built. It's created. It's as much about grit as it is intellect. An explosive high-tech corridor located at the intersection of muscle and brains? You bet. Because opportunity only comes to those already in the game. What does opportunity look like? It looks like Detroit. Opportunity, made in Detroit.

The commercial centers itself on a gritty, blue-collar work ethic. The path to opportunity is earned. Fascinatingly, the slogan of the commercial and the company,

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50 Muller, “A Billionaire’s Drive”
Opportunity Detroit, hinges only on potential. It is not “Success Detroit” or “Triumph Detroit.” Instead, the commercial says that opportunity is a privilege earned and not universally guaranteed or fair. Gilbert and his company assert that the potential for success is instead based on the hard work of individuals.

This kind of entrepreneurial spirit is literalized in the images of the commercial. The ad depicts a mix of hands-on work combined with artistic endeavors. Dance, construction, urban gardening, music, urban planning, fashion, and more are all jam-packed into the sixty second commercial. Interestingly, but perhaps unsurprising for Gilbert and his company, there are only four people in the commercial who seem to be over forty. Two of them are white male musicians, including Kid Rock and a conductor for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. The other two are older black women, one an urban planner and the other sewing a coat. The rest of the people in the commercial are a mix of young African Americans and whites. Similarly to Chrysler depiction of race, there seems to be a very precise balance between African American and Caucasian representation. However, Opportunity Detroit isn’t selling a product, it’s selling a life. Dan Gilbert along with Quicken Loans and Opportunity Detroit created this commercial to depict life in Detroit as a risky but exciting possibility for young creatives to make their mark on the world.

Dan Gilbert’s impact on Detroit has been monumental. Financially, he has invested billions into Detroit and encouraged others to do the same. Downtown would not look the same without his influence. More than parking structures and buildings, Gilbert has had a massive effect on Detroit’s image. Demographics are changing
under Gilbert’s watch, with jobs and internships provided for young outsiders coming into Detroit. Additionally, those coming into the city are lured by the possibility of “opportunity.” A rebranding mechanism for the city, Opportunity Detroit sells life in the city to new investments, businesses, and people. It depicts Detroit as an electrifying place of risk and reward; a landscape in which young people are able to earn and make an impact on a place that needs them. Similar to the news media’s portrayal of Gilbert as a do-gooder in Detroit, Opportunity Detroit allows young people to feel the same. Gilbert’s influence on Detroit in the past five years has allowed both a financial boom in the downtown area and a rebranding of the city as a vibrant urban arena of possibilities.

(H)Our New Lifestyle

*Hour Detroit* is a monthly lifestyle magazine covering the metro-Detroit area. The city magazine contains articles on food, entertainment, fashion, and decor as well as features of Detroiter and Detroit institutions. This flagship publication for Hour Media was established in 1996 and has its headquarters in Troy, Michigan, a northern suburb of Detroit. The magazine’s circulation is 45,000 with the reader’s median age at 48 and average household income at $178,000 (the median household income in Detroit is $26,095). Unlike a typical city publication, *Hour Detroit* is closer in design to high-fashion magazines like *Vogue* or *Vanity Fair* with its unusually large format and glossy pages. Self-proclaimed as a magazine that “metro Detroiter rely on for dynamic, award winning coverage of issues and people affecting their lives, (as well as their source for enjoying the finer things in the region).” *Hour Detroit’s* coverage is a conglomeration of “up and coming” restaurants, businesses, and artists who are
all moving into the wealthier and more gentrified areas of the city. Although some of the articles feature black Detroiters who have lived in the city for a long time, the majority of the magazine seems to be dedicated to “revitalization” through innovation in the city. The homophone title of the magazine, *Hour Detroit* or *Our Detroit*, thus begs the question of whose Detroit this magazine is representing.

In order to examine the content of the articles in *Hour*, it is important first to understand the structure of the magazine as well as the team behind it. Contained in its shiny pages are copious amounts of advertisements for Metro Detroit. Doctors and lawyers, casinos, and restaurants are only a few of the businesses that take up ad space in *Hour*. The majority of the advertisements are for local operations that range from restaurants to plastic surgery. *Hour* charges the same fee for both local and national advertisers—a pricey $5,985 for color ads and $4,930 for black and white. Although the advertisements don’t directly address *Hour Detroit’s* depiction of Detroit, the presence of certain ads can help interpret the audience and niche of the magazine. Assumedly, advertisers would only buy ad-space that would reach their intended clients; meaning pricier businesses would try to reach wealthier people with their advertisements. The vast majority of the advertisements in *Hour* are dedicated to
expensive restaurants, jewelry, and local doctors. In one particular issue, there was an entire page wide ad dedicated to private schools in the area. The content of the ads combined with the median income of subscribers point to the readership as wealthy, older, and most likely living outside of Detroit.

The readership is only a part of the equation in understanding *Hour Detroit*. The editors and contributors must be considered as well. The magazine has seven regular positions for editors and directors and hires four or five different freelance contributors who write articles for the magazine. The only person of color on the regular team is an American-Mexican woman and the majority of them are young, with only two people on the team who are seemingly over 35. The contributing writers are also largely young and white. In the last year of monthly publications from *Hour* there were fifty-three spots for contributors. Out of that, only nine were filled with people of color and four of those were African American. Additionally, the majority of the contributors are on the younger side with most of them in their mid to late twenties. The content of *Hour Detroit* is written mostly by the young, intellectual, and white class that is beginning to gentrify Detroit. However, it is aimed at older audiences who live outside of the city and come into Detroit for a weekend show or game. Still, the magazine is called *Hour Detroit* and features mostly Detroit-based content. The social imaginary that *Hour Detroit* creates is then created by and for outsiders.

The majority of stories about Detroit in *Hour* are positive depictions of new initiatives and businesses moving into the city. The articles vary from reviews of restaurants to coverage on a proposed plan to make the streets more bicycle and
pedestrian friendly. In the July issue of 2015, Hour created a feature on the city called “The 313: Dialing In To Metro Detroit.” They devised a city guide based on the question, “what does the future hold, and who’s going to mold it?” Divided into five different subjects, the magazine identifies itself with Detroit and shows its audience “who we’re watching, what we’re fixing, what we do for fun, where we go for culture, where and what we eat, where we live and work, what else needs work.” Hour’s city guide serves as an indicator to what Hour Detroit cares about—trendiness and a desire to “fix” the city.

The focus of the July 2015 issue educates its audience on what is cool in Detroit—up and coming restaurants, hot neighborhoods, and happening bars are only a few of the trendy things in the city. The language describing these locations display the suave yet vague approach that Hour seems to utilize when describing revitalization in Detroit, “as much as this is about food, it’s even more a story about rebirth. This city has an earned character, and there is a quiet, new kind of undeniable awesomeness to it.” The connection between “earned character” and “quiet, new kind of undeniable awesomeness” eloquently showcases how Hour approaches its city guide with a rustic and supercilious appreciation combined with a desire to make it over new. Continuously the magazine reviews new restaurants and businesses that supposedly revitalize old neighborhoods. In fact, it often links the quality of neighborhoods to businesses moving in as exemplified in the “Where We Live and Work” section. A “hot spot for emerging Detroit Entrepreneurs and young families”

has given “streets once lined with boarded-up buildings and broken street lights”\textsuperscript{52} a new opportunity. Unlike the “Detroit 50 Voices” piece from the \textit{Detroit Free Press}, there is very little mention of how these businesses and “revitalized” areas are affecting Detroiters who have lived in the city all their life. Instead, \textit{Hour Detroit} celebrates these new neighborhoods and the issues of gentrification and displacement often go unmentioned.

Another large section of \textit{Hour} covers the many programs that have been implemented to revitalize Detroit. More often than not, these articles are dedicated to arts programs that either fund artists or bring artists into Detroit. Write A House and the Kresge Foundation Artist Fellowship are two of the programs that they highlight. Although these grants do not solely exist in the pages of \textit{Hour Detroit}, this is a good opportunity to write about these two programs that have received a lot of attention and press coverage.

The Kresge Foundation awards eighteen fellowships every year for film, music, live arts, literary arts, and visual arts. Those who win a fellowship are given $25,000 in unrestricted grants to help with their art. The fellows can use the money for anything they want, including paying off loans or going on vacation, in order to help their creative process. The grant is awarded to those who live in the metro Detroit tri-county area, have lived in that area for the past two years, and show a track record of achievement and high quality work that has positively impact their communities. The coverage of this program by \textit{Hour} both highlights the impact of the Foundation on the city and their goal to “advance human progress” in Detroit. Based out of Troy,\textsuperscript{52}

Michigan, the Kresge Foundation awarded 125 grants equaling $137.8 million to different Detroit initiatives in 2014.

Founded in 2012, Write A House (WAH) is a nonprofit organization that renovates and gives houses in Detroit to writers from across the United States. On their official website, WAH states their mission as “(1) educate the under-employed on carpentry and building skills (2) use those skills to renovate Detroit city homes and (3) award those homes to writers.” So far, they have awarded two “writers in residence” with a goal to someday award three houses a year. In 2014, they received 220 applications and evaluated them based on talent as well as a desire to live in Detroit. The writers are charged a small fee to cover taxes and insurance but if they stay in the city for at least two years, they are awarded the deed for the house. The program is aware of the gentrifying role that they could be accused of playing in Detroit and include this statement on their welcome page,

Write A House’s homes are located in an active, creative, and diverse neighborhood of Detroit. This neighborhood was chosen with great care and deliberation. We’re not seeking to push current residents out, or drive up rental costs; we’re looking to invest in and stabilize the area. This city has seen enough displacement, and we seek to build with conscience. We’re looking for writers who want to live and take root in Detroit and become a part of its rich creative landscape.

The team behind Write A House is outwardly conscious of issues and weariness of gentrification in the city. The first two writers who received houses are both women of color who write on issues of racism, invisibility, and culture. However, news coverage of WAH never mentions these issues. In Hour Detroit, the article states that first writer in residence, Casey Rocheteau, has become a kind of ambassador for
Detroit—giving an outsider’s perspective of the city. However, there is no mention of the conscientiousness that WAH highlights on their homepage. This appears to be the norm when writing about WAH, as many articles are more interested in covering the unusual concept of the program than how it is executed or perceived. However, *Hour* does give an interesting bit of information that wasn’t found on the WAH website: the neighborhood that they chose in Detroit is called NorHam (north of Hamtramck) and is home to the largest and most concentrated Asian population in the city, many of Bangladeshi descent. It doesn’t seem accidental that, in a predominantly African American city, WAH placed their writers in a non-black neighborhood especially considering their self proclaimed “care and deliberation.” That being said, the program is new—the first writer in residence doesn’t even own her home yet. Perhaps with time WAH will fulfill its goals of becoming a conscious and sustainable program for stabilizing neighborhoods, providing jobs, and bolstering a literary community. However, the narrative of the program thus far is only depictions of renovated homes, given away to outsiders.

*Hour Detroit* includes many stories about Detroit-based programs such as these. The journalists always construct an emphasis on how the charitable programs connect to and help the Detroit community. However, there is little to no specific plans for connection between communities or positive results.

In an entire year of *Hour Detroit*, from April 2015 to March 2016, there were only two articles that covered the issues of still struggling neighborhoods in Detroit. Interestingly, the two articles are from the same December Issue. The first article

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asked Detroiters what they see for the city five years down the road. Some of those interviewed expressed how the city often fails its neighborhoods and older residents. However, the pervasive sense of positivity and hope that Hours embodies leaks through the article as they also include the opinions of young and white boosters for the city. One person who disagrees with the overly positive portrayal of his city is the 21-year-old photographer Vuhlandes who photographs blighted buildings, abandoned neighborhoods, and friends who wear a gun as an everyday accessory. In the article, “At Street Level,” Vuhlande states that “You can say (Detroit’s) making a comeback, but me and the people I grew up with and hang out with, we’re not seeing any part of that because my neighborhood still looks the same way it does since I’ve been living here.”  

Although Hour is somewhat commendable for featuring an up and coming artist and his work, the writer dedicated a grand sum of 338 words to this feature (in the same issue a review of a restaurant used 1,013 words). The article consists mostly of Vuhlande’s photos and small captions but dedicates very little space for anything else. Judging by the fact that this article is the only one of its kind in an entire year at Hour, the magazine seems to approach Vuhlande and his outlook on Detroit with disinterest.

The pictures that the article includes are beautiful and haunting in their portrayal of Detroit yet somehow different from the ruin porn that comes from outside photographers. Although Vuhlande has taken many photos of abandoned buildings, the quintessential objects photographed for Detroit’s ruin porn, he said that he grew tired of it, “but now I’m over it. I think I have cancer because I’ve been in so

many abandoned buildings. I’m not too much of a fan of it anymore.” In this short quote, Vuhlande states why he is so different from outside photographers. Unlike those who can come in, snap a picture, and leave, Vuhlande stays in Detroit with all of the social and health issues that accompany that. He also takes a special interest in portraits and neighborhood photos, viewing them as visual objects that can never be recreated and with a sense of immediacy and individualism. In short, he makes Detroit personal.

The fact that this is a singular and unique article raises the question of why this story in particular made it to the pages of Hour Detroit. It is significant that unlike “Detroit 50 Voices,” where the majority of people who voiced concerns were older residents of the city, this perspective on struggling neighborhoods in Hour comes from a young black man. Hour made a strategic decision to show “Detroit’s blight and abandoned streets” through an article on a young street photographer whose biggest audience is from his Instagram account. This seems comparable to the way Hour generally presents the city: through the eyes of the young and hip. Even when discussing something as tenuous and complicated as the ignored neighborhoods in Detroit, Hour cannot detach itself from a millennial perspective. Although this cool perspective makes sense in the context of articles about up and coming restaurants or stores, it is awkward to use a “cool” framework for Detroit’s afflicted neighborhoods. It is possible that through this perspective Hour attempts to make the struggle in Detroit cool and interesting. The glossy pages of Hour glaze over any struggling places or people in Detroit and instead create a narrative where outside businesses and artists are the ones who will save the city.
**Time for Detroit**

Detroit’s boutique business scene is led by the luxury watch, bicycle, and leather goods store Shinola. Founded in 2011 by Tom Kartsotis, the company has fourteen store locations all over the country. However, Shinola’s headquarters and first flagship store was based in Detroit, due to the marketability of an American made—and specifically Detroit made—company. Chief Executive of Shinola, Steve Bock, said this on the move to the city, “Detroit fits perfectly into the fabric. The more we talked about Detroit, the more it made sense. This is an iconic city built over decades, a brand unto itself….people keep telling us how much Shinola has done for Detroit but it’s the absolute opposite: it’s what Detroit has done for Shinola.”

As of September 2015, Shinola has created 320 new jobs in Detroit, pays its factory workers between $11.40 and $14 an hour, and has still not turned a profit four years after its opening. Despite the growth of the company, Shinola is also one of the most highly criticized businesses in Detroit. For one thing, although the products are assembled in Detroit, a good portion of the pieces and parts are manufactured overseas. For another, Shinola sells a luxury (average of $550 for a watch and bicycles starting at $2000) brand in an increasingly gentrified area of Detroit. Despite these misgivings, Shinola has created an American heritage brand that uses Detroit as a focal point of its branding.

Shinola’s choice to use Detroit for marketing has resulted in significant business and press for the company. They have attached themselves to the brand of

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56 ibid
Detroit and sold themselves as authentic and altruistic. American-made authenticity has historically been a great selling point for companies. Offering reassurance of simpler times long ago, American heritage products evoke safety, stability, and a prospering community. This manufactured authenticity of American produced products gives, as Greg Goldberg argues, an idea of being “real,” which is “a source of discursive legitimacy, a means through which values can be asserted and interests can be furthered.” American made products often have a connotation of being higher quality and special, contrasting to non-American products that are cheap and mass produced. Shinola as a Detroit based company, touting the line “Where American is Made,” creates a belief that the company is an authentic and legitimate American company.

It could be considered a matter of perspective; whether Shinola is a symbol of evil gentrification in the city or redefining a new, cool Detroit. One thing certain is that the branding of the company points heavily to the latter, creating an almost utopian image of the city and their product. Shinola’s commercial, “Welcome to Detroit,” is an upbeat tribute to both American-made products and Detroit through a lens of reinvigoration and authenticity.

The commercial reflects the presence that Shinola embodies in Detroit; emphasizing a shiny, glossed over version of the city. The commercial opens on a beautifully lit city street while up-beat, synth-pop music plays. The first words, “Welcome to Detroit: the new watch making capital of America,” immediately presents Shinola as a company that is redefining and speaking for Detroit.

57 Greg Goldberg, “Anti Social Media,” 11
Throughout the commercial, Shinola links the revitalization of American made watches to the revitalization of Detroit. The company aims to “take our place out on the factory floor” and is dedicated to the work required to “return to form.” The commercial defines Detroit as a “storied American city” fit for a “storied American Brand.” The name Shinola originated as the name of a popular shoe polish in the early and mid twentieth century. Widely popular for their phrase “You don’t know shit from Shinola” which came out during World War II, the company name provides an aura of pithy American frankness in a time of uncertainty and hardship. Shinola uses this motif again in its presentation of current day Detroit, celebrating the reinvigoration of an American-made product bringing hope to a turbulent city.

Shinola’s commercial builds upon the value of authenticity of its products and branding. Unlike, Chrysler’s “Imported from Detroit” commercials that feature a hard and gritty side of the City, the authenticity from Shinola seems fixated more on immaculate and crisp images of blue collar work, the “beauty of industry,” and the “glory of manufacturing.” The Shinola factory features teams of white and black workers wearing scrub-like sanitary garments making watches. A white man wears a hairnet and a monocle magnifier as he inspects each and every part that goes into creating a Shinola watch. An African American woman stands proudly with her arms crossed as the narrator says “it takes work to return to form, but we’re up for it.”

Everything in the commercial is visually pristine and beautiful; portraying symmetry, vibrant colors, and clean lines. Interestingly, Shinola readily acknowledges its newness to the history of Detroit, “we know there’s not just history in this town, there’s a future. It’s why we came.” Shinola’s idea of authenticity is
based on a testament to hard working Americans and an image of Detroit that exudes nationalism and optimism. However, the reality of Shinola and the images and narrative they produce point to a certain kind of city; one that is as pristine and utopic as their commercial.

The racial makeup of those featured indicates Shinola’s intentions within this commercial. It showcases black and white workers but the skilled labor, such as design, inspections of the watches, and the assembling of the bikes, is all completed by white hands. Most striking, although perhaps unplanned, is the line “we know there’s not just history in this town, there’s a future” that is accompanied by an image of a young, white man assembling and designing bicycles. Subsequently, a black male worker visually accompanies the line “it’s why we came.” He is dressed in factory garments whereas the bicycle designer is in his own clothes, reflecting the commercial’s hierarchy of labor. The company puts hope for the future into the young white population while profiting on an image of working-blackness as the reason they came to Detroit. In the end, the commercial shows us the Shinola team where the majority of those featured are young and white.
Shinola’s commercial also lands on an awkward contradiction, valuing blue collar work to create highly expensive luxury items. A Shinola factory employee would have to work forty-eight hours to afford the cheapest watch from the company. Unsurprisingly, the Shinola store in Detroit is located in one of the most gentrified areas of the city. Shinola’s aim to create a “community that will thrive through excellence of craft and pride of work” asks the question: who is receiving the excellent craft versus who is doing the work? Finally, the tagline of the commercial, “Shinola: Where American is Made,” implies a certain high price tag on “American.” Detroit workers can make American just as they can make luxury, but can they afford it?

*Fashioning a Black Future*

The intersection of fashion and culture has often created poignant moments within historical narratives. Clothing carries social meaning because it is inseparable from its ability to create and modify social capital. The social symbolism of fashion can also be intrinsically linked to region. Tracy Reese, a woman of color and Detroit native, recently released her Fall 2016 collection at New York Fashion Week. Instead of a traditional runway show, Reese decided to debut her line with an eight minute short film entitled “A Detroit Love Song.” A truly Detroit production, the “fashion film” was directed by Ali Naseer, used music by Jazz Violinist Regina Carter and was modeled by Nako, all of whom are from Detroit. This film treads heavily in vintage imagery of black Detroit with modern twists implemented throughout. With a focus on black femininity, the movie uses nostalgia to recall memories of a predominantly
African American city while also creating a modern narrative of an inclusive Detroit where modern blackness is not left behind.

The film starts with audio from Detroit’s 1965 Olympic bid, “You are about to witness the very exciting story of a city and its people. It will be an adventure that will open new sights and familiar surroundings. That city is Detroit.” Immediately after, the screen is inundated with retro imagery of an auto assembly line, jazz and Motown musicians, and a black middle class. Abruptly, the camera switches to show the protagonist of the fashion film, a tall and elegant African American model, walking down the stairs of a family home. She has on a beige high-collared lace gown with ruffles cascading down the middle of her chest. As the camera pans across images of middle class African American Detroiter's, the model caresses the pictures lovingly; staring at the images with fondness and wonder. This attachment to nostalgia is heavily featured within the short film. Audio clips are used throughout the video with unseen people praising Detroit for its spirit and history. The quotes are from a mixture of modern day and historical recordings with ellipses added to indicate a change of speaker, “I noticed Detroit had a very unique sound…I think it was the energy of this city at that time…it is a gift. It is absolutely a gift…In Michigan’s motor town, a new export was added to cars. The Detroit Sound…In other words, you may do it your way but we’re going to do it our way.” Tracy Reese presents Detroit as a historical paragon of a city; a place where the past is valued and treasured. “A Detroit Love Song” connects to history in such a way that the movie becomes almost timeless in its representation of an era. The era of the piece is
decidedly vintage with the clothing and the music reflecting that. A review of Reese's collection in *Vogue* stated that her clothes had a

> Palpable nostalgia to the delicate, sheer lace dresses that came in black or red and were styled with high-waisted underwear and garter socks…Those, and especially the calf-length fur coats, had a seedy glamour to them that brought to mind evenings tucked away in a hidden speakeasy, listening to the blues.  

Reese’s collection has an effect of linking emotion to place. This is often emulated through the feeling of agelessness in the video.

Reflecting both a nostalgia for an old Detroit and burgeoning vibrancy within the city, Reese places her main model in iconic and historical locations in Detroit, such as Red’s Jazz Shoe Shine Parlor or the inside of the Fisher Building. Each of these locations serves a very different version of Detroit history within the video. The inside of the Fisher Building is adorned with gilded Art Deco designs, a reminder of the thriving Golden Era within Detroit. Red’s Jazz Shoe Shine Parlor, which has been open since 1950, is a relic in the city. The beginning of the scene shows only shoes as they are placed one by one into the shoe shine holster. Slow and serious music is played with staccato strings and gradually builds in tempo and intensity. The image flashes to the sock garter that is found on every outfit in Reese’s line and the music switches to a swingier, up-tempo jazz piece. The model sits among a group of old and young black men as they all get their shoes shined. They laugh and joke together as sounds of a bustling room join the soundtrack. This image recalls ideas of a thriving black community within Detroit with black owned businesses and spaces. Reese commented on this location choice,

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I just felt like that was so Detroit…Every grand building in Detroit has an old-school shoe shine shop in the basement. He does it the old way. He dabs on salve, he whips the towel, he gets out the double brushes. It's something we hardly ever allow ourselves to enjoy. I think more women should be going to get shoeshines.

With the model placed in such a male dominated space, this is one of the many instances where the importance of black femininity is featured in the film.

The fall collection for Reese is a mix of lace and flowing floral patterns. Black women model almost all of the unmistakably feminine prints and silhouettes. Reese places African American models at the forefront of her fashion line and continually asserts their power within her short film. The shoeshine scene shows a black woman literally stepping into place among a space usually dominated by men. It is also evident that the model takes the epicenter of the action within the scene; guiding the attention of both the audience and the crowd that surrounds her. This power from the protagonist is seen in multiple sections of the film, most notably in the scene that takes place in the dance studio. It is one of the longest segments, in a video that changes scene and tone at an almost dizzying rate. Similar to the shoeshine, this scene places the protagonist at the center of attention and power. She observes the dancers as they stretch over the ballet bar; her shapeless dress and voluminous natural hair in stark contrast with the skintight leotards and pulled back buns of the almost all white dancers. The model is shown in the middle of a circle of twirling ballerinas as she stares into the camera. Close up shots of the dancers are briefly seen but the model is depicted as the nucleus of action and attention in the scene. She unabashedly stares at

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the white dancers as they twirl around her, asserting power through her gaze. However, it isn’t a sinister scene by any means; the model and dancers smile throughout the action. Instead, it depicts a black woman as the main character who observes and interacts with peripheral white characters. Unfortunately, and it would be amiss to not mention this, the black women who are in “A Detroit Love Song” are all light-skinned black women; a giant issue within the modeling industry and the film industry in general. Nonetheless, it is still worthy to note the inversion of the widespread trend of centering media on men and white people. Reese’s short fashion film defies this trend by dedicating its focus to celebrating black women.

The celebration of blackness is almost as central as the fashion in “A Detroit Love Song.” Unlike other representations examined, this film pays close attention to young and black Detroiters. In one particularly poignant scene the model walks down
the street and encounters a young black man. Initially just passing by, the camera does a sort of double take and flashes back to the couple as they stare deeply into each other eyes. Images of Auguste Rodin’s *The Thinker* (one can be found outside the Detroit Institute of Arts) and Marshal Fredericks’ *The Spirit of Detroit* are inserted into the video of the two young people as the camera whirls around them. This is one of the only scenes where the main model has a prolonged and direct interaction with another character in the film. The references to *The Thinker* and *The Spirit of Detroit* evoke the timeless and iconic presence that each statue represents both in Detroit and the world; poignantly linking two young black people to the very spirit of the city.

Although the film deals heavily with nostalgia for Detroit’s heyday, there is also a sense of investment in black futurity. The influence on the video is decidedly vintage with an emphasis on the 1930s; however, it is also modern in the style and depiction of the city. The film does not try to hide the fact that this is present-day Detroit, briefly showing blighted houses and dilapidated neighborhoods. Additionally, the use of vintage video of the assembly line or city streets is used to contrast and highlight the modern style of the present-day footage. This is most present in the final scene of the film. The camera takes the point of view of someone who is driving in a car, moseying down a brightly lit city street filled with restaurants and stores. As they pass through a tunnel, unseen voices remark “Soul, as it’s called, is something that you feel from within and you do it spontaneously…it’s not something that you learn and it’s not something that you read and you do it well. You have to have a natural feel for it.” Suddenly, the tempo picks up and a bustling jazz
club appears. Like other parts of the film, the modern jazz club is spliced with video clips of an older jazz club from the 40s or 50s. The old film features all black people. The new film shows both black and white patrons of the night club. The older film is black and white whereas the new film is awash in bright colors. While the majority of the film features muted colors in sepia tones, this final minute in the jazz club features vibrant colors; highly contrasted with the black and white video from the past. The buzzing contemporary nightclub seems to deliberately show both African American and white actors, but of course places an emphasis on the lead black model. Right before the end of the film, we see the model back in the original room with all of the vintage black middle class photos. However, instead of staring at the photos, she sits in front of them, facing the camera with her face upturned to the light. This image, along with themes through Reese’s film, seems to point toward a bright and hopeful future for a black Detroit. Although the film acknowledges a growing presence of white people within the city, it mainly focuses on and celebrates an African American history and future for the city.

Reese created her fashion film as a response to her inured feelings toward a traditional runway show. She wanted her newest city-inspired collection to be new and exciting for New York Fashion Week. “A Detroit Love Song” is completely embroiled in the city, with the designer, director, main model, and composer all from Detroit. More than that, it is one of the few modern imaginaries to completely encapsulate itself in Detroit as an African American city. When Reese posted the fashion film on her Facebook page, one commenter from Detroit had this to say: “The most significant aspect in the storytelling is the seamless weaving of iconic Detroit
imagery with the dynamic presence of Black people - something avoided in too much of the current video treatments of the city.” At the film’s core, it is a celebration of African Americans and, in particular, African American women in Detroit—two categories of people often ignored in recent media representations. Unlike Chrysler, Shinola, or Opportunity Detroit with their masculine voice-overs and brooding nature toward a gritty city, Reese’s “A Detroit Love Song” presents the city as nostalgic and modern, feminine with Detroit Soul. It would be amiss to not mention the pricy nature of Reese’s high-end collection; it is somewhat doubtful that people living in the neighborhoods of Detroit could ever buy the expensive clothing. However, unlike Chrysler or Shinola, Reese doesn’t use Detroit as a focal point for labor and production. Instead, she celebrates it for its cultural and historical landscape. On celebrating her hometown, Reese said “Detroit is changing right before my eyes—it’s very exciting...Detroit kind of gets a bad rep. People don’t realize the cultural richness, the richness of the people, and how passionate and hardy they are.”

The film creates a social imaginary of the city as muse to Reese’s collection, a place where there is a future for widening demographic that celebrates the essential blackness and female empowerment in Detroit.

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60 Phelan, “Tracy Reese.”
Epilogue:

The city of Detroit has often fascinated the public. Through its history of radical success, racial tensions, and decline, the city became an emblem of triumph and failure for American cities. The social imaginary of the city has altered through time to reflect the prevalent attitudes, fears, and ambitions of local residents and outsiders. Throughout this thesis, I have analyzed a small excerpt of the vast imaginary that surrounds Detroit. Tracking the city’s representation through narratives of success, destruction, and revitalization has provided a complicated vision of the city’s social and political circumstances.

Although Detroit has been through trials and tribulations, there is a considerable sense of pride and love for the city from its long-term residents. As much as the city has changed and will change, Detroiters will fight for a city that is theirs. This pride and love is not an idealization of grit and resilience from imaginaries created by Chrysler, Shinola, or Dan Gilbert. It’s also different from the nostalgic narrative of the past where black Detroiters are often forced into certain roles or completely ignored. And it definitely isn’t a plea to white artists and entrepreneurs to come in and save the city. Instead, it is an unfettered desire for a vital Detroit that is designed and uplifted by its citizens.

There are people in the Detroit arena who are fighting for improvements in the city while conserving the spirit of residents who have lived here their whole lives. Aaron Foley, a journalist from Detroit, recently released a book entitled “How to Live in Detroit Without Being a Jackass.” He says,

The biggest mistake is this whole idea of being able to save Detroit or rescue Detroit—this idea that all you have to do is make this one app or open this one
shop and everything is going to be great…so that’s one mistake that hipsters make, forgetting that there’s decades and years of things that have to be undone before Detroit can get better. Whether it’s racial tension or the schools or the poverty or the unemployment or the empty space, that’s not going to be fixed with a coffee shop.\textsuperscript{61}

As Foley points to, it is hard to ignore the real and concrete problems in Detroit. Many institutions, schools, and neighborhoods have been in disrepair for years and continue to fail Detroit’s citizens. However, these issues must be addressed through the guidance and perspective of Detroit’s citizens. There is too much historical and racial strife for people to enter and change Detroit without understanding the social landscape. As I have argued, the social imaginary has been used to help efforts of gentrification in a “new” Detroit. However, the social imaginary can also be used to further the voices and perspectives of Detroiters who are looking to make the city great on their own terms. jessica Care moore’s poem “I’m too Detroit to Starve” that began this thesis is emblematic of the indisputable tenacity and spirit from Detroit’s citizens, “I imagine myself in the future. It’s a great exercise in survival.” So let’s imagine Detroiters in the future of Detroit—it will be a great exercise for an enduringly great city.

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